

TEXTUAL GAMES, INTERTEXTUAL READINGS: LUDIC DIMENSIONS IN STORY
AND STYLE IN THE WORKS OF JEAN-PHILIPPE TOUSSAINT

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Romance Languages in the Department of Romance Languages (French).

Chapel Hill
2006

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ABSTRACT

SARAH GLASCO: Textual Games, Intertextual Readings: Ludic Dimensions in Story and Style in the Works of Jean-Philippe Toussaint
(Under the direction of Dr. Yves de la Quérière)

Author of nine texts published by Editions de Minuit, Belgian writer Jean-Philippe Toussaint emerged onto the literary scene with his first novel in 1985. From the beginning, humor has been one of his trademarks, slapstick and crude at times, darker, more subversive, and subtler at others. While scholars all recognize the presence of humor in his works, none have really concentrated solely on this author's novels with the depth that they demand in terms of why they make us smile and even laugh. Hence, this is precisely what this dissertation accomplishes. The focus revolves around all of the playful aspects of Toussaint's texts in order to show how the author, as he has stated himself, privileges style over story. In the 1980's and 1990's, his works were often characterized as minimalist, and it is rather from this perspective that so many studies have been published. However, as his writing has evolved over the years, this description no longer seems to be valid in relation especially to his most recent works. Thorough examinations of semantic and syntactic fields have been initiated in this study in order to link the author's ludic sensibilities to his style, despite the fact that the content of the texts often contains much humor. Furthermore, the notion of intertextuality as a ludic device as well as incongruities in both text and context are also explored in detail. Toussaint alludes to numerous authors' works, from Pascal, Flaubert,

Gide, and Proust, to Apollinaire, Beckett, Nabokov, and Kawabata among others. Although the stories themselves are often humorous on the surface, the vast pleasure of this author's texts resides in the writing itself, the narrative style and the dialogue between his and other texts, details sometimes so subtle that they are easily overlooked.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Five years after the completion of coursework and exams and two children later, I finally finished, and so it did take an army to get me here. There are certainly so many to thank, and I will do my best to acknowledge the plethora of people who have helped me to see such a massive project through to completion. I would first like to thank Dr. Ed Montgomery for coming to my rescue and sitting in on my prospectus defense. He was completely willing to serve full-time on my committee when prospects in our department were slim. Thank you also to Dr. Fred Vogler and Dr. Dominique Fisher who also served briefly yet effectively for me. Thank you so much to Dr. Hassan Melehy, whose careful readings and extremely detailed comments helped me enormously throughout the process. His insights were always so dead-on and so welcome, and I always looked forward to getting a chapter back from him. He encouraged me greatly over the years and has been an exemplary mentor and friend. I would also like to thank Dr. Alain-Philippe Durand of the University of Rhode Island who served on my committee for two years and also helped me tremendously throughout. His generosity and encouragement were truly inspiring to me, and parts of this doctoral thesis would not be what they are without his expert advice. Thanks so much also to Dr. Michele Magill of North Carolina State University who stepped in so last minute to replace Dr. Durand when scheduling conflicts could not be resolved. She jumped in full force, immediately reading chapters and commenting, and her advice was abundantly

appreciated as well. Very special thanks go to Dr. Carol Sherman and Dr. Maria Salgado. Both of these esteemed professors served on my committee from the beginning and saw my project evolve from its genesis. They both read, critiqued, and offered so much helpful advice throughout the years. It was only due to the simultaneous timing of the birth of my second child with my original defense date that forced me to postpone the defense and thus forced me to replace them since the first defense date also coincided with their retirement. They were greatly missed. I was so fortunate to find such wonderful replacements for them in my colleagues Dr. Nina Furry at UNC and Dr. Sophie Rigolot Adamson of Elon University. They both stepped in only months before my defense, but both read individual chapters and helped me greatly before I submitted the entire book to them. Their careful readings and profound attention to detail were serendipitous and vastly appreciated.

I must thank my family profusely for their various sacrifices over the years. To my husband Ed who has always supported me in my endeavors and never lost faith, even when I felt like I might not make it. He devoted so many weekends to playing alone with our son Quinn, and, at the end, taking care of our infant daughter Sasha. I would have never been able to finish without his help. Thank you, Ed. I love you. And thank you Quinn for being so patient with me when I would swat you away from the computer and tell you to wait for something because I was working. And thank you Sasha for being born when you were (four days before my original defense date). In reality, the postponement allowed me to make revisions and rethink some things that would not have otherwise been possible had I defended on the originally scheduled date. Things really did work out in the end.

Finally (last but not least), I cannot thank enough Dr. Yves de la Quérière. I must address you directly here. It has been such a pleasure getting to know you over the years. I

have learned more from you than any other mentor in my life. Thank you so much for your brilliance, your patience, and your sense of humor. Your insights amazed me at first but then became no surprise at all. Your brilliance always inspired me; your criticism, direct without fail (and sometimes brutally honest, which I truly appreciated), always drove me to be more precise and to question more deeply. Sometimes the truth hurt, but you were never discouraging. I always looked forward to our meetings, at “the office” (aka Caffè Driade), and your willingness to work with me, to take me on as your last student when you were in the last phase of retirement will always humble me. Your patience has been remarkable...I don't think either of us would have predicted that I would have taken as long as I did... and I can never thank you enough. You would always tell me to stop thanking you, and that you really enjoyed the reading and the intellectual stimulation, and that just made me respect and admire you all the more. Thank you so much for helping me to write a dissertation that I know we are both proud of. You have inspired me, and your contribution to the scholar I have become and will continue to evolve into will not soon be forgotten. Je vous remercie mille fois, mon maître!

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>SB</i>	<i>La Salle de bain</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>Monsieur</i>
<i>AP</i>	<i>L'appareil-photo</i>
<i>LR</i>	<i>La réticence</i>
<i>TV</i>	<i>La Télévision</i>
<i>AE</i>	<i>Autoportrait (à l'étranger)</i>
<i>FA</i>	<i>Faire l'amour</i>
<i>F</i>	<i>Fuir</i>
<i>TP</i>	<i>Text Production</i>
<i>RL</i>	<i>Le Roman ludique</i>
<i>EM</i>	<i>L'écriture minimaliste de Minuit</i>

CHAPTER ONE

OVERVIEW OF THE AUTHOR AND HIS TEXTS

A. The Critical Consensus: Toussaint as Magister Ludi

Author of nine books all published by Editions de Minuit, Belgian writer Jean-Philippe Toussaint published his first novel *La Salle de bain* in 1985.¹ Cited often in works on the French novel of the 80's and 90's, it is precisely these two decades that brought about the recognition of this author in the forum of international literary criticism. How has this author won acclaim in both critical and scholarly circles? Let us find out what drives them to write about this and other relatively young writers at Editions de Minuit and what it is that they are saying.

Scholars across the board mention the presence of all sorts of jeux—jeux langagiers, jeux d'esprit, jeux de miroirs—to name a few, and most acknowledge their existence and even use words such as ironic(al), comic(al), and humor(ous) specifically and somewhat interchangeably to describe the author's novels. For example, in her article on the author's first three works entitled simply "Jean-Philippe Toussaint," Annie Pibarot explains that "Les trois livres sont écrits sur le mode de l'ironie," and later on writes that "l'auteur ironise et s'amuse . . ." (119). Then Pibarot adds that generally "Aux jeux et à l'ironie se mêlent des réflexions plus graves . . ." (120). Many critics also touch on linguistic, grammatical, and

¹ Seven of Toussaint's nine works are subtitled "roman." *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)*, published in 2000, is one exception. Most recently, *La Mélancolie de Zidane*, which came out on November 9, 2006, is a sort of mini-chronicle based on true events of the 2006 World Cup soccer championship.

syntactical elements such as the use of parentheses, and yet for the most part any deeper elaboration of these elements as ludic dimensions has been too casually glossed over. Indeed, Toussaint likes to play textual games with double meanings, understatements, and repetitions, among other things, and he is often cited for his use of ludic devices such as irony, pastiche, and parody. Similarly, he often distorts conventional linguistic notions by manipulating verb tenses, sentence structure, and punctuation. Overall, scholars seem to agree that these texts make us smile, and often laugh; in fact, Leclerc goes as far to say in “Autour de Minuit” that “Toussaint manie l’humour” (71). Yet, most critical commentary on Toussaint’s novels focuses on more serious, often philosophical topics.² Are these smiles motivated strictly by content-related issues of intrigue, or rather did we laugh in complicity with the author as we understood and appreciated his jeux de mots or blatant grammatical infraction? Scholars have likely avoided in-depth discussions of why these texts make us laugh or smile, though, due to the simple fact that humor is subjective and thus impossible to prove on a universal level.

Many critics also acknowledge the presence of allusions to other texts within the author’s own texts citing Pascal in particular; however, the intertextual dimension is quite rich and one that has scarcely been explored in this author’s texts. This will constitute the other primary theme in the dissertation with discussions involving not only Blaise Pascal, but also many other ground-breaking writers and artists such as Gustave Flaubert, Marcel Proust, Guillaume Apollinaire, Yasunari Kawabata, Samuel Beckett, and Vladimir Nabokov, for

² For example, see Maryse Fauvel’s articles “Narcissisme et esthétique de la disparition chez Jean-Philippe Toussaint.” [*Romanic Review* 1998 Nov; 89 (4): 609-20] and “Jean-Philippe Toussaint et la photographie: Exposer le Roman.” [*Romance Languages Annual* 6 (1994): 38-42], and Dominique Fisher’s article “Les non-lieux de Jean-Philippe Toussaint: bricol(1)age textuel et rhétorique du neutre.” [*University of Toronto Quarterly* 65.4 (1996): 618-31].

example. Additionally, I will discuss these intertexts in terms of their playful relationship to the text in which they are found as well as certain allusions' ludic links to each other within a single text. To put it concisely, it is my assertion that Toussaint's use of intertextuality constitutes ludic play, and it is this and other elements of ludic play that I will examine in detail in this dissertation. To some, this author's texts are extremely comical, while to others they only elicit faint smiles. Thus, while it would be difficult to argue the inherent humorous and/or comical nature of the texts since this effect would rely upon the reader reception and interpretation of them, it is quite a feasible task to argue that Toussaint's texts all encapsulate elements of ludic play and then through careful analyses, elaborate on how this use of play may translate into humor. In his thorough study *The Comedy of Entropy: Humour/Narrative/Reading* Patrick O'Neill observes the following:

The relationship of humour, games, and play (as *parole*) within the discursive system of ludic play (as *langue*) is dynamic rather than static, and any one of the terms of the relationship can quickly metamorphose into either of the other two. Play and games owe their difference to the presence or absence of a single game-constituting rule; humour and the lusory to a single constitutive factor, the factor of observation. Games and play, like anything else, can easily become forms of humour, while humour always has an element of the lusory in it, whether as a form of play with the logic of the everyday or, like all jokes, as a form of a game. All forms of play ... including humour, make possible ludic pleasure; games make possible specifically lusory pleasure as well, while humour similarly can provide both ludic and specifically humorous pleasure....
(84)

This author is particularly known for his absurd episodic stories; however, the linguistic play and parodic elements, for example, may provoke laughter as well. It is for these reasons, I believe, that Jean-Philippe Toussaint has experienced such widespread success in both the mainstream public and scholarly circles.

As I just mentioned, most critics agree that Toussaint's works don a tone full of playfulness, and describe them as humorous, comical, and most notably ironic without

focusing on the works as such. However, it should be noted that a few scholars have emerged in the past few years with works that do in fact focus on this playfulness and the author's overwhelming penchant for the ludic, most recently Olivier Bessard-Banquy's book *Le Roman ludique. Echenoz, Toussaint, Chevillard*. His discussion of the works of the three authors more particularly revolves around the jeu, and the lexical field he chooses certainly supports this idea, with adjectives such as ironique, comique, drôle, amusant, and rigolard, for example, in circulation to describe these contemporary novels. While style does play a significant role in this scholar's work, he leaves Toussaint out of certain chapter discussions, choosing to limit these sections to Jean Echenoz and Eric Chevillard. Two specific sections include "Le jeu romanesque," which is part of the larger chapter entitled "L'aventure narrative," and "Lettres vives," which is part of the larger chapter "Pour une stylistique hédoniste." I would argue that Toussaint plays a significant role in Bessard-Banquy's theses and should not have been practically ignored in these particular discussions. In fact, Toussaint is completely omitted from "Le jeu romanesque, which focuses on le noir as theme and the genre of detective fiction. This would have been the perfect place to wax poetic on Toussaint's fourth novel, *La réticence*, in particular. This novel was a surprise to those who had read his first three novels and thought they knew this author. It is not outwardly funny like the ones before it and in terms of a jeu romanesque, this is exactly what *La réticence* embodies, as I will show in chapter three of the dissertation. This text is a metaphor for literary production in general and for the creation of his novel, which I will discuss in detail, and the author said so himself in an interview with Michèle Ammouche-Kremers.³ Bessard-Banquy comments that the act of writing itself encapsulates "un jeu pour le romancier comme l'aventure l'est pour le héros . . ." (*RL* 103). He sums up this point accordingly:

³ See chapter three, section A.

Le jeu littéraire n'a pas pour fonction en l'espèce de divertir la critique ou de séduire le lecteur mais bien d'indiquer la nouvelle importance de l'attitude ludique dans la gamme des comportements contemporains. (RL 103-04)

The quotation rings so significant to Toussaint and more specifically to *La réticence*, so it is baffling that he is utterly ignored here. Toussaint's mystery novel is rather written in a parodic mode, and readers discover at the end that there really is no mystery. While the crimes in the novels of Echenoz and Chevillard are real in their respective fictive universes, perhaps the reason why the scholar chose not to include *La réticence* here, these novels, like *La réticence*, do embrace a more parodic view of literature. Indeed, all of the dark and mysterious premises of *La réticence* turn out to be the quasi-paranoid wanderings of the narrator's mind. While murders really do take place in the novels of Echenoz especially, no such crime occurs in Toussaint's mystery. Nevertheless, his novel still portrays "la nouvelle importance de l'attitude ludique dans la gamme des comportements contemporains," as Bessard-Banquy describes that of Echenoz.

Furthermore, Bessard-Banquy also almost exclusively privileges the works of Chevillard and Echenoz in his chapter "Lettres vives." The chapter commences as follows:

Echenoz et Chevillard, **plus que Toussaint**, aiment à soulever les jupes de la langue pour voir ce qui se cache en dessous. Si tous les trois n'auscultent pas le corps de l'écriture avec une égale ardeur, il reste bien que tous les trois de la même manière conçoivent la langue comme un extraordinaire terrain de jeux. (RL 109) [my emphasis]

While Bessard-Banquy does credit all three authors with an equal penchant for play in their texts, I must disagree with him on the point of unmasking language when he posits that Echenoz and Chevillard are more interested in this than Toussaint. In fact, many of the examples that he provides concerning the role of language in the works of Echenoz and Chevillard can also be found throughout Toussaint's novels. Perhaps the critic chose not to

cite them, so I will do so on numerous occasions in the chapters to follow. For instance, he provides an example from one of Echenoz's texts and describes his style in explaining that "le mot et la chose se confondent" and that "le mot n'est rien s'il ne dit pas le monde" (RL 109-10). He concludes that in fact these two things [the word and the world] are so interconnected and indecipherable from one another that "il n'est pas rare d'assister dans les proses d'Echenoz à la fusion pure et simple du langage et de l'univers" (RL 110). While this description could be considered valid for Toussaintian prose and would be apparent as early as the first page of his first novel as I will discuss in chapter two, a semantic investigation of the first paragraph of *La Salle de bain* reveals that Bessard-Banquy's argument is rather vague. That said, one might be able, then, to apply his reasoning to just about any text, thereby deflating the description that the critic uses to depict one of the unquities of Echenoz's works. At any rate, Bessard-Banquy also cites examples from Echenoz's texts that demonstrate astute word play and characterizes them as follows:

Les jeux de mots, à commencer par les assonances cocasses ou les allitérations alertes, peuvent néanmoins parfois se donner pour ce qu'ils sont, c'est à dire un clin d'œil poétique, un moyen ludique de rappeler au lecteur que l'écrivain reste conscient des mots qui sont les siens ... (RL 112).

The texts of Toussaint, however, can all easily boast such witty and/or nuanced word play as well, and so the fact that he is not even mentioned or quoted here seems a bit skewed. In *La Télévision*, for instance, there are many poetic lines throughout the text, some quite complex such as triplets of alliteration and assonance that occur simultaneously, for example, "un pâle plateau en plastique" and "un beau bol blanc." In brief, it is not until the end of this twenty-page chapter (and even then, only for two pages in a discussion subtitled "Une précieuse trivialité") that the scholar so much as glosses over our author in his discussion of linguistic games. While he concludes that everything in "l'esprit echenozien" is potentially a pretext

for “une dérive rhétorique” and “un décrochage stylistique” (112), one could easily conclude the very same about l'esprit toussaintien, especially in a novel like *La Télévision*, which places the writer and the writing process in the foreground of the story.

Given these factors among many, I am proposing a more profound detailed study of literary style and narrative technique in the author's texts. I will give consideration to not only possible evolutions in narrative technique but also the idea of intertextuality as a ludic device in order to show how the intertextual references do not merely stand alone, and that it is their organization and mingling with other allusions that gives them their inherent ludic quality. At any rate, Bessard-Banquy undeniably attributes the most time to discussions of the works of Jean Echenoz, which seems understandable perhaps since Echenoz's œuvre is in fact much more vast; however, in large part this scholar cites mainly Toussaint's first two novels *La Salle de bain*, and most notably *Monsieur* while *L'appareil-photo*, *La réticence*, and *La Télévision* are certainly much less often cited, only a few times each at most. Finally, though, I should note in all fairness that since Bessard-Banquy's book was published in 2003, he did not have the opportunity to study *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)* in depth nor the author's subsequent text in particular, *Faire l'amour*, which I examine in great detail in chapter four.

Indeed, I continue to accentuate that perhaps more than anything else, critics seem to agree that Toussaint's works are humorous and full of jeux de mots, for instance. However, many are either unable, or simply do not choose, to articulate specifically what embodies this humor because, as I stated earlier, humor is subjective. Readers often smile with clear affirmation, or in other cases, with perplexity, thus the terms play and playful are more logical descriptors. That said, playfulness (not just humor) is often acknowledged in the author's works, but rarely elaborated upon in much detail, especially in the form of semantic

and intertextual games specifically. For instance, in Bertrand Westphal's "Le quadrillage de l'arène: Temps et Histoire chez Jean-Philippe Toussaint" he writes that time and history in particular reside not so much in profundity as they do "sous un voile ludique" (119).

Westphal also believes that considering history in these works is inevitably done through "l'optique apparemment drôlatique" (120). This scholar, then, like so many others, acknowledges the ever-present playfulness while concentrating on other topoi.

Warren Motte in particular is most notably a specialist of Toussaint's works and recognizes humor as a dominating characteristic therein as well. Although this scholar focuses on minimalism in his article "TV Guide," he describes *La Télévision* as "droll" from the start and the narrator as "a most reluctant hero, engaged in a comically unequal struggle with his own constitutional penchant for passiveness...." Moreover, after ten pages of focusing on banality, alienation, and cultural survival, Motte does conclude that though the novel may tell a dark story on the one hand, "Toussaint packages it in a wrapping of comedy" (539). He explains his reasoning:

From the beginning, humor has been his signature, a puckish, absurdist sort of humor that leavens even the most dire of the traumas that assail his characters. In *La Télévision*, the comic dimension of Toussaint's discourse is closely organized and framed as a structural principle, because Toussaint stages his novel—and the capital issue of writing itself—very deliberately as a *game*. (539)

What Motte seems to be suggesting in this article whose focal point is minimalism is that if we took the comic elements out of Toussaint's texts, they would collapse. Despite the fact that most scholars downplay the ludic dimensions, Motte acknowledges that they play an integral role in this author's work. While I certainly agree with this notion, I should point out that the ludic dimensions embody not just the isolated comical comments of the narrator that Motte cites, but also and more notably the various stylistic elements, linguistic play, and

semantic fields, for example. The stories as a whole are not necessarily comical, that is to say, there is no consistent trajectory of humor regarding the plot in the novels; it is rather that they are made up of random comical anecdotes and situations, often disconnected from what could be considered the concrete plot of the novel. The author comments on this in an interview with Laurent Hanson, asserting that “comme il n’y a pas d’histoire, il ne reste que l’écriture.” He further explains this rationale:

Dès lors qu’il y a une histoire, elle fait passer l’écriture au second plan comme un moyen. S’il y a une histoire forte, fortement charpentée, qui avance et puis tout ça... l’écriture n’est qu’un moyen plus ou moins efficace qui fait suivre cette histoire et le lecteur est entraîné dans l’histoire. Si l’on enlève cet élément, il ne reste que l’écriture, et c’est l’écriture elle-même qui va faire avancer. L’intérêt viendra de l’écriture. Et un livre qui n’est pas porté par une histoire est plus difficile à appréhender parce qu’on tombe tout de suite sur l’écriture. Il y a beaucoup de lecteurs qui refusent, parce que ça ne les intéresse pas de se pencher....

This commentary will prove particularly pertinent to the author’s eighth novel *Fuir*, which I will touch on briefly in the conclusion to this dissertation. Some of the author’s most notable techniques such as incongruity, which will be discussed in a moment and explored further in the chapters to come, certainly reinforces dramatic (often anti-climactic) function.⁴ On the one hand, he tends to present the reader with a situation that leads one to expect a certain event or new character, for example, as a natural follow-up, but he leaves the reader hanging, and this never happens. On the other hand as I will later show, often when a situation seems to gain momentum and the reader witnesses what may be deemed concrete action, a scene that is actually going somewhere, Toussaint introduces an interruption without fail, and the scene is thus abruptly and permanently halted. In sum, all the scholars I just cited touch on

⁴ Of course, it should be noted that even Toussaint’s use of suspense and drama is more often than not presented in the parodic mode, another ludic dimension that I will explore.

playfulness in their articles, but moreso at the level of story, and therefore this is still not the main point of their arguments.

B. Tracing Toussaint's Literary Associations: the case of minimalism

Earlier I discussed critical acknowledgement of the author's works as characteristically playful while focusing on other topics, with Motte in particular having focused on the notion of Toussaint's texts as minimalist. In "Minimalism as Postmodernism: Some Introductory Notes," Kim Herzinger posits that minimalist fiction is "relatively plotless" and "concerned with surface detail, particularly with recognizable brand names" (73).⁵ Toussaint undeniably describes objects right down to their physical material, be they "en metal," "en plastique," "en vrac," or "en verre," for example. Moreover, in *L'appareil-photo* alone, the narrator mentions such brand names as Volvo (14, 51), Campari (19), Mars, Nuts, Milkyway, and Crunch (29), Nescafé (11), Tuborg (43), Mammouth (54), Volkswagen (51), and Shell and Total (73). Ginette Michaud notices in the minimalist texts of the 80's that "ce qui frappe surtout le lecteur dans les descriptions ... c'est la manière dont ces divers[es] [choses] sont traité[s], c'est la manière dont le statut du détail lui-même se trouvera peu à peu modifié jusqu'à devenir l'un des traits caractéristiques de son écriture" (72).

