Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Unfinished

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The fall of 2005 was an unjoyous time in Paris. In the popular press, article after article spoke darkly of a sour mood that had settled over the French, attributed variously to a sluggish economy, faltering confidence in the future of the European Union, sheer boredom, or a vague sense that France's best days lie behind her. Not surprisingly, the latest Michel Houellebecq novel was being touted as the book of the season, and even as the one (gloomy) bright spot in what promised to be a drab literary *rentrée*. Actual events, meanwhile, demonstrated the existence of real suffering in the midst of all this moping: first a series of deadly fires in apartment buildings occupied primarily by African immigrants, then a sudden and protracted eruption of rage from the marginalized communities of the suburbs (no doubt paving the way for yet another resurgence of the xenophobic far right). In short, a field day for prophets of doom of all stripes; for everyone else, there seemed remarkably little reason to be cheerful.

Nevertheless, if you had been strolling the streets of Paris in the fall of 2005, you would have seen one spirit-lifting sight, many times reproduced in the windows of bookstores all over the city: a display consisting of a small bouquet of white-covered books, enlarged photocopies of glowing reviews, and a photograph of a tall man in a sweater, his arms raised and crossed just in front of his eyes, a sheepish grin on his lips. The photo depicted the Belgian writer Jean-Philippe Toussaint; the subject of the glowing reviews was his latest novel, *Fuir*, whose appearance, Houellebecq notwithstanding, was unmistakably the major event of the 2005 literary season.

This may seem a strange thing. Toussaint has long been admired by fans of adventurous new conceptions of the novel, but he has never really imposed himself as a literary star. Neither fascinatingly reclusive nor relentlessly self-promoting, he seems to have devoted little energy to the development of an alluring media persona, and his books appear similarly unfrantic to win us over: brief, not all that numerous, often (and, up to a certain point, accurately) described as "impassive" or "minimalist," they offer stories without clear direction, with uncertain conclusions, rather

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vague characters, mildly enigmatic motivations, little action, and few Big Ideas. There is of course their wonderful humor, but even that is of a somewhat unforthcoming sort, gentle and dry; and then, in any case, humor is hardly the surest path to follow if you want to be taken seriously.

And yet there we are: little by little, Toussaint has worked his way into the French literary mainstream (an arrival confirmed by the attribution of the 2005 Prix Médicis to *Fuir*), demonstrating both the force of his own remarkable writing and the durability of a change in the French novel that is now some twenty years old—like Toussaint's career, as it happens, since it was in 1985 that his first book, *La salle de bain*, was published by the Editions de Minuit. At the time, Minuit's reputation as one of France's most adventurous publishing houses was founded primarily on a glorious—but to some extent faded, or at least fading—past: the golden age of the *nouveau roman*, the days of Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, and Duras. But in fact Minuit had already begun to move beyond that incarnation of itself; by the mid-1980s, it was already offering a home to a new generation of writers, and encouraging another (somewhat quieter) shift in the look and feel of the French novel. Soon this shift would be noted, and the novelists responsible for it—Jean Echenoz, Marie Redonnet, Eric Chevillard, Christian Oster, Marie Ndiaye, Jean-Philippe Toussaint, and others—would be dubbed the "new Minuit" writers. It should immediately be said, of course, that there is no "new Minuit school"; these writers are bound by no manifesto, and their novels neither promote a common agenda nor hew to a specific shared esthetic. Nevertheless, there is a distinctive feel to their work, and a noticeable difference from the avant-garde writing of the sixties and seventies: a greater accessibility, a more self-directed sort of irony, a more playful manipulation of narrative practices, a less overt concern with questions of theory or politics. In other words (and for want of a better term), their writing is postmodern, though even that highly unconfining categorization seems to me irksomely restrictive, given the kaleidoscopic heterogeneity and consistent inventiveness of their output.

Nowhere, perhaps, is this inventiveness more visible than in the novels of Jean-Philippe Toussaint. Toussaint has published eight books in his two decades as a "new Minuit writer." The first three—*La salle de bain* (*The Bathroom*), *Monsieur*, and *L'appareil-photo* (*The Camera*)[1]—have more in common than the novels to come, and it is largely from these that Toussaint derives his reputation as a minimalist. Short, somewhat inscrutable, offering only the most denuded and tenuous sort of plot, each of these books is constructed around a central character whose life

