IX

Jean-Philippe Toussaint's TV Guide

Droll and sharply focused on the little vexations of everyday life, *La Télévision* (1997), Jean-Philippe Toussaint's fifth novel, takes its place in a body of work that is beginning to look like an epic of the trivial. Its narrator is a most reluctant hero, engaged in a comically unequal struggle with his own constitutional penchant for passiveness, diffidence, and immobility.[1] Like Toussaint's other protagonists, the narrator of *La Télévision* is anonymous; apart from his name, though, information about him is supplied in abundance. Some of that information is largely administrative in character. He is a fortyish university professor from Paris, spending a sabbatical year in Berlin in order to write a book on Titian, and particularly the painter's relations with the emperor Charles V, "a vast essay on the relations between the arts and political power" (15). He is married, with a young son, and his wife is expecting another child. Other data are more intimate. He mentions that he used to place sex above swimming in his pantheon of favorite activities (but below "thinking," of course, like any good academic); yet now he wonders if he doesn't prefer swimming to sex (12). The narrator stayed behind in Berlin when his family went on vacation to Italy, promising himself that he would put that time to good use. Having completed his research, he was ready to begin writing his book. Instead of that, however, he began to watch television; and he watched it constantly, indiscriminately, and bulimically.

La Télévision begins with one of the most radical gestures of renunciation one can make in our culture: "I stopped watching television" (7). The narrator's decision is grounded in a variety of closely reasoned considerations, both practical and philosophical. Though it will shortly become clear that

decisiveness is not one of his principal virtues, as his resolution erodes ineluctably into velleity, it is nonetheless interesting to examine his reflections, for it is through them that Toussaint stages the crucial problematics of his novel. Taking stock of his life, the narrator realizes that he had been watching TV too much and that he didn't have time for anything other than TV:

> For hours every evening I remained immobile in front of the screen, my eyes fixed on the discontinuous glimmering of the changing scenes, invaded little by little by the flux of images that lit up my face, all of these images blindly directed toward everyone at the same time and addressed to nobody in particular, each network, in its narrow channel, being only one of the links in a gigantic pattern of waves which broke daily upon the world. (21-22)

It is the *image* that obsesses the narrator, and more particularly the raw, uncontextualized image that television projects.[2] As an art historian, the narrator is professionally attentive to images and how they signify. Yet despite his sophistication he cannot construct meaning from the images he sees on television: they are too indiscriminate, floating signifiers in a broader discourse that fails to cohere according to any of the codes—aesthetic, historical, social—that he is used to.

He senses that, while television pretends to give us the real, the images it bombards us with are empty ones from which the real has been very largely evacuated: "Television does not offer the spectacle of reality, though it has every appearance thereof [. . .], but rather of its representation" (13). Clearly, the narrator has read his Guy Debord.[3] And like Debord, he realizes that the permanent spectacle which television constructs is one that inverts the conventional relations of truth and falsehood: "I reflected that it was nevertheless thus that television presented the world to us every day: falsely" (205). Therefore, on TV, the real becomes the false, the false the real; and the spectator is left to negotiate a semiotic landscape that bears, at best, only a parodic relation to the world outside.[4]

Moreover, television banalizes human experience, the narrator feels. It takes event and abstracts it from history, strips it of meaning and deploys it as an undifferentiated integer in an infinitely self-perpetuating combinatoric of the senseless. It is important to note that the narrator does not take issue with

banality itself. Quite to the contrary, he is a man who is intrigued—and utterly bemused—by the small things in life. He finds meaning in the little social rituals and trivial occurrences that most of us neglect by virtue of their very obviousness. Like his narrator, Toussaint himself is deeply interested in the banal, and in *La Télévision,* as in the novels that precede it, he focuses his gaze squarely upon it, in an attempt to invest the quotidian with significance.[5] The spectacle enacts a process that is precisely opposite in the narrator's view, taking the particularity of event and the heterogeneity of meaning and reducing them to pap in a cultural Cuisinart, through what Debord refers to as the spectacle's "movement of *banalization*" (43).