Fieke Schoots illustrates varied minimalist aspects that she sees in Toussaint's works such as "la brièveté [of the novels], la sobriété [of tone] et la simplicité [of sentences]," but

⁵ Characterized by a minimalism in not only plot, as well as a prolific penchant for the smallest and most banal details, Toussaint elaborately describes objects and clothing down to the smallest particulars in order to accentuate a certain sense of minutia in his novels, seemingly in the spirit of Balzac. However, what differentiates this author in this arena from the great masters and admitted influences Balzac, Flaubert, and Proust, for example, is indeed the whole reasoning behind all the description. Schoots reiterates that "le retour à la narration n'implique pas un retour au récit naïf de Balzac" (*EM* 54). While these authors used description to explain their characters and no detail was ever left unresolved or purposeless, Toussaint does not seem to carry the same intentions with him in his writing. In short, it often seems that our author gives the reader an infinite amount of details, which otherwise might not be furnished in more conventional story telling, while he simultaneously excludes the larger and seemingly more important details of the plot. He often leaves out details that the reader anticipates but will never receive, and this discrepancy constitutes a major characteristic in all of his works.

especially “l’absence de conjonctions causales à tous les niveaux du récit.” As a result of this absence she writes that “l’arbitraire s’affiche comme le principe organisateur de la narration” (EM 56). Indeed, our author favors ellipses and gaps in the so-called storylines such that the organization of the text seems arbitrary on the surface, which is likely his playful intention. However, this organization constitutes a major characteristic of his writing technique, and as an author who privileges style over story, nothing is really arbitrary. Schoots’ characterization in particular suggests a minimalism in both content and style. Sparseness of action and thin plots are accompanied by brief simple sentences, and the author does indeed describe everyday objects and clothing down to the most minimal and banal details.

It will become more and more evident that this description no longer fits, and that with this evolution in style, all three elements of language, story and style can be even more playful.⁶ While the brief simple sentences were certainly indicative of Toussaint’s first two novels at the beginning of his career, one could already detect a distance emerging from the stylistic minimalism by his third novel in terms of sentence structure, for example. Sentences went from a basic construct of simple subject, verb, complement, period, to paragraph length fragments divided by commas, relative pronouns, and present participles. These sentences became so long and complex that they simultaneously and paradoxically sped up and slowed down the reading. Initially, on the one hand, the reading is accelerated because with no periods in sight there is no place to pause for reflection. On the other hand, however, the reading is slowed because these sentences are so lengthy and fragmented that by the time the

⁶ From a more historical perspective, critics quickly cited this author’s works, along with the works of many other contemporary authors published by Minuit, as hailing from a new school of literature, which they called Le ‘nouveau’ nouveau roman. The name was coined for these contemporary works’ similarities to the new novel and its authors from the 50’s and 60’s such as Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, and Butor. However, the contemporary authors tend to reject this categorization and have never banded together as a movement as the previous generation of writers is supposed to have done. There is no sense of solidarity among them, even though they are working for the same publishing house.

readers reach the end, they must go back to the beginning in order to remember what the original subject and verb were as well as grasp the more general sense of the thought being expressed, which is one place where Toussaint acknowledges Proust in particular.

At any rate, whether Toussaint's sentence structure and language, for instance, are simple or seemingly more complex, these stylistic elements often directly reflect what is going on in the content, a prime example of Riffaterre's theory of context and effect, which will be discussed in the chapters to follow. That is to say, if sentences are brief and language seems empty, this often embodies a reflective device used to portray banality in the content. By the same token, if Toussaint writes paragraph length sentences with little room to pause through syntax, he may well be relaying something chaotic in his text. Bessard-Banquy credits Echenoz with this technique, but Toussaint uses it, too. Minimalist or not, the relation between story and style, this theory of context and effect, constitutes yet another one of his ludic devices. Besides, as we will discover by the end of the dissertation, the term minimalism seems to represent a category that has become useless in the recent years, at least as regards Toussaint's works.

C. Deciphering Stylistic Traits and Narrative Techniques

Let us now reveal some of the narrative resources and stylistic traits that are representative of the ludic dimensions in Toussaint's texts. The author's texts often function like mirrors that invert or reverse previously perceived images. They also attribute an enormous amount of descriptions to modern objects, thus their marked comparison to the new novel, and clearly mark this author as one of contemporary times. Moreover, as I will examine in this dissertation, this author's texts revolve more around disjointed anecdotes than the unity of a single, well-developed plotline precisely because the author wishes to accentuate style

over story. He affirmed this himself in an interview with Arnaud Moulhiac when he said that “tout ce qui se rapproche d’une histoire fait oublier le style ou la dimension poétique et méta-physique de la littérature, qui sont pour moi l’essentiel. Et pour qu’ils soient au premier plan, il ne faut pas que l’anecdote capte toute l’attention.” Here, then, are some of the most remarkable traits among the author’s stylistic resources as they relate to ludic interpretations:

- 1- He disappoints expectations in falsely signaling another event that would seem to add depth to the plot but never happens, or by playfully creating an anti-climactic effect from an unexpected outcome.
- 2- He has a penchant for incongruity and the saugrenu, which often results in these smiles of perplexity that I will mention from time to time . The humor is a very uneasy one, and thus the reader may laugh either without knowing why, or perhaps feeling that laughter is not an appropriate response given the context of the situation with which the author presents us. This is indicative of black humor and the author’s subversive sensibilities.
- 3- From semantic and syntactic points of view, his texts contain tic-words, adjectives and adverbs for the most part, which become suspect due to their frequent use. While the term tic has psychological connotations since representations, like fixed ideas, may tend to dominate a writer’s thought processes and therefore be repeated with the obsessive frequency of a nervous tic, my viewpoint is that the author is in fact in control of these words and uses them to over-emphasize tone to the point of playfulness. That said, the texts routinely contain repetitions, jeux langagiers, and blatant grammatical infractions, for example. The author’s language is often much more poetic than he is given credit for, boasting rich

alliterative plays in particular. Even if he may be making a game out of this poetic language, it is nevertheless stylistically motivated.

- 4- The texts all make frequent use of parenthetical comments, favor an indirect discourse with interior monologues over the use of direct quotations, and contain familiar language and even swear words that serve to establish quickly a seemingly intimate or overly familiar relationship between reader and narrator, comfortable and desired or not. Some of the most humorous moments can be found in the parenthetical comments.
- 5- Toussaint often alludes to other texts in the form of direct references as well as more subtle implications. Sometimes these allusions are isolated instances, while at other times the intertexts weave a complex web of thematic and linguistic undertones often signaled by specific semantic fields. This offers the careful reader a richer experience and attests to the author's sophisticated ludic sensibilities.

Now that I have sketched out some of the main stylistic characteristics of Toussaint's texts, let us take a few examples that we may relate to the ludic dimensions so commonly cited in previous works on his texts. While I will touch neither on every characteristic cited above here nor every text, they will all be addressed in detail in the chapters to follow.

Jacques-Pierre Amette describes *La Salle de bain* in particular as "quelque chose qui n'est ni une chronique ni un roman, mais une histoire picaresque version compact, un bric-à-brac d'émotions et de détails saugrenus, une sorte de miracle qui tient sur le ton et non pas sur l'histoire" (72). On that note, our author often inserts something saugrenu into any scene,

which results in incongruity. This also introduces a disjointed element to the established tone, thereby altering it playfully. Some examples in *La Salle de bain* include the following:

Tendant un bras vers le lavabo, je l’invitai [Kabrowinski] à prendre une serviette.
Plutôt la jaune, l’autre était sale. (SB 14) [my emphasis]

La laine était douce, sentait bon. Je mis les chaussettes propres, le caleçon neuf. Je me sentais bien. Je traînai quelque peu ainsi dans la chambre; je tirais sur l’élastique de mon slip, lisais les notices punaisées sur la porte, les consignes de sécurité, le prix des chambres, du petit déjeuner. Revenant vers la table, **j’enfilai mon pantalon et remis ma chemise sale qui puait aux aisselles.** (SB 54-5) [my emphasis]

In the second passage in particular, the vacuity of this banal scene is comical enough, but the concrete ludic quality bursts forth in the last sentence, which is also the last sentence of the paragraph. There, it is the juxtaposition of the dirty smelly shirt with the clean socks and the new underwear that elicits a smile or a laugh. The details such as the linen smelling good, the narrator feeling good, the dirty shirt that “puait aux aisselles,” as well as the nonchalance with which the narrator pulls on the elastic of his underwear while reading the information on the back of the hotel door further enrich the ludic character of the passage. And it is not just the phrase “puait aux aisselles” in its entirety that renders this scene funny but also the specific use of the verb puer, which is very brash and familiar. This author’s passages are carefully crafted in order to demonstrate not only the esprit ludique that dominates each text but also the intimate tone the protagonists establish.

The narrator of this first novel also likes to mock, and thus the author’s playfulness is not merely limited to a simple humor that immediately provokes laughter. He often juxtaposes the mundane with the tragic and often introduces incongruities that come off as inappropriate. This is certainly true of the quote above, “j’enfilai mon pantalon et remis ma chemise sale qui puait aux aisselles.” This technique serves to reinforce the malaise of the reader and makes us question these feelings of perplexity that surface in reading the texts.

Patrick O’Neill characterizes laughter in one sense as “malicious joy” and writes that people sometimes laugh because they are tickled, embarrassed, terrified, “and in all sorts of situations that cannot be comprehensively accounted for by theories of humor alone” (37). He makes a point of further arguing that “humour [does not] always make us laugh: one person may become helpless with laughter at something that another person — or even the same person under slightly different circumstances — may only smile at, or register unsmilingly as vaguely amusing, or simply just not find funny at all” (37). Mocking is one form of derisive humor that may elicit this so-called malicious joy. It seems unkind, and yet sometimes we laugh. Some feel guilty for laughing while others remain unphased and feel no moral dilemma in their complicitous laughter.

In *La Salle de bain* particularly, the Belgian narrator mocks the French on various occasions. He encounters a French couple in the hotel where he is staying during a trip to Italy. He explains that “Parfois, au détour d’un escalier, il m’arrivait de croiser le couple de Français” and that one day “Malgré l’heure matinale, à peine assis, ils entreprirent de converser” (SB 58). Here the comment is amusing in itself because the narrator mocks them for their lack of spontaneity. He then directly inserts this parenthetical comment: “(c’était sûrement des Parisiens de longue date)” (SB 58). He tells us that “Ils parlaient de beaux arts, d’esthétique” and that “Leurs raisonnements, absolument abstraits, me paraissaient d’une suave pertinence.” Finally, he remarks that “S’exprimant en termes choisis, l’homme déployait une grande érudition, ne manquait pas de cynisme” and that “Elle, elle se cantonnait à Kant, se beurrant une tartine.” The narrator so comically concludes that “La question du sublime, me semblait-il, ne les divisait qu’en apparence” (SB 58). This passage is extremely playful with the jeu de mots “se cantonner à Kant.” This sentence is amusing

because of the contrast of the intellectual topic of Kant with the banality of the simultaneous action “se beurrerait une tartine.” The narrator implies in his characteristically deadpan manner that these people are boring and pretentious. The sarcasm inherent in the last lines of the passage is also humorous. He could not care less about “leurs raisonnements” but so comically and sarcastically criticizes them as having “une suave pertinence.” He utterly mocks their pseudo-intellectualism.

Then, while watching a soccer game at the hotel bar, he flings another insult at the French when he evokes the final match-up that “opposa la Belgique à la France” (*SB* 84). He reveals that “Dès la première série de lancers, mon peuple, très concentré, prit facilement l’avantage sur ces maladroits de Français” (*SB* 84). Again, the narrator openly makes fun of the French.⁷ The declaration “mon peuple” is intriguing from a structural point of view because up to this point in the novel, we likely assumed that our narrator was French. Therefore, the discovery this late into the text that he is Belgian is an amusing surprise. Since this was Toussaint’s first published novel, even scholars and the public probably did not yet know that the author himself was Belgian.

Many of the traits that characterize Toussaint’s literary style and narrative technique can be found in his first three novels. The first book I ever read by Toussaint was not in fact the author’s first, but rather his third, *L’appareil-photo*, published in 1988. This novel is undeniably comical and obviously contemporary with all the references to popular culture strewn about, and thus perhaps for these reasons, even the first-time reader of this author or a reader who may not have any background in literary theory or philosophy is able to enjoy his books. Toussaint waxes poetic on the ideal reader, explaining simply that “Le lecteur idéal

⁷ Here we have a Belgian making fun of the French, but one more often hears about the French making fun of Belgians. It should be noted that Belgian jokes are sort of the French equivalent of Polish jokes.

est celui qui aime ce que je fais et que mes livres rendent heureux” (29). Moreover, “Beaucoup de choses sont effectivement préméditées,” says Toussaint in an interview with Michèle Ammouche-Kremers, but further insists that “ce n’est pas non plus un jeu à décoder. Certains éléments intentionnels sont toutefois intéressants [...] Tant mieux si on [les] voit mais cela n’a pas d’importance si on ne [les] remarque pas” (31). On the whole, these statements suggest the multiplicity of ways that one may approach his texts, and yet are likely expressed tongue-in-cheek. Although the author has quickly become a staple in discussions of contemporary French literature in scholarly circles, indeed he appeals to a much wider audience that can take his books at face value and appreciate them for just that. In an article about *L’appareil-photo* entitled “Le nouveau «nouveau roman»,” Amette also describes Toussaint as an author who “[pratique] . . . «le monologue intérieur visuel», genre délicat qui vient à la fois de Joyce, de Beckett, de Claude Simon, mais, plus haut, d’un certain Marcel Proust . . .” (10). Indeed, Toussaint seems to acknowledge Proust through some of his writing techniques; however, our author is the first to admit the overwhelming influence that Samuel Beckett most notably had on his writing when he was much younger. In an interview with Jean-Louis Tallon in November 2002, the author explained that after having read Dostoïevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and before writing *La Salle de bain*, “[son] plus grand choc littéraire fut la découverte de l’œuvre de Samuel Beckett.” He elaborated this further, accentuating that “C’est [l’œuvre de Beckett] pour moi LA grande influence littéraire. J’ai lu toutes ses œuvres et me suis mis à écrire comme lui, à être influencé par son style, au point d’en arriver à une sorte d’impasse toute ‘beckettienne’ (rires) de l’écriture.” He added that fortunately he was able to sufficiently “digérer l’œuvre de Beckett, au bout de deux ans, en trouvant dès *La Salle de bain* [sa] propre voix et [son]

propre style.” Even though he has been able to get past his apparent obsession with Beckett, the influence lingers, and our author has scattered allusions to the works of his literary idol throughout his own novels, and this will be illuminated in some of my discussions on intertextuality in the chapters to come. At any rate, the author himself also confirms a definitive evolution in his writing with the publication of *La réticence* in particular. He explained his thoughts on this novel in an interview with Laurent Hanson:

La réticence, c’est une expérience intéressante qui s’écarte un peu de la ligne mais qui me permet d’avancer. Je vois ça comme une évolution. L’ensemble de ce travail, depuis le début, est une recherche. Je ne sais pas ce que je recherche, mais c’est une recherche. Donc, j’avance. Il y a une évolution. Je me sens beaucoup plus à l’aise avec l’écriture qu’au début.

An exploration of this initial departure of sorts from his first years of publishing will be presented in chapter three of the dissertation.

D. Establishing a Ludic Lexicon: exploring some terms behind the playful aspects of Toussaint’s texts

Critics of Toussaint’s novels have evoked such terms as humorous and even comical when describing various aspects of the texts, as I mentioned earlier.⁸ In this section, I will touch on several terms that we will encounter throughout the dissertation and thus the need to lay down some basic characterizations regarding these particular ideas and theories is essential. These terms, which are all interconnected, include the following: incongruity, saugrenu, black humor, and intertextuality.

⁸ It would be a lengthy task to thoroughly examine and distinguish these two terms, which are often used interchangeably (and thus perhaps confused), and this is certainly not my intention. What I affirm, however, is that the common link among them is indeed their inherent playful character. O’Neill cites Freud’s work *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* and his attempts to distinguish what is humorous from what is more concretely comical. O’Neill writes that according to Freud, the comic “[provides] relief from what Kant called ‘strained expectation’” while humor “[provides] relief from the need to feel sympathy” (107). He concludes that “the comic is discovered, is limited to human beings and their environment, and needs a victim” while humor “is also discovered, specifically in situations where sympathy was felt to be called for but proves not to be necessary, and needs only one person, namely the humorist, the observer” (107).

One of the characteristics that constitutes a major force in the ludic ambiance of the novels is certainly the use of incongruity. O'Neill insists that incongruous juxtapositions "[are] central to all our notions of humour" (108). He then inevitably must ask: "But what is incongruity?" (108) To this he responds as follows: "In a universe without perceiving subjects there could be no incongruity, for incongruity is a function of perceived deviation from an accepted norm" (108). In short, it is the embodiment of two things that seem to oppose one another, and these incongruous elements may be characterized as inconsistent or out of place and even inappropriate or absurd. Incongruity is also a central characteristic of black humor, a technique often used in literature of the absurd, in which characters cope with events and situations that are simultaneously comical, brutal, and horrifying.⁹ Toussaint's texts do seem to embrace a darker humor, as we will see in the dissertation, especially in chapter four with my in-depth examination of the author's seventh Minuit publication, *Faire l'amour*.

Incongruities can be found throughout all of the author's texts, and examples can be cited at the levels of language, story, and style in general. Although it may be central to humor as O'Neill suggests, incongruity is not necessarily synonymous with humor. Nevertheless, juxtaposing inconsistent and/or absurd linguistic, contextual, and stylistic elements is absolutely playful. Whether we laugh or not, whether or not this ludic effort is transformed into something more humorous or comical, depends on our ability or willingness to play along, to play the game the author may be proposing.¹⁰

⁹ As O'Neill points out, black humor seems to be characterized by a lack of certainty and a feeling of insecurity. His study discusses this characteristic absence and bypasses the ambiguities of the term black humor in order to detail more specifically what he calls entropic comedy and humor.

¹⁰ To this effect, no matter what potential for humor exists in any literary text "as a result of its linguistic being," explains O'Neill, "this potential will remain unrealized without the reader who ... switches it on" (120). For more intriguing and in-depth perspectives on reader reception, see Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the text* and

Directly related to and used hand in hand with incongruity in Toussaint's texts is the concept of the saugrenu. Saugrenu is an adjective in French that conveys something that is absurd, ridiculous, or even of a shocking strangeness. It embodies something that seems quite simply out of place in its context. Toussaint likes to insert absurd elements that may often be characterized as saugrenu in his texts and in turn juxtapose the given context with these elements so that they become incongruous, often inappropriate and out of context. The effect is often a certain degree of dénivellation, or a downward slope, an unevenness that occurs in the text be it related more to content or form. It should be noted that the French language is much more attached to the idea of consistent levels of speech, hence the effectiveness of dénivellation in a French text. Basically, these ideas of incongruity, the saugrenu, and disappointed expectations all encompass approaches to contrast, and contrast is a stylistic device commonly seen in the works of our author, as I will show. It can certainly also form a comical device.

The most intriguing game of all in Toussaint's texts to my mind, and one that especially relies on the reader's ability to perceive the often elusive allusions, is that of intertextuality. His stylistic pastiches as well as allusions to other texts, be they concrete references or subtle allusions, one-time mentions or themes interwoven throughout, create a rich and complex subtext underneath the main story line. As Tiphaine Samoyault points out in her book, intertextuality is an historical notion created to relate inherited literary discourse and modern writing practices. This notion finds its foundation in the idea that texts are constantly in movement, that is to say, whether we realize it or not, we take into account our own literary experiences and combine them with each new text that we read. While the idea is not really new and can be traced back to Baudelaire's *Palimpsestes*, for example, and other

authors' texts from long ago, the term intertextuality was coined by Julia Kristeva who was really borrowing the idea of new texts dialoguing with old ones from Mikail Bakhtin's concept of le dialogisme. Bakhtin's primary emphasis in his theory of dialogism was that the conscious is incessantly filled with exterior elements, ingredients brought by others and necessary to our creations and accomplishments. Roland Barthes and Michael Riffaterre also published seminal studies on their ideas of intertextuality. For Barthes, texts are not authorities but rather circular: according to his line of thinking, it is impossible to live outside a text. Riffaterre's notion of intertextuality revolves around the concept of reception and the perception of the reader. He calls the effect of reading an intertext, which he distinguishes from the term intertextuality. He posits that an intertext represents the continuation of a work by the reader and sees the text more as an ensemble of presuppositions of other texts.¹¹ Every author, whether intentional or not, is affected by every literary work he or she has ever read, and thus these influences surface in their own literary works in the subtlest allusions to the most obvious citations. Culture is also inextricably embedded in literature. Knowingly or not, writers use intertextuality as a means to show what they want to show be it because they find it impossible to concretize the conceived idea or simply because they consciously believe that by mimicking the style of another or referencing an established icon, the reader will better relate to their project.

¹¹ I also briefly cite Genette in this dissertation for his contribution to the study of intertextuality, but he studies it in more specific terms, suggesting that the general notion of intertextuality has several subdivisions. In his seminal work *Palimpsestes*, he speaks of intertextuality in terms of several other types of textual transcendence: architext, metatext, paratext, hypotext, and hypertext. According to Genette, a hypertext is defined as "tout texte dérivé d'un texte antérieur par transformation simple" (16). He also characterizes a hypertext in particular as one in which "la présence effective d'un texte dans un autre" exists, especially as with parody and pastiche. While Genette's distinctive divisions of intertextuality only seem to repeat what Kristeva studied, his notion of a paratext is intriguing and original. He characterizes paratexts as the presence of subtitles, prefaces, post-faces, footnotes, and dedications, for example, within a literary text.

If we recall the mention of Kant just cited in an example from *La Salle de bain* in the previous section, for example, we could relate intertextuality to Kant's notion of the sublime. In *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, Lyotard writes that literature and modern art find their reason in the esthetic of the sublime. He interprets it as developing through a conflict in the ability to conceive something versus the ability to present it. He describes this as the insufficiency of demonstration, writing that one may be able to conceive of an idea of reality while at the same time unable to reproduce it outside one's own mind. This is where the sublime comes in and masks the unshowable through such forms of expression as allusions. In alluding to the works of others, we can rely on previously accepted words and/or ideas in order to get our own across. Scholars of intertextuality assert that every text is historical in this way, leaning on the writings of its predecessors, and as Lyotard posits, naming something and repeating it legitimizes the new text and gives it an identity, something that readers can grasp and understand.

According to Samoyault, parody in particular transforms a previous work "soit pour la caricaturer, soit pour la réutiliser en la transposant," nevertheless, "qu'elle soit transformation ou déformation, elle exhibe toujours un lien direct avec la littérature existante" (38). Genette contends that parody constitutes one of the main forms of intertextuality and that its intent is either to be ludic and subversive, or to admire. Either way, Genette's etymological breakdown of the word parody according to Samoyault "met l'accent sur l'opération de dérivation dans laquelle le texte antérieur est, d'une manière ou d'une autre reconnaissable..." (38). In studying Toussaint's texts, the allusions must be recognized by the reader in order for the game to be reciprocal. The intertextual references as parody, subversion, or homage, for example, are all nevertheless ludic once the reader discovers

them, and it will be my job to pinpoint these intertexts in order to analyze in detail their playful relationships to the text as a whole, and even to each other as the case may be. Playing games garners reader involvement, and this is all part of Toussaint's ludic landscape.

