

The Contemporary Novel in France



Edited by
William Thompson

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Preface

In a controversial essay that appeared in the *Stanford French Review* in 1991, Antoine Compagnon lamented what he called the “diminishing canon” of French literary studies in the United States, contending that the focus of French specialists in America has become increasingly limited and that the number of authors deemed worthy of analysis has consequently diminished.¹ The favorites (Proust and Duras are the two he mentions by name) undergo a seemingly endless barrage of analysis while other, equally talented and intriguing writers receive scant attention—both those whose careers have long reached a conclusion and those more contemporary writers who have received critical or popular acclaim in France, but who remain relatively obscure in the United States. Another phenomenon on which Compagnon touches is the fascination by many American literature specialists with postwar French thought (literary, sociological, and philosophical; structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, feminism, etc.)—again at the expense of novelists, poets, and playwrights, in other words, those writers who have been the traditional focus of literary analysis. Few major institutions of higher education in the United States today do not have in their curriculum at least one course on or encompassing literary theory from France. Familiarity with literary theory has increasingly become a prerequisite for young scholars attempting to obtain an academic position in the area of French literary studies, and the likes of Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and their successors are the subjects of an overwhelming number of scholarly books and articles.

These latter authors have intrigued both French and North American intellectual circles and inspired a generation of critics and imitators.

9. Patrick Drevet, *Récit d'un geste* (Lyon: MEM/Arte-Facts, 1984), p. 45.

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Jean-Philippe Toussaint

Roy C. Caldwell

Le véritable écrivain n'a rien à dire.¹

Since 1985, Jean-Philippe Toussaint has published four slim novels with the Paris publishing house Minuit: *La Salle de bain* (1985), *Monsieur* (1986), *L'Appareil-photo* (1988), and *La Réticence* (1991). Readers of these texts have had no difficulty in detecting affinities between them; already the first novel seemed the result of a fully formed, carefully controlled talent. Curiously, the appearance of each new text revealed no "maturation," no "development" of narrative technique or thematic concern, but rather a continuation of an unchanging writing practice: minimalist, composed in blocks of nonsequential text, strangely comic, mixing formal and colloquial linguistic patterns, highly wrought. Toussaint's textual production thus gives the illusion of a certain immobility, fitting perhaps, when one considers that immobility forms a central thematic configuration in each text.

Like Toussaint's writing in the different texts, his narratives display a marked consistency. Each novel centers on a young male protagonist, never named, who displays boyish charm, passivity, and a peculiar ineptitude when faced with social conventions. These characters respond to the anxieties of modern life by flight (to Venice in *La Salle de bain*, to the Midi in *Monsieur*, to London in *L'Appareil-photo*, to Sasuelo in *La Réticence*), and by withdrawing into isolated, often closed spaces to follow the paths of their sedentary thoughts: into the bathtub (*La Salle de bain*), onto the rooftop under the stars (*Monsieur*), behind the doors of a gas station toilet and a self-service photo booth (*L'Appareil-photo*), into