The narrator levels several other charges against television. It fosters alienation; it makes people passive; it doesn't leave time for thought; it causes people to be indifferent and keeps them in a state of artificial awareness (25-26). Most insidiously, he believes, it encourages people to spend more time commenting upon their actions than in performing those actions. He speculates upon television's nefarious effect on artistic creation, and on the way it invites artists to speak about works they *might* create, rather than comment on works they *have* created (54). The narrator feels that paralyzing effect intimately, because of course he has not written one word of his book on Titian.

The struggle between television and the written word is the problem upon which *La Télévision* hinges. In the narrator's view—and in Toussaint's, too—it is a vital problem, one that engages not only the local manifestations of culture, but also cultural survival. Television competes directly with literature in the cultural marketplace, Toussaint argues, and the result of that competition will determine the way we conceive our world. Staging that competition at the center of his novel and staking the fate of that novel boldly upon his polemical wager, he intends to tip the odds in favor of the written word, through the use of satire, irony, and humor—precisely the kind of subversive verbal strategies that television, in his opinion, eschews. In the course of the novel, it gradually becomes apparent that *La Télévision* is not "about" television, nor is it about one man's grapplings with television; rather, it is about literature and its uses, and more specifically about the uses that remain to literature in its current embattled state.

Toussaint will attempt to enlist the reader in this debate through the

way he describes his narrator's dilemma, making it clear that it is a question not only of writing, but also of reading. For if the narrator is a writer (or rather he *would* be, if only he could write), he is also a reader, one who is deeply committed to literature in all its forms. When he compares literature to television, he concludes that the former offers people a far vaster field of possibility than the latter, leaving ample room for thought, inference, and interpretation, in short, for all the maneuvers in which an intellectual takes pride: "Whereas books, for instance, always offer a thousand times more than what they are, television offers exactly what it is, its essential immediacy, its ongoing superficiality" (159). The choice is clear for him, then. Yet the day after swearing off television cold turkey, he feels "a lack" (112). He does have time to read once again, but to his chagrin he finds himself reading the television listings in the newspaper. And television continues to vex his life in ways that are stranger still: in a moment of stunned recognition, the narrator reflects upon the ominous purport of the initial letters of Titian's given name, "Tiziano Vecellio" (248).

He sees TV wherever he turns, poor soul. Gazing out into the Berlin night from his apartment window, he realizes to his astonishment that all of his neighbors are watching television:

> I watched all of these luminous screens change together before me, or at least in great successive, synchronous waves that undoubtedly corresponded to the different programs that people were watching in the different apartments of the neighborhood, and, seeing this, I experienced the same painful impression of multitude and uniformity that the spectacle of thousands of camera flash bulbs going off at the same time in a stadium during a great sporting event gives me. (44-45)

Later, when he goes to visit a friend, he watches an episode of *Baywatch* adapted for German television. Looking out the window, he notes that the people in the apartment across the street are watching the same program (201-04). For the narrator, this is a chilling, uncanny moment: is he watching *Baywatch,* or is *Baywatch* watching him? It brings, too, a sobering recognition of television's cultural force, because despite the fact that *Baywatch* is commonly regarded as the most cretinous, most utterly vacuous program on TV,

everyone seems to watch it.[6] Yes, everyone watches TV—but very few people are prepared to acknowledge that dirty little secret. To the contrary, within the narrator's circle of friends, everyone claims not to watch TV, or to have sworn off it, or to watch it very, very rarely: "Nobody watched television, in the final analysis (except me, of course)" (141).