seems to have been (willingly or unwillingly, but in any case not unhappily) pared down to a string of disconnected minor events, and his range of responses reduced to a sort of unalienated passivity, sometimes shading into withdrawal. Nothing particularly decisive happens to these characters; they might travel, they might exert their autonomy in various ways, but in the end their stories are aimless and amorphous ones. *La réticence* (*Reticence*) marks a sort of change in this pattern, for here a plot can be made out, slight but unmistakable, with a beginning, a middle, and—unusual for Toussaint—an end: a nameless narrator arrives in a foreign town, becomes convinced that something sinister and perhaps criminal is going on around him, then discovers that no such thing is true. A rather self-negating sort of plot, perhaps, but one whose limpidity—indeed, whose very existence—marks a departure from the preceding novels; and from this point forward (up to now, at least), each of Toussaint's books has similarly diverged, in one way or another, from its predecessors. Thus, although his next novel, *La télévision* (*Television*), returns to the sort of inconclusiveness that characterized his earlier work (an art historian on sabbatical leave in Berlin sets out to write a study of Titian and to stop watching television, and apparently—but not certainly—fails on both counts), it also offers Toussaint's first foray into a kind of social critique, for interwoven with that story is an astute and sustained meditation on the place of television in the contemporary world, its pleasures, its dangers, its effect on the way we live and the way we see our surroundings. Such social concerns are entirely absent from Toussaint's next offering, however: the presumably non-fictional *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)* (*Self-portrait [Abroad]*) is composed of eleven little vignettes, most of them humorous in a discreetly absurd kind of way, showing us the author travelling in Europe, Asia, and North Africa. His own role in these anecdotes is for the most part fairly minimal, but he observes the details of the events and their players with an amused, self-deprecatory acuity that might well, in the end, give us a certain idea (whether true or false) of his personality. In *Faire l'amour* (*Making Love*), Toussaint turns to the subject of love—a theme only now and then touched on in his previous novels—and tells of a crisis in the relationship of an unnamed narrator and his flamboyant lover, Marie de Montalte. *Fuir* (a title we might translate as *Flight*, in the sense of "fleeing") unexpectedly returns to the couple introduced in that previous novel, recounting another charged moment in their shared existence: the death of Marie's father, several months before the events of *Faire l'amour*.

With each of these works—since *La réticence*, at least—Toussaint has consistently strayed from the expectations set up by his previous novels. Indeed, as he makes clear in an interview from just after *La réticence*, he considers this unpredictability a vital element of his craft: " . . . as I go on writing, I upset the hypotheses of the specialists working on my texts. Thus, the people who studied my first three books are troubled by *La réticence*. And that's a very good thing: as a writer, it's my job to shake things up, and not to let myself fit into a mold" (Ammouche-Kremers 27). Now, it is of course entirely possible to produce a brilliant body of work by writing one text after another in the same vein: think of Beckett, for example, or Patrick Modiano, not to mention such contemporary Minuit writers as Eric Chevillard or Jean Echenoz. I certainly don't mean to cast Toussaint's refusal to settle down as the sign of some particular virtue or superiority; nevertheless, I believe it's an important thing to note, for to my mind it represents one way of approaching his two most recent novels, of appreciating their remarkable density and—perhaps—their newness.

I'd like to talk about those two novels in these pages, but I mean to do so only in a tentative and provisional way, for I've noted that, thanks to Toussaint's insistence on undoing the assumptions created by his own earlier works, interpretations of his writing tend to become obsolete at an alarming rate. It was once entirely possible, for instance, to call Toussaint a minimalist—in at least one interview, he even does so himself (Ammouche-Kremers 33)—but I don't see how that label could legitimately be applied to *Faire l'amour* and *Fuir*, which are novels of a perfectly respectable length, rich and complex, full of descriptive detail and even of action (elements that, as Sophie Bertho notes, are markedly absent from Toussaint's earlier works [16]). Similarly, Toussaint once claimed that his stylistic ambition was a writing of "non-academic awkwardness" (Ammouche-Kremers 35), but that too seems to have fallen by the wayside; the writing in these two latest books is in fact remarkably eloquent, and even hauntingly beautiful. Nor does his oeuvre now look so much like "an epic of the trivial" (Motte 179) or a "meticulous observation of the little trivialities and problems with which daily life is studded" (Durand 542): the everyday has its place in *Fuir* and *Faire l'amour*, but only in the context of extraordinary, shattering emotions and events. Toussaint's novels were at one time marked by "a flagrant absence of plot" (Lemesle 118), but no more; similarly, the vagueness of the earlier books' chronology (Lemesle 107) has disappeared in these last two novels, whose stories unambiguously unfold over a determinable number of

days. Once it could be said that Toussaint's characters "no longer believe in external reality, but rather in the mediatization of that reality" (Fauvel 617), and that their existence is reduced to a series of "pseudo-events" in which "nothing happens" (Fauvel 618); but the characters of *Faire l'amour* and *Fuir* are caught up in a reality that seems only too real, the reality of death and lost love, of fear and confusion. If *La télévision* was a "warning cry in the face of a robotized society" (Durand 542), these most recent novels are entirely fixated on immediate, genuine emotion. Gone, then, are the clone-like, "entirely de-eroticized" characters (Fisher 628) of the past; sex is in fact a crucial element of the latest two novels, along with such intimately human sentiments as jealousy, longing, and even hope.

