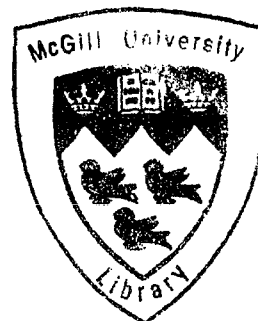


Volume 2

# Paths to Contemporary French Literature



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## *A Deceptive Lightness of Being* (Jean-Philippe Toussaint)

After the Nobel Prize awarded to Claude Simon and the astonishing world-wide popularity of Marguerite Duras's novel *The Lover*, everyone in France agreed that 1985 was an excellent year for the Éditions de 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 (b. 1957). His only claim to fame until then had been his winning of the 1973 International Junior Scrabble championship. That was no mean feat, of course! Somewhat resembling a game, *The Bathroom* (as it was later called in English) amused and perplexed readers with its playful eccentricity. The paragraphs are numbered (rather like Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*) and the main character, sitting in a bathtub, meditates on existence.

The next year, *Monsieur* arrived. In respect of an age-old French custom, this second novel was given a lukewarm reception, critics parroting each other with the remark: "It's good, but not as good as *The Bathroom*." Yet to my mind, *Monsieur* is the subtler of the two books. And in regard to Toussaint's evolution ever since then, it has proved to be the more seminal model. If a main character meditating in a bathtub constitutes an unforgettably droll image (reinforced by Tom Novembre's performance in the fine film that was later made from *The Bathroom*), it is also a rather facile one. *Monsieur* resembles the traditional novel more closely, which means that its quirky departures from classical form are more intriguing and artful. The anonymous non-hero is more like us—well, more or less. Monsieur, as he is simply called, has an executive job at Fiat. He has two twin nieces whom he baby-sits. He lives with a woman for a while. He smokes cigarettes.

Interestingly enough, it is Robert Musil's "man without qualities" who comes to mind in *Monsieur*; and it is no coincidence that *Eigenschaft*, in *The Bathroom*, is the name of the Austrian ambassador. (Musil's original title is *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*.) Toussaint's Monsieur archetype can also be contrasted with Jean de la Ville de Mirmont's little-known masterpiece, the novella *Les Dimanches de Jean Désert* (1914); and perhaps with some of

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Musil and other modernists: saint's oeuvre. In interviews, Witold Gombrowicz, Jean-Paul fied his admiration for, and diff the French New Novel such as Marguerite Duras. If the manner and to the light touch and thematic sured that these stylistic traits constantly opened up by his or and cool detachment.

Yet the reader is probably first is finely brought out in the scene from the ground floor of the building to the sixteenth floor without removing empty-souled, unassertive, yet trail along the wall as he strolls with his colleagues. Monsieur d in with his fiancée and her parents break up. He accepts with equanimity around or to him, including his apartment for him. The very evening, Monsieur lets his neighbor, a geologist from the Centre de Recherche Scientifique, talk him through the study of crystals. Monsieur Playing the game, he becomes "American readers may be tripped up by the translation when a "paddle" is to

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Kafka's enigmatic and comical short stories as well. As an appellation, "Monsieur" is at once richer in meaning than the typically Durasian "he" or "she" and lexically more subtle than Bertolt Brecht's "Herr Keuner" or Musil's "man without qualities." Like the latter two characters, Monsieur is an Everyman.

Musil and other modernists are of course not the only influences on Toussaint's oeuvre. In interviews, the author has paid homage to Blaise Pascal, Witold Gombrowicz, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. He has also specified his admiration for, and differences from, various authors associated with the French New Novel such as Claude Simon, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Marguerite Duras. If the manner and method of such writers stand in stark contrast to the light touch and thematic *légèreté d'être* of Toussaint's writing, be assured that these stylistic traits are deceptive: philosophical perspectives are constantly opened up by his original blend of punning, precise observation, and cool detachment.