Television stalks the narrator even when he's working (or trying to work). Visiting a museum, he looks at the video screens on the security guard's desk and sees on one of them an image of one of the paintings that initially prompted him to write a book on Titian (236). The burning issue here is that of *mediation.* The narrator's situation as he gazes into the video screen is emblematic of his broader dilemma as an intellectual and a critic of culture: TV gets there before he does, more quickly, more immediately. It expropriates the cultural artifact and leaves nothing—or very little—behind. The critic finds himself distanced from his object of study, seeing it only in heavily mediated form, through a glass, darkly.[7] That same situation haunts the narrator in other circumstances as well. Reading microfilm in a library or doing a bibliographic computer search on "Musset" at Beaubourg (78-84), he stares into a screen, a handy simulacrum of TV. He sees words there, certainly, words that might facilitate the other words that he wishes eventually to write; but these words are televised, and the narrator finds it difficult to come to terms with them. At home, laboring to write the first sentence of his book, he looks into the emptiness of his computer screen—a postmodern correlative of Mallarmé's "empty paper which whiteness forbids"—but no inspiration comes, and all he sees there is his own failure to create (48).

Even his own extinguished television set belabors the narrator. Poking around his apartment one evening, he catches himself staring into its darkened screen; what he sees there is himself, "in the center of the screen" (122), the butt of a hopelessly intricated joke. Contemplating the portrait of Charles V on the security guard's video screen, he finds the emperor "unrecognizable," and closes his eyes momentarily: "I opened my eyes again and, when I glanced once again at the video screen, it was my own face that I saw appear in the reflection on the screen, my own face which began to surge slowly out of the electronic limbo of the monitor's depths" (237-38). These moments contain, I think, a hard lesson. One can turn TV off, but it might just as well be

on, for in either case television ceaselessly projects the riddle of the sphinx upon us, reflecting back to us our own banalized image.[8] And indeed that is the sense of every image of television in this novel, whether it be staged explicitly as a mirror scene or not. As the narrator strains to read the image that television projects, to penetrate beneath the flatness of its surface, he is continually confronted with the parodic representation of his own otiosity. What he really sees in that image on the screen, then, is a commentary on writing and its difficulties, writ large. That same image is emblazoned in specular fashion throughout *La Télévision*—and the narrator is not the only benighted academic who will recognize himself in it.

For a text that deals principally with the fate of literature, there is very little intertextual allusion in this novel. The narrator evokes Musset, as I mentioned, on several occasions; he refers in passing to Roger Martin du Gard's *Les Thibault (The Thibaults)* and to a new German translation of Proust. The Dutch novelist Cees Nooteboom makes a brief cameo appearance, too, when the narrator runs into him in a city park. But, at least in terms of explicit references to other writers, that's about all. Toussaint's four previous novels, like *La Télévision,* all invest heavily in metaliterary reflection; yet there, too, one notes a paucity of overt intertextual allusion. Questioned about the relative lack of cultural reference in his work by an interviewer, Toussaint offered a curious response: "No, in spite of the temptations, I shy away from that, I refuse that game in order to find my own path, where culture is almost inimical" (Ammouche-Kremers 33). In *La Télévision,* it is obvious from the first pages onward that Toussaint takes an adversarial stance toward the kind of culture that TV constructs. With regard to literary culture, however, his position is rather different. Clearly, he is attempting in his novel to argue a brief for literature's viability as a cultural medium; yet he wishes to elaborate that argument on his own terms, following an independent and very idiosyncratic "path." Rather than adducing other writers' work in an effort to convince his reader of literature's undiminished cultural strength, he intends that his own novel should *perform* that lesson through the force of example. His wager is not lacking in audacity. And many of Toussaint's readers may not be persuaded by it. Nonetheless, it seems to me that such is his strategy here, for better or for worse.

