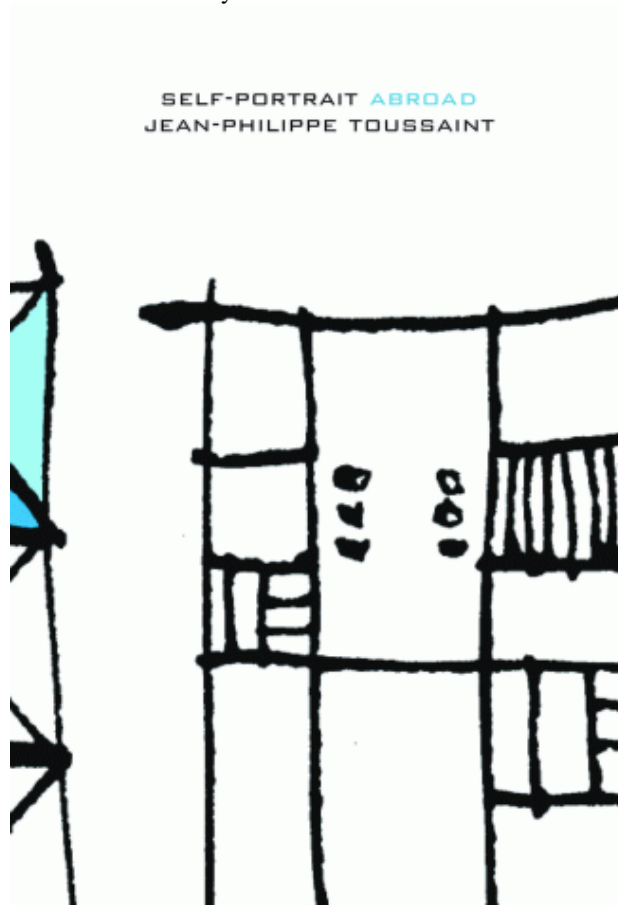


Portrait of the Artist as a Literary Traveller

By Colin Herd.



The last few years in my house have been punctuated (at a rate of commas rather than full-stops) by the regular publication by Dalkey Archive of novels by Jean-Philippe Toussaint in English translation. *Self-Portrait Abroad*, released in May of this year, is the most recent, and it follows hot-on-the-heels of *Running Away* in November last year, which in turn was preceded by an excitable burst of three in 2008: *Camera*, *Bathroom*, and *Monsieur*. I find Toussaint difficult to categorise. Just when I decide I have him pegged as a writer of Kafkesque claustrophobic psychological mazes, in which characters never quite confront their Existentialist crises, I take a turn in one of those mazes and find myself bumping up against potently hilarious Absurdism, in the line of Beckett and Pinter. At other times his humour seems more in-tune with the Minimalism of Mary Robison, and then there's his debt to Nouveau Roman, which reveals itself not only in the formal distinctness of each of his novels but also in his deft unstitching of stable self-hood and his explorations of specific spaces and sites. None of which really captures what I love most about his novels: their charming woundedness and mannered humour. *Self-Portrait Abroad* is a sequence of vignettes, portraits of the narrator (a Belgian writer called Jean-Philippe) on his travels, often for literary conferences and publishing meetings. The vignettes are connected by frequent reference to mode of travel, by just as frequent nods to language-usage/difficulties and by an engaging anecdotal tone. The narrator's urbane, friendly and witty. There's a slight recurring note of self-satisfaction, but it's easy enough to brush off - just a hint of the narrator's apparent literary success, and anyway he's aware of it, self-deprecating about it. Neither one of these impulses outstrips the other. The narrator's very charming, but at the same time there's something faintly unpleasant about his constant focus on his self, and scanty reference to his wife and children.

But then, these are meant to be self-portraits. On the one hand, Toussaint dissolves the distinction between the narrator and himself; as he has recently said in an interview: "he has the same wife, the same children, the same age. The same questions. He is myself." This, I guess, is the 'Self' part of the deceptively simple title. But on the other hand, the vignettes are very carefully constructed, his prose quirky, writerly, in fact almost painterly at times, drawing attention to its brushstrokes in subtle ways.

The strained relationship between the author, the narrator and the act of writing is dramatized in this short

passage from 'tokyo', where the narrator is suffering from back pain in a sushi restaurant:

'I kept changing my posture as the courses came and went in front of me, kneeling, looking straight ahead, my legs forming first a Y, then an L, a P, an R, an &, and finally, a poor M with two branches, a pitiful hiragana, a defeated katakana.'

In one episode, the narrator gets someone's name wrong and seamlessly makes an excuse to cover it up; in another we are told two ladies are thirty five and sixty, "I'm making them a bit younger to be on the safe side". The narrator fictionalizes whimsically for aesthetic reasons. Everyday events are sometimes described in a comically dramatic fashion, such as in 'cap corse', on the way to a Boules tournament: 'without speaking a word, like astronauts with less than an hour before takeoff'. This technique gains volume and takes on a darker edge near the end of the novel.

One of the longer vignettes, (appropriately) the penultimate one, 'Tunisia', begins:

'I no longer know exactly how this strange premonition came about, but I was certain I was going to die on this trip to Tunisia.'

This sentence plants the seed of a plot, a different plot, a dramatic inverse of the non-plot that subsequently unfurls. The alternative plot is logically extinguished immediately: the narrator's speaking, so he hasn't died. The episode develops with typical attention to the minutiae of experience. The narrator does some sight-seeing, gets 'a small, inept erection' as he travels by chauffeured car to Sfaz, gives a lift to two archaeologists in Souffle whose car has broken down, then gives a lecture at the French Institute. But the dramatic plot never quite disappears, Toussaint's prose consistently points to it as a kind of alternative reality, tending towards dramatic description of everyday things: lavish car-wreck descriptions of "*the remains of my flexible black travel bag...under the heap of archaeological material they'd piled on top*"; tears from one of the archaeologists on reading of Ayrton Senna's death in the newspaper; a description of the El Djem Coliseum as 'abandoned in the emptiness'; detailed depiction of the narrator's fellow speaker's 'stage fright' as 'trembling' and 'stricken'. The little tale literally fizzles out, (not with a crash, but a bubble) as the narrator pours himself a glass of mineral water and incidentally drowns out his fellow-speaker's voice, and clears the stage for a strange reflection on the narrator's part (an imagined obituary?) as he notices a strange expression on his audience's faces as they listen to a speech on the subject of "*lets face it, my really rather wonderful books.*" . I read this vignette as playfully (and kind-of painfully) self-concerned, the wool pulled from under the narrator's doom- foretelling self.

This chapter, and *Self-Portrait Abroad* itself are examples of what Toussaint has called 'infinitesimal novels', pointing towards the small (in fact, the minute - and time is a recurring theme in the novel) at the same time as pointing towards the infinite, where attention to the smallest details is key. *Self-Portrait Abroad* displays an immeasurably light touch but a searing psychological awareness. Toussaint's most recent novel, which won the Prix Decembre last year, is due out from Dalkey later this year, with the English title *The Truth About Marie*.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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