Yet the reader is probably first struck by Toussaint's humor. Its deadpan tone is finely brought out in the scene where Monsieur masters the feat of getting from the ground floor of the building in which he works up to his office on the sixteenth floor without removing his hands from his pockets. Similarly, this empty-souled, unassertive, yet surprisingly charismatic non-hero lets his hand trail along the wall as he strolls nonchalantly away from a hallway conversation with his colleagues. Monsieur displays "in all things a listless drive." He moves in with his fiancée and her parents, but does not bother to move out when they break up. He accepts with equanimity nearly everything that happens, whether around or to him, including his former fiancée's mother's attempts to find an apartment for him. The very evening he moves into his new apartment, Monsieur lets his neighbor, a geologist who works for the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique, talk him into typing up, from dictation, a book about the study of crystals. Monsieur, however, cannot stand to lose at ping-pong. Playing the game, he becomes "another man, an ugly look on his face." (Some American readers may be tripped up in John Lambert's excellent British-flavored translation when a "paddle" is termed a "bat.")

An enticing strangeness lies in the vivid evocation of all the characters, however minor, in contrast to the blurred contours of Monsieur. The contents of his ego remain diffuse, indefinite, ill-defined. He likes to stare at fish in aquariums, to contemplate "the inaccessible purity of the trajectories they trace out 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, and certainly the aforementioned traits are not correlatives of any precise emotions.

Is it possible to convey in English all the connotations of the fitting name by which Toussaint's non-hero is designated? In French, "Monsieur" (like "Madame") is still a common way of addressing someone (e.g., a shopkeeper

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to his customer) in the third person. And this 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 the husband's name. To preserve a respectful social distance, he might ask not about "Georges" or "Monsieur Dupont" or "votre mari" (your husband); but rather about "Monsieur." The same usage can also lead to irony, increasingly so in our time. Such connotations enter into the triadic relation implicitly established by Toussaint between his narrator, his reader, and Monsieur.

In *Monsieur*, Toussaint often employs what in contemporary French rhetoric is called an *épiphraise*. The third-person narrative is occasionally interrupted with interjections (e.g., "jusqu'à présent c'était parfait," "au paprika pourquoi pas," "que sais-je moi," "eh oui," "tiens, tiens") which represent Monsieur's thoughts or spoken words quoted directly; in a few cases, such epiphraises may be associated with other characters, the invisible narrator, or perhaps with a second writer of sorts who comments on the narrative progress made by the first writer. Toussaint at times seems to be in dialogue with himself. For the French reader, moreover, interjections like the recurrent "ma foi" remain teasingly ambiguous, even polysemous. The same applies to an epiphraise that is also a leitmotiv: "Les gens, tout de même." The first part of the phrase, "les gens" ("people"), oddly tilts toward generalization; and this oddness pervades the entire novel. The second part, "tout de même," is a rather common expression (though not quite as common as the synonymous "quand même") indicating surprise, polite resistance, even disgust; the slight stiltedness adds a twinge of humor. Does this epiphraise reflect Monsieur's judgment of his fellow human beings? Or the novelist-narrator's perception of his characters, including Monsieur? The various epiphraises suggest different types of speakers (with respect to social class, level of diction, emotional or rhetorical intention in a given situation). By the end of the novel, these interjections, taken together, give some indication of the personality and intelligence of Monsieur; and of his metaphysics. Passive though he is, Monsieur is exceptionally aware of himself and his acts, of others and their manipulations. This is why he often seeks out the cosmological perspective. The one recurrent symbol in the novel is his contemplating of the heavens, from his rooftop.

As in all of Toussaint's novels, *Monsieur* is sprinkled with allusions to scientific theories obliquely pertinent to the author's style and overall approach. "Quantum theory," notes the narrator, "destroys the notion that physical description can be accurate and that its language can represent the properties of a system independently of observational conditions." This describes well enough the narrative technique of *Monsieur*, which is more the portrait of how the main char-

acter perceives existence than the adventures are significant only in their arbitrariness. The "world happens" incidents in which he (ever passively) An odd detail always sticks out of the twist of humor—along with a tale, treat his lady to dinner? Monsieur she would rather go Dutch. And "splitting the bill in four and plus" he said, and of a certain mathem-

Does a lot—does nothing—Monsieur leaves us with questions, more or less. Is this because of the night sky, as Monsieur does, until thoughts stirred in [his] mind, but

*L'Appareil-Photo* (1989) and the adventures, though the nameless person narrator—is no longer concerned. he decides to take driving lessons, experience that has so little to do with none of this stress will perturb him. has no other pressing obligation than school to sign up, but then spends an etor, a placid divorcee named Paulette, pronounceable foreign names as the narrator fails to get his identity rollment. Examining contemporary consistent narrative ploys.