Symptomatically enough, while there is very little reference to other bodies of writing in *La Télévision,* there is an insistent pattern of allusion to

Toussaint's own works. Some of those allusions are fairly oblique, but many are more explicit. In this novel, for example, the narrator calls his wife simply "Delon." Seemingly a last name rather than a first name, and of undifferentiated gender, it recalls Toussaint's first novel, where the narrator's companion is a woman named Edmondsson. More obvious still is the passage in the early pages of *La Télévision* where the narrator remarks, "I place baths very high, actually, on the scale of pleasures that life offers us" (12). Near the end of the text, the narrator relaxes luxuriously in his bathtub, listening to the *lento* of Beethoven's last string quartet (256). Together, those two moments frame the autoallusive weft of *La Télévision* and remind the reader that Jean-Philippe Toussaint made his mark on the literary horizon in France with a novel called *La Salle de bain (The Bathroom).* The title of Toussaint's third novel is inscribed in the narrator's evocation of "thousands of camera flash bulbs" (44-45). The novel that precedes *La Télévision, La Réticence* (Reticence), is alluded to on several occasions, first slyly, then more directly. The narrator mentions that he is constitutionally reserved (28), and reserve is the most salient trait of the narrator of *La Réticence*—as well as that text's most characteristic discursive strategy. Later, when the narrator informs his wife by telephone that he has stopped watching TV, she asks him for his reasons, but he declines to elaborate further, explaining in an aside to the reader that those were reasons "that I would have been very reluctant [*réticent*] to give her" (112). He notes too that, while people will lend their books, records, videocassettes, and even their clothes to other people reasonably freely, "people were very reluctant [*réticents*] to loan their television" (141). And when the director of the foundation sponsoring his sabbatical year asks him how his work is going, he answers his question "with reticence," remarking moreover that "I have always been somewhat reticent when asked to speak about my work" (71).

That passage performs an interesting critique on Toussaint's novels in general, and on *La Télévision* in particular. On the one hand, Toussaint's oeuvre as a whole is a singularly reticent one. His narrators are diffident in the extreme: they tell their stories despite themselves, as it were, and only at the expense of an effort that is almost beyond their powers. On the other hand, the "work" that the narrator of *La Télévision* envisions—for the moment at least—is writing, and much of the metaliterary dimension of this novel is bound up in a sustained meditation on writing *as work.* Vivid ironies color

that meditation at every point. For, clearly enough, Toussaint's "work" is also writing, and in one sense the task the narrator has set himself is an analog of Toussaint's own. In that perspective, Toussaint deploys his narrator as a stalking-horse, using that man's struggles in order to suggest his own conception of writing and its vicissitudes. Yet, unlike Toussaint, the narrator's writerly efforts do not bear fruit—and one understands readily enough why he is "reticent" corncerning his work. One of the functions of autoallusion in *La Télévision* is to remind the reader that two very different kinds of writer are at issue here: if the narrator cannot write his book, that same charge cannot be laid at Jean-Philippe Toussaint's doorstep. At certain moments in the novel, then, Toussaint casts his narrator as exemplary: the problems he faces as he tries to write his book on Titian are real ones, problems that any writer must confront. At other times, the narrator's gropings, maunderings, and surjustifications are intended by Toussaint as counterexample, a ludicrously exaggerated depiction of a failed writer's martyrdom.

In both cases however, whether Toussaint is offering his narrator to us frankly or parodically, the central question is that of the *work* which writing demands. The narrator is an academic, after all. Any academic knows that work is tough (especially, perhaps, if like the narrator, one works very little). There are no easy solutions available, either: the only way to get one's work done is, well, to *work*. The dilemma is tautological; still more egregiously, it's unfair. The narrator of *La Télévision* senses that unfairness with every nerve in his body, for his essential vocation is to do nothing. By his own account, that nothing is a something which demands considerable mastery:

> I did nothing at all, moreover. By "nothing," I mean only doing the essential, thinking, reading, listening to music, making love, strolling, going to the swimming pool, picking mushrooms. To do nothing, contrary to what one might at first imagine, demands method and discipline, openness of mind and concentration. (11)

In point of fact the narrator will do almost anything in order to avoid work. After putting his family on the plane for Italy, he returns to his apartment, vowing to begin writing his book the next morning, bright and early. In order to prepare himself for that momentous step, he engages in a frenzy of activity, cleaning up the accumulation of papers on his desk, classifying his voluminous

and hopelessly unmanageable notes, sweeping his office floor, taking the rug out onto the balcony to give it a sound beating (18-21). Toussaint describes those rituals of preliminary procrastination with some hilarity; yet one senses that, for anyone who has ever practiced them, they are more than a little harrowing, too.