an anonymous hotel room in an empty seaside resort (*La Réticence*). In all these novels a certain Sartrean intertextuality may be found. Roquentin's nausea appears in various forms: in the oozing flesh of the "poules" (*La Salle de bain* and *La Réticence*), in the disagreeable "odeur de cire mêlé de sperme sec" in Monsieur's rented room (p. 44), in the "réalité brute et presque obscène" that emerges from the stolen photos of *L'Appareil-photo* (p. 120), in the drowned, decomposing cat whose image haunts the narrator of *La Réticence*, and in the rain that falls almost continuously throughout all four novels. Against the fluidity and decay of existence the protagonists attempt to impose images of pure order drawn from geometry, modern physics, and games: darts and Pythagorean theorem in *La Salle de bain*, crystallography and quantum physics in *Monsieur*, chess and photography in *L'Appareil-photo*, the codified narrative practice of the detective novel that forms the subtext of *La Réticence*. But the heroes of Toussaint do not flee harsh reality altogether for the "quiétude [d'une] vie abstraite" (*La Salle de bain*, p. 15). They live in the world and are drawn to its charms. In these stories, women represent the promise—and the threat—of joining the body of life: a lover fled, then nearly killed (*La Salle de bain*), a woman seduced, or rather, seducing (*Monsieur*), a young mother always asleep (*L'Appareil-photo*), a baby son and his entirely absent mother (*La Réticence*). If these are love stories, they lack the closure (either rupture or consummation) that one expects. At the end of *La Salle de bain*, the protagonist may abandon the solitude of the bathroom to rejoin his female companion, but *L'Appareil-photo* closes with the protagonist, lost in thought, waiting in a phonebooth for his lover to return his call. These are faint stories, antinarratives. Very little "happens" in Toussaint's novels, and what does happen tends to occur at the margins of the discourse.

Reviewers in the French press have inevitably attempted to situate Toussaint's enterprise by invoking previous writers whom he seems to resemble. These readers have cited Kafka, Camus, Modiano, Valéry's *Monsieur Teste*, Woody Allen (!), Beckett, the nouveaux romanciers, and other writers recently published by Minuit—Patrick Deville, Jean Echenoz, Marie Redonnet, and the late Hervé Guibert. These may all in some way be useful in explaining certain aspects of Toussaint's work. Nonetheless, the project here is to delineate the figures by which Toussaint structures his narratives, and for this Robbe-Grillet's narrative theory and practice offer the best foundation. In *Le Miroir qui revient*,

Robbe-Grillet divides modern novelists into two groups: those who follow Balzac's realism, and those who "voudront explorer . . . les oppositions insolubles, les éclatements, les apories diégétiques, les cassures, les vides, etc., car ils savent que le réel commence juste au moment où le sens vacille."² Toussaint clearly belongs to the second group. Like the juxtaposed snapshots from which Robbe-Grillet forms his narratives in the collection *Instantanés*, Toussaint's stories are composed of fragments, frozen moments, aleatory coincidences, holes, sudden shifts. Like Robbe-Grillet too, Toussaint fills his texts with insignificant details from everyday experience and long, precise descriptions of banal actions (the eating of an olive in *L'Appareil-photo*, for example). Toussaint writes what other writers omit, omits what other writers emphasize. One also finds in Toussaint the *mises en abyme* that Robbe-Grillet employs to duplicate the structure of his narratives: the crystallography of *Monsieur*, the movement of the knight in *L'Appareil-photo*, the purloined letter of *La Réticence*. Unlike Robbe-Grillet, however, Toussaint produces a much more ordered narrative system. The fiction is not *plural*; variants do not accumulate to force the explosion of the unitary récit; in Toussaint events are not blatantly contradictory. Furthermore, Toussaint's texts do not contain strange loops and paradoxical spaces—metaleptic shifts between different diegetic levels—as do Robbe-Grillet's. In Toussaint, we are never taken into the laboratory of fiction where the story—with its dead-ends and false starts—is being composed before our very eyes. At the core of Toussaint's narrative system is an essentially classical principle: the narrator reflects on his past experience and recounts it in well-chosen phrases. Even more than Robbe-Grillet's, Toussaint's narratives appear ludic, that is, governed by arbitrary rules, symmetrical, ritualistic.

Toussaint's protagonists appear strangely passive, strangely empty of desires. In the hotel room, the young father of *La Réticence* expresses what seems the emblematic attitude of these characters: "Je ne faisais rien, je n'attendais rien de particulier" (pp. 14–15). The hero of *La Salle de bain* passes long moments watching the clock's second hand and trying to perceive the minute progress of a crack in the wall. Monsieur reaches perhaps a perfect state of well-being when he swings in the hammock, "suivant en pensée le rythme des balancements" (pp. 28–29). But almost in spite of their natural inclination toward immobility, Toussaint's protagonists are possessed of an "élan furieux" (*L'Appareil-photo*, p. 113)

and are constantly on the move. To achieve the conditions necessary for serene immobility, paradoxically, they must travel. Each of Toussaint's four narratives has at its center figures of "locomotion," of change of place. These figures assume various forms: in the paths followed by the protagonists, in the different images employed to represent these trajectories, and in the paradoxes of mobility and immobility that emerge from each voyage.