E. Organization, Methodology, and Assertions of this Doctoral Thesis

All in all, I am proposing a much more detailed and categorical study of literary style and narrative technique in the author's texts, and I will accomplish the following:

- 1- This dissertation will initiate detailed semantic and syntactic examinations in the texts on a level significantly more profound than is evidenced in any previous studies of this author's works in order to extract the ludic undertones inherent therein. I will argue that this author's playfulness in all its layers is inextricably related to his narrative technique and the stylistic choices he makes.
- 2- I will use a methodology that revolves around stylistic examinations with the task of exposing the ludic dimensions within them in order to suggest that minimalism is not always the appropriate terminology to describe Toussaint's style. When this author first emerged in the literary forefront of French literature, his writing was so often described as minimalist. It will become more and more evident that this description no longer fits and that with this evolution in style, all three elements of language, story and style can be even more playful. As I will show through careful semantic and structural examinations, this author's later texts especially are often quite far from being minimalist as framed according to the terms on pages 10-12.
- 3- I will give consideration not only to possible evolutions in narrative technique but also the idea of intertextuality as a ludic device, not just the author's memory (subconscious or not) of literary, scientific, philosophical, and artistic texts of the

past. Instead of just quoting examples of word play, for example, and announcing briefly that yes, Toussaint's novels are playful, even funny at times, I will dissect the ludic elements and analyze the language. I will also study the language and style of the intertextual references and the allusions themselves in detail in order to back up the claim that the playfulness in the texts is indeed semantically, stylistically, and intertextually motivated.

In brief, this dissertation will revolve around all of the author's ludic sensibilities: therefore, I will deal with not only concrete humor regarding the stories themselves, but also and more importantly the overwhelming presence of stylistic play in the form of semantic games, syntactic games, and intertextual games. The dissertation will be divided into three main chapters. Chapter two will cover Toussaint's first years of publishing with a discussion of *La Salle de bain*, *Monsieur*, and *L'appareil-photo*. Chapter three will then entail an exploration of the author's next three publications in order to illuminate an evolution in his style. While a main component of my thesis revolves around the idea that Toussaint privileges style over story, this notion will especially come to the forefront in chapter three, which covers *La réticence*, *La Télévision*, and *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)*. Finally, this textual and contextual evolution reaches a new height with the publication of the author's novel *Faire l'amour* in 2002, to which I will dedicate the whole of chapter four. I will then continue to examine this evolution in a brief discussion of *Fuir*, which was published in 2005, with some concluding statements to finish in chapter five.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FIRST YEARS: *LA SALLE DE BAIN*, *MONSIEUR*, AND *L'APPAREIL-PHOTO*

A. Introduction to the texts

The first three novels published by Jean-Philippe Toussaint by Editions de Minuit, *La Salle de bain*, *Monsieur*, and *L'appareil-photo* were published in 1985, 1986, and 1988 respectively. These novels quickly established a name for this young Belgian author, and scholars began to study and write about his works. The first three works certainly share a vast number of attributes, namely, the presence of an anonymous young male protagonist whom the reader may find completely alienated from society as well as the abundance of slapstick humor and elements of the saugrenu. Duplication and repetition occur on both a narrative and thematic level. Incongruity abounds, and in many scenes throughout Toussaint's texts it is impossible for the reader to find a mood or unified tone because of interruptions. These three novels are riddled with digressions, diversions, and various discontinuities that serve to confuse the chronology of the text, thereby disorienting the reader. Furthermore, incongruity is without a doubt one of Toussaint's most frequently used techniques. It serves as the foundation for many of the interruptions that occur in his texts, as well as the key element in disappointing the expectations of the readers, deceiving any anticipation about what will happen in the texts.

While concrete slapstick humor and elements of the saugrenu are not the only things at issue in these texts, they play an integral role when it comes to masking some of the more

subtle stylistic elements. Many of the games that scholars cite, as I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, revolve around plays on words and allusions to other texts. Not only will the presence of semantic and syntactic games be discussed in relation to incongruity in these three texts, but also intertextual games, since this author often alludes to other texts within his own. This is a complex and abundantly ludic trait of his work, one that has scarcely been cited and certainly not revealed in any detail with the exception of the obvious relationship between *La Salle de bain* and Blaise Pascal's *Les Pensées*.

La Salle de bain tells the story of a twenty-seven year old young man, the protagonist and narrator of our tale. It is divided into three brief sections based on the Pythagorean theorem: Paris, the hypotenuse, and Paris. This narrator lacks motivation in life, and the novel opens with his decision to retreat to the bathroom for an indefinite period of time. He moves himself in, transporting all of his books there and turning the bathtub into his permanent lounging place, even his meditation space as my semantic investigation of the opening scene will show in a moment. He does not work, and with his wife Edmondsson only working part-time at an art gallery, one wonders how they are able to get by. One also wonders how his wife is able to endure the perceived laziness and pathetic state of her mate, and yet, she humors and supports him. Despite the banality of his life and the story we are reading, his general musings do make us smile if not for their concrete humor, then for their utter absurdity. He is after all in a bathroom and the bidet, for instance, already leaves room for elements that are saugrenus as we shall also see in a moment.

In the second part of the novel, the narrator leaves the bathroom. He escapes to Italy without his wife. She eventually joins him, but the trip neither begins nor ends well: the narrator is annoyed constantly by Edmondsson's desires to visit tourist sites because instead

of playing tourist, he just plays darts in his hotel room. In somewhat of an unexpected twist, he ends up wounding her by plunging a dart into her forehead, a possible allusion to the life of William S. Burroughs.¹² This wound subsequently lands Edmondsson in the hospital. This chain of events stuns our protagonist and his tenderness and attention to his wife are notable after this trauma. Despite his concern for her wellbeing, however, she returns to Paris unaccompanied. The narrator needs her, though, and cannot subsist in Italy alone after all. In the third and final section entitled *Paris*, just like the first part, the narrator has returned to Paris and asks Edmondsson if he may return home after all that has happened. She says yes, and then a peculiar thing happens: we see him leaving the bathroom again after apparently having passed another significant block of time there as a recluse, an amusing testament to the cyclical nature of his life. Although the story itself is undeniably banal, the details of it are often humorous, and many of the playful elements of this and Toussaint's other texts reside not so much in the stories themselves, but rather in the little details that otherwise seem insignificant to any plot development and in the writing style itself. These characteristics along with an underlying ambiance of existential angst intertwine and play off of each other just enough to capture the curiosity of the reader and even make him/her laugh out loud at times. Thus, despite the surface simplicity of the story and the brutal banality of the plot, numerous deeper layers exist at the levels of semantics, style, and subtext, and these are precisely what I examine in this chapter.

¹² Born in 1914, William Seward Burroughs was a writer of the Beat generation. His semi-autobiographical stories generally dealt with his homoerotic urges and drug use, his most famous work being *Naked Lunch*. After fleeing from the law to Mexico for his drug activities, he showed off his marksmanship to some of his friends by doing his "William Tell act." His common-law wife, Joan Vollmer Adams, placed a glass on her head and he killed her with one shot.

In like manner, *Monsieur* tells the story of a young man who shall remain nameless throughout. He is the main character of this novel, but this time, the story is told by a third person narrator. This is the only one of Toussaint's eight texts that is not narrated in the first person. Truly, nothing happens in this novel. We know that Monsieur used to have a fiancée. We also know that he works for Fiat-France and seems to have a relatively prestigious position, but we really do not witness him working. We also realize that much like the narrator of *La Salle de bain*, Monsieur is restless and will go to great lengths to avoid reality and confrontation. The novel oscillates between two main scenarios. Firstly, we often see Monsieur switching apartments several times to avoid a situation with which he is annoyed but lacks the courage to be honest about. Secondly, we see Monsieur actually getting reeled into the situations he tries so much to avoid, like helping type a neighbor's book on mineralogy. This does not sound like the stuff of great intrigue and adventure, but suffice it to say that like the first novel, the second novel also contains playful observations throughout and much of the humor is experienced through Monsieur's evasive tactics, which are often quite pathetic and/or absurd. Even in pursuits of love, Monsieur is detached, and the dates he goes on are anti-climactic and banal. Olivier Bessard-Banquy summarizes similarly Monsieur the man and *Monsieur* the novel:

Sans nom, sans véritable fonction . . . , sans histoires, Monsieur est sans corps, sans épaisseur, sans existence. Et le roman ne décrit rien finalement que la désertification de la personne dans un monde désincarné : si l'identité ne se construit qu'au travers des relations aux autres, alors le délitement de ces relations débouche inmanquablement sur une éclipse de l'être, sur une suspension de l'existence. (*RL* 173)

He leads a child-like existence, shunning responsibility throughout, and this is reaffirmed at the end of the novel that describes Monsieur's life as "un jeu d'enfant" (*M* 111).

Like the first two novels, critics were quick to categorize *L'appareil-photo* as a minimalist novel in terms of both content and style. While indeed not much happens in this novel as the plot is thin, and the characters seem utterly immobilized, one can certainly begin to detect an evolution in the author's style and a deeper sense of content and thematic development that I will illuminate and discuss in terms of the intertextual allusions to Pascal later on in this chapter. The Pascalian subtext is one that initially surfaced in *La Salle de bain* as scholars such as Margaret Gray and Heidi Marek-Marburg have noted. However, a playful continuation of this subtext proliferates in *L'appareil-photo*, and these obvious intertextual winks that occur throughout on both a semantic and thematic level in relation to this third novel have been somewhat acknowledged but never expounded upon in any depth by scholars. Therefore, I must disagree with Bessard-Banquy when he compares our author's style to that of Jean Echenoz, asserting that "On ne peut pas dire de Toussaint qu'il suive une même dynamique de l'amplification narrative" (RL 36). While the critic believes that readers can sense a "gradation narrative" and a "développement thématique" and that there exists "une extrême densité de sens" in the works of Echenoz, for example, he insists that "Il est au contraire évident que [la] poétique [de Toussaint] de la concision lui interdit toute excroissance épanouie, tout développement un peu trop alerte (pour les trois premières œuvres du moins...)" (RL 36). The grammatically and syntactically simple and concise sentences that often appeared in the first two novels are found in this third text, but they begin to be overshadowed by other sentences so long and complex that they have the power to completely disorient the reader. Suddenly, a minimalism in style seems to be questionable, as there are also neologisms and blatant grammatical misuses present in this third text along with the aforementioned Pascalian intertext that the author so humorously extends and

elaborates. He also elaborates on the passage of time as theme with allusions to Proust, and thus this “densité de sens” that Bessard-Banquy claims absent from Toussaint’s text does, in fact, exist.

L’appareil-photo begins with the narrator wanting to obtain a driver’s license, as well as the mention of a long lost friend’s wedding to which he was invited. However, our protagonist never actually does acquire the documents he needs in order to get his license, and the wedding mentioned on the first page is never referred to again. Our main character meets Pascale, the young woman who works at the driving school, and his adventure takes off from there. Pascale becomes his constant partner in all the banal details of what will eventually comprise the entire novel. The two spend an inordinate amount of time on a quest for propane. The fact that the narrator accompanies Pascale on this quest in the first place is funny since it is she who needs the gas and they have just met: he has nothing better to do and is merely there with her out of his own idleness. At the propane filling station, the two seem very friendly, but the intimacy of daily life that they are so quick to establish is mocked and comically undermined when we realize that they do not even know each other’s names yet:

Nous marchions l’un à côté de l’autre, je portais la bouteille de gaz. Au fait, dis-je, je lui [au marchand de gaz] ai dit que vous étiez ma femme. Vous avez bien fait, dit-elle. Vous vous appelez comment, à propos? Pascale, elle s’appelait Pascale Polougaïevski. (*AP* 54)

There are clues that would indicate the newness of their relationship, apart from the fact that the reader should remember that they have only just met at the driving school: firstly, the narrator previously refers to her as “la jeune femme,” and secondly, they use “vous” with each other. However, their sense of ease with each other and the quirkiness of the situation at hand make it easy to forget that they have literally just met. Furthermore, Toussaint’s comic

timing of this scene is so impeccable that the aforementioned detail where the narrator asks Pascale's name in the above quotation still comes off as quite surprising and amusing.¹³ Throughout the text, the reader also notices Pascale's overwhelming fatigue (and/or boredom...it is difficult to say) and ability to fall asleep in just about any situation. Yet again, the reader is left wondering at the end what actually happened in the book and what will happen to these characters who, on the one hand have just met but on the other hand seem to have so quickly become lovers. The reader may also wonder if the narrator will ever get his driver's license since that was how the novel opened, pretext or not. We will never know.

One thing is certain: Toussaint's first three novels bask in the banality of their details. The quotidian is magnified and pathetically placed on a pedestal for readers to examine in all its minutiae. Furthermore, this author emerges immediately as magister ludi, a master of word play and allusions, a craftsman of a writer who decidedly prioritizes writing and style over story, as well as structure and language over content and plot. With all this in mind, his ludic spirit dominates in everything he creates, and thus the pleasure of the text for the reader is threefold, detected firstly in the concrete elements of the content, but secondly and more importantly in the writing itself. It is then amidst both the content and the writing that we may thirdly find the numerous subtle allusions to other texts. Just when the reader thinks a

¹³ It is also surprising and amusing here to see Pascale's last name, which is Russian. It is very exotic compared to the context, and as I will bring up later in the section on this novel, it seems that Toussaint is actually winking in reference to Lev Polougaevsky (spelled Polougaïevski by the French), a famous chess player. As we see in the first two novels, this author often chooses foreign, unfamiliar names for his other characters, which constitutes another disorienting technique. In the first novel, the narrator's wife's name [Edmondsson] seems to be Scandinavian, while in the second novel, Monsieur has a date with Anna Bruckhardt, perhaps Swiss or German. It seems that the reader is always in an unfamiliar zone for the duration of the text, be it via references to foreign characters and ideas or via actual trips abroad despite Paris being the initial setting for the first three novels. After these first three novels, however, each successive novel is set outside of hexagonal France: Corsica, although part of France, is not France proper and indeed has its own linguistic and cultural heritage, as well as stereotyped stigma, and this is the setting of *La réticence*; *La Télévision* takes place in Berlin; *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)* takes place in cities all over the world; *Faire l'amour* takes place in Tokyo; and most recently, *Fuir* takes place in Shanghai and Elba.

serious theme will dominate or that the author seeks to impose some philosophical or satirical commentary into a text, ludic elements always inevitably surface to diffuse any semblance of a higher purpose. He is not a preacher or a teacher nor is he a literary theoretician: he is a writer.¹⁴

B. *La Salle de bain*

1. Narrative Style: semantics and the saugrenu

One of the very first scenes we encounter in *La Salle de bain* exemplifies incongruity in using elements considered saugrenus, out of place, as I mentioned in the introduction. The narrator has been spending so much time in the bathroom that it has become his living room, the bathtub his couch. Thus, Edmondsson decides that it is time to alert his parents. The narrator's mother shows up, and since he refuses to leave the bathroom, she must go in:

Maman m'apporta des gâteaux. Assise sur le bidet, le carton grand ouvert posé entre ses jambes, elle disposait les pâtisseries dans une assiette à soupe. Je la trouvais soucieuse, depuis son arrivée elle évitait mes regards. Elle releva la tête avec une lasse tristesse, voulut dire quelque chose, mais se tut, choisissant un éclair dans lequel elle croqua. Tu devrais te distraire, me dit-elle, faire du sport, je ne sais pas moi. Elle s'essuya le coin des lèvres avec son gant. Je répondis que le besoin de divertissement me paraissait suspect. Lorsque, en souriant presque, j'ajoutai que je ne craignais rien moins que les diversions, elle vit bien que l'on ne pouvait pas discuter avec moi et, machinalement, me tendit un mille-feuilles. (SB 13)

This passage is abundantly ludic. We perceive immediately the mention of the bidet, no longer found in most modern French bathrooms, so the fact alone that the narrator's mother must use this as a chair sets a more comical tone. Incongruous elements abound further as she is seen sitting on this bidet with a box of pastries placed between her legs as well as the

¹⁴ Toussaint mused to this effect in an interview with Laurent Hanson in January 1998: "Le fait de ne pas raconter une histoire, même si l'on est loin d'une écriture abstraite, peut aussi rendre l'approche plus difficile, mais c'est cela qui m'intéresse davantage parce que l'accent est mis sur la manière d'écrire. En dehors de ça, je ne théorise pas beaucoup ma manière d'écrire. Je n'ai pas l'impression de développer une théorie." Even so, one could also easily argue that just because a writer is not consciously theorizing does not mean that theory is not involved.

fact that the pastries are brought out in an “assiette à soupe.” The tone appears to turn serious when the narrator says that he found his mother to be worried, noticing that she had been avoiding his looks since her arrival. However, all attention refocuses on the presence of the pastries in the bathroom because Toussaint contrasts her “lasse tristesse” and her desire to say something to her son with her decision to remain silent, ultimately by choosing a pastry to eat. The fact that she wipes her mouth with her glove is banal but also adds to the incongruity of eating pastries on a bidet: the mouth is not usually the part of the body that one wipes when sitting on a bidet, and the glove one would use in a bathroom is a gant de toilette. This detail in particular is out of place and so completely embodies the idea of the saugrenu.

When the narrator says “en souriant presque,” the word presque is doubtless significant to the playful tone. Often with Toussaint, it comes down to semantics because had he expressed the same idea in a different manner, the effect would be entirely different. One may imagine the author portraying the narrator as a character who knows that he is playing a role, amused by his own words, but needing to refrain from smiling in order to maintain a certain gravity of tone. Nevertheless, this almost smiling detracts from any seriousness in discourse that the presence of the mother may have possibly introduced. Finally, all seriousness is shattered, and the focus returns to the pastries: the last sentence of the passage expresses the mother’s feelings of defeat as she simultaneously hands her son a mille-feuilles.¹⁵ The word machinalement serves particularly to accentuate the stalemate, as it

¹⁵ The fact that the pastry that the narrator’s mother chose was a mille-feuilles does indeed have semantic significance, which will be better discussed in the next section on intertextuality. Moreover, the narrator’s comment about the need for distraction being suspect seems to allude directly to Pascal’s *Pensées*, thus offering a rich subtext that I will also examine in the subsequent section. This famous pensée on divertissement will be addressed specifically at that time.

suggests a lack of emotion and reflection, but why is her apparent resignation comical? The playfulness in this word seems to embody Bergson's conception of laughter and the comical. In *Le Rire*, Henri Bergson frames laughter and the comical in terms of their socio-cultural implications and asserts according to Defays that "le rire vise surtout à réprimer, donc à prévenir les automatismes qui prennent la vie à contre-pied et qui menacent finalement l'harmonie sociale" (20). The narrator's mother does not want any trouble. She does not want to upset any social harmony despite her concerns, and her actions and gestures reflect her distance and detachment, which are synchronous with Toussaint's semantic choice for her final action.

Later in this first novel, two Polish artists with shows at the gallery where Edmondsson works are hired to paint the couple's apartment and invited to lunch as well. Since Edmondsson failed to buy paint, they kill time and metaphorically create a nature morte with octopi as the subject, as we will later see. They take over the kitchen as they prepare a meal of these sea creatures they bought for cheap. Meanwhile, the narrator has just received a mysterious invitation from the Austrian Embassy and is lost in reverie in his bath, creating imaginary scenarios about who he might see at this international cocktail party and what would be said. Additionally, the diplomatic verbiage comes off as meaningless and thus humorous as a result of its meaninglessness:

Compte tenu des grands espoirs nourris par les participants, ils se sont entendus pour conjuguer leurs efforts dans les domaines de la responsabilité, de la fidélité et de la cohésion. Davantage. Ils attendent – et l'expression est de la bouche même du président de séance – une multiplication des efforts en vue de réaliser les principaux objectifs assignés. **Vous avez un saladier? demanda Kabrowinski. Pardon? Un saladier, répéta-il en mimant approximativement un saladier.** [my emphasis] (SB 34)

After a long paragraph waxing on an imaginary ambassador's speech, it is not only the narrator who is abruptly removed from his daydream, but also the reader, as Kabrowinski interrupts the scene with his banal request for a salad bowl. The narrator must return to the most mundane kind of reality, and this sudden exit from a dream and return to reality represents just one of so many dénivellations to occur throughout the novel. The nature of the interruption is one aspect that renders this scene humorous. Interruption can always break a story line, but had the author chosen a more congruous detail, like a telephone or an alarm clock ringing, for example, the end of this scene would lose its playful edge. Indeed, the incongruity (the mention of the salad bowl) is exactly what provides the scene with a final ridiculous element. The other comical aspect of this scene also plays on the mention of the saladier, but in a completely different way. Toussaint seems to be playing on the multiple interpretations of the word salade in French since in the slang sense, des salades can refer to something that is muddled and confusing and can even imply that something is a lie. The narrator's own dream sequence that contained the speech (the salades) being interrupted by the reality check of a request for a salad bowl offers a witty comical contrast and a biting demystification of diplomatic speeches.

The narrator of *La Salle de bain* often finds himself in purported serious scenes, wanting to smile, and trying not to do so. With the two Polish painters Kabrowinski and Kovalskazinski preparing lunch, his daydream about going to the reception at the Austrian Embassy continues:

Le déroulement de la soirée, prévue pour le prochain mardi, me paraissait absolument inexorable. Je mettrais un costume sombre, une cravate noire. Je tendrais mon carton d'invitation à l'entrée. Sous le cristal des lustres brilleraient des épaules nues, des perles, les revers satinés des costumes. Lentement, je circulerais de salon en salon, le regard si légèrement penché. Je ne parlerais pas, ne sourirais pas. Je marcherais très droit, m'approcherais de la fenêtre. D'un doigt, j'écarterais le rideau et regarderais

dans la rue. La nuit serait noire. Pleuvrait-il? Je lâcherais le rideau et retournerais au buffet. (SB 27-8)

This scene is quite entertaining and could perhaps only come from the imagination of someone who is not supposed to be there (the narrator) via the imagination of someone who has perhaps himself been in similar situations (the author). Thus, the author can inject his own sense of humor into them via the narrator. Our protagonist offers the reader his idea of what these functions are supposed to be like and how he is expected to be perceived or to behave. His comportment comes off as contrived and formulaic especially because it is seemingly scripted with the word lentement describing how he would walk from room to room. Furthermore, his “regard si légèrement penché” emphasizes the exactitude of the mannerisms that he believes appropriate in this sort of situation. Then it is as if he recognizes the pronounced nature of this prescribed behavior once and for all when he specifies “d’un doigt” how he would pull the curtain back to quickly glance out the window. It is a game of airs for the narrator, and he imagines these necessary actions in order to fit into this echelon of society. This episode certainly portrays the narrator as a kind of social voyeur, simultaneously detached and immersed in the scene like Proust’s Marcel in *Le Temps retrouvé*.¹⁶ Like Marcel who relives certain episodes of his life through his memories, both immersed in the memory since he was there, but also detached as time and experience have given him new

¹⁶ In the seventh and final volume of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust is on his deathbed looking at photographs. We see memories of his childhood that move back and forth in time. He sees Marcel at various ages interacting with all the various characters of the novel over time, Odette, Albertine, the snobby Charlus among so many others. We are presented with images of an aristocratic echelon of society and can see how Marcel’s perception of this society has changed over time. Specifically, the second part of the novel details an afternoon when a reception takes place (La matinée Guermantes). The narrator accepts the invitation after a long eclipse and there discovers a very different world. Like the narrator of Toussaint’s novel, there is a certain voyeurism involved in his attending the reception, and the ambassador of our author’s novel could also be seen as a reflection of Proust’s character M de Norpois, also a Voltairean windbag of a diplomat. He has the realization here that living is remembering, even if only for a fleeting moment. Ultimately all this remembering constitutes his creation, and all of these memories parallel the final volume of Proust’s novel.

perspectives on these episodes, the narrator of Toussaint's novel experiences a similar sensation. However, the narrator of *La Salle de bain* is not remembering, but rather creating a hypothetical episode through which he vicariously lives and views outside his own reality at the same time. This in turn will paradoxically create a memory for him of something that never actually happened, that only happened in his imagination. Moreover, the keen observations of human gesture and language are indicative of a Proustian pastiche. The details of this scene are perhaps banal yet very acute in their perception.

