novel: his contemplation of the heavens).

Whence the evolving effect, as if from low to high comedy, of the leitmotiv, an épiphrase such as those mentioned above and likewise redoubtable for the translator: "Les gens, tout de même." With the first part of the phrase, "Les gens" (people), providing an odd tilt towards generalization—an oddness which pervades the entire novel—the rest is a rather common expression (though not quite as common or as colloquial as the synonymous "quand même") which indicates surprise, polite resistance, even a certain disgust; the slight stiltedness adds a twinge of humor. Monsieur's judgment of his fellow human beings? The narrator's? In English it might be rendered by something like "People—indeed!" or "People—how incredible!" or even "People—what won't they do next?" [John Taylor]

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Maxine Chernoff. *Bop.* Coffee House Press, 1986. Paper.

Attempting to review a group of short stories, especially when the group contains more than a few excellent examples of the genre, presents the inevitable problem of numbers—reviewing them is not necessarily easier by the dozen. Unlike novels, plays, histories, and biographies, which are discussed as single works, the variety of most collections of short stories requires some order of excellence, some priority for discussion and review. It's like commenting on a dinner party of twelve or a horse race of nine. The superior guests or the horses that run in the money must be acknowledged.

It is also a truism that the great majority of collections of short stories have as their title the best story. This is true of Maxine Chernoff's *Bop,* clearly the best of the dozen stories in this 1986 collection. In "Bop" we see a Pnin-like Russian émigré, whose tortured English is the stuff of comic dialogue whether in print or on film. However, Oleg Lum's language is only one of his problems. He also has a childlike attitude toward life. He has a menial nine-to-five night job; is fascinated by Xerox machines; meets Carrie, a ten-year-old girl, in a library; offers her a cigarette (she tells him, "Kids don't smoke here"); buys her ice cream at a 31 Flavors; learns that her mother is divorced and has had a hysterectomy; is invited to their apartment for pizza, where he brings roses and a sympathy card and where he says to the mother, referring to Carrie, "She is sad that you are not able, may I say, to reproduce." Finally he sees an abandoned baby at the beach, asks him his name ("Bop," said the child), at sunset takes him to his apartment, and the next day to Carrie's, after which the mother calls the police. Lum's fantasy is over. "He'd never thought of having a child himself. He had spent his years getting out of Russia, while other men searched for lovers or wives." Oleg Lum, though he reminds one of Salinger's Seymour Glass, Jacques Tati's *Mon Oncle* and all the other wonderful uncles both in life and in literature, has enough originality in his character to be memorable.

Several other stories are worthy of praise in this first collection of short

It is the enticing strangeness of the novel that all the characters, however minor, are vividly evoked—except Monsieur. Both the contents and contours of Monsieur's ego remain diffuse, indefinite, ill-defined. He likes to stare at fish in aquariums, to contemplate "the inaccessible purity of the trajectories they trace with indifference." He also likes to take a chair up to the roof of his apartment building and from there contemplate the stars. Little else do we learn.

How to translate into English all the connotations of the perfectly appropriate word by which the hero is designated—Monsieur? For in French "Monsieur" (like "Madame") is still a commonly used way of addressing someone (e.g., a shopkeeper to his customer) *in the third person.* And this same form of address is used, in front of a second party, to refer to someone whom the first party does not know on a personal basis but who is (perhaps) known more familiarly or intimately to that second party. "And how is Monsieur?" a wife might be asked by someone who does not know her husband personally, even though that someone knows her husband's name. To preserve a respectful distance he might ask, in other words, not about "Georges" or "Monsieur Dupont" or "votre mari" (your husband), but rather about "Monsieur." Such connotations enter into the triadic relation implicitly established by Toussaint between his narrator, his reader and Monsieur. As an appellation, "Monsieur" is thus at once richer in meaning than the typically Durasian "he" or "she" and lexically more subtle than Brecht's "Herr Keuner" or Musil's "Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften." With the latter two characters, of course, Toussaint's "Monsieur" might profitably be contrasted.