The journeys of Toussaint's novels are fugues, flights from the quotidian and oppressive experience back home. The protagonists of *La Salle de bain* and *Monsieur* both flee women who have rendered their lives too muddled, too murky, too tangled; in escaping the difficulties created by women, they seek to reconstruct the conditions necessary for "the quietude of an abstract life." Each disappears abruptly from Paris for a destination where he will be unknown, out-of-place, and thus exempt from assaults on his solitude. The destinations of these trips seem entirely arbitrary. When Monsieur's fiancée asks him what he plans to do in Cannes, the reply is that "il ne savait pas, il verrait bien" (p. 25).

The protagonist of *La Réticence* displays a similar uncertainty about his trip to the abandoned resort. Inquiring about a room, he asks the hotel-keeper "s'il serait possible d'avoir une chambre pour quelques nuits, même davantage peut-être, jusqu'à la fin de la semaine, je ne savais pas très bien" (p. 13). Although we never learn exactly what situation the protagonist in *La Réticence* has left behind in Paris, the presence of the infant son, and the complete absence of reference to the child's mother, would seem to indicate another flight from complicated, unhappy love. This voyage appears just as unmotivated and haphazard as those in *La Salle de bain* and *Monsieur*. Here the hero's solitude cannot be absolute, however, nor his life abstract, for he has certain "creatural" responsibilities: feeding the baby and changing his diapers. The weekend in London of *L'Appareil-photo* represents a different but essentially related kind of flight. This novel's protagonist has adapted a strategy for handling reality markedly different from that of his *confrères*; he seeks not to escape reality, but to break it down by a slow, deliberate campaign. When he meets Pascale Polougaïevski, his plan to seduce her resembles his elaborate, slow-motion manner of eating olives: "Tout mon jeu d'approche, assez obscur en apparence, avait en quelque sorte pour effet de fatiguer la réalité à laquelle je me heurtais" (p. 14). The trip in this text is thus undertaken not in order to escape love, but rather to pro-

mote it. The hotel room here becomes, in theory at least, a closed space where the purity of an erotic *solitude à deux* may be created. The complications the would-be lovers flee are those of the noisy, busy, clutching world which hinders their intimacy: Pascale's family responsibilities (her father and her child), her job, Paris.

The journeys in the four novels are reflected by the protagonists' various meditations on movement. All four of Toussaint's heroes tend to figure the paths of bodies as pure, abstract patterns. For each of them, locomotion becomes trajectory. Motion may be the change of a body's position in time, but these characters seek to represent the entire course of a motion in an image from which time has been removed. The young man in *La Salle de bain* wonders how many times he has followed the trajectory from bathroom to kitchen in his apartment. The geometric figure of his fugue to and from Venice is provided by the text's epigraph: "Le carré de l'hypoténuse est égal à la somme des carrés des deux autres côtés" (p. 7). Monsieur finds peace by contemplating "l'inaccessible pureté des trajectoires" of fish in an aquarium (p. 90). At night on his roof, he finds a similar purity as he attempts to track the repeating paths of the satellites passing overhead. Later in the text he succeeds in transforming the night sky into a metro system where he takes imaginary voyages: "partant du Sirius qu'il repérait sans peine, il évolua du regard vers Montparnasse-Bienvenue, descendit jusqu'à Sèvres-Babylone et, s'attardant un instant sur Bételgeuse, arriva à l'Odéon, où il voulait en venir" (p. 93). In *L'Appareil-photo*, the main character choreographs his movements to correspond to another celestial sphere; in Milan he spends his time reading newspapers on park benches, "passant de banc en banc pour suivre la progression du soleil" (p. 17). Elsewhere, he compares the real path of the automobile to another perfect, and still more abstract movement from the game of chess: "nous empruntons toujours le même itinéraire maintenant, à quelques nuances près, qui consistait en un parcours qui n'était pas le contraire de celui du cavalier dans la variante Breyer de l'espagnole fermée" (p. 41). In *La Réticence* the young father becomes obsessed with the beam from the lighthouse; he traces its trajectory from the harbor back to its source, where he fantasizes several grim dénouements for the halting fictions he composes.