Come the morning, the narrator will not work, of course. Instead, he will devote the days ahead to behaviors that he can substitute for work, wrestling with his conscience in an effort to convince himself that he is using his time productively. Spending an afternoon in a city park, he indulges agreeably in two of his favorite pastimes, thinking and swimming:

> I was stretched out on my back in the water, reflecting on my study, my two hands limp and relaxed floating next to me, and I watched them with a benevolent curiosity, my wrists slackened, each finger, each joint eased in the marvelous liquid element in which I bathed, my legs extended and my body suspended, my package lightly emerging from the water, like a very simply arranged still life, two prunes and a banana, which a very mild wave sometimes partially covered. In short, work. (74)

Yet that industrious contemplation of his own genitalia, however inspirational they might seem, brings little real solace to the narrator. For the only way he can get his mind to focus on the problem of work is to construe it as an eternally deferred abstraction: "I continued to think of my work in that manner, as a delicious and distant eventuality, a little bit vague and abstract, reassuring, which only circumstances, alas, momentarily prevented me from finishing" (193).

Clearly, if the narrator wishes to justify his own sloth, he must work harder at it. With all the intellectual resource he can muster, he constructs elaborate, intricate arguments to explain his failure to work, gradually building up an imposing edifice of self-deception and bad faith. Assuming once again the only position for which he is truly suited, supine, he basks in the sun, meditating on the mutual affinities of work and reverie, luxuriating in an orgy of sophistry: "However, wasn't working precisely this, I told myself, this slow and progressive opening of the spirit and this total availability of the senses that came over me little by little?" (89). Isn't the act of thinking about work, in other words, work enough? A corollary to that thesis occurs to him in a flash of insight, one which appears to blunt the horns of his dilemma: "not writing is at least às important as writing" (90).

Would it were so. If one could just hold onto that shining proposition firmly, one might believe in it deeply enough to make it *work*. But there's the rub, after all: work itself. In his moments of weakness—and they are, alas, legion—the narrator suspects dimly that merely thinking about work will not get his book on Titian written. Moreover, more chillingly still, he wonders on occasion if that very process of reflection is not in fact counterproductive to the task at hand:

> The rule, once again, seemed to confirm itself. I had not yet formulated it clearly to myself, but its pertinence had already appeared to me in a shadowy manner on many occasions. One's chances of successfully finishing a project are inversely proportional to the time one devotes to talking about it beforehand. For the simple reason, it seemed me, that, if one has already luxuriated in the potential joys of a project during the stages preceding its realization, there remains, at the moment when one has to begin it, merely the pain inherent in the process of creation, of burden, of labor. (53-54)

How else to account for the fact that when he finally sits down to write, despite his exhaustive preparation, he finds himself with nothing to say? That moment, long anticipated and lovingly imagined over many arduous months, is the narrator's dark night of the soul. "Seated in my study," he says, "I looked at my computer glowing before me, and I reflected that my desire to finish this essay had quite simply passed" (52).

In short, he's blocked. He realizes that fact, moreover, which only accentuates the tragic character of his situation. One imagines that this is not the first time in his career that the narrator has wrestled with the writer's worst bogeyman. He's not the first writer to do so—nor, one can predict with confidence, the last. Moreover, the narrator of *La Télévision* is the most recent avatar of a venerable literary type. In the contemporary French tradition, for example, one can point to Roquentin in Sartre's *La Nausée (Nausea),* a historian, also, who loses his enthusiasm for his writing project; or to Joseph Grand in Camus's *La Peste (The Plague),* who for years on end writes and rewrites the first sentence of his novel because nothing less than perfection will serve to enable the rest. Like Grand, the narrator of Toussaint's novel will struggle manfully against his condition, engaging in a Sisyphean labor that is as noble as it is absurd. By dint of an almost superhuman effort, he succeeds in writing

the first two words of his book: "When Musset." Yet when his wife calls him on the telephone and asks him how it's going, he tells her he has written half a page (107). In a charitable perspective, one might suggest that he is motivated in this instance by modesty, rather than by duplicity, because, in his current state, those two words represent volumes.

