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SMALL WORLDS

Minimalism in Contemporary French Literature

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5 JEAN-PHILIPPE TOUSSAINT'S ABLUTIONS

Asked to identify that figure whose work most closely and consistently crystallizes the fundamental concerns and techniques of contemporary minimalism, one might point to Jean-Philippe Toussaint. Born in 1957, Toussaint is a Belgian who lives in Corsica. He is the author of five novels, any one of which might be invoked in a discussion of minimalist writing. For a variety of reasons, Toussaint is often compared to Jean Echenoz. They are contemporaries, both publish at the Editions de Minuit, and both wager heavily on the technique of economy of expression in their writing.

It seems to me, however, that important differences prevail between Toussaint and Echenoz. Whereas Echenoz's novels display a recognizable plot, the little stories Toussaint tells question the very notion of narrative logic. The idea of character is far more embattled in Toussaint than in Echenoz, and where Echenoz writes exclusively in the third person, Toussaint's novels (with the lone exception of *Monsieur*) are told in the first person by narrators who display striking mutual affinities. More apt comparisons might be suggested outside of French literature. Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine*, for example, tells the tale of a benighted narrator who struggles to come to terms with the simplest acts of daily existence, such as tying his shoes, and most of that novel's "action," such as it is, takes place on an escalator. In a similar way, much of Alf MacLochlainn's *Out of Focus* takes place in the narrator's room as he gazes out the window through the empty barrel of a ballpoint pen. Like Baker and MacLochlainn, Jean-Philippe Toussaint evokes in his novels a world in which exoticism is no longer possible, a world of starkly

reduced dimension where the story of the endotic, the brutally familiar, is all that remains.

In this chapter, I shall focus on Toussaint's first novel, *La Salle de bain* (*The Bathroom*). Published in 1985, *La Salle de bain* is a text of 123 roomy pages and sold more than fifty thousand copies (Leclerc 65). It is composed of numbered paragraphs, or fragments, and divided into three parts: the first, entitled "Paris," includes forty fragments; the second, "L'Hypoténuse," eighty; and the third, "Paris" once again, fifty. Emblazoned over the threshold of *La Salle de bain*, epigraphically, is the Pythagorean theorem. And in spite of the fact that the numbers do not resolve themselves obviously and readily ($a^2 + b^2$ would seem not to equal c^2), the formalist concerns that the epigraph announces are amply confirmed in the text: *La Salle de bain* is animated by concrete, formal geometries; by pleasantly quirky triangulations; and, more generally, by a concern for symmetry that is characteristic of minimalist writing as a genre.[1]

The first fragment stages a world that, if small, nonetheless offers a modest share of *luxe, calme et volupté*:

> When I began to spend my afternoons in the bathroom I had no intention of moving into it; no, I would pass some pleasant hours there, meditating in the bathtub, sometimes dressed, other times naked. Edmondsson, who liked to be there with me, said it made me calmer: occasionally I would even say something funny, we would laugh. I would wave my arms as I spoke, explaining that the most practical bathtubs were those with parallel sides, a sloping back, and a straight front, which relieves the user of the need for a footrest. (11/3–4)[2]

The narrator is a curious bird, an inactive, static, recumbent hero reminiscent of other inert figures in literature, from Bartleby to Thomas l'Obscur and from Oblomov to Molloy. He is anonymous and will remain so throughout the novel. He is alienated (largely by choice, it would seem), though he has not always been so. An invitation to a reception at the Austrian embassy (15/7) testifies to his former social integration, and he confesses later that his existence prior to his decision to live in the bathroom was rather more worldly: "Not long ago, acting in a sense in the capacity of researcher, I

had had dealings with historians and sociologists. I was T's assistant, who presided over a seminar, I had students, I played tennis" (21–22/13).

His companion, Edmondsson, is sketched with little more definition. The name is a foreign one, and we are told her gender, grudgingly, only in fragment thirteen when "she" announces that she wishes to make love with the narrator. This furnishes the latter with an opportunity to display his complaisance: "To please her, I took off my trousers" (19/11).

The narrator's existence as the novel recounts it is easily described. In the second part, "L'Hypoténuse," he goes to Venice alone. There, he spends his days mostly in his hotel room with regular forays to the bathroom on the floor below. More rarely, he goes out, jumping up and down on the pavement in order to help that city sink into the sea all the quicker (81/65). Edmondsson joins him in Venice, then returns to Paris, where he too returns in the third and final part of the novel.