On the move, Toussaint's protagonist thus manages to pull away from the gravity of a life and to become a particle in pure flight. Alone in

the photo booth, the hero of *L'Appareil-photo* follows the course of his thoughts and finds there some kind of solace; he passes from "la difficulté de vivre" to the "désespoir d'être" (p. 94). These characters can grasp existence only in its abstract form, only when they have succeeded in creating a closed space of silence in which the course of their own thoughts may be detected. (Descendants of Descartes, they think therefore they are.) In tranquil solitude thought gathers its innumerable strands and rushes "mystérieusement vers un point immobile et fuyant" (32). This paradox of "fleeing immobility" indeed represents one of the central figures in Toussaint's narratives. In *La Salle de bain*, the paradox appears as the protagonist outlines two fashions of watching the rain: first, "de maintenir son regard fixé sur un point quelconque de l'espace et de voir la succession de pluie à l'endroit choisi" (an approach that renders the rain immobile and furnishes "aucune idée de la finalité du mouvement," p. 36); or, second, "suivre des yeux la chute d'une seule goutte à la fois" (which permits one to "se représenter que le mouvement, aussi fulgurante soit-il en apparence, tend essentiellement vers l'immobilité," p. 36). Immobility, this man concludes, frames motion and thus represents the dominant—and superior—state of affairs. The paradox recurs in *L'Appareil-photo*, where the protagonist, like the raindrop considered in its entire flight, finds himself during a Channel-crossing between two places and thus, he concludes, momentarily nowhere: "L'endroit où je me trouvais s'était peu à peu dissipé de ma conscience et je fus un instant nulle part, si ce n'est pas immobile dans mon esprit" (p. 102). Being nowhere, fixed outside space in a motionless trajectory, he achieves the immobility of spirit that represents for Toussaint's characters the only consolation possible. Movement, concludes the man in the bathroom as he watches the single raindrop, bears bodies continually toward death, which is immobility. Likewise, on the deck, between places, where the division between sea and sky disappears, the Channel-crosser remarks: "Parfois, oui, la mort me manquait" (p. 106). Around the fret and agitation of life, free from time altogether, Toussaint's protagonist finds the pure immobile trajectory that prefigures the perfection of death.

L'Appareil-photo takes as its point of departure the curious coincidence of two distinct events: the narrator decides to learn how to drive, and he receives a letter in which an old friend informs him of his marriage.

After admitting that these two matters "n'avaient malheureusement aucun rapport entre eux" (p. 7), the narrator concludes the section, surprisingly, with the remark that he abhors "amis perdus de vue" (p. 7). This incongruous movement between unrelated sequences seems typical of Toussaint's writing. His narratives often proceed by *parataxis*; there seems to be no link between successive segments. Readers of *L'Appareil-photo* are left to establish for themselves the possible connections between learning to drive, marriage, and friends from the past.