In the rest of the same passage, we witness Toussaint's mocking of discourses on the sciences, arts, and politics, and the result ultimately becomes a mockery of language in general and its inability to express true meaning, or rather its lack of authenticity. The narrator continues his imaginary wanderings:

Derrière un groupe d'invités, je m'immobiliserais. Un ambassadeur parlerait. Notre pays est en bonne santé, dirait-il. Ce constat, qui s'appuie sur un bilan dénué de toute complaisance, a été fait dès l'ouverture de la réunion périodique de notre gouvernement. Une telle constatation est d'autant plus significative qu'elle intervient dans un contexte international très contraignant. Je l'écouterais. Il serait imposant, parlerait avec suffisance. C'est sur cette toile de fond reconfortante, expliquerait-il, que les différents thèmes qui étaient à l'ordre du jour ont pu être examinés : de nombreuses clarifications ont marqué le déroulement de la séance, permettant entre autres, grâce à une concertation fructueuse, de faire le point pour chaque secteur concerné. Désormais, les exigences qui s'expriment sont qualitativement nouvelles; elles ont pour noms : réalisme dans les objectifs, conjugaison de toutes les capacités, rigueur dans la gestion. Rigueur. Le mot me ferait sourire; je tâcherais de ne pas sourire, je ferais demi-tour, marcherais dans les salons une main dans la poche. Et je partirais, sans oublier de récupérer mon écharpe au vestiaire. (*SB* 29-30)

The speech by the ambassador is a magnificent pastiche of diplomatic double-speak. If we examine closely what is being said, it becomes apparent that nothing substantive is actually being expressed. At first glance, the speech seems intelligent, thoughtful, and quite serious. It seems perhaps an incongruous direction in the novel at this point since the reader has been reading about a more troubled young man who isolates himself and who spends his days

reading in a bathtub that has become his makeshift couch. At second glance, however, this seemingly rich lexicon used to describe the state of a country turns out to be an illusion of complexity, a paragraph full of ambiguity and over-embellished generalizations with no real goal or message. Thus, in this passage, Toussaint uses his own stylistic prowess to defer to what he expresses as the style of his character, the ambassador. The author pastiches this lexicon, thereby transforming the passage into something definitively ludic, especially when the narrator cites the word rigueur, saying that it would make him smile. It also makes the reader smile. The author pulls us into his narrator's imaginary world, and then it is not only the narrator who is trying not to smile, but also the reader. He does not want to laugh during this serious speech, but he cannot help himself, and so must "[faire] demi-tour." One also wonders if it is not the author himself who tried not to smile as he wrote the passage, the word rigueur among other catchwords and phrases also often used in the world of academic production. The word is suspect, and in spontaneously wanting to smile, the narrator acknowledges this, thereby calling the bluff of the ambassador's meaningless language. The build-up of playfulness does not waver, and the author masters this posture down to the very last detail, the fact that when leaving, the narrator would not forget to pick up his scarf from the coat check. He recognizes that merely transcribing words exactly does not suffice, but rather that he must relay in the authentic language of his characters all the facts and circumstances. This notion that language must do more than simply say is a common feature in Flaubert and Proust in particular. Language must represent, and Toussaint takes his cue from these predecessors, two of his confessed most significant literary influences. More specifically and playfully here, however, language represents itself.

2. Syntax, Structure, and the Role of Language

Not only can we note the pastiche of the lexicon in the aforementioned passage, but also the punctuation that Toussaint chooses on a stylistic level. It is interesting to see that when the narrator describes himself, what he would wear and what he would see and do, the sentences are brief and simple. However, when the text shifts slightly to the ambassador and his speech, so, too, does the structure of the sentences. Not only do they become longer, but the syntax also becomes more complex. Let us then re-examine a portion of the ambassador's speech:

C'est sur cette toile de fond réconfortante, expliquerait-il, que les différents thèmes qui étaient à l'ordre du jour ont pu être examinés : de nombreuses clarifications ont marqué le déroulement de la séance, permettant entre autres, grâce à une concertation fructueuse, de faire le point pour chaque secteur concerné. Désormais, les exigences qui s'expriment sont qualitativement nouvelles; elles ont pour noms: réalisme dans les objectifs, conjugaison de toutes les capacités, rigueur dans la gestion. (SB 28-9)

There are commas, which serve to compartmentalize bits of information that would otherwise be too compact by detaching parallel elements, or conversely, elements going in different directions. The comma ultimately adds clarity of intellectual order to a sentence, according to Cressot (49-50). He also uses colons and semi-colons in this part of the passage cited above. According to Cressot, all of these punctuation marks have first and foremost a pause in common, "une chute complète de la voix devant le point" (50), particularly a feeling of suspension with the comma, the colon, and the semi-colon. The last phrase of the text that appears after the colon is precisely divided by commas to form an A/B/C structure, a tripartition so embraced in French stylistics. The previous allusion to "rigueur" is limited to expression, and as for content, there is none. This would certainly conform to the air that I propose Toussaint is trying to portray in the passage, one of pseudo-intellectualism. This is written French, and thus it is not conversational here. It is therefore a prewritten document

likely memorized in order to enunciate this formal version with spoken words. Since it seems to have been prepared ahead of time, perhaps just a standard repertory speech, it loses the authenticity that an informal dialogue between people would offer.

As I suggest above in mentioning the intellectual air that the author wishes to relay to the reader, what interests the writer as stylist is certainly not so much the morphological implications of the punctuation he uses, but rather the affective value of these pauses as modifications in the tone. Intonation is of utmost importance with this author. The ambassador's speech is full of rhetoric, but this is precisely the goal of both author and character. The ambassador manages to master the art of persuasion through his meticulous and artful use of language. The author uses these structural devices to his advantage, and in doing so they are instantaneously transformed into dramatic devices via perception of tone. At the same time, they may be perceived as comical devices. For example, when the ambassador's sentences get longer, it becomes more difficult to comprehend what he says. This is his purpose. He has nothing to say or wants to say as little as possible in the guise of saying something very intelligent and important. He is a manipulator. Let us take the example in which he says that "de nombreuses clarifications ont marqué le déroulement de la séance, permettant entre autres, grâce à une concertation fructueuse, de faire le point pour chaque secteur concerné." Inserting several commas to divide different ideas gives the guise of organization and ideas that are perhaps well developed, which is indeed the point. It adds to the humor of this way of speaking around things and not concretely about them. Had Toussaint decided to write the sentences in a less complex manner, he would be doubly diminishing, if not losing, the element of pastiche. Additionally, the author repeats the word rigueur by isolating it, setting it apart and making it into its own fragment with a period to

follow. This sets a tone as well and contributes to the tongue-in-cheek quality of it. Ultimately, the ambassador seems to enjoy listening to himself speak. In this way, he represents the quintessential Panglossian character, a real windbag as embodied in Voltaire's *Candide*.¹⁷ As I just said, this part of the speech appears to be prepared ahead of time, rather a written statement; it is carefully crafted to avoid any disagreement or objection for lack of real content.

In another seemingly banal passage, the author appears to be making fun of language yet again. I already mentioned the octopi that the two Polish painters were preparing for lunch when the narrator began to daydream about the Austrian Embassy's party. When he comes back to reality, the two men are in the throes of skinning these creatures. The narrator observes their activity closely:

Le poulpe avait été entièrement dénudé. Seule l'extrémité des membres préhensiles restait encore couverte, où subsistaient des pièces de peau grisâtre, retroussées, ainsi que des chaussettes. Quittant de toutes parts la planche en bois, les tentacules sinuaient dans toutes les directions; ils longeaient la surface de l'évier, surmontaient les obstacles, se rejoignaient, parfois se superposaient. Les plus longs pendaient dans le vide en différents endroits. (SB 32)

The body of the octopus is easily seen as the body of the text of the novel, or rather the language itself, having been completely stripped of meaning, as in the ambassador's speech that directly precedes this passage. The tentacles going in all directions as well as the grayish skin mentioned certainly attest to an ambiguity of sorts. Additionally, Toussaint's semantic choice of grisâtre versus gris only pushes the ambiguity further. The language here is graphic and repugnant, and thus if the author is in fact alluding to his own text, in which we have the

¹⁷ The caricatural character Pangloss is Candide's tutor and insists in his teachings to him that there is no effect without a cause. Voltaire created his name from the Greek prefix pan, which means all or every, and the Greek suffix gloss, which means language. The on-line encyclopedia Wikipedia says the following to this effect: "Dr. Pangloss was called a scholar by saying that he knew all languages. Voltaire would have claimed that this was his way of showing what people found to be as a trustworthy and respectable person. (However, another possible translation of "Pangloss" is "all tongue," i.e., one who speaks incessantly without thinking.)"

ambassador's text, and language in general here, it is indeed comical that he would compare it to a dead octopus. The mirroring device is effective. Like the octopus, the ambassador's speech represents an entity "où subsistaient des pièces de peau grisâtre, retroussées" at the level of content, so neither black, nor white, but rather grayish are the details of which "les plus longs" are destined to be left hanging "dans le vide en différents endroits" of the text. At the level of syntax, however, the ambassador's sentences are very structured and nothing is left hanging. His speech is solid and exudes a certain strength and stability in contrast to an octopus, which is an invertebrate capable of spontaneously collapsing itself. Where the similarity lies in relation to an octopus, however, is in the ambassador's rhetorical abilities: like an octopus that can squeeze in and out of the tightest of spaces, the ambassador is able to weasel himself out of the most precarious situations through his clever use of language. While the octopus contorts its body, the ambassador twists language and uses it to his advantage. Two different perceptions are possible here. On the one hand, whereas one might take offense at the insincerity of the ambassador's speech if it is indeed perceived, our author's grayish details that leave the readers hanging and that are left unexplored simply constitute part of a work of fiction and therefore must be understood from this perspective. Conversely, on the other hand, we may choose to view the author's text as an unfinished product, a work in progress that is in the process of being written as we read it as opposed to the finished and polished product that the ambassador's speech represents. Either way, both attest to the power of language and its careful construction as a means to reach one's goals, whatever they may be.

From a structural point of view, it is intriguing to notice that Toussaint goes back and forth between the preparation of the octopus and his daydream about the party at the

embassy. First, the Polish men are cleaning the octopi, and then the narrator dozes off a bit. Afterwards when he snaps out of his deep thought, the two men are skinning the animals. Then once again and immediately following the above-cited description of the skinning, the narrator drifts away without transition:

Des débats ont été engagés, dirait l'ambassadeur, des suggestions émises, des conclusions tirées et des programmes adoptés. Ces projets, qui ont été élaborés dans le sens de l'harmonisation des textes, visent à travers une définition précise des études préalables, à renforcer la mise en oeuvre des dispositions établies lors de la précédente réunion. Les mêmes dispositions tendent, du reste, à inspirer aux participants une programmation plus rigoureuse de leurs activités d'étude pour une meilleure maîtrise des projets, de manière à mettre en oeuvre les modalités d'une amélioration de l'efficacité pratique des capacités. (SB 33)

Here again, we have artfully organized and seemingly detailed language in terms of this political discourse. The first sentence above exemplifies once more the structural and rhetorical use of syntax to accentuate order, in this case perhaps to feign order with commas dividing the ideas into three separate parts, as in an A/B/C form. Unlike the content of the speech, the octopus now lacks this structural glue and no longer has skin to hold it together: it is viscous and has no shape. Although the signifiant or the speech as a whole has shape, the signifié, the meaning of the language and the words as they relate to one another, is stripped like the octopus that has been skinned. The speech contains many well-articulated words, but ultimately on the whole they mean nothing and refer to nothing real. In this light, it is striking to notice the author's structural agenda for his novel. If we extend our analysis further, it is possible that a game exists between the author and reader in this particular passage. If one seeks to harmonize something, for example, one eviscerates it. The mention of "l'harmonisation des textes" is notable since Toussaint is clearly harmonizing his own in a sort of ABAB form, A being the octopus, and B being the ambassador. In this way, if we view the octopus as a sort of canvas or text, this evisceration entails removing its internal

organs, its entrails, everything that holds it together, thereby completely gutting it as the two Polish painters have done. In like manner, eviscerating the ambassador's text would require a removal of the essential parts so as to weaken it, and it appears that this is exactly what Toussaint has done with both. Is the author alluding to the writing of his own text? Is this a subtle and playful metanarrative implication? When he says that the same dispositions "tendent, du reste, à inspirer aux participants une programmation plus rigoureuse de leurs activités d'étude pour une meilleure maîtrise des projets, de manière à mettre en œuvre les modalités d'une amélioration de l'efficacité pratique des capacités," one could imagine the participants as the readers with "leurs activités d'étude" as the reading of the novel." Then, a "meilleure maîtrise des projets" could be interpreted as a better understanding of Toussaint's game. Part of this understanding, however, would require the reader's acknowledgement of the fact that the above sentence is pretentious and has no meaning. One may amusingly conclude then that paradoxically, the dead octopus has more presence than the ambassador.

What we have at work here is Riffaterre's theory of context and effect, in which one set of sentences becomes the context against which the other is effective. He explains that the "contrast between the two results in a stylistic effect" (TP 7), and that consequently, these "[stylistic units] must be a group of words (or of sentences) joined together in something other than a syntagmatic relationship" (TP 8). He elaborates this idea:

This property can be perceived only if the unit is not the word, but that word associated with another, so that their newly created compatibility, defined by their grouping, is superimposed on their natural incompatibility. (TP 8)

In any case, the language of these passages from *La Salle de bain* is embellished, and in the end does not express a specific message. The point of the entire passage remains ambiguous. Riffaterre so pertinently reaffirms the presence of textual ambiguities and explains that

nevertheless, “obscure and ambiguous passages are as much a part of the text’s semantic structures as its clearest passages” (*TP* 10). He concludes this thought as such:

The ambiguity, which the explanation must keep from destroying, is not the result of a faulty reading or lack of understanding that can vary with the readers. It is in the text: it simultaneously encodes the evidence that several interpretations are possible and that making a choice among them is impossible.¹⁸ (*TP* 10)

Riffaterre’s line of thinking certainly holds true for Toussaint’s texts and offers a sense of reassurance to the uneasy reader who may feel as if he or she might not be grasping some bigger picture. Toussaint himself has insisted in the past that his texts are not games to be decoded.¹⁹ The fact remains, however, that he does admit to the many allusions strewn throughout, so a richer pleasure of the text resides just under the surface for the reader able to perceive these stylistic subtleties. Even if they are not perceived directly, they are inevitably experienced, for if the author chose different stylistic devices, the reader’s reaction and the effect of the text on the reader would most certainly be different as well.

As I mentioned earlier, the narrator is extracted from his reverie by Kabrowinski’s request for a salad bowl. In that passage as in the previous one cited, punctuation plays an integral role in setting the tone. The isolation of davantage is playful, as is the fact that Toussaint chooses the dashes to punctuate the next sentence that begins with “Ils attentent...” Lastly, the phrase “mimant approximativement” constitutes another structural

¹⁸ Riffaterre presents us with an afterthought on textual ambiguities and writes that “These problems all point to the role of one particular property of stylistic phenomena: we must be able to perceive them” (*TP* 10). This point of view will play a larger role in my discussions on intertextuality in this dissertation. Selected allusions to other texts within Toussaint’s texts will be discussed, but I will note that many studies on intertextuality in particular stress the importance of recognizing that just because one reader may not perceive a reference does not make the text any less accessible or comprehensible as a whole. Conversely, readers often detect intertexts that may not have been intended by the author in the first place, and even Riffaterre comments to that effect, stating that the “tendency to seek out hidden meanings has, of course, always existed in literary criticism” (*TP* 10).

¹⁹ See Toussaint’s interview with scholar Michèle Ammouche-Kremers, p. 31.

harmonization, as it mirrors the technique used by the ambassador in his speech: everything is approximate and not exact so that there is no room for disagreement.²⁰ Once again, the narrator's hypothetical embassy reception is followed directly by more descriptions of the octopus:

Le poulpe avait été entièrement découpé, le corps en lamelles, les tentacules en rondelles, et décomposé, constituait l'amas en mouvement que Kabrowinski faisait dévaler au fond du récipient à l'aide de son couteau. L'opération terminée, il empoigna un deuxième poulpe dans l'évier, l'éleva très haut au-dessus de nos têtes et, en souplesse, les genoux fléchis, l'allongea sur la planche dans un mouvement enveloppant. (SB 34)

It is intriguing yet to view the octopus as one would view the text.²¹ As Kabrowinski places a second octopus in the sink, we also move on to a new direction in the narration. When he takes the second creature and raises it way above everyone's heads with suppleness, one might imagine the same act occurring in the text or the ambassador's speech. The idea of something that figuratively goes way up over our heads would seem to attest to the ambiguities that abound in the text.

Moreover, Toussaint's text is completely cut up. Indeed, the novel is fragmented in the most literal sense, and the author playfully gives a guise of organization by organizing the novel into numbered sections. The "opération terminée" in the passage cited above ends the first part of the novel and coincides with the end of daydreaming about the ambassador.

Thus, the author simultaneously puts a permanent halt to both of these directions in the text

²⁰ The narrator's empty daydreaming that produces the ambassador's vacuous speech also sits in opposition to the Pongian activity of the Polish artists, again an amusing perspective of transformation through art.

²¹ We could also see this quote about the body of the octopus in fragments as describing literary criticism. This amusing take mocks the role of the critics as stripping down the language of a text, dissecting it on all levels, and analyzing it to such a degree so as to extract from it what they want to see for their purposes. Of course, that is their prerogative. This is exactly what I am doing in writing this dissertation, and so even my suggestion that Toussaint is making fun of my role as a scholar of his work may be absolutely overanalytical as well and thus quite humorous.

and goes off in a new one that begins with watching the rainfall and then having dinner with the couple who used to live in their apartment. The structural va-et-vient is indicative at least of his first four novels. The reader feels unsettled for a brief moment from three different angles: through empty language, empty plot, and a general lack of temporal consistency.²²

This could also be a metaphor for the author's own text, however, his text cannot not be characterized as disgusting or completely unappealing in terms of language as is the still life these two painters above are about to symbolically create:

Les Polonais, chose surprenante, ne parlaient pas. Kovalskazinski Jean-Marie continuait de maintenir la tête d'un mollusque sur la planche en bois. Il avait les mains très rouges, mouillées, contractées. Il perdait patience, me semblait-il, commençait à avoir mal au dos. A chaque fois que le couteau survolait la poche beige blottie dans la calotte, il mettait sèchement Kabrowinski en garde de ne pas la percer, car elle renfermait l'encre. Kabrowinski n'en croyait rien, qui disait que c'était le foie et, pour le prouver, d'un coup sec, il enfonça l'opinel dans l'organe. L'encre ne se libéra pas tout de suite, quelques gouttes d'abord, extrêmement noires, émergèrent à la surface, puis d'autres gouttes et enfin un filet, qui glissa lentement sur la planche. Kovalskazinski Jean-Marie dénoua le torchon qui lui entourait la taille et, se désintéressant de la situation, vint s'asseoir à côté de moi. Le visage tendu, il alluma une cigarette et, moitié en français moitié en polonais, reprocha à Kabrowinski de ne pas avoir demandé au poissonnier de dépouiller lui-même les poulpes de leur peau. D'autant, disait-il, qu'il en restait encore quatre intacts, dans l'évier. Kabrowinski n'écoutait pas. Il avait trempé son doigt dans l'encre et expliquait que c'était avec l'encre des seiches qu'était faite la sépia. Dans sa jeunesse, il avait peint de très beaux lavis. (SB 45-6)

Scholar Bessard-Banquy posits that “derrière cette anecdote inconséquente il faut bien voir en effet une histoire de première importance” (RL 256). He asserts this sentiment as follows:

²² The most interesting thing regarding the structure of *La Salle de bain* in particular, however, is Toussaint's enumeration of the paragraphs in order to give the illusion of consistency. The joke is on the critics at whom he laughs for trying to find a structural pattern in this game of numbers. He told Ammouche-Kremers that “les critiques ont tout calculé et rien ne tombe juste” and that “[il] n'en avai[t] rien à faire de cette histoire de forme et de calcul; ce qui compte, c'est de donner l'illusion d'une logique” (30). This ludic aspect directly relates to Pascal and thus will be touched on in the section of this chapter on intertextuality as well. So many scholars' attempted to organize Pascal's *Thoughts* after his death and did so by numbering them. This was never Pascal's intention, and it is amusing to see all the variations in organization that exist, scholars' attempts to predict some higher purpose or logical order they believe Pascal may have had in mind. There are several editions of *The Thoughts*, most of which are completely different in their ordering.

Certes, deux façons de préparer les poulpes semblent s'opposer avec simplicité : faut-il préserver l'encre à tout prix ou au contraire la libérer avec délicatesse ? Mais cette question en appelle évidemment une autre : faut-il intérioriser les choses ou au contraire favoriser leur expression maîtrisée ? Faut-il opter pour un silence tranquille ou une parole libérée ? (*RL* 256)

The two characters of the novel have different ideas on how to go about this process. One does not want to cut the octopus in a way that would cause the ink to leak. The other, however, gladly inserts his knife. While Kovalskazinski sees the delicate task of skinning and gutting these creatures as difficult and annoying, Kabrowinski seems to get lost in reverie by it, fascinated by the ink that has clearly evoked a beautiful memory for him. That said, while I may have just described the author's text above as having empty language and empty plot like the gutted octopus, what we learn from this is that the author privileges the act of telling over what is told.

This idea is directly related to the works of Samuel Beckett, whom I will discuss at other points in this dissertation, since his works seem to sporadically penetrate the works of our author. I already mentioned in the introduction to the dissertation that Toussaint's admitted obsession with Beckett's texts was indeed profound up to the publication of *La Salle de bain*: he explained that his writings were often written in such similar style to Beckett's works and that he found this influence difficult to escape.²³ However, just because he claimed that he was able to "sufficiently digest" this influence, the effects of it are still indeed profound and allusions to Beckett are abundant in this author's novels. It is therefore curious to view Toussaint's texts in light of what Raymond Federman has written to describe

²³ In his interview with Ammouche-Kremers, Toussaint admitted: "L'influence de Beckett a été très pesante et j'ai dû faire des efforts pour m'en éloigner." He went on to say that when he was writing *La Salle de bain*, "[il] [s]'était[t] libéré de son emprise mais, deux ou trois ans auparavant, [il] écrivai[t] encore des textes qui étaient des pastiches de Beckett, des pastiches bien involontaires puisqu' [il] croyai[t] faire quelque chose d'original" (30).

Beckett's trilogy in particular. He posits in "Samuel Beckett: The Liar's Paradox" that what Beckett denounces in his fiction "is not fiction itself, nor the idea that fiction can no longer match the reality of a past experience" (129). He lends further specificity to this line of thinking:

What is denounced here is an obstinate and obsolete (traditional) concept of fiction: the concept of story-telling, the concept that fiction must tell a coherent and logical story... This is undoubtedly the most crucial, if not the most original aspect of Beckett's creative process: his fiction no longer tells a story (past realities reshaped into a plausible aesthetic form by the process of imagination), but simply reflects upon itself, upon its own chaotic verbal progress, upon its own deficiencies—that is to say upon its own defective substance: language. (129)

This certainly would appear to be the goal of our author. He does not want to encourage anecdotal and plot development; in this way, the writing itself will stand out above story.²⁴

As I have just said, the vacuousness of a plot that describes two men cleaning an octopus for a meal we will never hear about is banal and reflective of language itself. Ultimately, it is also reflective of the author's text that revels in its own communication breakdowns.