And so forth and so on. In no way do I mean to question the sagacity of these readings; on the contrary, what I find remarkable is how *true* such descriptions were when they were made, and how little they have to do with Toussaint's most recent books. How to interpret this shift? I can imagine two ways. The first would be to assert that Toussaint has abandoned everything that once made his work "new," that his writing has simply grown less unorthodox in recent years. I'll return later to this interpretation, with which I vehemently disagree. Rather, I would argue that this disparity is the sign of a writer who, twenty years into his career, is still devising, discovering, and rethinking the parameters of his oeuvre, actively resisting definition, categorization, and closure. And this brings us to an aspect of Toussaint's writing that has *not* changed all that much in the past twenty years, except to grow more insistent, more multiplicitous in its effects, and more varied in its forms: a consistent refusal to conclude.

This refusal marks Toussaint's narratives every bit as strongly as it does his career. Vague, apparently aimless, his novels seem to be made up of inconclusive or incomplete events, strung together to form nothing more than an "enumeration of facts with no evident necessary relationship between them" (Lemesle 112). Because of this directionless quality, the reader finds it difficult to assemble the novel's episodes into one coherent, fully-motivated narrative; hence the frequently repeated claim that "nothing happens" in Toussaint's novels. In fact, a great many things happen, even in his most minimalist texts; the impression of inertia and randomness derives simply from the absence of any conclusive way to understand the relationship of those events to a larger story. Take for example *La télévision*: the broader story of that novel concerns an academic who wants to write a monograph and to stop watching TV, but the events that make up his narration have little to do with those laudable

aims. He swims, he (very half-heartedly) tends to his vacationing neighbors' plants, he goes for an airplane ride over Berlin—in short, he does a great deal, but nothing particularly relevant to his stated ambitions. Of course, it would be possible for the narrator to *make* these episodes relevant: he would have only to conclude his narration with something like, "And so, given all that had happened over the summer, I to decided give up (or to pursue with greater fervor) my project to write a study of Titian (or to stop watching television)." With a final sentence like that, it would become possible for the reader to construct some connection between the events and the story; if *La télévision* does not allow that connection to be made, it's because the narration does not give us the conclusion that would allow us to make it. (At the end of the tale, the narrator has not really decided to give up or not to give up on either of his two goals; if he had, the novel would *ipso facto* have a plot.) Like many of Toussaint's novels, then, *La télévision* works to avoid any sense of conclusion, and I think "works" is indeed the word. To my mind, we should see the vagueness of this and Toussaint's other novels not as some sort of gratuitous, quirky play with the reader's expectations, but as the expression of a coherent creative stance: an opposition to ends and ending, and a championing of mutability and potential.

The full import of that stance is suggested most clearly in the final pages of *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)*. The little stories recounted in that text's first ten chapters are in the end not so very different from the episodes of (for example) *La télévision*: they generally involve minor events, leading to no particular conclusion or revelation. In one chapter, the author arrives in Japan for the first time and meets an old friend of his wife, who fills him in on the latest news from Corsica. In another, he is introduced to a Japanese admirer of his works, who tells him she expected him to be "more intelligent" in person (70); he is then taken to a striptease show of some considerable sordidity. One chapter shows him trying and failing to learn to cut fish in the Japanese style; in another, he briefly makes life difficult for a clerk in a Berlin delicatessen, who attempted to sell him an overly thin slice of aspic. In one episode, he triumphs in a *boules* match on a Corsican beach; another finds him participating in a colloquium of French and Vietnamese writers in Hanoi, a meeting that produces nothing more edifying than a funnily incongruous song performed by the actress and singer Jane Birkin. Each of these episodes ends without anything in particular having been demonstrated or made clear; each ends, too, with the expectation of some possible revelation to come in the following chapter, and in the following journey. For, as Toussaint writes

in a little liminal text that appears on the first page of the book, "Whenever I travel, I'm always gripped by a very slight terror just as I'm setting off, a terror sometimes tinged with a faint shiver of exaltation. Because I know that with travel there always comes the possibility of death—or of sex (highly improbable occurrences, of course, but all the same never to be ruled out entirely)" (7). Like the author setting off on his journey, the forewarned reader launches into each segment with the knowledge (or hope, or fear) that *something could happen* (death, sex, even perhaps the appearance of some concrete element of the promised self-portrait). The fact that no such thing comes before us only makes us more eager to begin the next chapter, convinced that new possibilities lie just around the corner, and encouraged in this belief by the very inconclusiveness of the preceding segment's conclusion.