It is to all appearances a banal story, a story focusing on the mundane, the quotidian, the ordinary. Yet, as Fernando Pessoa pointed out, "Banality is a home" (*Book of Disquiet* 82); and the narrator of *La Salle de bain* describes his particular home with a fine attention to detail:

> Around me were cupboards, towel racks, a bidet. The washbasin was white; a narrow shelf projected above it, and on the shelf lay toothbrushes and razors. The walls facing me, studded with lumps, showed cracks, and in places cavities pitted the lifeless paint. One crack seemed to be gaining ground. (12/4)

The landscape of the bathroom is an obvious one, so obvious that it would seem to beggar description. Singling out the asperities of that landscape is a curious tactic, for these *things* (towel rack, bidet, sink) do not signify individually in a traditional literary regime but rather collectively: "bathroom." Toussaint is elaborating a poetics that addresses a capital issue in minimalist art: how to accommodate the obvious (Saltzman 423) and, more ambitiously, how to habilitate the obvious as a privileged topos in representation. As he deploys it, Toussaint's strategy goes well beyond the *chosisme* of the New Novel: here, the furniture of the quotidian will eventually support a story that plays out an epic of the trivial.

Clearly, for the narrator of *La Salle de bain* the banal offers a refuge. The bathroom's decor is familiar, homely, secure. As a space, the bathroom is knowable. It can be experienced without mediation. It may even offer adventure; but that adventure will be *local*, played out within a radically circumscribed field. On the double level of the represented and the representing, there is a double thesis at work: on the one hand, that profound experience can hinge upon surface phenomena; on the other, that narrative values should be restructured in order to privilege the usual rather than the exceptional.

The principal technique used is that of reduction: reduction of stage (the bathroom *is* the world, or at least the only pertinent world); reduction of intrigue, of action (the narrator dwells far longer on the act of shaving, for instance, than on his trip from Paris to Venice); reduction of narrative form (studied flatness of narration, simple declaration, little or no explanation or modification). In Toussaint's case, however, the notion of reduction deserves further nuance. Rather than a mere stripping away of traditionalist narrative trappings, there is a phenomenon of concentration at work in *La Salle de bain*.[3] As he draws his focus closer and closer, Toussaint insists upon the details of his small world. No longer spurious, these details are gradually invested with significance in a novelistic logic of the minute; the bathroom, as a locus, is *full*.

References to the world outside the bathroom abound in the text. They too are concentrated, enunciated mostly in single words that offer up diminutive chunks of the "real." There are allusions to countries (France, Belgium, Italy, Sweden, the United States), cities (Paris, Narbonne, Carcassonne, Venice, Glasgow, Milan), monuments (the Doge's Palace, St. Mark's Church), philosophers (Kant, Pascal, Gramsci), musicians (Charles Trénet, Frank Zappa, Mozart, Chopin), artists (Mondrian, Raphael, van Gogh, Hartung, Pollock, Titian, Veronese, Sebastiano del Piombo, Jasper Johns), athletes (Moser, Merckx, Coppi), political figures (Mussolini, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Stalin), and even that very incarnation of the insignificant, Jean d'Ormesson.

These allusions are tossed into the text offhandedly as it were; they settle there isotopically, without hierarchy or privilege. They are dislocated, floating signifiers. As such, they compete—unequally—with the details of

the narrator's more intimate world. The competition is unequal precisely because the material imported from the larger world fails to cohere. It is not animated by any discernible logic. Yet it is important to recognize that these real-world allusions share one characteristic with the details of the narrator's small world—their literalness.[4] Like the sink, the bidet, the bathtub, they are what they are: decontextualized and denuded of the cultural mythology that habitually clothes them, they reveal their quiddity, their "thingness." And that quiddity is the foundation upon which Toussaint builds his novel.

The impression of concentration is heightened by iterative effects of various kinds. The narrator's world being so diminutive, its constitutive elements are few, and they recur in the narrative with regularity. In the same fashion, the narrator's actions are repetitive: incidents, gestures, and thoughts repeat themselves over and over in the patterns of his life. Through this, Toussaint suggests the banality of the narrator's existence and the ennui that grips him. Yet it is precisely here that Toussaint comes up against one of the thorniest problems that minimalist art encounters. The structures of repetition inscribe the impression of banality in the text efficiently, such that the reader, caught up in an economy of iteration, may become prey to the same sort of lassitude that the narrator experiences. Patently, Toussaint's strategy is to elicit sympathy in his reader for his narrator through a gradual process of identification. But it's a tricky, dangerous game. For if the representation of the banal is minimalism's richest subject, it is also, as Arthur Saltzman has pointed out (423), its principal restriction. How, indeed, to represent ennui effectively without inflicting ennui—terminally—on the reader?