In *Le Miroir qui revient*, Robbe-Grillet claims that, while the classic novel "masked and denied" the problems of representing the instant, the modern novel intentionally exposes these problems and stages the paradoxes of instantaneity. Modern narrative becomes, he claims, "l'impossible mise en ordre de fragments dépareillés, dont les bords incertains ne s'adaptent pas les uns aux autres."³ Toussaint's composition by unmatched segments appears to correspond to Robbe-Grillet's description of writing in the modern novel. His texts are discontinuous, fragmented, constructed like collages. Parts are unmatched, wrenched from their contexts, and thrust together in jagged patterns. In Toussaint, edges do not disappear; the two never become one. The edge-that-refuses-to-disappear privileges spatial form in the text.

A long theoretical discourse on the nature of images and narrative, of the limits and potentialities of space and time in art, immediately intrudes on the questions raised by Toussaint's novels. Lessing formulated the classical position sharply distinguishing the modes of existence of painting and poetry. Plastic forms, he writes in the *Laocöon*, are spatial, because the visible aspect of objects is best represented in a single instant. By contrast, poetry employs language, which exists as a sequence of words in time. But we know very well that postclassical art refuses to respect genres; it revolts and escapes from the designated territories.⁴ As certain kinds of painting seek a temporal dimension, certain kinds of literature attempt to create a spatial dimension. For this kind of painting the problem is narrative: how to represent a series of events—and therefore a duration—in fixed images. For this kind of literature, the problem is pictorial: how to constitute a space with a series of words. Narrative painting wants to seize time, while spatial literature tries to eliminate it. As Toussaint's protagonists consistently convert locomotion into trajectory by eliminating the dimension of time, so too these narratives flee temporal structure for spatial form.

Toussaint's narratives, unlike Robbe-Grillet's, are not fundamentally anachronic: it is possible to reconstruct from the mixed episodes a chronologically consistent narrative. Nevertheless, chronological order is radically fragmented everywhere in Toussaint's novels. The clash of narrative and textual orders is sharpest in *La Salle de bain*, where the text closes by returning to its point of departure: the protagonist exiting his bathroom. We recognize that the trip to Venice, subject of "Hypoténuse," the novel's long middle section, has been an extended analepse. Instead of smoothly narrating continuous actions, Toussaint renders the passing of time through a series of fixed images, minutely detailed and often perfectly banal snapshots. The trip to the Midi in *Monsieur* is not recounted in full, but represented through a sequence of images: a dog's eyes in a flashlight, swinging in a hammock, the bodily sensations of cutting wood: "Puis vint le temps où Monsieur dut rentrer à Paris" (p. 29). As Schrödinger's Copenhagen experiment (which obsesses Monsieur) proves that an electron's leap to another level may not be predicted, Toussaint's narrative seems to shift venues by "sauts discontinus" (p. 78).

Photographs in Toussaint's novels thus play a dual function: they are *mises en abyme* of Toussaint's narrative practice, but they are also of central thematic importance, for they symbolize attempts by the protagonists to control existence by suppressing time. In photographs, the flux of existence is momentarily arrested, providing a transitory image of order. And yet, photographs are simultaneously sources of anxiety for the central characters. Instead of the current identification photos necessary to complete his dossier at the driving school, the narrator of *L'Appareil-photo* brings pictures from his childhood. In these images a past self, secure in the bosom of a child's family relations, is frozen and preserved. But the adult resists the very simple operation of finding a photo booth to obtain the photos he needs to complete his dossier. The anxiety a current photoportrait holds for him seems manifest in the image closing the novel: "Je regardais le jour se lever et songeais simplement au présent, à l'instant présent, tâchant de fixer encore sa fugitive grâce—comme on immobiliserait l'extrémité d'une aiguille dans le corps d'un papillon vivant" (p. 127). Another of Toussaint's paradoxes: how does one capture the instant without killing it? Or, differently stated, where is the unchanging core that constitutes one's essential identity? For the problem of the portrait—the problem of identity—has troubled this man