But with the final chapter, "Retour à Kyoto" ("Return to Kyoto"), this impression of possibility and potential comes to an abrupt, painful halt. Here we see the hungover author standing in the rain, "thinking of times past" (116), looking into a closed train station he once frequented, trying but failing to weep over the destructive passage of time. "Until now," he writes in the book's final lines, "that sensation of being carried off by time had always been muted by the fact that I wrote. Writing was in a sense a way of resisting the current that was dragging me off, a means of inscribing myself in time, of laying down points of reference within the immateriality of its flow, incisions, scratch-marks" (119-20). There are two ways to read these lines, it seems to me. They might describe an author's despair in the depths of a case of writer's block (until now, writing allowed him to escape the destructive force of time, but now that he can no longer write, he feels himself being swept irresistibly toward oblivion); or perhaps it is not the author's gift that has failed him, but writing itself (once, writing allowed him to feel as though he were resisting the passage of time, but now it no longer has that power). I see no way to decide between these two readings: we know that Toussaint did suffer a prolonged bout of writer's block after *La réticence* (Ammouche-Kremers 34), an experience which, as Warren Motte suggests, might be visible in the plight of the narrator of *La télévision* (191), but of course there's no reason to assume that this is the key to the chapter from *Autoportrait*. In either case, though, the broader idea is the same: writing, when it works, offers an escape from the end. Writing means *going on*. It means the opposite of impossibility, the opposite of definition and closure—but, as the author finds here, writing can also fall silent, and with that comes helplessness, immobility, death. There is

of course a cruel irony in the placement of this passage at the end of *Autoportrait*, for with these words, the book itself falls silent (stops "writing," stops creating text), and so does indeed find itself swept away, its events no longer happening, its potential extinguished, ready to go back on the bookshelf, closed, mute, already half-forgotten.

One way (among others) to read *Faire l'amour* and *Fuir*, I think, is as an answer to that very threat of disappearance and as a reaffirmation of writing's powers to overcome it, for here we find a refusal to conclude pushed to some remarkable lengths. These two novels tell of two different moments in the complicated relationship of Marie de Montalte (a designer and artist of considerable international renown) and an anonymous narrator (*very* anonymous, in fact, even by Toussaint's standards: while we discover a great deal about Marie in these two novels, we really learn nothing tangible about their narrator). *Faire l'amour*, which opens with the word "Winter" printed alone on a page, covers three or four days in Japan, where Marie and the narrator have come for the opening of an exhibition devoted to her work, and where their troubled relationship seems destined to reach a fatal crisis. The story begins on the night of their arrival, with an emotionally fragile Marie weeping uncontrollably at the narrator's distance and unresponsiveness. (Indeed, this narrator seems to be a strangely if quietly tortured soul: for reasons never made clear, he has taken to carrying a vial of hydrochloric acid with him wherever he goes, ready to fling its contents into someone's eyes when circumstances require it, but at the same time tormented by the idea of actually doing so, particularly if the victim should turn out to be Marie.) Marie numbly prepares for bed, still weeping, and then things take an unexpected turn: pulling the narrator to her, she wordlessly compels him to make love with her, no doubt for the last time. This act is interrupted, however, when the television set suddenly switches on, announcing the arrival of a fax. Unable to continue, the narrator flees the room and goes for a midnight swim in the hotel pool; he then meets up with Marie in the lobby, and together they wander aimlessly through the cold Tokyo streets, stopping to eat soup and to buy warm athletic socks (they're both underdressed for the weather). They witness a fairly minor but frightening earthquake, and as Marie clings to the narrator for comfort, their lovemaking seems on the point of resuming. They stumble back to the hotel and collapse wearily into bed; but soon the phone rings, announcing the arrival of Marie's welcoming party, who take her and the narrator to the museum to plan the hanging of her exhibition. Exhausted and feverish, the narrator returns to the hotel,

then flees to Kyoto, where he spends a few days in the house of an old friend. Finally he calls Marie, and their conversation suggests the possibility of a reconciliation. The narrator returns to Tokyo, but his calls to the hotel room go unanswered; he makes for the closed museum, forcing his way past the guard, wandering through the rooms now full of Marie's creations, unable to stop imagining himself throwing his acid into her face. At last the guard chases him from the museum, and he finds his way into a small park, where he finally pours his acid onto a small flower; the novel ends with the flower shriveling, and the narrator recognizing (but with what emotion we do not know) that he himself is "the origin of this tiny disaster" (179).

Fuir is set the preceding summer (again, the season is announced by an isolated word on the first page). This novel begins with the narrator arriving in China, where he has come to do a favor for Marie (the delivery of $25,000 in cash to her business associate Zhang Xiangzhi) and then to indulge in a bit of tourism. For reasons the narrator doesn't entirely understand, Zhang gives him a cellphone on his arrival; shortly thereafter, he introduces the narrator to a young woman named Li Qi, for whom he feels an immediate, and reciprocated, attraction. She invites him to accompany her on a jaunt to Beijing, and he accepts; only later does he learn to his dismay that Zhang Xiangzhi will also be going along. Nevertheless, on the night train taking the trio to Beijing, he and Li Qi slip away into the bathroom. Just as they're about to make love, the narrator's new cellphone rings: on the other end of the line is Marie, calling from the Louvre, where she has just learned of her father's death. Stunned, the narrator spurns Li Qi's further advances; arriving at the hotel in Beijing, he arranges to return to Europe the next day, unperturbed by the discovery that Zhang and Li Qi are sharing a room, but shaken when he sees Zhang surreptitiously slipping Li Qi what he believes to be Marie's $25,000. He now has one day to kill in Beijing. Zhang Xiangzhi shows him around a small corner of the city, then takes care of some business of his own: he buys a used motorcycle, on which he immediately whisks the narrator to a suburban bowling alley. Here they are joined by Li Qi, who gives Zhang a mysterious package. Suddenly Zhang's cellphone rings, and he hurries the other two to his motorcycle. Together they flee into the night, hotly pursued, perhaps, by the police; Zhang speeds through the streets to a small bar, where he conceals the package (a drug shipment, the narrator concludes) in a cubbyhole. With this he and Li Qi race off again, leaving the narrator to return to his hotel. We next see him arriving on the island of Elba, where Marie's father has