Language's inability to express is reflected in the conflicting ideas of the two painters: their opposing methods concerning the skinning of the octopus and the impossibility of showing what each wants to show or not show is embodied by the octopus's ink.²⁵ The first section of the novel ends on this image. No solution or resolution is provided and the novel shifts suddenly at this point. We are left with gaps in the story.

Gaps play an important role in Toussaint's works and serve constantly to upset reader expectations. Defays remarks on this note in *Le comique* that gaps represent "un jeu, ce qui

²⁴ It should be noted at this juncture that there is, as we know, much more in Beckett's texts than a questioning of language. I am merely limiting Beckett to this perspective here because one of the main focal points of my dissertation is Toussaint's language.

²⁵ We could once again relate the impossibility to show what we want to Kant's notion of the sublime as I referenced it in the introduction to the dissertation.

signifie qu'il est gratuit, futile, divertissant, et que, à ce titre, il ne porte pas conséquence” (38). The author takes liberties in his work, and according to Defays these liberties simultaneously transgress and confirm, as is the nature of any game. Right after the dispute between the two painters about how to deal with the ink of the octopus (to let it flow or to avoid spilling it), the reader is confronted with yet another large gap that ushers in the second section of the novel. It simply begins: “Je partis brusquement et sans prévenir personne” (*SB* 49). There are no words to explain why the narrator has left Paris without Edmondsson so abruptly at the beginning of the second part of the novel. Indeed, then, this work does reflect upon its own deficiency and refuses the notion of conventional storyline where we need a reason for everything that happens. The effect of the second section of this novel would not be the same if the narrator justified his departure with words. There is no language to show the ambiance established in the second section. Thus, the way to show the unshowable here is paradoxically by showing nothing, by leaving a big gap between the end of the first section and the beginning of the second. The narrator is seen sitting in his kitchen with two Polish painters arguing about how to cut into an octopus they plan to eat for lunch, and then he is suddenly seen leaving Paris.

Structurally, Kabrowinski dipping his hand in the ink from the octopus ends the first part of the novel. Since the end eventually leads back to the beginning, one could venture to say here that the end of this first section of the novel could in fact be the end of the entire novel. The story comes full circle at the end and attests to the cyclical nature of life. This inherent nature of the novel is also seen in the allusions to other texts. In alluding to other texts, we prove once again that history perpetually repeats itself. Nothing is new. The cyclical nature or the spiraling effect of the text will be discussed further in the next section

of this chapter.

3. Pascalian Allusions: an intertextual reading of *La Salle de bain*

A Pascalian intertext is ever-present in *La Salle de bain*. Many scholars mention it, and a few have published articles on this connection. Margaret E. Gray, for example, wrote an article entitled “Pascal in the bathtub: Parodying the *Pensées*,” which concentrates on parody and mentions the presence of complex humor. Indeed, it seems as though Toussaint is making fun of discourses in philosophy, the sciences and the arts in all of his books, but the specific mention of Pascal in particular in his first novel provides the reader with an intertext that must not be left unexplored. His amusing take on Pascal certainly adds a rich and playful element to the text as a whole. While this topic has been discussed, the critics limit their arguments to thematic analyses that really only scratch the surface. Pascal’s text is quoted only sparsely, and the inextricably related lexical and semantic fields of this subtext that command a thorough examination have also been ignored.

La Salle de bain in particular begins immediately with the phrase “méditant dans la baignoire” in the first sentence of the novel. The use of the verb méditer becomes the first wink at a Pascalian reading, but only upon a second reading of the novel.²⁶ Pascal does not make a concrete appearance until near the end of the novel, and then so suddenly and unexpectedly in English. Edmondsson is visiting the narrator in Italy, and he has become overwhelmed with an undefinable anxiety:

69) Il m’arrivait parfois de me réveiller en pleine nuit sans même ouvrir les yeux. Je les gardais fermés et je posais la main sur le bras d’Edmondsson. Je lui demandais de me consoler. D’une voix douce, elle me demandait de quoi je voulais être consolé.

²⁶ In his interview with Ammouche-Kremers, Toussaint relayed that he was not explicitly thinking of Pascal when he first began to write the novel. He admits: “Lorsque je me suis rendu compte que ça collait bien, j’ai alors rajouté, à la relecture, certains mots ‘pascalien’ dans le début” (30).

Me consoler, disais-je. Mais de quoi, disait-elle. Me consoler disais-je (to console, not to comfort).

70) But when I thought more deeply, and after I had found the cause of all our distress, I wanted to discover its reason, I found out there was a valid one, which consists in the natural distress of our weak and mortal condition, and so miserable, that nothing can *console* us, when we think it over (Pascal, *Pensées*). (SB 86-7)

This quote comes from out of nowhere. It is neither introduced nor explained after the fact, again another gap in the text. Once the reader encounters this reference in the novel, a retrospective reading seems imperative.

The entire beginning of the novel is comical, perhaps in a more deadpan manner, but very funny nevertheless.

1) Lorsque j'ai commencé à passer mes après-midi dans la salle de bain, je ne comptais pas m'y installer; non, je coulais là des heures agréables, méditant dans la baignoire, parfois habillé, tantôt nu. Edmondsson, qui se plaisait à mon chevet, me trouvait plus serein; il m'arrivait de plaisanter, nous riions. Je parlais avec de grands gestes, estimant que les baignoires les plus pratiques étaient celles à bords parallèles, avec dossier incliné, et un fond droit qui dispense l'usager de l'emploi du butoir cale-pieds. (SB 11)

The narrator philosophizes the bathroom and puts it in a category in which it would seem to not belong. It is the reverence with which he speaks of this bathroom and the tone he takes as well as the importance this in turn gives this otherwise banal place that rings so amusing. While the rest of the world bathes there behind closed doors, it is his solace, the place he meditates, reads, and generally passes his time.²⁷ Since the first sentence of the book invokes the bathroom as central place, as well as the title being the bathroom, the reader is then led to believe that the whole story may well take place within the confines of this small space, which seems impossible and ridiculous.

²⁷ We can note here that for Archimedes at least, a major scientific contribution originated in the bathroom, the relationship between weight and water displacement. Therefore, more profound things have in fact taken place in the bathroom. With that in mind, perhaps we should not dismiss the possibility that our narrator, too, may also be searching to discover something big in the bathtub.

Stylistically, the use of the verb couler, meaning to flow in French, is playful since this is a verb whose transitive and intransitive meanings intersect in our context. Used transitively, one would usually see water as the subject [water flows]. What Toussaint puts into motion here is an overdetermination of the term since the proper intransitive use of couler with a measure of time shows the meaning to flow as a palimpsest. This curious semantic choice in lieu of the verb passer, for example, is a very appropriate one and in turn is recognized for its ludic character. Moreover, couler in conjunction with heures invokes “l’écoulement du temps,” a theme that will dominate the narrator’s thoughts and pervade the novel as a whole. Thus, this word choice is pertinently playful. In addition, the accentuation of “non” followed by a comma reinforces the absurdity of the narrator’s current intentions to remain in the bathroom indefinitely. In this we can imagine how common it is for many people to laze luxuriously in a warm bath. Of course, this was not the type of retreat that Pascal imagined either. In this case the narrator “passe [ses] après-midi dans la salle de bain.” The outcome of the verb to spend or to pass time [passer] is altered ever so slightly through the use of the preposition dans, which signals a place where one would spend time, as opposed to à that would evoke an infinitive to follow, that is to say, an action. This playful hyperbole of passer son temps constitutes yet another of the countless linguistic games the reader will encounter throughout the text. Another detail that rings out of place is the fact that the narrator says that he was “parfois habillé, tantôt nu” in his bathroom. This detail brings immediate attention to something saugrenu. In sum, some of the most recurrent stylistic traits of Toussaint’s works are evidenced immediately in the first paragraph of his first published novel.

The first sentence is humorous in terms of content as well. To say that you began to spend your afternoons in the bathroom sounds a bit strange, but then to immediately admit in the same phrase that when you began to spend your afternoons there, you had not necessarily planned on actually dwelling there permanently comes off as ridiculous. It is ridiculous in its utter lack of conventionality, and it is also how he nonchalantly informs us that he is essentially living in the bathroom. It goes against the grain of what is considered normal behavior. It is also very anti-social. The tone is quite sober, though, and so the humor exists in precisely that fact: the narrator clearly takes it very seriously. The author presents the narrator in such a way that his decision to hang out in the bathroom starts to seem not so crazy after all. This is reinforced by the fact that Edmondsson supports him and comes to see him there as if this life were normal. She seemingly approves or does not necessarily disapprove of her husband's bizarre affinity for frequenting the bathroom, at least at first:

4) Un matin, j'ai arraché la corde à linge. J'ai vidé tous les placards, débarrassé les étagères. Ayant entassé les produits de toilette dans un grand sac-poubelle, j'ai commencé à déménager une partie de ma bibliothèque. Lorsque Edmondsson rentra, je l'accueillis un livre à la main, allongé, les pieds croisés sur le robinet.

5) Edmondsson a fini par avertir mes parents. (*SB* 12)

This is comical because at first, the narrator's simple relaxation in the bathroom was strange, but accepted; however, when he starts to move part of his library in there and rearranges things, Edmondsson decides that it has gone too far. The image of him lying in the tub with his feet propped up on the faucet attests to the high level of comfort he has reached there. Like the faucet, the narrator has become a permanent fixture in the bathtub. The faucet has become his footstool; the old toiletry shelves are becoming his new bookshelves. Setting apart the sentence where Edmondsson tells his parents accentuates not only the gravity of the

situation in her mind but also the overall humor of it as well for the reader. This indirectly indicates that the narrator is still very young and perhaps immature.

His mother comes to visit because Edmondsson has alerted his parents that he is spending his days lounging around the bathroom, specifically the bathtub, which must seem absurd to them. I have already discussed some semantic traits evident in this passage along with elements judged as saugrenus, but let us now direct our attention to its inherent Pascalian parody, which, like the previous stylistic reading of the same passage, is quite amusing.²⁸ When the narrator's mother says, "Tu devrais te distraire ... faire du sport, je ne sais pas moi," and then he responds that "le besoin de divertissement [lui] paraissait suspect" and that "[il] ne craignai[t] rien moins que les diversions," the semantic choices of distraire and divertissement relate so explicitly to Pascal, as many of the thoughts revolve specifically around the idea of distraction and diversion. For example:

126. Divertissement. Quand je m'y suis mis quelque fois à considérer les diverses agitations des hommes et les périls et les peines où ils s'exposent dans la cour, dans la guerre, d'où naissent tant de querelles, de passions, d'entreprises hardies et souvent mauvaises, j'ai dit souvent que tout le Malheur des hommes vient d'une seule chose, qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer en repos dans une chambre. [...] Ainsi l'homme est si malheureux qu'il s'ennuierait même sans aucune cause d'ennui par l'état propre de sa complexion ; et il est si vain qu'étant plein de mille causes essentielles d'ennui, la moindre chose comme un billard et une balle qu'il pousse suffisent pour le divertir. (118-21)

This passage is intriguing for a variety of reasons. First of all, we do know that the narrator does leave the bathroom and does engage in many games, such as Monopoly, tennis and darts. This is pertinent since Pascal cites a billiard cue and a ball in this section on diversion as enough to distract us. Secondly, we see the narrator trying to remain in one place as Pascal mentions. He tries to play the role of a thoughtful and meditative man without agitation in

²⁸ See pages 33-35 of the dissertation.

life, a man who considers diversion suspect, a man attempting to stay in one place; and yet he feels pressure from not only Edmondsson and his mother to leave the bathroom, but also himself. Pascal wrote that “Si notre condition était véritablement heureuse, il ne faudrait pas nous divertir d’y penser” (91).

Additionally, this ideal of staying in one place without distractions is not accomplished in the author’s novel, and therein lies the main parodic aspect. Pascal wrote that it is man’s inability to stay in one place, to remain at rest without diversion that represents the root of all his problems, and this is exemplified brilliantly in Toussaint’s first novel. The mere fact that the author chooses a bathroom of all rooms in which his narrator attempts to remain is also comical. It would appear that in today’s world especially, this is about the only place where one can truly be alone. Ironically, however, he is not even alone here:

Edmondsson pays him regular visits to bring him food and chat as I just explained, and as we see in the aforementioned passage, his mother also arrives and invades this purportedly solitary haven. The presence of the Polish painters serves to distract the narrator as well, and the author seems to hint at the idea of art as divertissement. The narrator says explicitly trying to convince himself that “il n’était peut-être pas très sain, à vingt-sept ans, bientôt vingt-neuf, de vivre plus ou moins reclus dans une baignoire” (*SB* 15).²⁹ He continues, telling Edmondsson that he should “prendre un risque . . . le risque de compromettre la quiétude de [sa] vie abstraite pour” (*SB* 15). He comments on his last sentence, explaining “Je ne terminai pas ma phrase” (*SB* 15). This is humorous since one imagines that his sentence is left

²⁹ His omission of twenty-eight constitutes yet another testament to his strange perception of time, or perhaps his acute awareness of it. Perhaps he goes straight to twenty-nine because he really believes that if he does not leave the bathroom now, he might end up spending another year in there. When Ammouche-Kremers asked the author if this “étrange raccourci” was perhaps an allusion to Ionesco, he replied “Non,” and that “l’expression est vraiment de [lui] et [qu’il était] assez heureux de cette trouvaille” (32). He simply affirmed: “Je n’avais pas envie de nommer 28 ans, sorte de superstition” (32).

unfinished because he became distracted by something. It is also ironic that he views his life as quietude when clearly he still needs distraction in the form of reading or conversation with his wife in the bathroom. Then again, perhaps he cannot find a good reason to live any other way for lack of purpose in his life.

Case in point, directly following the unfinished sentence, the narrator then says that the next day “[il] sorti[t] de la salle de bain” (SB 16). What should not be ignored either in terms of parodying *Les Pensées* is the fact that the novel is organized by numbered fragments in the same way that Pascal’s thoughts were numbered upon posthumous publication as Gray points out. Pascal was also a mathematician, and I have mentioned the critics who have tried to find some kind of formula, logic, or pattern to the organization of *La Salle de bain*. However, these attempts have been in vain according to the author who says that it is the illusion of logic that counts, not logic itself. This is funny because he clearly mocks those who search for logic and meaning amidst chaos, or at least those who search for meaning in something completely meaningless. What is significant here, however, is the author’s choice of pastries in the passage quoted above. The fact that the narrator’s mother selects a mille-feuilles is also humorous and becomes an abstract representation of the text, itself a figurative thousand pages, numerous, often random, fragments. Arthur H. Beattie, one translator and editor of *The Thoughts*, explains that Pascal’s comprehension “of the complexity of life prevents his accepting and following anything so simple and rectilinear as conventional logic” (xii). This same case could be argued for our narrator as well: he is rendered anxious by life’s complexities.³⁰

³⁰ The author plays doubly on this idea of defying logic as we will see especially in the next section of this chapter on *Monsieur*, and therefore it is both the text and its main character that seem to play off of the seventeenth century philosopher and mathematician and his thoughts. Pascal himself saw and exposed the limitation of logical thinking and expressed in a thought on geometry and discernment, the esprit de géométrie

In the same way that the narrator tries to remain in one room without distraction but fails, so, too, does he attempt to think of what it is to be a man in the words of Pascal, but is unable to truly reflect on his reality since it causes him so much angst. While Pascal believed that meditation would bring man to a realization of his own misery without God, no absolute truth is proposed in our author's novel: only misery remains. Toussaint mocks his narrator through Pascal, and thus this protagonist becomes a sort of pathetic Pascalian parody, who, amidst all the chaos retreats to distractions such as darts instead of examining himself from the inside in order to remedy the ongoing anxiety. A little later on we see the narrator "Assis sur [son] lit, la tête dans les mains (toujours ces positions extrêmes . . .)" (SB 31). This seems to be a playful allusion to Rodin's sculpture *Le penseur*, which certainly serves to enrich the subtext further.

To curb his restlessness, or avoid the reality of dwelling on time, misery, his own mortality, the pain of mankind, the narrator takes a trip. Pascal wrote:

124. Divertissement. Les hommes n'ayant pu guérir la mort, la misère, l'ignorance, ils se sont avisés, pour se rendre heureux, de n'y point penser. (117)

Still, he sequesters himself in his hotel room, and thus the room seems to serve the same function that the bathroom did back in Paris: isolation. Moreover, in the same way that he is unable to remain at rest in his bathroom at home, unfettered by any sort of diversion, he is also unable to do so in his hotel room. The protagonist engages directly in diversions such as tennis and games of darts. Once again, Pascal stressed man's use of diversion to distract from life's misery, and this is clearly what is happening here in Toussaint's first novel. His reality back in Paris must be troubling, perhaps just boring him, and so he leaves. However, his

(reason) versus the *esprit de finesse* (intuition), that true eloquence disdains eloquence. As we will see in a moment, in the case of *Monsieur* especially it seems that like the novels themselves, fragmentation is favored, continuity rejected.

daily routine in Italy seems to be just as banal as the everyday life he was leading back in his apartment in Paris.³¹ The narrator is visiting an Italian city, staying in a hotel, and yet his activities are antithetical to those of a typical tourist. Instead of a romanticized image of Italy and its countryside or architecture, the reader gets a glimpse of this:

Dans la rue, je frottais ma langue contre mes dents, contre mon palais. J'avais un goût de train dans la bouche, les vêtements moites. J'époussetais mes manches, marchais en secouant mon manteau. Les rues étroites imposaient une direction, je continuais tout droit sans réfléchir, traversais des ponts. Je trouvais une banque où changer de l'argent. Je fis l'acquisition d'un transistor bon marché. Je bus un café succinct, demandai des cigarettes. Dans un grand magasin Standa, j'achetai un pyjama, deux paires de chaussettes, un caleçon. Les bras chargés de sachets, je fis une dernière halte dans une pharmacie. La porte d'entrée grinçait. Le pharmacien ne comprenait pas très bien où je voulais en venir. Je dus déposer mes paquets sur le comptoir pour lui mimer la brosse à dents, les rasoirs, le savon à barbe. (SB 51-2)

This passage is unabashedly realistic, and it represents another way in which the author defies expectations. The narrator crosses bridges, but he furnishes no descriptions of these. He is and feels filthy, so this is what he chooses to describe. This dominates his present reality.³² This is also a prime example of l'effet de réel. It should be noted, of course, that if we are physically uncomfortable in any way, these feelings override any desire to engage in

³¹ The presence of the non-lieu, a term coined by the eminent French anthropologist Marc Augé, comes to mind here. Contrary to places, non-places lack historical identity according to Augé, and the images of the non-places the narrator visits are all defined in terms of consumerism. Instead of describing the city from a more historical point of view in terms of its architecture and landmarks that have stood the test of time and with which the reader could perhaps identify, the reader accompanies the protagonist on his errands to a bank, a café, a store called Standa that reminds us perhaps of a Wal-mart where he buys underwear and socks, for example, and then finally on to a pharmacy where he purchases toiletries. Thus, the hotel and the department store epitomize especially this notion. They have no distinguishing attributes, and the narrator and these places could be anywhere in the world. This interchangeability is precisely what turns them into non-places. See *Non-lieux. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*. Paris : Seuil, 1992.

³² In *Un monde techno*, Alain-Philippe Durand explains that “Ces non-lieux sont des endroits de mouvement, de circulation, d’interchangeabilité. Ce sont des emplacements qui ont perdu leur substance identitaire” (15). Non-lieux dominate all of Toussaint’s novels. These non-places as characterized by movement, circulation, and interchangeability find their embodiments especially in airports, hotels, means of transportation, and large stores and shopping malls, for example.

other activities. Pascal also recognized that any physical discomfort prevents us from meditating, or even thinking.

The banality of this scene is reflected directly in the language, syntax, and structure of the sentences. The sentences are simple and concise: there are no subordinate clauses, no embellishing details, and thus, the telling of the story is just as flat as the story itself. This is Toussaint's way of infusing the appropriate tone into a passage through style in order to accentuate further the banality of the content, and so again the theory of context and effect is seen at work here. This is playful, and it is effective.³³ The narrator comes to Italy alone, without Edmondsson, but in the end, Italy in the banal way that the protagonist experiences it is not enough of a distraction. He and Edmondsson speak for hours on the phone, and she ends up coming to join him. Pascal mused to this effect: "73. Description de l'homme: Dépendance, désir d'indépendance, besoins" (93). Again, let us not forget that human beings are predisposed to attend to their most immediate needs, no matter how vulgar, so the narrator first tends to his personal hygiene. These besoins are both physical and emotional. This thought is otherwise applicable, as he depends on Edmondsson to support him financially and emotionally while he spends his days in the bathroom at the onset of the novel. Then, he decides that he should take a risk, as he states himself, a sort of recognition of his desire for independence. Alas, he has the darts he bought, but even that cannot entertain him forever. Ultimately, he needs Edmondsson:

³³ For a brief moment, he poeticizes the scene with the sentence "J'époussetais mes manches, marchais en secouant mon manteau," but the assonance and alliteration (the play on the letter m) ends there. This may remind one of Ponge poeticizing bread, for example, then suddenly deciding how ridiculous it is to speak in such lofty terms of an object meant to be eaten, not respected. Toussaint seems to tease a little with that sentence, but the poetic quality seems ironic when contrasted with the content it describes, and consequently banality resumes. Again, the Pascalian presence can be sensed here in Toussaint's implicit rejection of the picturesque and the kitsch in general in literature.

34) Au téléphone, Edmondsson restait très douce avec moi; elle me consolait si je le lui demandais. Mais elle ne comprenait pas pourquoi je ne rentrais pas à Paris. Lorsqu'elle me posait la question, je me contentais de répéter à voix haute: Pourquoi je ne rentre pas à Paris? Mais oui, disait-elle, pourquoi? Y avait-il une raison? Une seule raison que j'eusse pu avancer? Non. (SB 67)

Of course, she comes, ["Edmondsson a fini par venir me chercher" (SB 67-8)] and for a short while, the narrator is happy. Perhaps the reader laughs at the narrator's dependence, which may come off as slightly pathetic, but his uneasiness is at least temporarily put to rest with her arrival.³⁴ Without a doubt, boredom and anxiety once again abound, and the desires of the narrator are pitted against those of Edmondsson. While she wants to play the role of typical tourist and visit museums and churches, he would prefer to first play tennis. On the one hand, it would seem that in refusing to play the tourist the narrator rejects diversion, but on the other hand, he is really only trading in one diversion for another. He begrudgingly ends up accompanying her to a church, but when she wants to continue on to an art museum, he decides to go back to the hotel. When she returns, ready to play tennis, he announces malcontentedly: "je n'avais plus envie de jouer au tennis . . . Edmondsson remit alors sa robe, elle me trouvait ennuyeux" (SB 79). Finally, the narrator says in parentheses at end of the passage: "d'ailleurs je n'ai pas de short . . ." (SB 79). This last declaration would appear to undermine the gravity of the annoyance somewhat, but the tension does not end there.³⁵

Edmondsson spends most of her time from that point on away from her husband and the

³⁴ What is intriguing here as we will see especially in the context of the next section of this chapter on *Monsieur* is the implication of the protagonist's dependence. The verb consoler reminds the reader more of a desire for maternal love, and in French one would say that the narrator se fait materner. Let us recall that just before the narrator quotes Pascal in English in the text, he asks Edmondsson specifically to console him, not to comfort him. This theme will be reiterated and elaborated in Toussaint's second novel, as we will encounter Monsieur, a virtual child in an adult's body who cannot make decisions for himself. At any rate, the narrator still needs to be consoled for his human nature as well, for his existential angst. One does not preclude the other.