for some time. His suppressed desire to fix his identity surges forth when he finds a camera forgotten by tourists. With it, however, immediately kicks in the vague anxiety that has pursued him through the novel; he panics and races through the ship taking random shots to finish the roll of film as soon as possible. Only when he sees the developed photos does he realize that he has succeeded in taking the self-portrait he had once wished: "C'était comme la photo de l'élan furieux que je portais en moi" (p. 113). Unintentionally, he has managed to snatch from without himself and from the instant a photo that represents both immobility and fluidity: "La photo serait floue mais immobile, le mouvement serait arrêté, rien ne bougerait plus, ni ma présence, ni mon absence, il y aurait là toute l'étendue de l'immobilité qui précède la vie de toute celle qui suit, à peine plus lointaine que le ciel que j'avais sous les yeux" (p. 113).

Roland Barthes has written that photography has created a new category of space-time: "locale immédiate et temporelle antérieure; dans la photographie il se produit une conjonction illogique entre l'*ici* et l'*autrefois*."⁵ A photograph, continues Barthes, possesses an "irréalité réelle": "son irréalité est celle de l'*ici*, car la photographie n'est jamais vécue comme une illusion, elle n'est nullement une *présence* . . . et sa réalité est celle de l'*avoir-été-là*, car il y a dans toute photographie l'évidence toujours stupéfiante du: *cela s'est passé ainsi*" (p. 36). In photographs, Toussaint's protagonists perceive not their own presence, but yet another trajectory, the trace of their flight through time. The immobility of photographs is thus paradoxical. Photographs may fix images but they cannot truly *preserve*; they testify only to what has disappeared. Instead of capturing life, photographs become for Toussaint's characters the true image of the terrifying immobility surrounding existence.

When a lady visits Monsieur in his room, he notices, under her "robe moulante," "des traces à peine estompées des sous-vêtements vieux jeu" (p. 52). This detail represents another *mise en abyme* of Toussaint's narrative practice: the lines of his narratives must often be detected across and beneath the text that in part hides them. In these novels occurs a continual play of presence and absence: what appears in the text often seems inconsequential, while the important events occur in the white spaces surrounding the writing. The narrative regularly emerges not as figure, but as ground. Thus, in *Monsieur* the protagonist takes the bus and on it has an altercation with a man who resembles him; in the next

block of text, Monsieur has a sprained wrist and arrives at the home of his fiancée needing a place to live. Much later, almost in passing, the text tells us that before living with his fiancée, Monsieur had shared a dwelling with his brother. The conclusion remains for us to draw for ourselves: the man resembling Monsieur on the bus had been his brother, and their quarrel precipitates Monsieur's moving out. What were the reasons for their disagreement? We never know. Likewise, the breaking of his engagement, potentially rich in narrative material, eludes the narrative (and Monsieur himself): "Il avait assez mal suivi l'affaire, en fait, se souvenant seulement que le nombre de choses qui lui avaient été reprochées lui avait paru considérable" (p. 30). The anecdotes Monsieur and Anna tell each other at the party are emblematic of this narrative practice: "Non, ils se racontaient des anecdotes, plutôt, à chacun leur tour, qui à mesure qu'ils les accumulaient, devenaient de plus en plus insignifiantes" (pp. 94-95).

Holes of various sorts appear throughout Toussaint's texts. What does Monsieur burn in the ashtray (p. 20)? What event lies behind the bad blood between Monsieur Parrain and Doctor Douvres (p. 20)? What question by his fiancée provokes Monsieur to respond "Non" (p. 24)? Why would the protagonist of *La Salle de bain* give his age as "27, bientôt 29 ans" (p. 15)? More significant in the latter text are the larger narrative holes, central events in the narrative for which we never obtain any satisfactory explanation. Thus, we never learn how the protagonist came to receive the mysterious invitation to the Austrian embassy, nor do we witness the internal play of emotions and reasonings that ends in his trip to Venice, or in his self-imposed exile to the bathroom. Gaps configure *L'Appareil-photo* as well; a rather banal narrative sequence becomes unfamiliar because it suppresses certain intermediate narrative stages. Shortly after the narrator meets Pascale Polougaïevski in the office of the driving school, and with only the faintest signs of developing intimacy, they suddenly arrive in London to spend the weekend together. One block of text leaves them in the Paris metro, while the next block opens with their dining in London: a figure of discontinuity. Other narrative holes operate by what might be called misdirection: instead of the "main event," the text narrates peripheral actions. Thus, as the narrator of *L'Appareil-photo* and Pascale spend the afternoon in bed together, the text describes at some length the images on the television screen in their room. Similarly, when Monsieur takes Anna to a restaurant, we hear not