lived out his last years in a sort of self-imposed semi-exile from society. Deciding not to stay at Marie's father's house, the narrator finds a hotel, then makes his way to the church, where the funeral is already under way. He disappears halfway through, however, to wander the streets of Portoferraio; after the funeral, Marie comes looking for him, and eventually finds him in his room. They begin to make love, but Marie, abruptly deciding that this is the wrong time, puts a stop to it; they then drive to a small cove to go swimming. Marie resolves to swim around a promontory to the next cove while the narrator heads to the same spot on foot. He begins to fear she might drown on the way, but to his relief he soon spots her, and joins her in the water. In the sea, under the stars, Marie finally gives into her long-contained grief.

There is much to be said about each of these novels individually, but what interests me most is their implied invitation to be read together—an invitation, not an obligation, for there is no *necessary* connection between them, no overarching single conception. Indeed, when we met briefly in October 2005, Toussaint told me that he had no intention of writing the second novel as he was writing the first, and that as of now he does not know whether he will write another book in this series, even if the headings "Winter" and "Summer" suggest the possible future appearance of "Fall" and "Spring" installments. One can thus easily read *Fuir* without having read *Faire l'amour*, just as it was (and presumably still is) possible to read *Faire l'amour* with no knowledge of *Fuir*. Nevertheless, the invitation is there (in the two novels' shared characters, and even in the form of their titles: two unadorned infinitives, simultaneously linking these two books and separating them from Toussaint's earlier novels, whose titles are all unadorned nouns). If we were to accept that invitation, I believe we might discover an astonishingly complex set of interactions, correspondences, and divergences, and an intriguing meditation on the subject of endings, in life and especially in literature.

There is no denying that, from one point of view, both novels appear to be headed toward a very definite closure in their final pages. *Fuir* finds the couple reunited after a separation, both physically and emotionally close, the narrator having apparently forgotten Li Qi and explicitly feeling a renewed surge of love for Marie. In *Faire l'amour*, too, there has been a separation (the narrator's trip to Kyoto), which is now potentially about to come to an end; here too, love seems to have triumphed over the couple's passing estrangement (such is at least the apparent sense of their final telephone conversation). The instability that marks the beginning of *Fuir*

(the narrator far from Marie, their future in doubt) is thus seemingly resolved at the end of the novel, and the same can be said of *Faire l'amour*, where the opening instability (the narrator always about to fling his vial of acid, he and Marie headed for a crisis) seems at least momentarily stilled. In fact, however, each of these conclusions is haunted by an insistent ambiguity and uncertainty. In *Faire l'amour*, after all, we really have no idea whether the couple will or will not be reunited. The dead flower that is the novel's final image offers us precious little insight, particularly since we can't even be sure that it is meant to be telling us something—and if it is, just what that might be. Does it perhaps stand for Marie? For the couple's relationship? If so, we might conclude that their love is well and truly over. Then again, perhaps we should be thinking less of the flower and more of the narrator's abandonment of his cherished acid, which might mean a renunciation of fear and defensiveness, and so a renewed ability to love. There is perhaps a kind of conclusion here, but we have no way of knowing what it is. In *Fuir*, the tenuous nature of the story's closure is simpler and more overt: having read *Faire l'amour*, we *know* that the narrator's renewed love for Marie won't last long, and we know that Marie will still be grieving bitterly for her father months later, her sorrow still unsettling, still disruptive, still unresolved.