Squarely facing his block, the narrator tries a variety of ways to negotiate it, each resulting in defeat: "In the days that followed, I no longer tried to work quite as systematically on my essay. I chose instead an angle of attack that was less voluntary, more diffused, more subterranean" (164). But that subterranean strategy will not avail, either—and we recognize in any case that the literature of our time is littered with the bodies of underground men. Upon her return from Italy, Delon comments upon her husband's work, with the awesome trenchancy that spouses of academics habitually display. Speaking of their young son, she remarks, "At the rate you're writing, he'll be an adult by the time it's published" (254). The reader of *La Télévision* is perhaps less sanguine still than Delon, for the final pages of the novel portray the narrator trying to write in his study with not one, but two TVs braying in the background.

Jean-Philippe Toussaint, for his part, demonstrates quite a bit of sympathy toward his character, even at those moments when the narrator is the vector of the author's sharpest ironies. That sympathy hinges on the task they share, writing, and specifically upon the issue of writing as work. In an interview that appeared in 1994, Toussaint responded to a question about the way he writes with the following comments:

> I write in a more or less definitive way, and I take an awfully long time over the beginning; It's always the most elaborate, most reread, most revised part. I remember that for *L'Appareil-photo (The Camera)* I spent more than a month on the first paragraph. In spite of the fact that I already had my inaugural idea: to juxtapose two independent and rather uninteresting events. After four months, I had just about written the first part. Thereafter, and each time it's practically the same, everything came together until the rapid acceleration of the end. Then I write much faster. But since I always need to feel like it's a question of a quest [*une recherche*], when things begin to come too easily, I call a halt to the book. (Ammouche-Kremers 28-29)

Several things are worthy of note here. Toussaint's avowal of the difficulties he experiences in the liminal phase of his novels is particularly pungent when one reads it in juxtaposition with *La Télévision:* one might suggest that the narrator's struggles in that novel are a kind of *demonstratio ad absurdam* of the process that Toussaint describes here. His remarks about the rhythm of his writing are interesting, also. To the degree that that rhythm accelerates, Toussaint becomes suspicious of his writing. Writing must not come easily, he argues, invoking implicitly the aesthetic principle of *difficulté vaincue;* it is only through a laborious negotiation with difficulty that good writing can come about. Toussaint believes firmly that writing must be a *recherche.* Surely the Proustian overtones of that word are not lost on him, and I think it is legitimate to assume that he intends it to designate a dynamic of rigorous inquiry and innovation, a very deliberate, painstaking itinerary of literary experimentation that cannot concede anything at all to the facile. Briefly stated, Toussaint conceives writing in a resolutely materialist perspective: not as vocation, nor as a matter of inspiration, but rather as hard work.

He insists more directly upon that notion at other points in the interview. "Until now," he says for instance, "everything has always come to me through work. Thus, I would decide to begin writing; I would get ready, would get up early, would sit down at my desk and force myself to remain there" (Ammouche-Kremers 29). Toussaint's vision of writing here recalls Stendhal's celebrated prescription, "Twenty lines a day, genius or not."[9] For Toussaint, it is essential that the process of writerly work be inscribed in the text itself, at every level. Each of his novels, from *La Salle de bain* onward, deals with that issue, if in somewhat different manners; and some, like *La Télévision,* offer a figured chronicle of writing as work. Speaking of *La Réticence,* for example, Toussaint remarks: "I see that book as a metaphor of creation; as a metaphor of the writer's work, of his imagination" (Ammouche-Kremers 31). As Toussaint plots it out carefully on the local maps of his texts, such a strategy goes beyond the more familiar devices of metaliterary discourse, I believe, insofar as it focuses closely upon the literal, material—and apparently trivial—gestures of writing. For the crucial question in Toussaint's novels is how one coaxes words to roost upon a page.

