

[Back to Article page](#)

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Stabbing the Olive

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Running Away by Jean-Philippe Toussaint, translated by Matthew Smith
Dalkey, 156 pp, \$12.95, November 2009, ISBN 978 1 56478 567 1

La Vérité sur Marie by Jean-Philippe Toussaint
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For any serious French writer who has come of age during the last 30 years, one question imposes itself above all others: what do you do after the *nouveau roman*? Alain Robbe-Grillet, Claude Simon *et compagnie* redrew the map of what fiction might offer and aspire to, what its ground rules should be – so much so that some have found their legacy stifling. Michel Houellebecq's response has been one of adolescent rejection, or, to use the type of psychological language that the *nouveaux romanciers* so splendidly shun, denial: writing in *Artforum* in 2008, he claimed never to have finished a Robbe-Grillet novel, since they 'reminded me of soil cutting'. Other legatees, such as Jean Echenoz, Christian Oster and Olivier Rolin, have come up with more considered answers, ones that, at the very least, acknowledge an indebtedness – enough for their collective corpus to be occasionally tagged with the label '*nouveau nouveau roman*'. Foremost among this group, and bearing that quintessentially French distinction of being Belgian, is Jean-Philippe Toussaint.

Born in 1957, Toussaint was out of the blocks quickly: by the age of 35 he'd published four novels. It's the last of these, the so far untranslated *La Réticence*, which most blatantly betrays his generation's haunting by its predecessor. With its setting in an off-season fishing village, its quasi-repeating narrative loops that see an eminently unreliable narrator trace and retrace circuits through the corridors of a hotel or to and from the house of an absent friend-cum-rival whom he may or may not have murdered, its obsessive attention to surfaces and objects, or the geometric pulsing of a lighthouse's 'cône fulgurant de clarté' through the black night, over and over – in all these aspects, the book reads like an apprentice's studied emulation of Robbe-Grillet's masterpiece *The Voyeur*. The paradox is that, when *La Réticence* came out in 1991, Toussaint had already published three well-received, quite differently styled books: *The Bathroom*, *Monsieur* and *Camera*. It's almost

as though, having successfully completed the first stretch of his career, he decided to go back and write a *hommage* or pastiche, a finger exercise to reassure himself that he could 'do', straight-up, a genre that he'd been transforming from the get-go.

He'd made the addition of an element that Robbe-Grillet and Simon's work, for all its greatness, almost entirely lacks: humour. The protagonists (all nameless) of the first three novels are essentially slapstick heroes in the Keaton-Chaplin mould. They amble through the modern urban landscape, amusing themselves by triggering and retriggering an automatic doorbell, flirting with a pretty secretary, or failing to observe the etiquette of a posh tennis club or dinner with the girlfriend's parents, or to master the workings of cars or the rules of the Highway Code. The affect, here, stems from the naive individual's skewed encounter with systems larger than himself, an encounter which, reprised again and again, plays out Bergson's first rule of comedy: that life should be reshaped into a self-repeating mechanism (it's no coincidence that so much slapstick involves cars: in Bergson's terms, automobiles are automatically funny).

What this aesthetic shares with its uncomic *nouveau roman* forebears is an anti-naturalist, anti-humanist bent: we're being given access not to a fully rounded, self-sufficient character's intimate thoughts and feelings as he travels through a naturalistic world, emoting, developing and so on – but rather to an encounter with structure. In a wonderful sequence in *Camera*, Toussaint sets up a scene of dialogue in a restaurant and, having placed a bowl of olives on the table (as a naturalist writer would do to provide background verisimilitude), suppresses the scene's dialogue entirely, and describes exclusively the movement of hands as they reach towards the bowl, the trajectory of fruit from hand to mouth, the ergonomics of pit-transfers from mouth to tablecloth and, most striking of all, the regularly spaced imprints made by the back of a fork's tines across the skin of the lone olive the narrator toys with before stabbing it. We don't want plot, depth or content: we want angles, arcs and intervals; we want pattern. Structure is content, geometry is everything.