This refusal to make the conclusion conclusive manifests itself more dramatically in the curious relationship between each novel's events and the moment of their narration. "Would it ever end, with Marie?" run the first words of *Fuir* (11), a sentiment further developed a few pages later: "Was it already a lost cause, with Marie? And what could I have known about it then?" (20). Beneath these questions lurks the possibility of an imminent end to the relationship, and a simultaneous refusal to speak decisively about that end. The words "What could I have known about it then?" tell us that the narrator *does* "know about it" now—but what does he know? What has happened? And for that matter, when is "now"? After the events of *Fuir* but before those of *Faire l'amour*? If so, he really doesn't know much. After the events of *both* novels? In that case, he might know something, but he won't tell us what it is—which is in fact precisely the situation we find in *Faire l'amour*, whose action is set "a few weeks ago" (12) and whose events cover only three or four days. In that novel, then, the narrator *knows* what became of his attempt to see Marie again, but again he refuses to offer us that conclusion. To be sure, he writes that on that fateful night in Tokyo "we were separating forever" (12) and making love "for the last time" (16); but, he immediately goes on

to wonder, "how many times had we made love for the last time? I don't know, often . . ." (16). In short, Toussaint seems to work quite deliberately to remove every trace of a conclusion from this end-of-the-affair tale. Or rather: the end of the affair is always there, looming, and at the same time always fading. "Breaking up, I was beginning to realize, was more a state than an action," writes the narrator of *Faire l'amour* (129), and in a sense those words might well be speaking of *both* novels: the subject of each is an end (of a love affair, of a life), and each tells a story that arrives at an end, and yet something about that end prevents it from ending the events that preceded it.

Each of these novels thus has a complex and seemingly contradictory relationship with its own ending, and with the idea of the end. The relationship *between* the two novels is equally paradoxical, and indeed more destabilizing, marked as it is by a volatile mix of opposition and congruence. The oppositions between the two books are more or less overt: the titles themselves evoke two actions that could scarcely be more different, an opposition underscored by the prominent display of the two novels' seasonal settings, and by the insistent references to cold and rain in *Faire l'amour* and to dry heat in *Fuir*. Similarly, while the actions depicted in *Faire l'amour* take place primarily at night, those of *Fuir* are largely illuminated by bright sunlight (though the cover of darkness also plays an important role in this novel). Too, at the beginning of *Faire l'amour*, Marie and the narrator are physically together, and at the end apart, whereas *Fuir* runs in precisely the opposite direction. Beneath these superficial contradictions, however, lies an intricate network of parallels, whose effect is to force that opposition into a kind of congruence. We have only to return to the two titles to find an example of this: there is in fact no more lovemaking in *Faire l'amour* than in *Fuir*, and no more fleeing in *Fuir* than in *Faire l'amour* (in which, after all, the narrator flees both Marie and the museum guard).

But it is the parallel quality of the two novels' story lines that I find most striking. Both novels open with a set of events that are clearly headed somewhere, and in fact toward the *same* destination: an act of love. Everything effortlessly falls into place to make way for that act, and to lead up to it: Marie's slow, almost unconscious striptease at the beginning of *Faire l'amour*, the immediate attraction between the narrator and the conveniently forward Li Qi in *Fuir*. Each opening is thus headed toward an act of love—and of course the act of love itself is by its nature headed toward a conclusion—but in both novels that act is abruptly halted (and that conclusion prevented) by a communications device: the

television announcing the incoming fax in *Faire l'amour*, the ringing of the narrator's cellphone in *Fuir*. And with this, in both cases, begins a new phase in the action: a phase of indirection, of uncertain wandering, in which the narrator performs or is caught up in acts without necessary conclusion, heading nowhere in the most literal sense (in *Faire l'amour*, the quick swim on the top floor of the hotel, the aimless early-morning stroll in the nearby streets, the abortive attempt to accompany Marie to the museum, the short stay in Kyoto, the return to the museum; in *Fuir*, the fruitless attempt to sleep, the meandering, unfocused tour of one small neighborhood of Beijing with Zhang Xiangzhi, the trip to the bowling alley, the unexplained flight on the motorcycle, the narrator's directionless stroll through the streets of Portoferraio both before and after his glimpse of Marie at the funeral). After this period of wandering, each story closes on a note of loss and grief, with the impression of something broken: in *Fuir*, Marie's long-deferred outpouring of tears, in *Faire l'amour* the narrator's pouring out of the acid. And in both cases the sense of that ending is similarly uncertain, as we've already seen: in *Faire l'amour*, if the narrator's release of the acid might seem to constitute a sort of symbolic orgasm (much earlier, describing the lovemaking with Marie, he writes that "sexual pleasure was rising up within us like acid" [34]), thus finally putting an end to the action begun in the novel's first pages, it remains unclear whether this will only be one more of the many "last times"—past, and perhaps future—that the narrator has engaged in this act. In *Fuir*, of course, the reunion of the couple is *already* made uncertain by what we know of the events that will follow it in *Faire l'amour*.