Toussaint addresses this problem in two ways. First, he relieves the banality of his story strategically, investing the mundane with a *romanesque* of its own: an evening the narrator spends with his doctor's family reveals a panorama of social absurdity (101–6/83–87); a solitary game of darts in a hotel room assumes the moral dimensions of epic (83–84/67). Second, he deflects that banality, accounting for it within registers other than that of simple diegesis. Toussaint uses this tactic, for example, in the final pages of *La Salle de bain*. When the narrator finds an invitation from the Austrian embassy in his mail it provokes in him the following reflection:

> Seated on the edge of the bathtub, I explained to Edmondsson that perhaps it was not very healthy, at age twenty-seven going on twenty-nine, to live more or less shut up in a bathtub. I ought to take some risk, I said, looking down and stroking the enamel of the bathtub, the risk of compromising the quietude of my life for . . . I did not finish my sentence. (123/101–2)

The incident leads to a resolution on his part, recounted in the final sentence of the text: "The next day, I left the bathroom" (123/102). This would seem to constitute a fine point of closure for the narrator's story. Yet such easy resolution is rendered problematic by the fact that the events just described recapitulate previous events. In fact, the passages quoted repeat other passages (15–16/7–8) verbatim, with the exception of the form of the verb in the last sentence of the French original, first in the *passé simple*, then in the imperfect. That change of tense of the verb *sortir* is indicative of the fact that *La Salle de bain* moves not toward closure but rather away from it. It suggests that the narrator's final act, which should by all rights be definitive, is on the contrary progressive, recurrent, habitual. From a broader perspective, the repetition testifies to Toussaint's view of language as a fundamentally iterative system: we use the same words over and over to represent the essential sameness of our experience.

Like serial music, the effect of the repetition in *La Salle de bain* is to focus attention on process (Mertens 16). In literary terms, it functions to draw the reader's interest away from the narrated and toward the narrating and constitutes a tactic of deliberate deflection. This is not to say that such repetition does not have implications on the level of the narrative, for it certainly does. It suggests, for example, that the narrator's dilemma is inescapable, that he will once again seek refuge in the bathroom, that his existence will continue to be banal, and so forth. But its implications resonate more amply still on the level of the narrating where Toussaint invites his reader to consider issues in literary theory both broadly (the necessary circularity of all storytelling) and locally (the particularly futile circles described in the telling of *this* story).

As much as anything else, *La Salle de bain* offers a meditation on time and its uses. For time as the narrator conceives it is at the root of his dilemma. Like storytelling, time is both repetitive and cyclical. The privileged figure of human time, since Heraclitus, is water, an element that is omnipresent in the novel, always surrounding the narrator whether in his Parisian bathtub or in a hotel room in Venice. Yet unlike Heraclitus's river, those bodies of water are static (or apparently so), and that is what attracts the narrator to them. He is drawn to the immobile and senses therein a profound vocation: "I would scrutinize the surface of my face in a pocket mirror and, at the same time, the movement of the hands on my watch. But my face let nothing show. Ever" (12/4). Later, he returns to the mirror, again weighing the image of his face against that of his watch:

> Standing in front of the mirror, I looked at my face attentively. I had taken off my watch, which lay in front of me on the shelf above the basin. The second hand was touring the dial. Immobile. With every circle a minute passed. It was slow and pleasant. Without averting my eyes from my face, I put lather on my brush; I distributed the lather on my cheeks, my neck. Slowly moving the razor, I removed rectangles of foam, the skin reappearing in the mirror, taut and slightly reddened. This over, I fastened my watch around my wrist again. (25/15)

His intent is to slow things down, to measure them minutely, eventually to fix them in immobility because he senses, like Pessoa, that this is the only way to approach essence.[5]

The narrator thinks about a *dame blanche* (an ice cream dessert like a hot fudge sundae), seeing in it "a glimpse of perfection." He compares it to a Mondrian painting and suggests that it offers "imbalance and rigor, exactitude" (15/7). The evocation of Mondrian must be read, I think, on the specular level, for it effectively emblazons many of the most important concerns in *La Salle de bain*. The product of radical reduction and concentration, refusing easy representationalist norms, elaborated in rigorous geometries, insisting on the obvious, valorizing the simple, defiantly proclaiming its quiddity, the aesthetic statement of a Mondrian painting is deliberately and studiously *brief*, much like that of Toussaint's novel. The statement that the narrator reads in the *dame blanche* is similar; it seduces him powerfully because, like Florence Delay, he believes that brevity in art protects against the erosion of time (Delay 14).