their conversation, but that of the couple at the table next to them. Toussaint systematically narrates not the central action itself, but rather what occurs in the margins; he writes frames, rituals of opening and closing.

This narrative play of presence and absence assumes its most important function in *La Réticence*, a text whose narrative may be best described as built around or on a network of absence. In this text Barthes's hermeneutic code seems to run in reverse: instead of resolving the mysteries that configure the narrative at its outset, *La Réticence* multiplies them.⁶ When the text opens, we may well wonder why the narrator has come to stay in this off-season resort. He supplies a far from satisfactory answer: "C'était en quelque sorte pour voir les Biaggi que je m'étais rendu à Sasuolo" (p. 16). Just who are these Biaggis anyway? How does the protagonist know them, and why has he come to see them just now? This *en quelque sorte* serves to undermine most of the hermeneutic value the explanation may have possessed, but subsequently, as the story unfolds and he hesitates to show these mysterious acquaintances the least sign of his presence, our confusion increases. When he lifts his own letter from the Biaggis' mailbox, thereby hiding his presence in Sasuolo, he has effectively cancelled his original motives for the trip. Reticence, indeed: he resists explaining even to himself why he has taken the letters, why he has come to Sasuolo. And there remains the further question, never articulated but hovering over the entire narrative: where is the mother of the child?

In many ways *La Réticence* seems to be a novel in search of a story. From the beginning it appears to grope toward the narrative form of the detective novel: enigmas are present, and the setting in the abandoned town makes for an atmosphere of decay, suspense, and vague menace. Like a detective, the narrator wanders through town in search of clues. All detective work is analeptic: the effort to reconstruct a series of events in the past from traces left in the present. This protagonist's careful scrutiny reveals only very thin signs: a dead cat, the coming and going of a gray Mercedes, a suspicious fisherman. Nevertheless, he weaves these signs into elaborate and unlikely fictions which attempt to reveal the truth of the past. Tzvetan Todorov has remarked that the *roman à énigmes* is constructed around two temporal sequences, "dont l'une est absente mais réelle, l'autre présente mais insignifiante."⁷ In *La Réticence* the absence of the past crime finally overwhelms any reality it might possess,

and we are left with only an insignificant present. One by one the imagined crimes dissolve. Biaggi does not drive the gray Mercedes, and he has not taken a room in the narrator's hotel; neither Biaggi nor the cat has been murdered. The dénouement toward which the narrator's fictions build turns comic. Like a long joke without a punchline, the door to the narrator's hotel room slowly opens . . . to reveal the hotelkeeper coming to clean the room! As the narrator telephones Biaggi and leaves on the answering machine a recording of "toutes les imperceptibles variations de [son] silence" (p. 133), Toussaint has recorded the folds of absences: Biaggi, the woman, the narrative itself.