A tepid love slowly buds between the driving school for a few hours. Once, after being picked up, some attempts to turn in at a shopping center service station, walking for miles, circumventing a means of getting home, tours in stride. They eventually have been a torrid honeymoon inconclusively.

form of address is used, in front of the first party does not know on a familiarly or intimately to that might be asked by someone who thought that someone knows the social distance, he might ask not *votre mari* (your husband), but also lead to irony, increasingly so triadic relation implicitly establishes reader, and Monsieur.

in contemporary French rhetoric is occasionally interrupted by *il parfait*, "au paprika pourquoi" (s") which represent Monsieur's few cases, such epiphrases may be narrator, or perhaps with a secretive progress made by the first dialogue with himself. For the French *il "ma foi"* remain teasingly ambiguous to an epiphrase that is also a part of the phrase, "les gens" and this oddness pervades the end is a rather common expression known as "quand même") indicating a slight stiltedness adds a twinge of judgment of his fellow human beings. His characters, including Monsieur, types of speakers (with respect to rhetorical intention in a given situation, taken together, give some of Monsieur; and of his meta-exceptionally aware of himself and is is why he often seeks out the symbol in the novel is his con-

sprinkled with allusions to science or's style and overall approach. the notion that physical descriptions represent the properties of a system describes well enough the narrative portrait of how the main char-

acter perceives existence than the chronicle of his significant adventures. For his adventures are significant only in their insignificance; the plot is replete with arbitrariness. The "world happens" to Monsieur in all its illogicality, and the daily incidents in which he (ever passively) gets involved are only vaguely connected. An odd detail always sticks out, giving the narration of each anecdote a subtle twist of humor—along with a twinge of melancholy. Should a man, for example, treat his lady to dinner? Monsieur asks Anna Bruckhardt, his date, whether she would rather go Dutch. Anna has no preference. Finally Monsieur suggests "splitting the bill in four and playing three quarters himself (it was the simplest, he said, and of a certain mathematical elegance at the very least)."

Does a lot—does nothing—happen in this playfully solipsistic novel? *Monsieur* leaves us with questions, no answers and, strangely, a feeling of well being more or less. Is this because we would all secretly like to contemplate the night sky, as Monsieur does, until we "reach ataraxy"? At that still moment, "no thoughts stirred in [his] mind, but his mind was the world—that he'd convened."

\* \* \*

*L'Appareil-Photo* (1989) and *La Réticence* (1991) set forth Monsieur's (non) adventures, though the nameless character—now conspicuously the first-person narrator—is no longer called "Monsieur" as such. In *L'Appareil-Photo*, he decides to take driving lessons—that costly, stressful French educational experience that has so little to do with how Americans learn how to drive. But none of this stress will perturb him. As in all of Toussaint's novels, the narrator has no other pressing obligations, professional or otherwise. He enters a driving school to sign up, but then spends his time talking to the young woman proprietor, a placid divorcee named Pascale Polougaïevski. (Characters with arduously pronounceable foreign names are typical in Toussaint's fiction.) Significantly, the narrator fails to get his identity photos and documents in order for his enrollment. Examining contemporary man's lack of "identity" is one of Toussaint's consistent narrative ploys.

A tepid love slowly buds between the odd pair. Sometimes Pascale closes the driving school for a few hours, and the couple heads off on ordinary errands. Once, after being picked up by Pascale's father in his car, the threesome attempts to turn in an empty bottle of butane gas for a new one in a shopping center service station. They end up leaving the car to be repaired, walking for miles, circumventing an artificial lake, before finding a metro station and a means of getting home. Yet Pascale and the narrator take such detours in stride. They eventually spend a weekend in London, but what would have been a torrid honeymoon in most love stories here turns out "almost" inconclusively.

In Toussaint, everything depends on this "almost." Minor breaks in routines become moving because human action *per se* is depicted as fragile, ephemeral, absurd. In *L'Appareil-Photo*, the narrator finds a forgotten camera (whence the title) in the cafeteria of the Newhaven-Dieppe ferryboat that is taking him and Pascale back to France. The narrator's "theft" of the camera later gives him the desire "to take one single photo, something like a portrait, a self-portrait perhaps, but without me and in fact without anyone, simply a presence, at once whole and naked, painful and simple, without a background and almost without light." Echoes of Samuel Beckett's last writings, which were also concerned with blurry identities, "fizzles," and "stirrings," can be heard.