In *The Bathroom*, this logic frames the entire book, which – prefaced by Pythagoras' rule about the square of the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle being equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides – assumes a triangular form, its three sections entitled 'Paris', 'Hypotenuse', 'Paris'. When the hero, in a willed narrative refusal to go out into the world and make something happen, takes to his bathroom and decides to stay there, he luxuriates in the tub's parallel sides and in the patterns formed by the towel-rails, as though space itself was like the olive, embossed with evenly spread lines. Watching his lover move round their flat, he discerns the 'curves and spirals' described by her arms. We exist and assume subjectivity to the extent that we occupy a spot on or traverse the grid: an

implicit assertion that's part Descartes, part Deleuze. Geometry is not just an aesthetic: it is, to borrow a term from Deleuze, our 'habitus'. When the narrator finally leaves the bathroom and the flat whose passages he's 'stalked' (shoes intercepting shafts of light, half-open doors on each side providing symmetry and rhythm), he travels in the cube of a train compartment to a Venetian hotel, there to install himself in a new bathroom, to stalk new hallways, all of which he describes in careful detail. His lover, joining him, tries to entice him out to see Renaissance works of art, but he's not interested. Pictures can't be inhabited, unlike the neutral, unanimated surfaces and planes of corridors and door-frames.

At one point *The Bathroom*'s hero even buys himself a dartboard, 'sober-looking' and 'concentric', and, drawing on a round table columns representing various countries, plays out a darts 'world cup' – alone, of course. There are echoes here of Huysmans's *Des Esseintes*, who abandons the countries of the world in favour of their simulacra. But Toussaint's is a next generation decadent: where *Des Esseintes*'s creations convey the smells, sounds and colours of the landscapes they replace, Toussaint's narrator has excised all mimesis. His world-in-absentia has been reduced to a shorthand cartography, the dartboard's intersections and the circular chart: abstract globes made up of characterless vectors. And it's here that *The Bathroom*'s single genuine 'event' takes place: as his lover stands beside the board nagging him once more to get up off his arse and visit Venice, the narrator, quite deliberately, throws a dart into her forehead, piercing it as though it were an olive's skin. This, perhaps, is the *nouveau roman*'s greatest legacy: an understanding of what renders space meaningful. It's an understanding that Greek tragedy (with its houses, cities and whole states founded on primal murders) also displays – and one which illustrates why Houellebecq is so wrong about Robbe-Grillet's writing. In *The Bathroom*, as in *The Voyeur*, space is brought into its own, made present in the only true way possible: through acts of violence.

In his Venetian hotel room, *The Bathroom*'s narrator watches TV with the sound off, gazing, à la Ballard, at 'its procession of silent and incomprehensible images of disaster' – the TV here is another surface studded with violent moments. Incomplete ones, as it turns out: 'Vision alone, without sound,' he muses,

is incapable of expressing horror. If the last moments of the ninety billion men who've died since the world began could be recorded visually – filmed, put together and shown in a cinema – the sight might soon become wearisome. But if the sound of the last five seconds of their lives, their final sufferings, their gasps and cries and death rattles, could be dubbed onto one tape and played at full strength ...

The passage betrays the influence of Beckett, whose haunting line spoken by Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot* – ‘The air is full of our cries’ – it (I imagine knowingly) reprises. The difference is that Toussaint’s ‘air’ has to be understood in all its senses. His fifth book, *Television*, takes the modern kind of air – air-time – as its central subject. It does this with wonderfully comic inversion: the hero decides at the novel’s outset to stop watching television – which, of course, makes him obsessed with it. Staring for hours at his extinguished set, he reads the TV listings, or looks out of his window at the banked rows of his neighbours’ screens changing the colour of the night as they ‘flood’ space, just like the lighthouse beam in *La Réticence*. Visiting a flat where the TV is on, he tries facing it with closed eyes, then creating his own narratives by listening to the sound while watching something else. The whole city (in this case, Berlin, with its distinctive Fernsehturm) becomes a television: the security room of a museum with its CCTV monitors; a fish tank; the pixellated mosaic tiling of an empty swimming-pool, or the light flickering around the hero as he swims up and down a full one; the ‘chiaroscuro’ of his own apartment. To be without a TV is, in essence, as the hero soon discovers, to be without a household, since the 3 per cent of the European population which doesn’t own one ‘is for the most part made up of bums, street people, delinquents, prisoners, loners and the mentally ill’.

