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Author(s): Charles A. Baker

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La Réticence by Jean-Philippe Toussaint

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Mademoiselle, s'il vous plaît! Elle nous fait pénétrer dans l'univers quotidien des vendeuses où l'on papote, parle des plats qu'on a cuisinés la veille, de ses jambes lourdes et gonflées, de ses enfants, de ses ennuis—de cœur! Une conversation à bâtons rompus est constamment interrompue par la clientèle impatiente, exigeante, harcelante: "Mademoiselle! Mademoiselle, s'il vous plaît! Tu crois qu'elles s'occuperaient de nous, ces vieilles toupies? C'est vraiment plus possible, les grands magasins" (18).

Dans ce roman qui a plutôt l'allure d'un reportage, la chroniqueuse du *Monde* nous fait suivre les déboires et les mésaventures de ces deux héroïnes: Thérèse Lemerrier, dite Tatoune, et Paulette Vidal, surnommée Poupette. Elles sont toutes les deux dans la cinquantaine et sont de vieilles copines. Comme il arrive souvent dans les amitiés, elles sont très différentes l'une de l'autre, mais se complètent. Tatoune est autoritaire, possessive et se déclare raciste, mais a un faible pour les "beurettes". Elle est mariée à Lucien, garçon de café dans un bistrot du quartier, qui la trompe constamment et qu'elle envoie promener, mais qui revient à elle après chaque incartade. Pour Poupette, Tatoune éprouve une tendresse bourrue. Elle la commande et la protège, car elle la trouve trop naïve et confiante, cette gamine de cinquante ans. Poupette, veuve depuis des années, a deux enfants ingrats qui à la fois la malmènent et la dorlotent, car ils ne comprennent pas que leur mère soit restée si fleur bleue et rêve toujours de trouver le grand amour. Son fils Jean-Marc est marié et dirige une agence de tourisme, tandis que sa fille Béa, qui veut devenir actrice, ne travaille que deux jours aux Galeries Lafayette.

L'auteur brosse un tableau satirique de notre société contemporaine. Entre parents et enfants, les rôles sont renversés: une fois qu'ils ont grandi, ce sont les enfants qui surveillent, conseillent, grondent les parents dans la cinquantaine. Poupette se débat contre la tyrannie de ses enfants tour à tour indifférents, égoïstes et possessifs. Sarraute nous fait voir ce monde grouillant des grands magasins. On découvre les relations avec la clientèle: il y a les acheteuses pressées qui viennent à l'heure du déjeuner, il y a celles qui hésitent, viennent se renseigner et ne veulent pas acheter, puis il y a les consommateurs boulimiques qui achètent pour calmer leur angoisse. Sarraute fait le portrait de la vendeuse qui se fait un challenge de vendre, de "faire du chiffre" parce que c'est la preuve qu'elle a bien travaillé: "Le chiffre! le chiffre! Elles qui gagnent à peine le Smic, le Smic horaire, de surcroît elles devraient s'en foutre. Eh ben non, pas du tout! le chiffre, c'est l'angoisse, c'est l'allégresse" (21).

On retrouve dans *Mademoiselle, s'il vous plaît!* le franc-parler et le ton facétieux des livres précédents. L'auteur y est très présente, car elle est un témoin actif qui commente son expérience de vendeuse. Si les propos cocasses et les anecdotes humoristiques de la vie de vendeuse font sourire, l'auteur laisse entrevoir la détresse morale de la femme seule. Un livre plein d'un rire doux-amer.

Hofstra University

Liliane Lazar

TOUSSAINT, JEAN-PHILIPPE. *La Réticence*. Paris: Minuit, 1991. ISBN 2-7073-1395-5. Pp. 159. 65 F.

According to *Le Petit Robert*, "réticence" has two principal meanings: (1) "omission volontaire d'une chose qu'on devrait dire" and (2) "témoignage de réserve dans les discours, le comportement." Both of these definitions are appropriate to *La Réticence*. The anonymous first-person narrator initially holds back information

and then, via flashbacks, constantly re-examines the same data. This narrative process of repetition and accretion both heightens suspense and subtly links Toussaint's novel to the mystery genre. Second, the protagonist, for reasons that are unclear, hesitates to act.

Our narrator arrives at the fishing village of Sasuelo accompanied by his infant son. The ostensible purpose of his trip is to visit the Biaggis, a task he fails to accomplish. While recounting his activities, he involves us in the fantasies that accompany them, fantasies that are contrasted and emphasized by his repetitive use of the words "en réalité." In what is very much a minimalist style, Toussaint draws the reader willy-nilly into the hero's world. Caught up in the narrator's fear and anxiety, we begin to wonder whether there is more than meets the eye in apparently innocuous everyday events and happenings.

What is the significance of a dead cat floating in the harbor, and why does it twice (in the narrator's dreams) become a body? Who are the Biaggis and what is their relationship to the narrator? Why is he hesitant to visit them? What is happening on the top floor of the hotel? Is anyone spying on the narrator and, if so, why? What is the purpose of the mysterious gray Mercedes? Why does the narrator sneak out of the hotel at night, and who locks the door when he leaves? Why does the narrator steal mail and break into an unoccupied house? Is the narrator suffering from paranoid delusions, or does he have good reason to be afraid? In some ways, with its countless questions, *La Réticence* recalls modern European films, the kind that invite "art" as an adjective in American reviews. This resemblance is reinforced by a somewhat unsettling physical atmosphere, by certain cinematographic techniques, and by Toussaint's use of a mysterious stranger.

Skillfully playing on the reader's imagination and desire to know by supplying ever more material, Toussaint creates a tension that in part draws on our experience of things previously read and seen. A certain shiver results. Is there really some monstrous conspiracy menacing the narrator? In a sense, readers are encouraged to invent their own novel. They want to know who the narrator is, why he does what he does, why he is here alone with an infant child, where his wife is, what he has done to make him believe he is in danger, and why he is fixated on dead cats and dreams of floating bodies. The narrator may be slowly revealing a story to us but, at the same time, there is another tale he is concealing.

In thus manipulating the reader, Toussaint is helped by the fact that we live in an age of pop psychology, cynicism, and conspiracy theories. People are all too eager to assign sinister motives to the simplest events. We recognize that paranoia need not be based on delusions; people really do have enemies, and conspiracies do not occur only in novels and films. We can sympathize with semi-agoraphobic people who feel somewhat uncomfortable in social situations and so are tempted to avoid them.

As the novel progresses, we wonder whether we will ever have complete answers to the questions the narrator has posed as well as to our own. Will we find out that the matter we have been involved in is indeed sinister and complicated, or will we learn that the narrator has allowed his (and through him the reader's) imagination to obfuscate what is "en réalité" simple and ordinary? If the latter is true, will the reader be left with nothing more than the haunting question so starkly posed in the refrain of that old song, "Is that all there is"?