Toussaint's deft descriptions of "surfaces"—be they cityscapes, clothes, human bodies, or everyday objects like cameras, television sets, and portable telephones—are never without troubling depths. *La Réticence* even builds to a study of paranoia. In this take off on the French *polar*, the crime or detective novel, the main character arrives with his baby son in a seaside village called "Sasuelo," presumably located in Corsica (where Toussaint has lived) or another Mediterranean island. He spots a bad omen: a dead cat is floating in the water of the port. This initial vision induces a growing sense of being watched, notably by a writer called Biaggi whom he had wished to see during his stay but has not yet contacted for reasons that he cannot clarify. The "reticence" of the title tells all. Toussaint's stories are replete with ellipses, understatements, and suppressed clarifications, even as his narrators keep their hands in their pockets (a recurrent image), withhold their thoughts, and prefer gazing at stars from rooftops instead of taking initiatives. Yet for all their hesitation and gentle aloofness, these reticent Monsieurs inevitably make a few harmless bizarre gestures, then commit one or two rash, less harmless, acts. Like smooth continuous surfaces on which a number of unpredictable eruptions occur, Toussaint's plots give a literary interpretation of mathematical chaos theory.

To wit, the narrator of *La Réticence* breaks into Biaggi's empty villa to alleviate his suspicions. Pausing in the entryway, he spots a mirror, but discovers that its surface is so dark that he cannot distinguish any reflection of his own body; he discerns "only a dense and immutable darkness." Another time, he comes across a gray Mercedes that he thinks must belong to Biaggi. The car is parked near a puddle. The narrator examines the silvery reflection of the car from several angles, but "by some incomprehensible combination of vantage points and blind spots" he similarly fails to glimpse a "trace" of his own presence. Here, as elsewhere, the narrator—with a sort of quiet desperation—needs a confirmation of his existence. Often in Toussaint, a fragmented Cartesianism is at play, whereby the "I think" of the axiom is established but by no means the "therefore I am" of the conclusion. In *La Réticence*, the narrator's self-doubting results in a disturbing final twist: his paranoid visions seem to have been

figments of his imagination and place in Toussaint's fiction the writer who is writing the book.

Alter egos, mirrors, and reflexional novels can be read as oblique Corsica, included in the non-fiction calls a *pétanque* tournament in shoes he was wearing, then comes 'Monsieur.' The trips through Hong Kong, and Berlin, reveal of his recent novels *La Télévision* (2005) are indebted to these sojourns.

After a long period of neglect (hardly elsewhere), two well-known has brought out *Television*. Besides novel incisively dissects the role of the narrator is a somewhat of a *sieur* with whom we have been gaining weight. Here, he is an Italian professor. The man's preoccupation in Italy while he has remained in Corsica is to write a book about relationship between the artist Titian.

In French, Titian is usually called Titien, so many in fact that the name which name to use in [his] studies. Vecellio, Titien Vecelli, or Titien Vecellio, he escapes to swimming, pondering his disquisition by fiction. But then he abruptly decides to keep this resolution. Tiziano Vecellio's initials are "TV."

Like Toussaint's entire oeuvre, *Television* revolves around the narrator's stability to write his book, and—daily responsibility, that of water. Before he neglects (for water) rubber plant, noting its "impassioned" and fundamental indifference in the process. When he is expected to return home, a Chaplin

almost." Minor breaks in routines are depicted as fragile, ephemeral, as if by a forgotten camera (whence the image of the ferryboat that is taking him and of the camera later gives him the image of a portrait, a self-portrait person, simply a presence, at once without a background and almost without feelings, which were also concerned with "can be heard.

—be they cityscapes, clothes, human television sets, and portable televisions. *La Réticence* even builds to a climax in a seaside village called where Toussaint has lived) or announces: a dead cat is floating in the growing sense of being watched, which he wished to see during his stay but does not clarify. The "reticence" of the novel is in the ellipses, understatement, and the characters keep their hands in their pockets, and prefer gazing at stars from the car to all their hesitation and gentle movements. Like a few harmless bizarre gestures, acts. Like smooth continuous eruptions occur, Toussaint's narrative is a chaotic theory.

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figments of his imagination and Biaggi a sort of alter ego. This is not the only place in Toussaint's fiction where one writer seems to be watching another writer who is writing the book at hand.