To be sure, this parallelism is not systematic or mechanical; nevertheless, it recurs with some insistence throughout the two novels, extending beyond these questions of structure and into the intimate details of the narration. In both novels, reference is repeatedly made to darkness, light, dusk, and dawn: the couple is physically and emotionally reunited as night as falling in *Fuir*; in *Faire l'amour*, the narrator fears the imminent sunrise as he and Marie are wandering the streets of Tokyo, convinced that "with the end of the night our love would end" (71). In *Fuir*, the narrator's late-night assignation with Li Qi is interrupted by Marie's distraught call from Paris, where "it's light outside, she told me, it's terribly light out" (47). But often the echoes are much more fleeting: in *Faire l'amour*, we read that the logo of Marie's clothing company shows "a couple running along, in silhouette [that is, in the form of *ombres chinoises*, or 'Chinese shadow figures']" (67); in *Fuir*, we see the narrator and Li Qi, newly met but already lost in conversation, "silhouetted like *ombres*

chinoises—as *chinois* as can be, in fact" (22). Sometimes it's simply a question of wording, now teasingly resonant (looking down at the city from the hotel in *Faire l'amour*, the narrator believes he can see "the convex curve" of the earth [57]; in *Fuir*, he gazes out the train window and sees "the horizon and the curvature of the earth" [47]), now strikingly similar (picking up the phone in *Fuir*, Marie "didn't answer right away, then, in a hesitant voice . . ." [143]; in *Faire l'amour*, again picking up the phone, "She didn't answer right away. Then, in a murmur . . ." [161]), now almost perfectly parallel (" . . . through the [bus] window, I watched the streets of Shanghai disappear in the orange-tinted penumbra of the sunset" [*Fuir* 23]; " . . . leaning against the [train] window, I watched the hills of Kyoto disappear behind me in the night" [*Faire l'amour* 169]).

The relationship between the two books is thus at the same time one of opposition, of parallelism, and even of tangency or intersection. Or so it seems to me, at least: as I said at the outset, my reading of these two novels is meant to be tentative. Nonetheless, I believe that *Fuir* offers us a number of images that might be hinting at just that sort of relationship, visual metaphors serving as objective correlatives of opposition and sameness. Describing Li Qi at the bar of the bowling alley as she calmly chats with the bartender while surreptitiously inviting the narrator to clasp her hand behind her back, Toussaint writes: "there was a perfect dichotomy in her pose, her body and face turned toward the bartender ... and her right hand still outstretched behind her" (107): there is one Li Qi, and there are two. And here is the narrator describing himself and Marie embracing on the beach near Portoferraio, himself wearing no shirt and Marie no trousers: "now we formed one single body, half naked, half clothed" (177): there are two bodies, and there is one (or should that be two, intersecting?). Swimming to meet Marie at the end of the novel, the narrator peers through the water toward the sea floor below and sees "a blurred world of darkness, slopes, and abysses, like the concave reflection of the mountain's rugged terrain" (183): here, two perfectly opposed worlds are revealed to be oddly alike. Much earlier, at an art opening in Beijing, the narrator describes the videos being projected on the walls, "the images diluting each other . . . , separating and dissolving, then coming together and diverging again" (21): here, distinctness and oneness are continually asserting and annihilating themselves. In images such as these, I believe we might see a model of the ways in which these two novels fit together—and also, not coincidentally, a perfect expression of the narrator's relationship with Marie.

For everything I've just said about these two books would seem to hold true for their central characters as well. Marie and the narrator are

also opposites (she is dramatic, ambitious, masterly, he passive, undemonstrative, and indecisive), and also remarkably similar: when one of Marie's business associates alludes to the early-morning earthquake that ended their stroll through the Tokyo streets, she is reminded of the difficult moment their relationship is going through, and reacts by fleeing the room (*Faire l'amour* 116); when the narrator's friend Bernard alludes to the same earthquake, the narrator responds in precisely the same way (143), without mentioning the similarity, as if unaware, at the time of the event or of its narration, that he is reproducing Marie's actions. Indeed, at times these two seem almost literally to meld into one: at the end of *Fuir*, the narrator spends some ten pages recounting Marie's wanderings after her father's funeral, with a depth of detail that suggests a direct, immediate access to her thoughts and impressions. More strikingly still, in the course of his cellphone conversation with Marie, the narrator pictures her in Paris: "hurrying through the underground shopping mall of the Carrousel du Louvre, I—or she—I'm not sure anymore, the Rue de Rivoli was deserted at the top of the escalators . . ." (*Fuir* 54), the grammatical incoherence of the sentence only underscoring the confusion of identity that seems to have invaded his mind.

Thus, these two novels tell of a profoundly paradoxical relationship, whose intricacies are reproduced in the form of the narrative. At the same time, and in a manner complementary to the nature of that relationship, they put into practice a continuous deferral of the end (of the relationship and of its narration). As I've said, *Faire l'amour* will not allow us to know if the couple's story really has come to an end, and the first words of *Fuir*, even if they speak of an earlier time, are nevertheless, for the reader, speaking *after* the words of *Faire l'amour*. In other words, *Fuir*'s opening question—"Would it ever end?"—can in a literal sense be taken as an assurance that their story does in fact go on (in the book that this question introduces) even after it has already ended (in the previous [but narratologically posterior] book and, presumably, in the sequence of events it depicts). Here, then, endlessness or unfinishedness takes on a particularly concrete form: the first book is over, and then it is over no more. And this is true not only because that first novel's story is continued in the second, but also because, on finishing *Fuir*, the reader is compelled to go back and reread *Faire l'amour*, to look for points of contact such as those I have just pointed out, to ponder their meaning, and perhaps to scour the one book in search of illumination of the events found in the other. Does the logo of Marie's company described in *Faire l'amour* (the running couple, depicted in *ombres chinoises*) in any way presage or reflect