Boxes and boxes: again and again, the spaces Toussaint’s heroes occupy take on the characteristics of media devices. *Camera*’s protagonist draws rectangles on the moist windowpanes of the dark office of a driving school, ‘here a very large angle delimiting in space a view of buildings side by side, there a tight framing that isolated a single car, a single person walking on the sidewalk’. The room itself thus functions as a photographic mechanism: it’s a *camera* in both senses of the word, snatching moments from their contexts, creating a framework for the world’s temporary arrest, and for reflection. This, for Toussaint, is the real object of all mediation: thought. Sitting in a photo booth, and finding the conditions ‘perfect ... for thinking’, the same narrator recalls the rain that he was watching, seconds earlier, move through a ‘shining cone of light to the neighbouring darkness’:

Rain seemed to me to represent the course of thought, transfixed for a second in the light and disappearing the very next second to give way to itself. For what is the act of thinking – if it’s not the act of thinking about something? It’s the flow of thought that is so beautiful, yes, the flow, and its murmur that travels beyond the world’s clamour.

Water and thought go hand in hand throughout his work – Toussaint is a damply pensive writer. *The Bathroom*’s hero, watching rain falling outside the flat, experiments, in the

manner of his television-obsessed counterpart, by first fixing his gaze on a still point and watching drops fall past it (a strategy that ‘doesn’t convey any idea of finality’), then following each drop as it moves ineluctably towards the ground (which ‘demonstrates that motion, however swift it may seem, tends essentially towards immobility, and thus, however slowly it may sometimes appear to do so, continually conducts bodies towards death. Olé’). In Venice, as he gives his lover a watch, there’s a kind of time-lapse vision of the movement of the canal: ‘The water halted for a moment round the steps of a church, then cascaded away from them one by one.’ Life is a Heraclitan flow that thought, constantly negotiating terms with time, tries to freeze-frame, however briefly, before releasing it once more to run its course back into oblivion’s dark liquid mass.

At the same time, as anyone who’s read Barthes knows, photographs can only ever be of death. Toussaint, who also makes and exhibits photographic work, is very conscious of this. *Camera*’s hero, finding himself surrounded by a literal dark liquid mass as he travels on a night ferry from England, steals a fellow tourist’s camera and throws it overboard – but not before snapping a few random shots, which, developed later, seem to him to reveal ‘the whole stretch of stillness that precedes life and that follows it’. Thought, and its material extension in the form of technological media, are double-edged swords: attempting to create an interval of *chiar* in death’s endless *oscuro*, they merely succeed in framing and reproducing the whole process by which darkness triumphs. Art – for which all Toussaint’s media are to some extent stand-ins or metaphors – provides a snapshot of our condition, making it repeat or replay itself all over again by doing so. Even *Monsieur*, Toussaint’s weakest novel, manages to make this point emphatically. Rain-drenched and automobile-centred like *Camera*, it elevates its protagonist from an Everyman who ponders Schrödinger’s dead-cat paradox to a comically degraded deity who sits above the world in his high-rise office at Fiat’s headquarters opening and closing his eyes – as though he himself, like a camera, were causing light to follow darkness, then give way again. ‘*Fiat lux*,’ Toussaint writes, punning metaphysically. The book ends with a blackout across Paris during which the headlights of passing cars and flickering cigarette lighters provide temporary relief. *Godot* again: as Pozzo says, ‘The light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more.’

An endearing characteristic of Toussaint’s work is the way he unashamedly reprises scenes, situations and set pieces. Cones of light, swimming-pools, aquaria, octopi, chess games, lovers observed while opening letters, photographs and phone boxes, to name but a few motifs, recirculate with a rhythm that’s fresh and new in the very boldness of its repetition: the books, as *Camera*’s narrator says of his own life, seem to be ‘moving forward, yes, in a constant renewal of identical wavelets’. Toussaint is attached to the triangular set-up: start in Paris; take a trip somewhere else and stay in a hotel; go back to Paris. In the early

novels, that ‘somewhere else’ is usually Italy, sometimes London or Cannes, but always European. In his more recent *Making Love* and *Running Away*, published in French in 2002 and 2005 respectively, it’s the Far East.