Alter egos, mirrors, and reflections suggest, moreover, that Toussaint's fictional novels can be read as oblique studies in self-portraiture. In a text about Corsica, included in the non-fictional *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)* (2000), he recalls a *pétanque* tournament in which he participated, describes the fancy deck shoes he was wearing, then conspicuously notes that "the other players called me 'Monsieur.'" The trips chronicled in *Autoportrait*, notably to Tokyo, Kyoto, Hong Kong, and Berlin, reveal that the eccentrically detailed foreign settings of his recent novels *La Télévision* (1997), *Faire l'amour* (2002), and *Fuir* (2005) are indebted to these sojourns.

After a long period of neglect of Toussaint's work in the United States (but hardly elsewhere), two welcome translations have appeared. Dalkey Archive has brought out *Television*. Besides its jocular and enigmatic storytelling, the novel incisively dissects the role of television in contemporary lives. Interestingly, the narrator is a somewhat more substantial reincarnation of the Monsieur with whom we have been getting acquainted. Toussaint's Monsieurs are gaining weight. Here, he is an art historian, albeit more professional student than professor. The man's pregnant wife and son have left for a summer vacation in Italy while he has remained in Berlin on a scholarship, ostensibly to write a book about relationship between the emperor Charles V and the Venetian artist Titian.

In French, Titian is usually called Titien or Le Titien, but there are other variations, so many in fact that the narrator is perplexed by a "thorny little question, which name to use in [his] study, Titien, le Titien, Vecelli, Vecellio, Tiziano Vecellio, Titien Vecelli, or Titien Vecellio?" Faced with this paralyzing dilemma, he escapes to swimming pools for "work sessions." He has also been pondering his disquisition by following the Tour de France bicycle race on television. But then he abruptly decides to stop watching television forever. After successfully keeping this resolution for a while, he suddenly realizes that Tiziano Vecellio's initials are "T.V."

Like Toussaint's entire oeuvre, *Television* is funny and strangely haunting. It revolves around the narrator's struggle to cure his addiction to television, his inability to write his book, and—funniest of all—his failure to carry out his one daily responsibility, that of watering the many plants in his neighbors' apartment. Before he neglects (for weeks on end) to fulfill this chore, he admires a rubber plant, noting its "impassible sadness, Sphinx-like quality, calm, detachment, and fundamental indifference to the world." He of course describes himself in the process. When his plant-loving neighbors, the Dreschers, unexpectedly return home, a Chaplinesque episode ensues, involving a locked toilet

door. If this and other slapstick scenes represent climaxes, there is no true catharsis in the otherwise imperturbable storyline. In Toussaint, what should have been comic relief does not relieve; a diffuse existential, even metaphysical, tension always persists.

*Television* accompanies a New Press translation of Toussaint's sixth novel, *Faire l'amour* (2002). *Making Love* (as it is called) and now *Fuir* (2005), his seventh (untranslated) novel and recent winner of the Médicis Prize, form a diptych that, while humorous as ever, delves into the phenomenon of amorous separation. Set mostly in Japan and China, the books are narrated by still another Monsieur, who introduces himself as the companion of Marie de Montalte, a world-famous conceptual artist and high-fashion designer.

*Fuir*—"Fleeing" approximates the title—includes some of the suspenseful anguish of *La Réticence*, as the ever-obliging narrator gets hooked into a half-ludicrous, half-perilous imbroglio with Zhang Xiangzhi, an unfathomable Chinese business associate of Marie's. Wild and wacky chase scenes involve a motorcycle and the alluring Li Qi, who is Zhang Xiangzhi's business partner, paramour, or secretary: her identity is tantalizingly dubious as well. But beyond the farce of this *casse-tête chinois* (as the French term brain-teasers), the particular subtlety of both novels is Toussaint's focus, in less tumultuous passages, on the narrator and Marie as their love is beginning to crumble. Sometimes he depicts them together, once in Japan, once on the isle of Elba; at other times, he studies their individual trajectories.

Toussaint shrewdly explores the phenomenology of falling out of love. Love-making, for example, imperceptibly turns into sexual intercourse, as the man and woman's affection for each other diminishes. There is more explicit sex in the diptych than in Toussaint's previous novels, but the acts retain only the memory of, and no longer comprise, altruism and tenderness. The abstract, Beckettian, ontological vestiges for which the author has always searched—those traces of improbable "presence" on darkened mirrors—have become fleeting biological sensations inside the harried bodies of solitary individuals.

*Dreaming*