³⁵ Again, this comment seems to characterize the narrator as a capricious child trying to assert his independence by being negative and perhaps by getting in the last word, an interesting parallel with and foreshadowing of Monsieur.

hotel, while the narrator remains in the room playing darts. The dart game could be seen as an attempt to focus narrowly on a but, which in itself has playful implications as a double-entendre, but signifying on the one hand the bull's eye and yet also meaning goal or purpose in French. The narrator obviously lacks purpose in his life. He asks Edmondsson to console him from time to time, and when she asks for what, he does not have an answer. She is ultimately unable to console him, so he retreats to his game of darts:

Lorsque je jouais aux fléchettes, j'étais calme, détendu. Je me sentais apaisé. Le vide me gagnait progressivement et je m'en pénétrais jusqu'à ce que disparût toute trace de tension dans mon esprit. Alors—d'un geste fulgurant — j'envoyais la fléchette dans la cible. (SB 83)

Unfortunately, this zen-like sense of calm will not last. Pascal opined of diversion that if man were happy, “il le serait d'autant plus qu'il serait moins diverti, comme les saints et Dieu”

(117). He concluded this thought as follows:

– Oui ; mais n'est-ce pas être heureux que de pouvoir être réjoui par le divertissement?
– Non ; car il vient d'ailleurs et de dehors; et ainsi il est dépendant, et partant sujet à être troublé par mille accidents, qui font les afflictions inévitables. (117)

That said, the scene in which Edmondsson finally wants to sit down and talk about what is bothering her husband turns into one of these “accidents,” which only serves to cause the narrator further existential affliction:

Edmondsson me trouvait oppressant. Je laissais dire, continuais à jouer aux fléchettes. Elle me demandait d'arrêter, je ne répondais pas. J'expédiais les fléchettes dans la cible, allais les rechercher. Debout devant la fenêtre, Edmondsson me regardait fixement. Elle me demanda une nouvelle fois d'arrêter. Je lui envoyai de toutes mes forces une fléchette, qui se planta dans son front. Elle tomba à genoux par terre. Je m'approchai d'elle, retirai la fléchette (je tremblais). Ce n'est rien, dis-je, une égratignure. (SB 88)

The narrator panics as Edmondsson bleeds. She eventually loses consciousness and is taken to the hospital where he must wait to see her. Ironically, the darts that seemed to calm him at first become the source of great anxiety, just as Pascal predicted:

393. La seule chose qui nous console de nos misères est le divertissement. Et cependant c'est la plus grande de nos misères. Car c'est cela qui nous empêche principalement de songer à nous, et qui nous fait perdre insensiblement. (243)

What is even more stunning about the end of this section of the book is the fact that the narrator does not accompany Edmondsson back to Paris. She goes alone, and he stays in his hotel room feeling feverish. Perhaps his emotional instability begins to play a role in his impending physical ailments, as he affirms that “La souffrance était l’ultime assurance de mon existence, la seule” (*SB* 95). Once more, this is Pascalian, but what is different here is that the narrator shows no leap of faith. Rather than embrace religion and God as a retreat and ease from his suffering, he chooses to remain within his realm of uncertainty. Toussaint ironically portrays many of his protagonists as contemplators of sorts despite the fact that they seem to want to avoid reflection. They wax philosophical on the concept of immobility and the passage of time, for example, and this will be discussed a bit more in section D, part 3 of this chapter on Proust and other allusions in *L'appareil-photo*.

4. The Spiraling Effects of Time: subtle winks at Nabokov and Proust

In terms of both narrative and thematic repetition within the text itself, it is striking to see sentences from the beginning of the novel rewritten in their exact form at the end of the novel and still others that are similar but altered ever so slightly. We witness the Pascalian aspects penetrate the entire novel, but in acknowledging during his conversation with Ammouche-Kremers that for his first novel he felt and dominated his influences (30), Toussaint specifically mentioned Nabokov as one who “plane sur toute la dernière partie”

(30). With this in mind, it is curious then to read the last section of the text with in mind possible allusions to, for example, Nabokov's *The Gift* or *Lolita*. Themes that dominate these texts also abound in Proust's work, particularly *Le Temps retrouvé*. I do not intend to say that Toussaint's novel resembles the texts of Nabokov and Proust at the level of content or style on the surface, but there are some intriguing parallels.

Like Proust's masterpiece of seven dense volumes, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, *The Gift*, while incomparable in length to Proust's work, is still an extremely long and dense text that Nabokov considered the best of his Russian novels (he eventually began to publish all of his work in English). In terms of the main characters then, no mirror exists between the protagonists of these novels and that of *La Salle de bain* concerning the plot. However, these texts do contain similar observations regarding the respective quotidian of the characters even if the manifestations of each are a bit different. In *The Gift* the monotonous aspects of each day for the protagonist Fyodor are often laid out quite simply in the narration, and the reader witnesses the predictability of every morning in the eyes of this main character. Every day at the same time, he recognizes exactly what is happening. The notion of predictability and recycling, while thematically similar to *La Salle de bain*, is not experienced in the same way by the respective characters. While Fyodor seems to be acutely aware of this predictability, whether or not the narrator of Toussaint's novel recognizes the sameness of his experiences remains in question.

As I just mentioned, our narrator does not return to Paris with Edmondsson, but eventually he gets bored and needs her. He calls to ask her if he can come home, and she replies "Oui, si je voulais, je pouvais rentrer" (*SB* 121). The mail is the first thing evoked upon the narrator's return to Paris, as he mentions that it had piled up during his absence

from Paris. If we recall the beginning of the novel, the narrator “était sur le point de [s]’endormir lorsque Edmondsson entra dans la salle de bain, pivota et [lui] tendit deux lettres. L’une d’elle provenait de l’ambassade d’Autriche” (SB 15). An eerily similar scene takes place at the end of the novel:

48) Je restais allongé dans la baignoire tout l’après-midi, et je méditais là tranquillement, les yeux fermés, avec le sentiment de pertinence miraculeuse que procure la pensée qu’il n’est nul besoin d’exprimer. Parfois, Edmondsson entrait dans la salle de bain à l’improviste et, surpris, je sursautais dans la baignoire (ce qui la mettait en joie). Ainsi un jour, fit-elle irruption dans la pièce et, sans me laisser le temps de me redresser, pivota et me tendit deux lettres. L’une d’elle provenait de l’ambassade d’Autriche.(SB 122-23)

In the passage at the end of the novel, the Pascalian lexicon stands out as the narrator was meditating, eyes closed, deep in thought as opposed to the passage at the beginning of the novel in which he is merely described as being on the verge of falling asleep. The two scenes mirror each other remarkably, but the reflection back to the beginning of the text does not end there. The novel reaches its conclusion:

49) Devais-je, commençais-je à me demander, et pour en attendre quoi, me rendre à la réception de l’ambassade d’Autriche? **Assis sur le rebord de la baignoire, j’expliquais à Edmondsson qu’il n’était peut-être pas très sain, à vingt-sept ans, bientôt vingt-neuf, de vivre plus ou moins reclus dans une baignoire. Je devais prendre un risque, disais-je les yeux baissés, en caressant l’émail de la baignoire, le risque de compromettre la quiétude de ma vie abstraite pour. Je ne terminai pas ma phrase.**

50) **Le lendemain** je sortais de la salle de bain. (SB 123) [my emphases]

The narrator explains his line of thinking to Edmondsson just as he did at the beginning of the novel. What is funny about this is the fact that he feels the need to provide an explanation. What he explains to Edmondsson is so obvious to her, so again, he seems a little slow on the uptake in his revelations. The last sentence of the novel that follows his explanation humorously reiterates this slowness by stating precisely that the next day he left

the bathroom. Why did he not leave the bathroom right after his revelatory conversation with Edmondsson? Did it really take him a day to make this decision? It becomes immediately evident in the last two numbered sections of *La Salle de bain* that it is retracing its steps. The part of fragment 49 quoted above in bold type is exactly as appears the passage on page 15 of the novel. The reader may begin to wonder what is going on. While almost verbatim, the last fragment that ends the book, however, differs by one letter that changes the tense of the verb sortir. Whereas the narrator said at the beginning of the novel “je sortis de la salle de bain” (SB 16) in the passé simple translated as the self-sufficient action “I left the bathroom,” the sentence at the end of the novel appears in the imperfect tense, which we could translate as “I was leaving the bathroom,” possibly preparing the scene for one or several actions. He seems to be preparing to embark on the journey we have just read about, the journey that comprises the whole novel. In like manner, *The Gift* and *Le Temps retrouvé* have endings that cycle back around to the beginning. At the end of Nabokov’s novel, Fyodor sets himself to begin writing the exact novel that we have just read; in Proust’s masterpiece, it takes Marcel his whole life and thus the duration of the seven volumes of *A la recherche* to realize that he is about to become a writer. The reader follows him on this journey, and in the seventh installment *Le Temps retrouvé*, we see Marcel at the beginning remembering various episodes from the first six volumes in no particular order, mixing reality and fiction, retracing some steps through memories, as he, too, sits down to write the very novel we have just read.

The title of Proust’s novel *Le Temps retrouvé* or *Time Regained* in English rings particularly appropriate in the context of *La Salle de bain*. Our narrator does seem, in fact, to have recaptured time at the end of the novel. Whichever way we choose to look at it, the point is that the imperfect tense used at the end implies an ongoing action whereas the simple

past tense in French used at the beginning refers to a completed action in a distant past. In fact, this choice of tense leads the reader to expect that something is going to happen subsequently, but nothing happens within the book. The reader is then left to ponder what all of this means. Did the author trick us? Is the third part of the novel entitled “Paris” really just the first part of the novel (also entitled “Paris”) retold with varied details? Did we just read the same story twice, or is this just an amusing testament to the cyclical nature of life? The narrator does not choose God as solace, and thus upon returning home, he faces the same challenges as before and therefore repeats the same patterns such as his retreats to the bathroom. The interpretation of the last scene plays out like a game, and no matter which way we choose to play it, the author has indelibly left his ludic mark. At the end of Nabokov’s *Lolita* as well the characters are faced with the same situations that they encountered at the beginning, and this ultimately seems to be the case with Toussaint’s characters in *La Salle de bain*.

This recycling certainly attests to the monotony and sameness of our experiences. However, in using the imperfect tense in Toussaint’s novel, a continuum is implied and so while we sense the repetition, it is rather better defined as routine, something that is very similar, but not exactly the same. It opens up the story to something else, or another episode of the same, this being left up to the reader to decide. Additionally, this similarity as opposed to sameness is evident in the slight differences between the passages from the beginning and end. They are almost the same as a whole, but they are not all identical. The spiral would seem a more appropriate symbol of this movement in time, rather than a circle, for example. Although Nabokov, Proust and Toussaint use different techniques, the manifestation of these techniques is the same: the novels cycle back into themselves, and the readers become part of this spiral. As would be the case for Proust especially, memories are only representations of

reality that evolve each time we conjure them up. Thus, it is impossible for these relived experiences to be identical. In *On Some Semiotic Models in V. Nabokov's Fiction*, Marina Grishakova explains:

The spiral is a basic symbol in many cosmological and religious systems. It combines expansion, an image of spiritual or biological energy, with contraction, movement towards enclosure and death (e.g. Botticelli's illustrations for Dante's "Hell" or Hitchcock's sinister water spirals). One of the most obvious Nabokov's sources is the Symbolist idea of the spiral as a spiritualized circle (Nabokov 1989: 275) elaborated in the polemic against the Nietzschean "vicious" circle of the "eternal return". (291)

Indeed, Nabokov mocked notions of eternity and time as a means to grow and evolve.

Fyodor muses in *The Gift*:

Try to experience that strange, future, retrospective thrill... All the little hairs on the soul stand on end! It would be a good thing in general to put an end to our barbaric perception of time ... Or the drivel about eternity: so much time as been allotted to the universe that the date of its end should *already* have come, just as it is impossible in a single segment of time to imagine *whole* an egg lying on a road along which an army is endlessly marching. How stupid! Our mistaken feeling of time as a kind of growth is a consequence of our finiteness which, being always on the level of the present, implies its constant rise between the watery abyss of the past and the aerial abyss of the future. Existence is thus an eternal transformation of the future into the past—an essentially phantom process—a mere reflection of the material metamorphoses taking place within us. In these circumstances the attempt to comprehend the world is reduced to an attempt to comprehend that which we ourselves have deliberately made incomprehensible. The absurdity at which searching thought arrives is only a natural, generic sign of its belonging to man, and striving to obtain an answer is the same as demanding of chicken broth that it began to cluck. (354)

In fact, this seems to be what is at play in Toussaint's novel as well. "Existence is thus an eternal transformation of the future into the past." One is led to believe that after what the narrator has gone through in Italy with Edmondsson that he would learn from his mistakes, that he would try to do something more productive with his life, that he would take a risk as he himself expresses it. However, we realize that perhaps he has learned nothing when we see the similar patterns of his life resurface at the end of the novel. Grishakova so pertinently

points out as Fyodor intuitively near the end of *The Gift* in the passage above that “the circular spiral is an embodiment of the infinite renewal of the convolutions of time. The movement of the human observer is illusory” (292).

In conclusion, intertextual allusions abound in *La Salle de bain* be they brief winks or more well developed subtexts. The Pascalian intertext in particular is extremely rich, and there are countless references to be made. This intertext is inextricably related to a ludic subtext. Parody certainly represents the darker side of humor, but more specifically, it is Toussaint’s intentions as author, his will to play on this seventeenth century text that shows his first leanings toward a more entropic comedy.³⁶ On the surface, all the anxiety may not be funny, but Toussaint’s presenting the reader with a sort of pseudo Pascal is indeed playful. Our author also infuses a sense of existential anxiety regarding time into his text that so clearly penetrated the works of all three authors invoked for their intertextual winks, Pascal, Proust, and Nabokov. Moreover, the narrator’s feeling that he should take a risk, try to be happy, “le risque de compromettre la quiétude de [s]a vie abstraite pour” is certainly evocative of the questions at the end of *The Gift*: “Will it really happen tonight? Will it really happen now? The weight and the threat of bliss” (378). Toussaint definitively inserts a final

³⁶ During an on-line literary forum with Jean-Philippe Toussaint through Professor Alain-Philippe Durand’s undergraduate course on *Nonlieux dans le roman et le cinéma contemporains* at URI, the author commented on this:

Pendant que j’écrivais *La Salle de bain*, il m’est apparu qu’il y avait quelque chose en commun — thématiquement — entre le livre que j’écrivais et les *Pensées* de Pascal. Je ne connaissais pas particulièrement bien l’oeuvre de Pascal à ce moment-là, même si j’avais en tête la fameuse phrase : “Tout le malheur des hommes vient d’une seule chose, qui est de ne pas savoir rester en repos dans une chambre”. Je me suis alors fait prêter *Les Pensées* de Pascal par un ami (j’étais en Algérie à ce moment-là, et il n’y avait ni librairie ni bibliothèque), et je les ai lues à la lumière du livre que j’étais en train d’écrire. J’ai été particulièrement intéressé par les passages sur le divertissement, et j’ai alors, consciemment, parsemé mon livre de références au divertissement pascalien, en déclinant en quelque sorte les notions de divertissement, de diversion et de distraction. Mais, au moment de citer Pascal dans le livre, pour éviter la pesanteur d’un discours philosophique ou métaphysique trop sérieux, j’ai utilisé un procédé qui m’est cher — qu’on peut appeler le décalage —, et j’ai cité Pascal en anglais (j’ai d’ailleurs toujours trouvé que Woody Allen aurait pu citer Shakespeare en italien).

wink at Nabokov at the very end of *La Salle de bain* when he repeats the sentence from the beginning of the novel, “Je ne terminai pas ma phrase.” This seems to be a small subtle homage to the Russian author who concluded *The Gift* with a poem, the last lines reading “and no obstruction for the sage exists where I have put The End: the shadows of my world extend beyond the skyline of the page, blue as tomorrow’s morning haze—nor does this terminate the phrase” (378).

Of course, there are other elements of style outside these intertexts that are also playful and more outwardly comical as I have mentioned. Perhaps *La Salle de bain* could be best described as a tragi-comedy, a text rife with black humor. While Douglas M. Davis concludes in *The World of Black Humor* that black humor “laughs at the absurd tragedy which has trapped us all, man, woman, child, self” (14), Patrick O’Neill cites Robert Scholes’ *Fabulation and Metafiction* in his own study in order to describe authors as black humorists. He writes:

Black humorists, as Scholes observes, are often misjudged as failed satirists, or as deliberately choosing to be flippant rather than to attempt ‘seriously’ to alter the world for better (156), but, as he acutely phrases it, the black humorist is one who is concerned not with what to do about life but with how to take it. In this respect black humor has certain affinities with some existentialist attitudes, roughly distinguishable in terms of the difference between seeing the universe as absurd . . . and seeing it as ridiculous, a joke, with the point being one’s ability to enter into the joke, ‘get’ it, and laugh (Scholes, 147). (27)

This seems to be what critic Pierre Caminade is trying to grasp, as he appears to be baffled somewhat when attempting to situate *La Salle de bain* in a ludic context. He explains his reticence as such in a review that he wrote for *Sud*:

Certains livres m’ont fait sourire, éclater de rire, rire d’un long rire; ici, pas tout à fait cela, presque; ici, le varié, imperturbablement instrumenté, des sauts du coq à l’âne . . . détourne le rire possible de sa franchise. (254)

Margaret Gray adds to this, commenting that the complexity of this humor “both provokes and deflects spontaneous laughter” (28), and this is precisely the point I wish to make. Black humor seems to penetrate all of Toussaint’s texts and reaches its crescendo most notably in *Faire l’amour*, as I will examine in chapter four of this dissertation.

C. Monsieur

1. Evasion in Context: language, story, and style

All of Toussaint’s characters seem to have difficulty dealing with their respective realities, and Monsieur in particular bases his decisions on what he believes will produce the least conflict-ridden result in any given situation. Still, these characters always manage to find themselves in awkward instances, feeling anxious, wishing to retreat to the confines of a hotel room, a bathroom, or choosing escape through television, for example. Ultimately, this apparent ambivalence or indifference portrayed in order to avoid conflict (be it desired or affected) typically backfires. Monsieur’s attempts to evade, avoid, and hide represent some of the funnier isolated moments within the text as I will show throughout this section. For example, after having specifically described the room where a meeting is to take place as “immuable, une grande salle rectangulaire dans laquelle une table ovale, en bois laqué, occupait tout l’espace” (*M* 11), Monsieur proceeds to hide:

Monsieur s’asseyait à la dix-septième place en partant de la gauche, celle où, par expérience, il avait remarqué que la présence passait la plus inaperçue, à côté de Mme Dubois-Lacour, qui, supervisant une grande partie de ses activités, répondait à la plupart des questions qui lui étaient posées, et, tout au long de la réunion, fumant tranquillement une cigarette, Monsieur, veillait scrupuleusement à rester dans l’axe de son corps, reculant lorsqu’elle reculait, avançant lorsqu’elle se penchait en avant, de manière à n’être jamais trop directement exposé. (*M* 11-12)

Likewise, in *La Salle de bain*, the narrator expresses anxiously that “[il] ne voulais[t] plus sentir du regard posé sur [lui]. [Il] ne voulais[t] plus être vu” (*SB* 88). Monsieur’s leaning forward and back when Mme Dubois-Lacour does conjures up an amusing image, but with

black humor digging below the surface as I just mentioned, the fear of confrontation is inevitably deeper than simple slapstick humor. Quite simply, Monsieur does not want any trouble. In this light, he tries to remain indifferent in life, even though paradoxically as we will see in a moment, he is indeed inclined to judge.

In general, Monsieur's solutions to problems are far from logical. One embodiment of this apparent lack of logical thinking occurs in a scene near the end of the novel where he asks Anna Bruckhardt, whom he has invited to dinner, if she would like him to pay for both meals or for them to go dutch:

Au moment où on leur porta l'addition, Monsieur demanda à Anna Bruckhardt si elle désirait qu'il l'invite ou si elle préférerait partager. (*M* 107)

At this point, the reader is baffled. Did Monsieur not already ask this woman out on a date, which would typically imply that he was going to pay for her meal? This is a very conventional, traditional way of viewing the dating rituals between men and women, but the assumption is still valid. Once again, Monsieur needs a decision to be made for him. He wants to do the right thing so as not to offend, but coming out and directly asking her what she thinks should happen only accentuates Monsieur's social clumsiness. The scene continues:

Anna Bruckhardt n'avait pas de préférence. Après quelques instants de réflexion, Monsieur lui confia qu'il n'avait aucune idée de ce qu'il convenait de faire dans ce cas-là. Anna Bruckhardt, le rassurant, lui dit qu'il n'y avait pas de règle en la matière. (*M* 107)

In having no preference, Anna gives him an opportunity to come back to his senses, which he fails to seize. Upon her responding that there is no rule regarding this, Monsieur is baffled:

Parfait. Dans ce cas-là, c'était devenu tout à fait insoluble. Qu'est-ce qu'on fait, alors? dit Monsieur et, baissant la tête, il se plongea dans la contemplation de ses doigts dans l'obscurité. Anna Bruckhardt, qui commençait à sourire de sa perplexité, lui répéta que c'était vraiment comme il voulait. Finalement proposant de couper la

poire en deux, Monsieur, ne s'en sortant pas, suggéra de diviser l'addition en quatre et de payer lui-même trois parts (c'est le plus simple, dit-il, d'une assez grande élégance mathématique en tout cas). (*M* 107-8)

The word contemplation certainly indicates that Monsieur is thinking hard about what to do, perhaps weighing intuition against reason, because in his mind with the word mathématique, he clearly seems to favor reason. Intuition is linked too closely to emotions, and if Monsieur is to remain indifferent and indecisive, he must avoid emotional displays. Ironically and quite comically, however, Monsieur's line of reasoning is clearly skewed, and his decision makes no sense at all.³⁷

The fact is that Toussaint's characters are not indifferent, and paradoxically they are easily annoyed or baffled. They do have opinions and set ways of thinking, most particularly Monsieur. This is embodied concisely and comically in the stylistic value of the repeated understatement "Monsieur n'aimait pas tellement..." which occurs several times throughout the novel. While the repetition is playful because it reminds the reader of how particular Monsieur really is, humor surfaces as well in the litotes and the inherent manner in which Monsieur's obstinance serve to disrupt his world, thereby making the reader laugh. The characters seem to have strong negative opinions, and yet they still manage to keep their emotions in check and to a bare minimum.