the events of *Fuir* (the narrator and Li Qi fleeing Zhang's presence to make for the bathroom, or indeed fleeing *with* Zhang on his motorcycle)? Is the narrator's discomfiture when the fax arrives in the middle of his lovemaking with Marie in any way related to the prior experience of the phone call that interrupted his tryst with Li Qi? We can't know, of course, but these are not idle questions: the fact that they can be posed means that the elements of the first novel, which "end" when that novel ends, have now been in a sense brought back to life, ready for revisiting, rethinking, reinterpreting. The end of the relationship isn't the end, nor is its telling, nor is our reading. The fear and despair that we found in the last pages of *Autoportrait* is thus overcome: through writing, this story and its characters are pulled from the deadly riptide of time—and so is the reader, who is thereby allowed to travel backward from winter to summer (and back again, if he or she likes), and to see these two distinct moments as perfectly synchronous, and to recognize, on opening the second novel, that the end of the first was in fact not an end at all.

But—and this is a vitally important point—there is absolutely no reason why Toussaint's novels must be read in such an abstract way. *Faire l'amour* and *Fuir* are *also* beautiful, complicated love stories, genuinely moving and convincing in their mapping out of the tortured terrain of human affection and disaffection. My reading has privileged the formal aspect of these two works, but it would be equally apposite to see in them a sort of reclaiming of emotion—delicate, troubled, noble and ignoble—as a possible preoccupation of the postmodern, post-*nouveau roman* novel. Perhaps there's no need to choose between these two approaches; in our conversation, Toussaint suggested that this possibility of a double reading (one focused above all on the plot, the human story, the other on the abstractions that make it up) was in fact one of his central goals in these books. I hope it's clear how this duality also relates to the idea of unfinishedness: the novel does not really tell us how we are supposed to read it, and so we are free to oscillate between the two readings, or to reread the books in a manner contrary to our first reading, and so on. And this brings me to one final remark, concerning the question that is after all the implied subject of the special issue in which these pages appear: the newness of Toussaint's writing.

Let's return for a moment to the obsolete critical judgments I referred to at the start of this essay, and consider the possible interpretation that I cited and rejected: that Toussaint's writing has simply abandoned the strategies that once made it "new." Were we to pursue our thinking along these lines, we might note that everything I have said about the

structure of the two novels and its alignment with the complexity of the relationship they depict would seem to hark back to that venerable literary ideal, the congruence of form and content (and also to a far more venerable literary theme: *odi et amo*, love and hate intertwined). Is this to say, then, that Toussaint's writing has in some sense lost its newness, and that he has retreated into a sober, genteel classicism? I don't think so; on the contrary, I believe what we find in these novels might represent a way out of and *beyond* the spectacular, militant postmodernism of the 1980s and '90s. From one point of view, these two novels tell an entirely credible love story, and they tell that story, I think, with perfect sincerity, without distance or irony. At the same time, they put into practice a certain approach to the structure and composition of a novel that is informed by modernist notions of form as content, as well as by the theoretical refinements of the *nouveau roman* and its successors (the text is in part written by means of a system of echoes, of resonances and allusions that belong not to the world of the story-as-real-life but to the realm of narrative-as-construction), and these techniques too are deployed without irony, as is the Balzacian or Hollywoodesque phenomenon of the prequel. To my mind, these novels are not really a playful manipulation or quotation of those notions or techniques, but simply a *use* of them, however loose and indirect. Reading these novels, in other words, I find nothing that suggests I am in the presence of a parody or a pastiche; rather, it seems to me that Toussaint has simply taken up a number of tools that have over the years found their way into the novelist's toolbox, and that he has chosen to put them to use, little caring where they came from, less interested in showing us that he is using them than in what they allow him to do.

This, then, might be the nature of the newness of Toussaint's most recent novels: without allowing himself to be trapped in a *definable* postmoderism or traditionalism, he has created a writing that is unabashedly marked by both, and that recombines them in a manner suggestive of many possibilities to come. At the same time, by allowing the rereading, reinterpretation, and recreation of one story by another, he reminds us that a book can be a thing that never closes, that need never end, that can always be new in itself. And there we might see an answer to the desperation we found at the end of *Autoportrait*, and indeed to any fear that the novel as a genre is done for, its best days in the past: writing can go on, stories can go on, like a love affair, even after they've ended—which is, after all, a very fine reason to be cheerful.

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Note

1. Translations of titles may or may not refer to published volumes; see the Works Cited for information on English-language renderings of the works referred to here. Translations of quotations are in all cases my own (even if a published translation of the novel exists), and page numbers refer to the French edition.

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