When later, in a café, the narrator sits himself down in front of a real *dame blanche*, however, he quickly realizes that this vision of perfection does not escape from time:

> I watched the White Lady melt in front of me. I watched the vanilla melt imperceptibly beneath the coat of scalding chocolate. I watched the ball, still exactly round an instant before as uniform threads of mixed white and brown slowly trickled down it. I watched the movement without moving, my eyes fixed on the saucer. I didn't budge. My hands froze on the table and I tried with all my strength to hold this immobility, to keep it, but I realized that upon my body, too, movement was streaming. (80/64–65)

The incident is a lesson in life for the narrator. It is, moreover, a crucial event in the stories that Toussaint tells (both the story of the narrator and the story of the writing of *La Salle de bain*), and it impinges directly and unavoidably upon the manner of that telling. If all art is necessarily played out in time, this is especially true of narrative art. Stories *take* time. Yet despite his impulse to tell his story, it is time itself that continues to haunt the narrator: "what had really terrified me, once again, was the passing of time itself" (31/21). Seized in the abstract, a *dame blanche*, a Mondrian, or a right triangle can defy time; but as soon as one proposes to *tell* them they begin to melt.

The choices facing Toussaint are difficult ones. He cannot, like minimalist composers, reject narrative out of hand because narrative is the expressive medium he has chosen.[6] He can, however, mount an attack on traditional narrative teleology, which is after all the manner in which time is specifically encoded and put to use in stories. And, here, his tactics do resemble those of certain contemporary composers (Tarasti 115–116): Toussaint does away with obvious segmentation and causality, he subverts the notions of beginning and ending, he casts the time of his story as a series of "nows." This is where the iterative structures, the serialism, and the insistence on the banality of

the quotidian assume their full importance: they are defenses against time and the virus that it carries:

> What I like about Mondrian's painting is its immobility. No other painter has come so close to immobility. Immobility is not absence of movement but absence of any prospect of movement, it is dead. Painting, as a rule, is never immobile. As with chess, its immobility is dynamic. Every chessman, an immobile potential, is potential movement. In Mondrian, immobility is immobile. Maybe that's why Edmondsson thinks Mondrian is such a crushing bore. I find him reassuring. (84/67–68).

Mondrian is reassuring indeed: he doesn't *go* anywhere. His paintings represent precisely the "abstract life" (15 and 123/7 and 102) that the narrator longs for, a life from which all motion has been abstracted.[7] For motion means change, and the flux of the outside world corresponds all too closely to the flux of the subject. The narrator internalizes all the change he sees around him, feels its effect in his body, and that is a process that can only lead to senescence and death:

> I had spent the night in a train compartment, alone, with the lights out, immobile. Aware of motion, only motion; of the outward perceptible motion that was transporting me despite my immobility, but also of the inner motion of my body that was destroying itself, an imperceptible motion that began to occupy my attention to the exclusion of all else, a motion I desperately wanted to seize hold of. (51/39)

The narrator's grapplings with the notion of space are analogous to his problems with the notion of time. He finds it difficult to come to terms with either since both are constantly shifting, refusing to be circumscribed. Indeed, Toussaint seems to suggest that time and space are two complementary ways of looking at the same details of ordinary life, and that these details—a *dame blanche*, a trip in a train—necessarily escape from us.

In the bathroom or in his hotel room in Venice, the narrator is largely insulated from the flux of things. After his harrowing epiphany in the train from Paris to Venice, he is paralyzed, unwilling to move in any direction whatever. He resists Edmondsson's attempts to coax him back to Paris, and

she returns there alone: "Edmondsson wanted to go back to Paris. I was unenthusiastic, I didn't want to move" (87/71). Even after he finally returns to Paris, the narrator falls prey to the same immobility: "the bathroom was where I felt best" (122/100).

This reticence is undoubtedly the narrator's principal character trait. And Toussaint's novel, like its protagonist, is also decidedly reticent: discursively, *La Salle de bain* is uncommunicative, reserved, taciturn.[8] Composed of small, static forms, the novel lacks motility; simply put, it doesn't *go* anywhere. Like his narrator, and like other minimalists, Toussaint sees in those forms ways to resist evanescence.[9] More broadly, that defensive role is the one that *La Salle de bain* accords to literature in general. Building a world in a bathroom, the narrator brings his library with him; on her return from work, Edmondsson finds him in the bathtub, book in hand. The narrator reads to *pass the time* so as not to feel time passing.