Everything in Toussaint's second novel *Monsieur* revolves around a general theme of evasion. This thematic evasion is reflected not only in the story itself but also in the language used to express Monsieur's perpetual longing to flee or to not be known, for example, when we see that "Monsieur répondit évasièrement" (*M* 23) or that "Pendant

³⁷ We often joke about how some of the most educated people have no common sense at all. As an executive at Fiat-France, Monsieur likely attended a grande école and is thus very intelligent from society's point of view for having obtained an advanced diploma. However, when it comes to the smallest things, he seems utterly incapable, even completely inept.

quelques jours, ensuite, Monsieur tâcha d'éviter Kaltz" (*M* 87). At the beginning of the novel when Monsieur sprains his wrist, the situation unfolds as follows:

Monsieur n'aimait pas tellement tout ce qui, de près ou de loin, lui ressemblait. Non. Le soir où il s'est foulé le poignet, par exemple, il lisait le journal en attendant l'autobus, son sac de sport à ses pieds. Un monsieur, à côté de lui, essayait de lui demander quelque chose. Comme Monsieur ne répondait pas, terminant la lecture de son article, le monsieur, souriant prudemment, crut bon de lui répéter sa question. Monsieur baissa le journal et le considéra rêveusement de haut en bas. Le monsieur s'approcha de lui et, brutalement, le bouscula. Déséquilibré, Monsieur heurta de plein fouet l'arête métallique de l'abri-bus. (*M* 15) [my emphasis]

The reflective play between Monsieur and le monsieur in the passage is evocative. By stating that Monsieur did not like anyone who resembled him, one might be led to believe that someone similar would represent a metaphorical mirror, and that this mirror would force Monsieur to see himself up close, a reality that he would perhaps be reticent to confront. Bessard-Banquy sees the situation a little differently, however: "en vérité [Monsieur] aime encore moins ce qui ne lui ressemble pas. Il n'aime pas ce qui échappe, ce qui pèse, ce qui passe" (224).³⁸ This is part of the paradox of this character as I just mentioned. Monsieur comes off as indifferent and indecisive, but he is set in his ways and refuses to deal with any unpleasantness. If he is set in his ways, this then implies that moving away from the norm or from his routine, having to confront difference would indeed present a problem as Bessard-Banquy's comment implies. The introductory clause, "Monsieur n'aimait pas tellement," appears sporadically in the novel and subsequently becomes more humorous with each new

³⁸ The only apparent similarity between the two men in the quoted scene, however, is their clumsiness. Bessard-Banquy's reading seems specious, then, because it could just be that Monsieur does not like people who are as clumsy as he is, like the man at the bus stop.

appearance. The isolation of non adds to the humor as well since it strongly reinforces the sentiment that Monsieur does not like such and such a thing.³⁹

Monsieur does not see a doctor for this sprain, and several pages later his fiancée's father examines it, as it has swollen overnight: "Monsieur était, à cette époque-là, fiancé" (*M* 15). He suggests that Monsieur go to the hospital for x-rays, but "(Monsieur n'aimait pas tellement les hôpitaux)" (*M* 19). His fear of hospitals is mildly amusing, but in reality, most people, even adults, would not say that they in fact like hospitals. What is more amusing here, then, is perhaps the phrase itself viewed as an understatement, a declaration of something that is not at all surprising on the one hand. On the other hand, his unwillingness to get a simple x-ray does come off as a bit childish and will subsequently serve to verify the ending of the book: "La vie, pour Monsieur, un jeu d'enfant" (*M* 111). He needs an x-ray, but since he refuses to go to the hospital, any doctor available right there will do. He cannot make any definitive decisions for himself and constantly changes his mind. The scene progresses and Madame Parrain tells Monsieur that all he has to do is call if he wants to see the doctor. However, "Monsieur n'aimait pas tellement le téléphone" (*M* 20). Toussaint continues to play with the repetition of this phrase, and again it reinforces Monsieur's child-like qualities, the fact that he needs things done for him, and ultimately, the fact that he is not as indifferent as he would seem to portray himself. One begins to wonder if Monsieur likes anything at all, since he is clearly defined throughout the novel in terms of what he does not like. One thing is certain: Monsieur is passive, a trait we find in Toussaint's other characters,

³⁹ Isolated insertions of non also appear throughout the novel and again enrich the ludic implications even further not just in the immediate moment of its use, but also with each successive insertion. Repetition is a powerful tool, and the addition of non, or oui for that matter, is an intensifier in spoken language. Each time the readers encounter another non, the thought conveyed is intensified, and the author playfully reminds them of each previous occurrence.

but the paradox of Monsieur's personality often transforms him into a more passive-aggressive being as we will see in other examples throughout this section.

More humorous situations occur, as Monsieur finds himself getting involved in the typing of his neighbor's book on mineralogy: "Monsieur ne savait rien refuser" (*M* 36). This sentence is playful; it is set apart from the other paragraphs, thereby constituting its own paragraph. This inability to refuse people's requests becomes a paradoxical theme in the book as the reader witnesses the ridiculous situations that ensue as a result. This is yet again a comical testament to his inability to make decisions for himself and his fear of confrontation. The way that Monsieur chooses to deal with, or more accurately to not deal with his reality is what amuses the reader repeatedly:

Ainsi, tous les week-ends (pendant la semaine, Monsieur travaillait), Kaltz lui dictait-il son ouvrage. Tournant dans sa chambre avec une chemise de documents divers, ou parfois simplement installé sur le lit de Monsieur, les lunettes relevées, sérieux et concentré, ses divers documents répartis sur l'édredon, il progressait dans son travail à un rythme soutenu. Assis à son bureau, Monsieur tapait le texte à la machine, relevant la tête de temps en temps pour lui demander quelque précision. Les premiers jours, perdu dans ses notes et très fébrile, Kaltz s'irritait d'être interrompu, un peu trop souvent disait-il, par les questions de Monsieur, et se permit même d'ironiser sur le fait qu'il ne tapait qu'avec deux doigts, mais comme Monsieur l'avait tout de suite remis à sa place, et plutôt sèchement, il tâchait maintenant de dicter plus lentement.

Le béryl, mit ein i grec, minéral double d'aluminium et de béryllium, est un cristal hexagonal, tandis que la topaze, comme nous l'avons déjà indiqué, est un fluorosilicate d'aluminium orthorhombique. De même, les grenats, silicates doubles d'aluminium et de calcium, magnésium, fer, manganèse ou chrome, sont utilisés en joaillerie pour leurs formes cubiques. (*M* 37-8)

Including such a dry scientific text within his own represents another ludic dimension of our author's novel. Additionally, the invasion of Kaltz's native language German in the passage ["mit ein i grec"] reinforces the unfamiliar territory for both protagonist and reader, and the fact that the case of the indefinite article ein is incorrect and should actually read einem only further emphasizes that this is all jargon to Monsieur. When Monsieur decides that he no

longer wishes to help Kaltz with the book, nowhere is it written in the text that mineralogy bored Monsieur, that Monsieur was annoyed, or more concretely that he no longer wished to help him. Rather, the first sentence that follows the above quoted passage reads: “Monsieur finit par en référer à Mme Dubois-Lacour” (*M* 38). This sentence is set apart from the others and constitutes its own paragraph, a narrative technique we have already seen in the author’s text. This ellipsis helps this sentence to speak volumes in its tacit implication instead of actually verbalizing Monsieur’s annoyance at the situation in which he finds himself. It represents appropriately the theme of evasion that dominates the text on the whole.

Moreover, the dryness of the subject matter speaks for itself, and Toussaint mocks this discourse implicitly via his style instead of ever commenting on it directly, as I just showed. Once more, the author shows the unshowable through gaps, and this is abundantly ludic. Defays affirms that gaps are able to introduce “un sens second (politique, obscène, agressif...) sans devoir le nommer, sans même devoir lever l’ambiguïté” and that they embody “un jeu, ce qui signifie qu’il est gratuit, futile, divertissant, et que, à ce titre, il ne porte pas à conséquence” (37-8). In sum, again, Monsieur does not know how to refuse people, and again, he is a child who, unable to make his own decision, needs the advice of someone else. The text continues with his consultation with Mme Dubois-Lacour:

Dubois-Lacour, au téléphone (Monsieur appelait d’une cabine ; son voisin était en haut, dans la chambre), mise au courant de la situation, commença par lui dire qu’il aurait dû s’arranger pour refuser la proposition tout de suite, ajoutant que
maintenant, ce qu’il y avait de mieux à faire était d’essayer, très simplement, de lui faire
comprendre qu’il ne pouvait pas lui consacrer tous ses week-ends. Puis, s’irritant un peu à mesure que, fataliste, Monsieur se bornait à répéter qu’à son avis c’était devenu insoluble, elle conclut, agacée, qu’il pouvait quand même se débrouiller tout seul, non?

Non. La situation était bloquée. (*M* 38-9)

What is particularly funny in the above passage is the fact that Monsieur leaves his own apartment to call his boss from a phone booth, yet another level of evasion. Finally, though, he is not satisfied with Dubois-Lacour's advice, and the next paragraph resumes with the typing of the text on crystals, thereby closing the ellipsis, again another ludic use of gaps that allows the moment to speak for itself precisely through its lack of concrete verbal explanation: "L'or natif, difficile à trouver, connu et désiré depuis les temps les plus reculés, magnifique dans ses teintes, passe à l'état cristallin dans le système cubique" (M 39). Directly after this, rather than simply tell the truth, "Le plus sage apparut à Monsieur de déménager" (M 40). On the one hand, this seems to be twisted logic. On the other hand, however, it may just be a lack of character on Monsieur's part because within his own insufficiencies, his decision is perhaps quite wise.

Monsieur will go to some lengths to avoid reality, but these measures are not always great. He wants to avoid confrontation, but more often than not, his evasatory tactics come off as quite pathetic. He goes to look at a room that Mme Dubois-Lacour has found for him:

Il régnait, dans la chambre de Monsieur, une odeur de cire mêlée de sperme sec. Les rideaux étaient tirés. Le parquet, en bois foncé, paraissait plus sombre encore dans la pénombre. C'est la chambre de ma mère, dit M. Leguen à voix basse. Oui, je vois, chuchota Monsieur. (M 44)

The incongruity of this scene is almost shocking, and Monsieur is not sure himself how to react. Here we have two different stages of dénivellation that work together with the saugrenu: firstly, there is the juxtaposition of "une odeur de cire mêlée de sperme sec" and "la chambre de ma mère." Then, when Monsieur affirms with "Oui, je vois," again this is not a reaction that one would expect. By responding in this manner, Monsieur acts as if the smell of dried sperm in a room that belongs to this man's mother is quite normal and not unexpected. The narration goes on to describe the room a bit more, and then M Leguen says "si vous

voulez vous pouvez emménager dès la fin de la semaine” (*M* 44). The immediate invitation to move in may also come off as a surprise since Monsieur was clearly disturbed by the room as was evidenced through the reaction chuchota. However, perhaps Leguen’s encouragement to move in is merely part of his hospitable personality. He acts like a cicerone, guiding tourists through his house. The way that he introduces his mother’s room almost suggests a sort of religious reverence of it on his part, which adds yet another ludic element to the whole scene in its incongruity since this reverence would sit in total contrast to the smell of the room.

In a new paragraph, the reader sees only one word: “Non.” The next paragraph begins, explaining that “Monsieur avait dit non” (*M* 45) and ends with him being walked to the door by the landlord. Even though Monsieur’s decision should not come off as a surprise given the fact that the room obviously disturbed him, the reader still perhaps expects him to take it since he sought to avoid his current neighbor Kaltz. Toussaint constantly defies the expectations of his readers, and thus they never quite know what to expect. These games are what make reading his novels so intriguing.

When Monsieur refuses to accept M. Leguen’s room, there is still the possibility that he will merely search for another option, but this is not the case. The following paragraph goes straight away into a discourse on crystals found in nature:

Ainsi les cristaux que l’on trouve dans la nature ne sont-ils pas toujours parfaits et peuvent-ils présenter certains défauts, tels que les dislocations ou les fautes d’empilement, que la diffraction des rayons X permet de mettre en évidence soit localement par des topographies, soit globalement par la modification qu’ils entraînent dans l’intensité réfléchie par l’ensemble du cristal. (*M* 45)

This is quite droll because clearly, Monsieur does not want to have to deal with his neighbor Kaltz, the mineralogist; but indeed, he does not like the odor of the new room presented to

him or the thought of the origin of the odor as I have just discussed. Thus, he weighs the situation and in the end chooses what he deems perhaps the lesser of two evils. This ellipsis is again extremely evocative and humorous: this is the narrator's way of telling the reader that Monsieur has moved back into his old apartment. Just like the scene in which Monsieur calls on Dubois-Lacour for initial advice, the blunt cut to the next scene quoted above has a certain cinematic quality that we encounter from time to time in the author/filmmaker's works. These gaps not only allow the reader to imagine what happened in between but also to accentuate the storytelling; thus the reader becomes a collaborator in the writing of the text.⁴⁰

The discourse on crystals just cited above is amusing for other stylistic reasons: the style the author chooses directly generates the feeling of disorientation that Monsieur undoubtedly feels. Once again, we have Riffaterre's theory of context and effect functioning in this passage as I have just discussed in relation to *La Salle de bain*. The passage is one single sentence, and thus it is not difficult to get lost in the scientific jargon strewn about in subordinate clauses. Kaltz's technicalities are just one more example of the langage représenté I cited in relation to the diplomat's speech. As I previously mentioned, the author often seems to make fun of discourses in the sciences and arts in his novels and this can be seen as yet another manifestation of this mockery.

2. Narrative and Textual Evasion

Even though it appeared that Monsieur did not take the room at Leguen's house, in fact, he does end up moving in. In the end, the lesser of the two evils for Monsieur was

⁴⁰ Riffaterre insists that "linear and nonlinear reading can be reconciled" since "the result or effect of the nonlinear, paragrammatic reading is perceptible only through the ungrammaticalities or gaps that disrupt the linear sequence" (TP 88). He does make a point to stress, however, that it does not matter if the reader is able to fill in the gaps or not. He explains that either way, the reader "must accept a verbal detour and perform the ritual of deciphering *a contrario*" and that ultimately, "It is in this very game and in our awareness of this artifice that the significance is constituted" (TP 88).

Leguen, not Kaltz, as we were initially led to believe. This is unexpected and very funny. The va-et-vient created from the oscillation between Kaltz and M Leguen constitutes the structure of most of the novel and not only further enhances the central narrative theme but also the comical aspects as well. Two funny situations that attest to Monsieur's desire to escape or avoid things occur when he lives at the Leguen's house and then directly after when he once again moves back to his first apartment building where Kaltz also lives. At M Leguen's residence, Monsieur is helping his son Ludovic study and asks him to repeat a theory on the relative character of time: "Et, pendant que, regardant par la fenêtre, Ludovic répétait que la durée c'était l'intervalle de temps qui s'écoulait entre le début et la fin et que la date, c'était le moment où cela avait lieu, Monsieur, **sans faire de bruit, sortit de la pièce et quitta l'appartement sur la pointe des pieds**" (M 77). [my emphasis] Then, the scene concludes even more comically when Monsieur goes down into the street to the sidewalk in front of Ludovic's window "et vit Ludovic derrière la vitre qui terminait de réciter sa leçon (les gens, tout de même)" (M 78). Having returned, Monsieur, who "ne savait rien refuser" as we have seen, is again convinced to help M Leguen's son Ludovic with his physics studies. A dispute ensues, though, over what device measures time, a chronometer or a clock.⁴¹ Ludovic doubts Monsieur's response (a clock), and Monsieur tells Ludovic immediately to go "chercher [son] père" because apparently, "(Monsieur n'aimait pas tellement, non, qu'on le contredise)" (M 86).

Of course, he returns to his old apartment where he promptly encounters Kaltz:

⁴¹ Relevant or not, the main difference is that one can start and stop a chronometer as in a race, for example. This cannot be done with a clock, so in this light, Monsieur is wrong. Otherwise, both a chronometer and a clock measure time, but the difference is in their accuracy. A chronometer is known for its sharp precision. This would then be a humorous testament to Monsieur's attitude towards time. A chronometer is decisively a more accurate measure of time. There is no leeway, no room for escape or deviation in such accuracy, and this goes hand in hand with Monsieur's penchant for evasion. He always needs a way out, no matter how illogical his reasoning might be.

“Pendant quelques jours, ensuite, Monsieur tâcha d’éviter Kaltz” (*M* 87), so “Monsieur redescendit dans l’appartement, il refermait la porte derrière lui **sans faire de bruit** pour ne pas attirer l’attention de Kaltz” (*M* 87). [my emphasis] Monsieur’s wanting to avoid the other constitutes the bulk of the book, and the humor of this text is a direct result of this structural schema. The manner in which Toussaint frames the va-et-vient between the two residences is very playful. Monsieur just wants to be left alone, but in the end, it is an impossible task for such a weak man. He is still a child. He constantly goes back and forth in his mind, unable to make final decisions, and this fickleness is playfully reflected directly in the narrative structure.

Structure aside, one of the most striking stylistic traits of Toussaint’s second novel is that it is the only one of his texts not narrated in the first person. This narrative technique undeniably reinforces the dominant theme of evasion. By choosing a third person narrator, Monsieur, unlike Toussaint’s other protagonists, is not referred to as je for the readers. In this way, unlike the other protagonists of our author’s texts, Monsieur is able to evade the act of telling his own story.⁴² He does not have to speak and is therefore much more detached from what would be his own text and from any relationship with the reader. No rapport surfaces between character and reader. As characterized by linguist Emile Benveniste, the third

⁴² In fact, the first person pronoun scarcely exists anywhere in this text, save for a couple of isolated indirect quotations that are integrated into the narration itself. We have already seen one of these instances in the scene I just quoted where M. Leguen shows a room for rent to Monsieur. When M. Leguen explains that it is his mother’s room, Monsieur replies “Oui, je vois.” The other instance in which Monsieur voices his feeling directly occurs in a scene where Doctor Douvres examines his sprained wrist. He asks about Monsieur’s job: “Monsieur répondit évasivement,” (*M* 23) as we would expect him to. However, rather than indulge the reader by sharing anything meaningful about Monsieur the man, Toussaint leaves a huge gap. Directly following the sentence in which Monsieur replies evasively is the doctor’s response to his reply, so appropriately omitted from the text: “Et c’est intéressant? demanda le docteur Douvres” (*M* 23). As I iterated earlier in the chapter, Monsieur is easily annoyed, and his response to the doctor as well as the narrator’s parenthetical comment that follows come off as bitingly comical. Monsieur replies that “Oui, je suis assez bien payé...” (*M* 23). Then the paragraph concludes: “Je pense que je gagne plus d’argent que vous, ajouta-t-il. Dès lors, le docteur Douvres ne dit plus rien (c’était par là que Monsieur aurait dû commencer)” (*M* 24). These are the only two scenes in the entire novel in which Monsieur is quoted in the first person.

person is, in a speech act, a non-person. Monsieur's having no name, then, in spite of the third person grammatical subject further depersonalizes him. This notion represents a stark contrast in relation to Toussaint's third novel especially where the narrator goes to great lengths to establish a degree of familiarity and intimacy with the readers, as I will show in the next section of this chapter.

Another degree of textual detachment resides in the sentence structure that permeates the entire novel. It is pertinent to remark that Monsieur as the subject of a sentence is often not directly followed by a verb. A degree of separation between Monsieur and his action or Monsieur and a description of his character often exists in the form of a dependent clause, prepositional phrase, or other explicative phrase. Examples abound throughout the entire text; the proliferation of this sentence structure is notable. Here are several examples of this stylistic device:

Monsieur, un soir par semaine, pratiquait le football en salle, à l'économie, dans un gymnase polyvalent. (*M* 14)

[...] Monsieur, qui ne voulait pas d'histoires, essayait de justifier sa présence dans leur appartement (*M* 17)

Monsieur, soucieux de s'aérer quand même de temps en temps, un samedi après-midi, emmena ses nièces au Palais de la Découverte. (*M* 72)

Monsieur, paix aux hommes de bonne volonté, le lendemain soir, emménagea chez les Leguen. (*M* 75)

Monsieur, parfois pour améliorer son ordinaire, emportait une chaise avec lui pour se rendre sur le toit.⁴³ (*M* 88)

Monsieur, la tête baissée, mangeait son poisson en silence (*M* 104)

⁴³ The expression "améliorer son ordinaire" is humorous here because it is typically used to describe food, not people.

Certainly, the third person narration lends itself better to this style, and thus this sentence structure is a characteristic unique to *Monsieur*.⁴⁴ It does not exist in Toussaint's other texts. However, isolating the subject from the verb paradoxically draws more attention to the subject itself "Monsieur." In this way, Monsieur actually stands out more in the written text as a character, and this is very playful.

He is not a man of action. He wants to take life slowly and on his own terms, and nothing shows this more in the text than the constant references to sitting. Here are some selected examples :

Assis sur le lit, Monsieur ... essayait de se justifier sa présence dans leur appartement (M 17)

Il était assis dans la chambre à coucher, la lumière éteinte, dans un transatlantique. (M 32)

Assis à son bureau, Monsieur tapait le texte à la machine (M 37)

Assis là, le livre sur les genoux, il l'ouvrit pour se donner une contenance au cas où quelqu'un parviendrait devant lui. (M 56)

Monsieur s'assit sur le lit, sans rien dire (M 71)

La salle du café était presque déserte, et Monsieur alla s'asseoir dans un renforcement du mur, sur une banquette un peu passée, brune et lézardée par endroits. (M 79)

Monsieur, plus que jamais, était maintenant toujours en train d'être assis sur une chaise. Il ne demandait pas davantage à la vie, Monsieur, une chaise. (M 89)

⁴⁴ Unlike the first person pronoun *je*, *il* is perceived more as a "non-personne," as both Benveniste and Tadié explain it. Using a third person narrator shields our intellectual penetration of the character. According to Tadié, first person narrations impose a weight of suspicion on readers and cause them to question who the *je* really is. We will never know. Still, first person narrations impose the massive presence of the author, even if the narrator is not confused with the writer. This is proven through the act of writing and rediscovered through the act of reading. Basically, as Tadié affirms it, the use of the first person permits one to use analytical discourse, infinite interpretation, and ultimately the ability to read essence under appearance with the freedom that a novel written in the third person does not afford. (10-11) Essentially, *Monsieur* is harder to read, harder to get to know with the lack of a more narcissistic "je," and this is exactly the way he wants it.

These are just a few occurrences of references to chairs and the act of sitting, which can be found throughout the entire novel. It should also be noted that it is not just Monsieur who is seen sitting but also the other characters as well. The last quotation above is indeed ludic: not only is particular attention brought to the act of sitting and the fact that Monsieur likes to be seated but also the phrase “en train d’être assis” constitutes a paradoxical and thus playful choice of words. When one is in the middle of doing something as the French expression “être en train de **faire** quelque chose” [my emphasis] implies, it is normally a concrete activity, that is to say, a person is active. The text does not say that Monsieur “était en train de s’asseoir,” which would at least be sitting in the form of an action verb, and thus, his passivity is passed off as an activity.

Also intriguing is the appearance of the verb se rasseoir throughout the text. Significant attention is already drawn to the act of sitting through the countless references to it, but as if they were not plenty, Toussaint refers to sitting again precisely through his semantic choice of having the characters do just that: sit back down. Here are just a few examples that occur early on in the novel:

Aussi, se rasseyant, [Monsieur] demanda aux Parrain si, par hasard, il n’y avait pas de médecin dans l’immeuble, un radiologue par exemple. (M 19)

Ma foi, dit Monsieur en se rasseyant. (M 21)

Mme Parrain, pendant qu[e] [Monsieur] se rasseyait, apprit à son mari que le fiancé de leur fille était ingénieur commercial. (M 24)

When we see the verb se rasseoir, not only does this reiterate the act of sitting in the story, it also reflects back on itself since it means to sit back down or to sit again. The linguistic implication of this semantic choice only further adds to the repetition and the playfulness

therein. Finally, these references to sitting may well constitute an intertextual wink at Beckett's novel *Molloy*, as I will touch on in a short moment.