Or, in the case of the narrator of *La Télévision,* how one fails to accomplish that. To all appearances, Toussaint relies on the rhetorical force of counterexample in this novel, ironically comparing his experience of writing with that of his narrator. Yet by his own account, Toussaint is no stranger to writer's block. When asked about his current projects, a couple of years after the publication of *La Réticence,* Toussaint had this to say:

> After *La Réticence,* I no longer had the desire to write, I even experienced a kind of disgust sometimes. [. . .] For the last year and a half, not only have I written nothing, but I find writing, even writing a letter, extremely painful. If once I entertained the idea of a certain perfection in writing, today I'm seeking a kind of nonacademic awkwardness which, paradoxically, seems to be even more difficult to attain. (Ammouche-Kremers 35)

In light of that confession, would it be stretching the point to suggest that, in addition to the considerations I have outlined thus far, *La Télévision* is also a story about Toussaint's own struggle with writer's block? If one accepts that hypothesis, it becomes clear that Toussaint describes his narrator's dilemma from a special vantage point, one in which proximity and distance alternate in canny ways. On the one hand, Toussaint invites us to feel the anguish that a writer experiences when the words won't come, dwelling minutely on the excruciating tortures of failure. On the other hand, that account is mediated by the figure of the narrator who, after all, despite the fact that he resembles his creator in certain key regards, is not Toussaint himself. Moreover, the fact that we are holding the novel in our hands serves as the surest guarantor that Toussaint, unlike his narrator, ultimately found a way to overcome his writerly dilemma.

The problem of writer's block is heavily mediated, too, by the fact that Toussaint packages it in a wrapping of comedy. From the beginning, humor has been his signature, a puckish, absurdist sort of humor that leavens even the most dire of the traumas that assail his characters.[10] In *La Télévision,* the comic dimension of Toussaint's discourse is closely organized and framed as a structural principle, because Toussaint stages his novel—and the capital issue of writing itself—very deliberately as a *game.* Like Johan Huizinga before him, Toussaint realizes that literature is fundamentally ludic in nature;[11] and

he recognizes, too, the formidable advantages that ludic systems offer, precisely as laboratories of *recherche.* They allow people to test ideas in a circumscribed field of inquiry, according to a set of protocols, in a manner that is both useful and amusing.

Games are meant to be played, of course, and *La Télévision* is no exception. Here, the players are author and reader: they interact in the ludic economy of the text in a dynamic of exchange, sometimes in a collaborative way, sometimes in apparent competition. Like any game, this novel is governed by a set of rules.[12] They might be articulated as follows. First, we shall examine certain phenomena, for instance television and literature, the prolixity of the one medium and the relative muteness of the other, popular culture and elite culture, sloth and work, facility and constraint, aesthetic sterility and creativity. Then we shall turn each of those things inside out and vex them individually and severally against each other. At the end of that process (and here is the leap of faith for any reader who accepts the ludic contract that Toussaint tenders) we will decide who wins. Obviously, Toussaint constructs the rules of this game to his advantage; but many of us (and not least those of us in academe) know that games are often rigged, yet we can take considerable pleasure in them nonetheless. For Toussaint is a most savant gamesman,[13] and he realizes that the stakes are too high in this case to leave the result to mere chance. As we push the various tokens around the board of this novel, it gradually becomes clear that we are being asked to adjudicate an issue that goes well beyond the limits of the game we've been playing so agreeably, the question of whether literature can continue to prosper as a cultural form, or not.