The only book mentioned by name in *La Salle de bain* is Pascal's *Pensées*, which the narrator reads—and quotes—in English (82 and 87/66 and 70). The passage he quotes is taken from *Pensées* 2:139, in which Pascal meditates upon the reasons for the "natural distress" of the human condition, a subject that would seem to resonate deeply within the narrator as he contemplates his own condition. On the metaliterary level, moreover, the *Pensées* furnishes a most apt intertext for *La Salle de bain*. One recalls, for example, Pascal's insistence in the first section on the spirit of geometry, which he opposes to the spirit of *finesse*; it might be argued that Toussaint's novel is constructed of the very sort of geometries that Pascal describes. Like the *Pensées*, *La Salle de bain* is composed of fragments, small chunks of discourse. Pascal's contention that "true eloquence mocks eloquence" (1:4) has been taken to heart by Toussaint, as has the notion of seizing "infinity in smallness" (2:72), a gesture that is located at the foundation of Toussaint's project. More generally, *La Salle de bain* is an artifact that has been conceived, like the *Pensées*, in an ethos of radical renunciation. Traces of that ethos are everywhere apparent in the novel: the narrator's renunciation of the world figures Toussaint's renunciation of traditionalist novelistic technique; the narrator's taciturnity figures Toussaint's writerly laconism; the spareness of the bathroom's decor figures that of *La Salle de bain*. Often noted as a characteristic of minimalist plastic art, renunciation

goes, I believe, to the core of the minimalist aesthetic and prescribes a creative process animated by reduction, distillation, and concentration.[10]

The small world resulting from such a process would seem to leave little room for experience. Yet, insofar as *La Salle de bain* can be said to be "about" anything, it is about experience. I would like to suggest that a phenomenon of displacement is at work here. Eero Tarasti argues that in minimalist music the insufficiency of the musical stimuli forces the listener to focus upon the process of composition itself (15). In the same fashion, the poverty and banality of the narrator's experience encourage the reader of *La Salle de bain* to consider that artifact as textuality, as *écriture* (rather than as representation of the larger world), and to reflect in a sustained manner on the reading experience.

The implication of the beholder's experience is a familiar tactic in minimalist plastic art. Frances Colpitt contends that meaning inheres in the viewer's immediate encounter with the work, in the direct, unmediated beholding of the artifact (67).[11] The staging of that experience explains the valorization of the banal and the general impoverishment of representation in minimalism. It also subtends the argument that minimalism doesn't involve a radical innovation but rather a shift in emphasis, dramatizing and privileging what used to be taken for granted and presenting the artifact in such a way as to suggest that its subject is the viewer (Biggs, Curtis, and Pyne 7).

It is the insistence on the encounter with the beholder, moreover, that leads Michael Fried to postulate the "theatrical" quality of minimalist art. He argues that it has a sort of stage presence that extorts a "special complicity" from the beholder (125–27). The notion of *presence*, as embattled as it may be in contemporary theory, is a crucial, incontrovertible one in minimalist plastic art. Kenneth Baker insists that "direct vision," the simultaneous presence of object and beholder, is one of minimalism's fundamental conditions of possibility (24). In a similar vein, Lawrence Alloway argues that the minimalist artifact offers itself as pure, present object rather than as process of signification, and it is in this objectification that meaning arises (55).

Obviously, literary minimalism poses problems that are somewhat different. The clearing away of representation can never be as draconian in literature as in plastic art or (especially) music. For literature is more closely

wedded to representation than are other semiotics. And, indeed, *La Salle de bain* is in one sense fully representational: the bathroom is a bathroom, Venice is Venice, a *dame blanche* is a *dame blanche*. Yet within the larger economy of Toussaint's novel these things escape through their *telling*. That is, they refuse to take their place in a recognizable hierarchy of narration, whereby the details of the quotidian—the small things, precisely—serve, as Roland Barthes would put it, to guarantee the referential stability of far vaster narrative considerations.[12] In *La Salle de bain* one cannot exceed or surpass the quotidian; the focus remains fixed on the level of the small. Here the analogies with other minimalist media are striking. The refusal of traditionalist representational norms, the elevation of the banal, the effects of reduction and concentration all make of *La Salle de bain* an artifact that cannot be apprehended like other literary works. It demands to be approached in new ways, a demand that Peter Bürger identifies as being characteristic of the avant-garde:

> The recipient of an avant-gardist work discovers that the manner of appropriating intellectual objectifications that has been formed by the reading of organic works of art is inappropriate to the present object. The avant-gardist work neither creates a total impression that would permit an interpretation of its meaning nor can whatever impression may be created be accounted for by recourse to the individual parts, for they are no longer subordinated to a pervasive intent. This refusal to provide meaning is experienced as shock by the recipient. And this is the intention of the avant-gardist artist, who hopes that such withdrawal of meaning will direct the reader's attention to the fact that the conduct of one's life is questionable and that it is necessary to change it. (80)

"Change your life, change your Kelton!" brayed a commercial for a watch manufacturer in France not long ago. But things may not be quite that simple for us, or for the narrator of *La Salle de bain* as he tries to change *his* life. Once again, it is principally a question of experience, which the narrator seeks to reduce, to distill, and thus to comprehend. Here, it seems to me that his brief flirtation with the game of darts is exemplary. He buys a set of darts in a store in Venice and begins to play in his hotel room, finding in that game deep

satisfaction. "I concentrated intensely while playing darts," he says (60/47); and, of course, concentration is what he's looking for in life.

> When I played darts I was calm and relaxed. I felt pacified. Little by little, emptiness would creep over me and I would steep myself in it until the last trace of tension vanished from my mind. Then—in one blazing movement—I would launch the dart at the target. (83/67)

He imagines international dart tournaments, drawing up brackets of opposing teams from Belgium, France, Sweden, Italy, and the United States. The Belgians ("my people") are finally—and gloriously—victorious. He wonders why the target reminds him of Edmondsson rather than Jasper Johns (84/68). And when Edmondsson tells him she finds him "a bore" (88/71) and asks him to stop playing, he throws a dart into her forehead.

This marks the end of the second part of the novel. After being treated in the hospital, Edmondsson returns to Paris. Remaining in Venice, the narrator falls ill with a sharp pain in his forehead. X-rays taken at the hospital reveal incipient sinusitis. These events more than any others cause the narrator to scrutinize the way he is living his life. He ponders the x-ray of his head, confronting what he sees there:

> Occasionally I would take one of the x-rays out of the envelope to look at my skull; the best way was to hold it at arm's length in front of me, against the window, and study it with the light coming from behind. It was a white, elongated skull. The frontal bones receded at the temples. Four fillings in the mouth showed up sharply. The ends of the incisors were broken, one evenly and the other only on one side, where there was a splinter missing. The eyes were immensely white, anxious, gaping. (99/80–81)

Like the other mirror scenes in the novel, this introspection brings no transcendence. Despite all his efforts to immobilize his life, to stabilize his experience, to seize his small world and pin it to the wall, the narrator will not see into himself but rather *through* himself. In similar fashion, we are invited to see through *La Salle de bain*: a throw of the dart will not abolish chance, or anything else, for that matter. But that, after all, is the very point.

6 MARIE REDONNET'S SYMMETRIES

In less than ten years, Marie Redonnet has published a series of writings that must be considered, already, as a distinguished oeuvre. Deliberately interrogating the boundaries of a variety of traditional genres, including poetry, short fiction, the novel, and theater, these texts share the simplicity of conceit and transparency of style that have come to be the hallmarks of Redonnet's writing.[1] Born in 1948 and trained as a high school teacher, Redonnet inaugurated her career with a book of short poems entitled *Le Mort & Cie* in 1985. She is undoubtedly best known for her novels *Splendid Hôtel, Forever Valley*, and *Rose Mélie Rose* (1986–87), a triptych in which three female narrators struggle to come to terms with a barren, constricted world in which things always seem to be heading toward the worst. Both stylistically and thematically, Redonnet's writing testifies to the influence of Samuel Beckett, and she has spoken candidly about that influence in an essay entitled "Redonne après maldonne" (A new deal after a bad deal).[2] More broadly, Redonnet also acknowledges that the example of other figures in the Editions de Minuit group was important for her, and indeed the influence of the "new novelists," particularly Nathalie Sarraute and Alain Robbe-Grillet, is clear in Redonnet's own writing.[3]

From book to book, Marie Redonnet's work unfolds in a terse, unembellished, declarative style analogous to the "blank writing" that Roland Barthes identified in Camus and others and that he postulated as pointing toward the "degree zero" of writing (*Degré zéro* 10, 55–56). Throughout her career, Redonnet's principal thematic concern has been to show how the