If the translator manages to solve the problem of the appellation "Monsieur" —and I bring up the question of a translation into English, for although apparently no translation of either book is presently underway *La salle de bain* has already been translated into eleven other languages and *Monsieur* into four —he will by no means be at the end of his labors. Toussaint often employs what in contemporary French rhetorical terminology is called an *épiphrase,* "a part of a sentence which seems added on in order to indicate the sentiments of the author or the character" (Bernard Dupriez, *Gradus: Les procédés littéraires,* Paris: Union générale d'Editions, 1984, p. 194). The third-person narrative is thus occasionally interrupted with interjections (e.g., "ma foi," "jusqu'à présent c'était parfait," "au paprika pourquoi pas," "que sais-je moi," "eh oui," "tiens, tiens") which seem to be Monsieur's thoughts or spoken words— in a few cases those of other characters or even those of the invisible narrator— quoted directly. The utmost care will have to be taken when translating such interjections, especially the frequently recurring "ma foi," for to a French reader they remain teasingly ambiguous, calling up a variety of types of speakers (in terms of class, level of language, emotional or rhetorical intention in a given situation) of whom it could be said that they are typical. And yet, by the end of the novel, collectively the interjections have given some definition to the personality, specifically to the intelligence of Monsieur, more specifically still to his metaphysics. Passive though he is, Monsieur is to an exceptional extent aware of himself and his acts, of others and their manipulations, and able, in view of it all, to adopt the cosmological perspective (the one symbol in the

extended dramatic monologues, as in *The Ring and the Book,* and Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua,* Alexis highlights autobiographical elements designed to argue for his need to follow the dictates of his own sexual needs against which he has struggled for years. The gist of this long letter is that he, though now a father who has great affection for Monique and their child, must have the kind of freedom without which he cannot live. The complete title, *Alexis, or the Treatise of a Vain Struggle,* gives us more than a clue to the theme, Alexis's vain struggle to be exclusively heterosexual. He begins, "This letter, my dear, will be very long." It is, but its length is also necessary to the style and tone of the writer, who ends this novella by writing, "With the utmost humility, I ask you now to forgive me, not for leaving you, but for having stayed too long."

As the author tells us in her Preface, "It has perhaps not been adequately observed that the problem of sexual freedom in all its forms is, in large part, a problem of freedom of expression." *Alexis* expresses the problem of one man, eloquently. [Jack Byrne]

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Jean-Philippe Toussaint. *Monsieur.* Minuit, 1986. 39 Fr.

Everyone agrees—after the Nobel Prize awarded to Claude Simon and after the astonishing worldwide popularity of Marguerite Duras's novel *L'amant*—that 1985 was an excellent year for Les Editions du Minuit. But the same publishing company also enjoyed the equally astonishing success earned by *La salle de bain,* a slender first novel written by a young author, Jean-Philippe Toussaint. Now Toussaint's second novel, *Monsieur,* has received analogous critical acclaim, the French reviewers nearly unanimous in praising the originality of the writer's vision and the undeniable charm of his style.

Whether known to the author or not, both *La salle de bain* and *Monsieur* do have distinguished, not-too-distant literary cousins, Jean de la Ville de Mirmont's unknown masterpiece, the novella *Les dimanches de Jean Dézert* (1914), and Kafka's enigmatic short stories, by which I mean specifically that *comical* side to Kafka's writings which appears to the reader sometimes only after two or three readings. One does not have to reread *Monsieur,* however, to discern a concealed core of comedy, for Toussaint's humor, though everywhere subtle, *fin* (as the French say), is nonetheless forthright, such as when his nameless hero, Monsieur, masters the feat of getting from the ground floor of the building in which he works as an executive for Fiat up to his office on the sixteenth floor without removing his hands from his pockets. Monsieur moves in with his fiancée and her parents, but doesn't bother to move out when they break up. Monsieur accepts with equanimity nearly everything that happens, whether around or to him, including the fact that his former fiancée's mother is eventually obliged to find an apartment for him. The very evening he moves in, Monsieur lets his new neighbor, a geologist who works for the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique, talk him into typing up, from dictation, a book on the study of crystals. Monsieur, however, can't stand to lose at Ping-Pong.