Robbe-Grillet's description of the conflicting tendencies configuring the modern novel applies well to Toussaint's texts: "cette lutte à mort de l'ordre et la liberté, ce conflit insoluble du classement rationnel et de la subversion, autrement nommé désordre."⁸ This conflict forms the thematic center of Toussaint's texts. His central characters want to rediscover a male, abstract, Cartesian purity that has been contaminated by the complications of existence, the female, the city, people, modern life. Out-of-step, hopelessly inept, bewildered by life, these protagonists continually seek refuge from the disorder of life in elaborate abstract systems, especially in the pure spaces and actions of games. Thus, Monsieur proves incapable of the effort necessary to find new lodging, but plays soccer, chess, billiards, and ping-pong with passion. Likewise, the protagonist of *La Salle de bain* allows his lover (or wife) to handle the couple's finances, while he crushes his friends at the game of Monopoly; he understands only play money. Then, after he has abandoned her and fled to Venice, he spends his time shut up in his hotel room, where he plays darts, cultivating a Zen-like mental state: "Je fixais le centre de la cible avec une détermination absolue, faisais le vide dans ma tête—et lançais" (p. 60). But even the abstraction of games is not enough for him. Instead of watching football, he prefers to listen to it on the radio, because "le football gagne à être imaginé" (p. 13). In games may be found the neat geometric lines, the clear resolution, the limited perfection that teeming life rarely affords. The protagonist of *L'Appareil-photo articulates* what games represent in Toussaint: "je simulais une autre vie, identique à la vie dans ses formes et dans son souffle, sa respiration et son rythme, une vie en tous points comparables à la vie, mais sans blessure imaginable, sans agression et sans douleur possible" (p. 125). In games Toussaint's central characters find escape from the human con-

dition which haunts them; playing, they enter a simulation of life, a simulation where death does not exist.

Thus Monsieur, unable to decide whether he should pay for Anna's dinner, chooses what he considers the "elegant" solution of dividing the check into four equal parts, paying three. He wins the girl, and the text concludes by celebrating his victory over disorder: "La vie, pour Monsieur, un jeu d'enfant" (p. 111). Narrative itself always represents a kind of game: a playing at war without blood, a playing at finance with phony money, a playing at love without the attendant anguish: a simulation of life. Like his protagonist in *La Salle de bain*, who shifts football to a deeper level of abstraction by imagining it from radio accounts, Toussaint creates stories yet another degree more abstract, more removed from life than conventional stories. His characters flee the pain, the wounds, the aggression of existence; likewise, Toussaint writes fictions that systematically flee the traditional sound and fury of story-telling. He configures his texts to produce not true narratives, but rather simulations of narratives. In his novels literature has become as pure, as innocent, as easy—as illusory—as Monsieur's child's play.

Notes

1. Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Le Miroir qui revient* (Paris: Minuit, 1984), p. 219.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 212.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.
4. See Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," in *The Widenings of Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), pp. 3–62.
5. Roland Barthes, "Rhétorique de l'image," in *L'Obvie et l'obtus: Essais critiques III* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), pp. 35–36.
6. See Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970).
7. Tzvetan Todorov, *Poétique de la prose* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), p. 13.
8. Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir*, p. 113.

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General Bibliography

The following bibliography, without claiming to be exhaustive, is intended for the reader wishing to garner further information about the authors included in this collection, about other major authors of this period, or about trends and developments in the recent novel in France in general. The bibliography has been divided into four parts: book-length works, periodical articles, special issues of periodicals, and bibliographical resources. In order to keep this bibliography to a manageable length, only those works have been included (with a few noted exceptions) that discuss the novel in France since the advent of the nouveau roman. In other words, each of these texts includes either analyses of individual authors, overviews of contemporary literature including discussion of the novel, or specific commentary on the development of the novel in contemporary France. Exclusively theoretical works have been omitted, except those that include extensive analysis of the contemporary novel in particular.

The following notes are intended to facilitate usage of this bibliography:

1. Readers should note the date of publication of each text. An article on the "contemporary" novel written in 1958 will certainly differ from one written in 1988.
2. For the sake of uniformity and simplicity, the term *editor* (ed.) has been used to refer to individuals who are not the exclusive authors of works, but who have either edited, compiled, directed, or overseen the compilation of the work in question.
3. The descriptions following each book-length study are not meant to convey the theoretical or philosophical intricacies of these works. The annotations are intended simply to allow readers to sort through the many secondary mate-