Dominique Fisher sees in Toussaint's early novels a "hyperparodic writing which, not without humor, shows that it's in its end, in its own death, that the novel can exist and continue to be written" (628), and I feel that *La Télévision* contains the same sort of survivalist message. Through the narrator's unequal contest with TV and his fitful endeavors to write a book on Titian, Toussaint plays out a drama that may be read by any writer—and particularly any academic writer—as a cautionary tale. Through the immediate example of his own writing, he adumbrates a ludic parable of literature, speculating upon literature's limits and possibilities on a contemporary cultural horizon where the value of literature is no longer taken as axiomatic, but on

the contrary must be demonstrated afresh with each new literary gesture. In the mutual, playful articulation of those examples, what slowly takes shape in *La Télévision,* dimly at first and as if in profile, is a moral lesson that should have been obvious from the start, and which Toussaint offers, with wild surmise and considerable astonishment, both to himself and to us: if you *work* at it long enough and hard enough, any piece of writing will come to an end—even this one.

NOTES

[1] Many of Toussaint's critics have commented on the theme of immobility in his work. See for instance Bertho 19; Caldwell 369 and 373; Delannoi 1198-1200; Fisher 618; Leclerc, "Abstraction" 891 and "Autour" 68; Motte "Toussaint's Small World" 755-56; Prince "L'Appareil récit de Jean-Philippe Toussaint" 110; Taminiaux 91; and Westphal 122. See also Toussaint's remarks about the role of that theme in his first novel, *La Salle de bain* (Ammouche-Kremers 31).

[2] On the use of the photographic image in Toussaint's early novels, see Fauvel 38-39 and Taminiaux 87-93.

[3] See the inaugural words of *La Société du spectacle (The Society of the Spectacle):* "The entire life of societies in which modern consitions of production reign displays itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles.* Everything that had once been directly lived has now faded into a representation."

[4] On the way the spectacle "inverts" reality, see Debord 11-12.

[5] See Motte "Toussaint's Small World" 750-52 on the representation of banality in *La Salle de bain;* and Fisher, who analyzes the construction of a "daily hyperreal" (621) in Toussaint's first three novels.

[6] Or so I'm told. For my part, I have never seen *Baywatch*—and certainly would not admit it if I had.

[7] Dominique Fisher has commented incisively upon that phenomenon in Toussaint's early novels: "The mediation of reference by the screen or the windowpane leads to an 'atopos of the imaginary' similar to that which Buci-Glucksmann alludes to in *La Folie du voir* (The Madness of Sight). Thus, vision in Toussaint's texts is always obturated by windowpanes. The windowpane works like a screen; it is the double space of the disappearance of the subject and the object" (620).

[8] On the importance of mirror scenes in Toussaint's *La Salle de bain* and *L'Appareil-photo,* see Motte "Toussaint's Small World" 759 and Taminiaux 93, respectively.

[9] See also the intriguing way Harry Mathews puts that dictum into practice in *20 Lines a Day.*

[10] On humor in Toussaint's work, see Leclerc, "Abstraction" 898 and "Autour" 71-72. Toussaint himself has said he was afraid that the comic nature of his writing would prevent him from being accepted at the Editions de Minuit, and that he was relieved to learn that Jérôme Lindon, the head of that publishing house, has a great taste for humor: "Finally, I was lucky that this book [*La Salle de bain*] suited his taste, which was rather surprising. I loved Beckett and some of the Minuit authors, but the reputation of that publishing house seemed to me frankly too intellectual, that is, a little too serious. But in fact Lindon loves humor" (Ammouche-Kremers 27-28).

[11] See Huizinga 119: "The function of the poet still remains fixed in the play-sphere where it was born. *Poiesis,* in fact, is a play-function. It proceeds within the play-ground of the mind, in a world of its own which the mind creates for it. There things have a very different physiognomy from the ones they wear in 'ordinary life', and are bound by ties other than those of logic and causality."

[12] See Roy Caldwell's insightful remark about Toussaint's first four novels: "Even more than Robbe-Grillet's, Toussaint's narratives appear ludic, that is, governed by arbitrary rules, symmetrical, ritualistic" (371). On play in Toussaint, see also Fisher 628; Leclerc, "Abstraction" 896; and Westphal 119.

[13] Yvan Leclerc points out, tantalizingly enough, that Toussaint won the Junior World Championship of *Scrabble* in 1973 ("Abstraction" 896).

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Lydie Salvayre's Lecture