Monsieur’s protagonist wondered whether, given the Earth’s rotation, one could move east in order to escape oneself – yet what his successor in the Far Eastern novels is escaping is time. Or perhaps half-escaping: arriving in an alien time-zone, his body clock as out of synch as his wrist-watch’s redundant hands, the narrator of these books (‘the same character,’ I’d write, if Toussaint’s nameless subjects weren’t always the same character – or, rather, if his whole oeuvre didn’t constantly return the question of what such subjectivity means) finds that jet lag has granted him a kind of fold, bubble or indentation that allows him to occupy time differently. As the hero points out in the newly translated *Running Away*, jet lag causes ‘a slight distortion in the fabric of reality, a shift, a misalignment’. There’s a shift in the writing in the Eastern novels too – an upward one – as old shaft-teeth interlock with those of a new gear-plate, giving a familiar engine more purchase. The Tokyo of *Making Love*, like *Television’s* Berlin, becomes a TV set, but a better and sharper model, with data displays flickering over every surface as hotel windows reflect traffic lights and neon signs, producing ‘indéchiffrables colonnes d’idéogrammes’. People become data-impregnated screens as well, with illuminated ciphers sliding across their shirts and cheeks as they amble through the street markets. Viewed from a tower twice as high as Fiat’s, the nocturnal Eastern city doesn’t require substitution by an abstract grid, since it already is one. And, once more, it’s from this grid itself that the violent event comes: as the hero and his lover wander through a night they hope will never end, an earth tremor brings space juddering to life.

Before leaving the hotel, the narrator (naturally) swims in its top-floor pool and, his thoughts merging with the water, tells us that ‘I myself was time’s flow.’ *Making Love* and *Running Away* are as Heraclitan as the rest of Toussaint’s novels; but in *Running Away* the flow takes on a more proairetic character. Dispatched to Shanghai by Marie, the femme fatale with whom he wandered through the flickering Tokyo markets, the hero hands a package of whose contents he’s uncertain to a contact he knows nothing about, then is whisked off to Beijing by a second sexy woman, at which point the three of them (the contact has come along, package secreted in his shirt) are chased by police from bowling alley to building site to bar in a fast-paced action sequence with grand, universalist overtones. The effect, in terms of the prose, is quite hilarious – like a James Bond novel written by Beckett:

We came flying out into this world without shifting gears, still rushing ahead, still tense, still in a state of shock, running away, our bodies trembling, still

feeling the urge to escape, having trouble controlling the bike, braking, hitting the sidewalk too fast, with too much force.

Another way in which the Eastern novels differ from their predecessors is in the priority they give to that bugbear of all things even vaguely avant-garde: relationships. For all their narrative refusal and machine-like logic, Toussaint's first three novels also involved emotional encounters between men and women. They could even be seen as playful renditions of quite conventional romantic situations, but only if re-engineered through a certain kind of reading, much as some student guides to *Ulysses* try to persuade us that what's 'really' going on in such and such a scene is Bloom pining for Molly, for example ('No,' I always want to shout out when I read accounts like these, 'what's really going on is tramlines vibrating, soap singing and language rioting, just like it says!'). But *Making Love* and *Running Away* are unabashedly 'about' the troubled love between the hero and his girlfriend. As he cavorts with the sexy Chinese woman in the toilet of a hurtling train in *Running Away*, the narrator's mysterious contact passes him a ringing mobile phone, and he hears Marie's distant and distraught voice saying her father has just died. There's mediation, time-lapse, speed and death (doubly so: as she leaves the Louvre, where she called the hero from, Marie passes a car crash on the rue de Rivoli) but also straight-up, almost sentimental pathos. The last section of the novel sees the narrator return to Europe to attend the father's funeral in Elba, the phone – and, indeed, all mediation – becoming quite redundant as he rejoins his love in person.

Is this a crypto-reactionary step backwards towards humanism, sentimentalism, positivism and the whole gamut of bad isms that the vanguard 20th-century novel expended so much effort overcoming – and, moreover, a step backwards enabled by some of that vanguard's own techniques? It's hard to say. In *La Patinoire* ('The Ice Rink'), a film Toussaint scripted and directed, the French director-character (it's a film about the making of a film) tries to explain to his American star that he hides love stories behind elaborate formal exercises. Is that an inverse way of saying that, in order to get away with formal exercises, he uses love stories as a sweetener, a Trojan horse? Either way, the star, who doesn't speak French, smiles back and says, 'I don't understand'; then, as the ice melts beneath the spotlights, and the geometrically scored skate-marks disappear, he goes off and screws the leading lady the director covets. It's a brilliantly comic moment – and one that (again) replays, or becomes a snapshot, *en abîme*, of the complex cultural legacy Toussaint has inherited, and its relation to a dumb mainstream culture in a corner of whose soil it must somehow take root and grow.

To say of an artist that 'it will be interesting to see where he goes from here' might be the most banal of commonplaces, yet in Toussaint's case, given the battle playing itself out in

his work, it seems appropriate: will he turn out, ultimately, to have been deconstructing literary sentimentalism or sentimentalising literary deconstruction? I suspect he'll keep us guessing, although not through lack of productivity. In the time it's taken me to write this article, it seems, he's managed to knock out yet another novel. The winner of the Prix Décembre (how nice of the French to give an award each month), *La Vérité sur Marie* reprises the Paris-Tokyo-Elba triangle.

It reprises plenty more: the logic and aesthetics of TV reassert themselves, as Marie's new lover, struck down by a heart attack, is wired up to monitors that translate his life-force into lines moving across a screen; the hero's coitus with a new fling is again interrupted by Marie's phone call; there's rain, and geometry, and more rain. And, like a perpetual thunderstorm, the battle between sentimentalism and deconstruction rages unresolved. The novel's end, which sees the hero reconciled – again – with Marie against the backdrop of a catastrophic forest fire, struck me initially as worn – trite, even, tasting more of syrup than of soot. But this feeling is blown away by a stunning Faulknerian sequence describing the fraught transportation of a racehorse through Narita airport. As he bolts out of his box, dragging his handlers across the rainy tarmac till they let go or are knocked unconscious, regularly spaced arc-lights frame a 'tourbillon de muscles' and the horse, readying himself to jump over the line of vehicles hemming him against the perimeter fence, threatens to turn into Pegasus. He does, in a way. Recaptured and placed in a cargo plane's hold, he ends up airborne, riven by turbulence as lightning and wing-lights flash and pulse through the darkness, a sentient thing framed in a metal box that itself lies in a metal box, armed with no more than 'la certitude d'être là': despite his non-human nature – or perhaps even because of it – an exemplary Toussaintean subject.

If to wonder aloud which direction a writer's course will take is clichéd, to say of his novels that one of their best qualities is their shortness might seem like an insult. Yet Toussaint's writing is remarkable for its conciseness, its elision. All his books are short, and the shortest of all is *La Mélancholie de Zidane*, a ten-page essay which Minuit, charmingly but quite properly, published in 2006 as a stand-alone book. *Zidane* is perhaps the closest Toussaint comes to meta-fiction: in it, he not only revisits all his motifs, but does so with explicit references, dropped in via footnotes, to *The Bathroom*, Bachelard and Freud. Lucky enough to have been in Berlin's Olympic Stadium on 26 July 2006 for the World Cup Final and *that* head-butt, Toussaint sees in Zidane a classic melancholia: the card he's shown is not red, he asserts, but black. Like everyone else in the ground, he missed the incident itself (it took place off the ball), but saw it on the replay screen: always already mediated, even for those present. If it's violence that makes space meaningful, then Zidane's act was the event par excellence. In Toussaint's rendering of it, the football pitch's painted lines become geometrical axes; the ball's movement, a 'trajectoire de billard'; the passage of Zidane's

head, ‘un geste de calligraphie’. Zidane himself, like the Narita horse (whose name, perhaps not so coincidentally, also begins with Z), becomes an embodiment of raw, animal consciousness in space, aware only of ‘le sentiment d’être là, simplement là’.

He also becomes, with his calligraphy and his mad ‘geste inédit’, a kind of writer – and the whole episode turns into a Proustian meditation about time. Zidane, who had announced before the game that it would be his last one ever, wanted, Toussaint claims, to stop the 90 minutes running their full course, to short-circuit finitude itself. It’s a beautiful reading of the iconic moment – and, in a more roundabout way, a fine take on literature. Toussaint ends, Zidane-like, by removing all possibility of endings in invoking yet another Z, Zeno: Zidane’s head, he points out, cannot really have reached Materazzi’s chest, since it would have had to travel half the distance there, then half the remaining distance, and so on to infinity – what Toussaint calls ‘le paradoxe de Zidane’. Thus we’re left, appropriately, in suspension: held, geometry-bound, in a space, or time, that has become pure interval.

[Vol. 32 No. 3 · 11 February 2010](#) » [Tom McCarthy](#) » [Stabbing the Olive \(print version\)](#)

Pages 26-28 | 4275 words