3. Intertextuality in *Monsieur*

a. Intertextual winks at Beckett's *Molloy*

Other possible intertextual winks are present in this text. Toussaint himself has cited Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* [*L'homme sans qualités*] as a sort of inspiration for *La Salle de bain* and *Monsieur*, but even more intriguing is the fact that he has admitted that he really had Beckett's *Molloy* on his mind while writing his second novel. While one would likely not recognize *Monsieur* in *Molloy* on the surface, that is to say the novel entitled *Monsieur* in the novel entitled *Molloy*, some general thematic parallels come to light upon closer examination of the two characters Monsieur and Molloy. I am certainly not suggesting that the novels mirror each other directly: they do not. Nevertheless, the scattered and perhaps obscure allusions to Beckett's text in Toussaint's second novel are worth discussing for their playful implications. Our author seems to have taken several examples from *Molloy* concerning Molloy's personality and comportment and harnessed them as inspiration for a very general template of Monsieur's personality. Furthermore, there are anecdotes from Beckett's text that occur as strikingly reminiscent homages in Toussaint's text.

As becomes evident throughout my discussion of *Monsieur*, the protagonist leads a child-like existence and is in constant need of guidance with any decision in his life. Moreover, as I just evoked, Mme Dubois-Lacour seems to represent a sort of mother figure for this young man. He likes to exist in her shadow at the office and even calls on her for personal advice on weekends. Of course, she is not his mother, and in the end, she does not make all decisions for Monsieur. As a result, Monsieur is still left in limbo, not facing challenges in a mature, adult manner, and these are the times when the reader sees his absurd

solutions to uncomfortable situations. Ultimately, it seems, this grown man can barely take care of himself. In Beckett's novel, Molloy is in search of his mother: "je résolus d'aller voir ma mère" (22) and says that "je satisfaisais un besoin profond et sans doute inavoué, celui d'avoir une ma, c'est-à-dire une maman, et de l'annoncer, à haute voix" (25). He, too, although claiming to be very old and ready to die, seems to possess the neediness of a child: "On n'a qu'à m'apprendre en quoi consiste la bonne conduite pour que je me conduise bien..." (38). He, too, often seems to be lost and convinced of his own lack of responsibility: he thinks he may have even had a son for whom he cares: "Puis je me dis que c'est impossible. Il est impossible que j'aie pu m'occuper de quelqu'un" (8). Moreover, although he claims that he does not visit his mother for money, saying specifically, "D'ailleurs je ne venais pas pour l'argent," he admits: "Je lui en prenais ..." (27). Indeed, these two characters are immature.

In addition, I have described Monsieur in terms of evasion. He seeks to evade confrontation in his life, but due to his inability to express the truth out of his own cowardices, he finds himself stuck. He cannot stand on his own.⁴⁵ He is not living his own life, but rather he is doomed to be a participant in the banal activities of others, mere anecdotes in the grand scheme of what should be his own life. This is also evident in the scene where he meets Anna Bruckhardt, for although the two speak for more than two hours, they merely

⁴⁵ One might wonder if our author was not also playing off of Beckett's text when he decided to accentuate Monsieur's penchant for sitting. While Monsieur cannot stand on his own in the figurative sense, Molloy is most literally unable to stand unaided as he is crippled and uses crutches. He ponders: "car je devais me demander si je n'avais pas envie de m'asseoir, après un si longtemps debout, et me rappeler ce que j'avais appris à ce sujet, savoir que la position assise n'était plus pour moi, à cause de ma jambe courte et raide, qu'il n'y avait que deux positions pour moi, la verticale, affalé entre mes béquilles, couché debout, et l'horizontale, par terre" (34). With this in mind, though, he points out that "pourtant l'envie de m'asseoir me venait de temps en temps, me revenait d'un monde disparu. Et je n'y résistais pas toujours, tout averti que j'étais. Oui, ce sédiment mon esprit le sentait sûrement ..." (34). Molloy has his bicycle to which he makes constant reference, and Monsieur has his chair.

exchange anecdotes and still do not know anything about each other.⁴⁶ The idea of Monsieur's ever-elusive persona is comically expressed in the novel in the sentence "Monsieur, un puits d'anecdotes" (*M* 101). This statement serves as an ironic double-entendre since while both Monsieur the character and *Monsieur* the novel seem to be nothing more than a wealth of anecdotes, in fact, they are not. Indeed, there is no logical beginning, middle, and end that relate to each other; there is no exposition of a problem at the beginning accompanied by a related resolution. The text is as detached from itself as Monsieur is from himself and others, and this textual characteristic should be accentuated. In actuality, Monsieur's life as portrayed in the novel contains no anecdotes. There are no short personal accounts of the events of his life, and he certainly would not want to reveal anything too personal. An anecdote can be seen rather as a mini-story, but of all the stories that begin to be told in the novel, none is completed. All are left unresolved. While it is true that Monsieur may be a "puits d'anecdotes" based in the text on the fact that he and Anna exchanged them for hours, the reader is not privy to any of these anecdotes, and Toussaint purposely excludes these from the text. The author is able to mock the nature of anecdotes through his style, and thus this underlying commentary manifested precisely in all the incomplete episodes of the novel is subversive and ludic.

I also evoked the theme of evasion through style as well since our author's novel is written from a third person perspective. While Beckett's novel is narrated for the most part in the first person and is also extremely dense (about 300 pages of dense paragraphs as opposed

⁴⁶ The author's decision concerning Anna's name constitutes a sort of sadly ironical testament to the awkwardness and lack of familiarity always present between these two characters. First of all, the decision to name this female character Anna Bruckhardt playfully alludes to unfamiliar territory since the name is not French. Secondly and more amusing is the fact that to the end of the novel, Anna is referred to as Anna Bruckhardt. Not once do we see her referred to as just Anna, and thus, the presence of the last name seems to suggest an ever-present lack of intimacy.

to Toussaint's novel that is scarcely more than 100 pages of brief paragraphs, fragments and both textual and spatial gaps), what the reader soon realizes is that Molloy does nothing but ramble. These two very different narrative approaches in fact garner similar results in terms of their protagonists: Monsieur literally does not speak much. He is rarely quoted directly in the text, and the third person narration the author chooses facilitates this. In contrast, even though Molloy rambles on and on, what he says is really of no consequence for the supposed stated larger plot, that of finding his mother. Again, Beckett, like Toussaint in his footsteps, uses this rambling as yet another example of the insufficiency of language to relay meaning. Moorjani calls this technique the "Beckettian attack on language through the use of language" (39), and since Molloy talks continuously and randomly, this play on meaninglessness constitutes "a ludic disruption of the symbolic order" (39) according to Moorjani. Molloy, like Monsieur, is also full of seemingly anecdotal information and seeks to avoid too many personal details:

Ce dont j'ai besoin c'est des histoires, j'ai mis longtemps à le savoir.... Dire que je fais mon possible pour ne pas parler de moi. Dans un instant je parlerai des vaches, du ciel, vous allez voir. (18)

Like Monsieur, Molloy starts a lot of stories, but he is constantly distracted and diverted away from completing any thought. We are left with only disjointed fragments.

Other ludic allusions to Beckett's text abound in *Monsieur*, but none is more comical perhaps than Toussaint's possible allusion to Molloy's mother's room in referring to Leguen's mother's room. *Molloy* opens immediately with the protagonist proclaiming "Je suis dans la chambre de ma mère. C'est moi qui y vis maintenant" (7). He does not know how he got there and seems to be in a state of disorientation and confusion. Let us recall the scene in our author's novel in which Monsieur arrives at the Leguen's house at the urging of

Madame Dubois-Lacour to look at a room for rent and encounters a most unexpected aroma of wax and dried sperm. Molloy also evokes the unpleasant odor of his mother's room when he says that "La chambre sentait l'ammoniaque, oh pas que l'ammoniaque, mais l'ammoniaque, l'ammoniaque" (25). Both Molloy and Monsieur are clearly disturbed by the odors of their rooms, and these bodily fluids are an unexpected association to maternal references. While Beckett's evocation of the stench of urine in his mother's room may be a little jarring, Toussaint seems to turn his scene into something even more saugrenu through both the concrete image of the dried sperm and the possible implications related to this image. The conjuring of this odor certainly fuels the fire of the reader's imagination: why does M Leguen's mother's room smell like wax mixed with dried sperm? The most obvious playful answer would be because he is the one who lives there now ("c'est lui qui y vit maintenant"), and thus, he is the one who masturbates there now as well. M Leguen and his bodily fluids have taken over the room. Likewise, Molloy expresses on this note that "Quoi qu'il en soit, c'est moi qui ai sa chambre. Je couche dans son lit. Je fais dans son vase. J'ai pris sa place" (8).⁴⁷

Finally, at the end of *Monsieur*, we see Monsieur with Anna after their dinner:

⁴⁷ It should be noted that the father is clearly absent otherwise one would assume that the Mr. Leguen would have referred to the room as his parents' room. Likewise, a wife is never mentioned either. Is Leguen's mother even alive? Did the room used to belong to a now deceased mother? Toussaint uses the present tense c'est to say that it is his mother's room as opposed to the imperfect tense c'était to evoke otherwise. In Beckett's text, the present tense is also used, and the state of the mother is also presented as ambiguous since we see at the beginning of the novel that Molloy thinks she is dead. "Je ne sais pas grand'chose, franchement," he says. "La mort de ma mère, par exemple. Etait-elle déjà morte à mon arrivée? Ou n'est-elle pas morte que plus tard? Je veux dire morte à enterrer. Je ne sais pas. Peut-être ne l'a-t-on pas enterrée encore?" (8) The absence of the mothers and these two characters sleeping in their mothers' beds add further implications regarding the Oedipal myth. While my purpose in this dissertation is not to delve into psychoanalytical discussions, this curious subtext is one that would be intriguing to examine more deeply. (For an interesting take on this topic, see Angela B. Moorjani's book *Abysmal Games in the Novels of Samuel Beckett*.)

Il resta quelques instants ainsi, Monsieur, avec la main d'Anna Bruckhardt dans la sienne, puis, ne sachant qu'en faire, il la reposa sur le banc, délicatement. Bon, on y va, dit-il. Il se levèrent et se remirent en route.⁴⁸ (*M* 110)

It is pathetically funny to see that Monsieur does not know what to do with Anna's hand and therefore places it on the bench. This gesture comes off as illogical and ridiculous. Monsieur not knowing what to do has become the principal playful theme of the entire novel, and so this scene that demonstrates yet another instance of his social awkwardness should not surprise the reader. Monsieur has made some progress in that he is actually out on a date with this woman even though the steps taken to get there were perhaps not the most conventionally ordered. In the end, it is Anna Bruckhardt who "lui toucha la joue, alors, doucement, l'embrassa dans la nuit" (*M* 111). This time, Anna does make a decision, the one Monsieur would have liked to be brave enough to make. Amusingly enough, the text concludes:

Hip, hop. Et voilà, ce ne fut pas plus difficile que ça.

La vie, pour Monsieur, un jeu d'enfant. (*M* 111)

Monsieur has found a sort of mother figure in Anna, someone who will take initiative and make a decision.⁴⁹ She is not timid, and his quest for this person has become a game. The twisted path he takes to reach the point he has with this woman certainly likens itself to a game as well, a sort of dance with decisiveness in which he must always take two steps backward in order to take just one step forward.⁵⁰ This is the final wink at Beckett's text in

⁴⁸ While certainly commonplace, Monsieur's statement "Bon, on y va" certainly makes us wonder if Toussaint is not yet again winking at Beckett, as at the end of *En attendant Godot*, both Vladimir and Estragon say "Alors, on y va?" Beyond these echoing words, the link exists in the complete absence of resolution since "on y va" emphasizes that they are going nowhere.

⁴⁹ Again, the Oedipal myth would be intriguing to examine here as well. He seems to be looking for a romantic partner who embodies a mother figure as well. He needs nurturing. On that note, Moorjani writes that "Molloy's narrative throughout sounds echoes from the Oedipus story to the extent that it can be read as one version of the myth" (100-01).

⁵⁰ This was also evident earlier in the novel in the structural va-et-vient I evoked regarding Monsieur's moves

Monsieur. Molloy also expresses his overwhelming desire to “aller voir cette femme [his mother]” and like Monsieur “[il] ne savai[t] quoi faire, ni où aller ...”(22). In the end, Molloy declares that this quest to find his mother “fut pour [lui] un jeu d’enfant ...” (22). Additionally, he refers to this quest, this game, as a way to fill his spirit, to occupy his thoughts “jusqu’à ce que toute autre préoccupation en fût bannie” (22). This perspective is quite intriguing in contrast to Toussaint’s novel. Whether or not Monsieur is actually romantically interested in Anna is not completely clear since she so conveniently seems to symbolize a crutch for him as well. He does not want any trouble in life and does not like making decisions. Anna, then, represents the perfect distraction from life for Monsieur. Like Molloy who literally needs crutches to move, Monsieur needs a figurative crutch, an emotional crutch, and Anna could well be what he has been searching for.

b. The Flaubertian Allusion: parodying Monsieur’s sentimental education

Let us now return to the moment when Monsieur first meets Anna Bruckhardt. The novel suddenly shifts from the episodes between Kaltz and Leguen to Monsieur back in his office at work for a few pages, and then abruptly to the introduction of Anna Bruckhardt. The budding relationship between these two characters then constitutes the final seventeen pages of this brief novel.

At a party, Monsieur and Anna have just met that evening and have been engaged in very trivial conversation for two hours among the other guests at the party. After talking together for the duration of the party, they still do not really know anything about each other. Then, “échangeant une dernière anecdote,” they find themselves alone in the dark, immobile and suddenly silent: “Ils se turent tout à fait . . .” (*M* 96). The paragraph ends there with

between Kaltz and Leguen. Thus the symbolic structural order of the novel remains consistent in this pattern.

“Monsieur adossé au mur, et elle en face de lui, une main sur son épaule” (M 96). The next paragraph constitutes one single sentence: “Ce fut tout” (96). While they acknowledge Toussaint in the introduction of their text *French Fiction in the Mitterand Years: Memory, Narrative, Desire*, Colin Davis and Elizabeth Fallaize do not cite specifically his works in the major chapters of the book. They do, however, refer to the aforementioned scene in *Monsieur* in the conclusion of the book. They write that “The text’s pleasure here is its own withdrawal into itself, with the expulsion of sense and coherence, and to the exclusion of the reader except as uninvited guest witnessing the proceedings with uncomprehending bemusement” (146). Additionally, “The distance that has been traveled in the paring down of literary language is illustrated when the conversation [between Monsieur and Anna] in the kitchen ends with the one sentence paragraph, ‘Ce fut tout’” (146). “Ce fut tout” could have a multiplicity of implications, that that was all in terms of the anecdote exchanged, that that was all in terms of the encounter between Anna and Monsieur, and even that that was all in terms of what the reader had to endure because not only had the previous conversation been of no consequence to Monsieur, but perhaps also to the reader. As he and Anna were left alone exchanging anecdotes that “à mesure qu’ils les accumulaient, devenaient de plus en plus insignifiantes . . .” (M 95) as Davis and Fallaize point out, other guests would occasionally step into the kitchen to see what was going on, but since “il ne s’y passait rien” (M 95), they would immediately leave. In the most direct way, “Ce fut tout” really does seem to playfully refer to the end of anecdotal exchanges. Davis and Fallaize do cite Flaubert and the context in which that same phrase appears in his novel, and it must be mentioned specifically that this sentence is likely a parodic play on Flaubert’s *L’Education sentimentale*. In Flaubert’s novel when Frédéric and Madame Arnoux are never able to realize their relation-

ship, after so much longing the tone turns somber and nostalgic and Flaubert ends this scene and the chapter with the sentence “Et ce fut tout” (505). In Flaubert’s novel, this sentence vastly understates the situation at hand and the intense emotions of the two characters, as Davis and Fallaize point out. The statement is a sort of sad ironical one that almost shrugs off the significance of this love affair left unrealized. It is harsh in its lack of emotion and complexity. In contrast, Toussaint uses this simple phrase paradoxically in terms of the Flaubertian context, yet most appropriately in the blandest of situations.⁵¹ Contrasted with the intense emotion of Flaubert’s novel is the lack thereof between two people who have literally just met in Toussaint’s text, in essence a parodic portrayal of Monsieur’s sentimental education. This scene is funny because with Monsieur and Anna left alone in the dark, one might anticipate a romantic encounter to occur, but instead, any possibility of this is abruptly cut short. No physical or emotional connection materializes at that moment when the reader perhaps most expects it. Monsieur favors once again a lack of action. Flaubert himself thrived on impassibility, which so perfectly characterizes the whole relationship between Frédéric and Madame Arnoux and the end of the scene just quoted in *L’Education sentimentale*. Toussaint’s deflation of Flaubert’s pathetic story cannot help but come off as untragically comical. Our author’s works have also been characterized by critics as “impassible,” but Toussaint’s version of the impasse reached between his male and female characters shamelessly mocks the emotion and intensity between Flaubert’s characters that has been built up over the course of his extremely dense novel.

⁵¹ Evrard posits that “L’humour parodique s’attaque de préférence à des formes brèves” (71), and thus the very brief and isolated phrase “Et ce fut tout” from Flaubert’s novel would seem to embody the perfect target. Evrard explains that certain forms are more recognizable specifically due to their simplicity. He comments that “La brièveté des énoncés permet d’identifier l’hypotexte parodié” (71) and quotes Genette on this point who expresses in *Palimpsestes* that “Tout énoncé bref, notoire et caractéristique est pour ainsi dire naturellement voué à la parodie” (44).

D. *L'appareil-photo*

1. "Doux seigneur!" Ludic Incongruities in Text and Context

In the introduction to the dissertation, I brought to light several ludic characteristics commonly seen in the texts of Jean-Philippe Toussaint such as the presence of parentheses and digressions and the use of familiar language. In *L'appareil-photo* the reader meets a man who at the beginning of the novel seems to want to obtain his driver's licence, but the whole novel takes a different turn when he starts going out with Pascale, the woman who works at the driving school. The narrator of *L'appareil-photo* in particular fancies himself a pretty profound thinker, and this notion will be specifically addressed a subsequent section on intertextuality and the Pascalian perspective. However, in this third novel, the author playfully has his protagonist/narrator reflect on life while in a bathroom stall, for example, and this completely undermines the act of thinking and deep reflection in the sense that the place and its surrounding details (a restroom stall at a gas station) serve to distract the reader from the purported profundity that the act of thinking might otherwise be able to conjure. While *La Salle de bain* and *Monsieur* rightfully contain their own humorous moments exemplified through stylistic traits such as familiar language and the saugrenu, nowhere more than in *L'appareil-photo* do we witness the act of thinking out loud embodied in the textual characteristics cited above. The interior monologues with quick personal notes that often appear in parentheses invade and pervade the text like never before (and perhaps never again) and contribute to some of the most humorous moments of the novel with their linguistic and stylistic incongruities. This narrator likes to talk, so much so that it often becomes incessant rambling, and this is reflected directly in the style through sentence structure and syntax especially, as we notice the presence of single sentences that turn into paragraphs. Moreover, the familiar language and personal commentary further foster the accomplishment of the

narrator's primary goal of luring the readers into his world: he clearly seeks to establish a definitive tone of intimacy and does this through a variety of mechanisms, not only the use of familiar language as I just stated, but also by directly addressing the figure of the reader.

Here are some introductory examples:

1- Me familiarisant bien vite aux principales difficultés recensées, j'avais fini par prendre la mesure des situations les plus complexes susceptibles de se présenter et, comme j'ai toujours été assez véloce, d'esprit s'entend, à l'impossible nul n'est tenu, à peine avais-je aperçu la disposition des voitures que j'établissais l'ordre des priorités. Me fallait pas dix secondes. 1. La rouge. 2. La bleue. C'est un exemple. 1. La jaune. 2. La bleue. 3. La verte. Eh oui. (AP 37)

2- [...] quittant le pavillon [je] m'en revins vers le magasin libre-service, les mains dans les poches de mon pardessus (c'était un Stanley Blacker, dites, c'est quand même une bonne griffe de pardessus). (AP 51)

3- [...] (j'avais en effet commencé à prendre des leçons de conduite avant de présenter les examens du code – pour gagner du temps, en quelque sorte, vous me connaissez). (AP 35)

In the first quote, the most remarkable aspect the reader encounters is the familiar and personal tone of this interior monologue, which is accentuated then through the phrase “me fallait pas,” as the “il ne” from the correct written grammar is missing. The enumeration that follows and the final “Eh oui” only serve to stress this point further. In the second quote, the narrator remarks the brand name of his own overcoat, but it is the insertion of “dites” that attempts to create an intimacy between the text and the reader. Additionally, his use of parentheses acts as an aside, like a private conversation. In fact, the interior monologues often signal, if only for a moment, a sort of dialogue with the reader. Finally, in the third quote the narrator astonishingly speaks to an addressee referred to as vous. Furthermore, his comment “vous me connaissez” [you know me] would imply that indeed the narrator has established a relationship between his text and an audience, that there is indeed a destinataire du récit: they can trust each other. This relationship can be detected twofold in not only the

direct address itself, but also the content of the comment. All three words, vous, me, and connaissez, are significant. The assertion that the text has an audience, its own reader who is not the physical reader reading the author's text, takes us off guard not only in its sudden direct address but also in its inherent audacity. It constitutes a ludic incongruity in this passage and causes us, the actual readers of the author's text, to question the motives of the narrator. We may laugh, but perhaps more out of confusion as we carefully consider what the text has just proposed. Fiction collides with reality here as the readers are definitively pulled into the fictive universe of the novel and subsequently may then realize what has been true all along, that they are collaborators in the novel's production. Gardes-Tamines affirms that "L'utilisation de pronoms comme *on*, ou *vous*, est souvent une façon d'associer directement le lecteur au texte" (49). The reader may be left feeling uncertain: to whom is the text addressed? Is it addressing me? We may ask ourselves. O'Neill writes that uncertainty "plays a dominant role in all games" and that this uncertainty can be very self-reflexive (109). He notes the following:

The textualizing function of the reader has been a matter of major concern for a number of years now ... Approaches based on the premises of linguistic speech-act theory have been particularly enlightening in drawing attention to the constitutive role of the reader—the 'textualizing' role...—in determining the 'literariness' of given texts and thus effectively becoming their active co-producer rather than remaining simply the passive recipient of a finished product. (109-10)

In like manner, Riffaterre reminds us in *Text Production* that "the literary phenomenon can be defined as the relationship between text and reader, not the relationship between author and text" (90).

Another example of familiar language that occurs several times in the novel is the narrator's exclamation "doux seigneur." The expression in itself does not necessarily have to

garner comical effects, but the elements cited specifically in conjunction with this interjection infuse it with a sense of absurdity in their inherent understatedness:

Vous ne voulez pas plutôt des petites saloperies plus marrantes, dis-je en me frottant assez suggestivement le bout des doigts, des noisettes salées, un mélange de fruits secs, **des apéricubes**. Oui, oui, dit-elle, comme vous voulez, et ouvrant le coffre, elle sortit la bouteille de gaz. Bon. Je n'étais guère plus avancé. **Des apéricubes, doux seigneur**. (AP 29) [my emphasis]

La directrice m'assura qu'elle serait à moi dans un instant et, terminant de rédiger une lettre à l'encre turquoise (**turquoise, doux seigneur, de l'encre turquoise**), me fit savoir en continuant à écrire qu'il lui semblait qu'il manquait toujours certaines pièces à mon dossier. (AP 47) [my emphasis]

J'allai retrouver la jeune femme et lui dis que voilà, c'était arrangé, on en trouverait sans doute **au Mammouth. Au Mammouth, doux seigneur**. (AP 54) [my emphasis]

As seen in the above quotations, the narrator's invocation "doux seigneur" is often combined with a seemingly unemotional element such as the snack, the turquoise ink and the gas station. These appear to be extremely banal things not worthy of a phrase such as "sweet lord." At any rate, the author certainly seems to be making a statement about the narrator's personality and what in fact fascinates him, and it is precisely in the banality that Toussaint's acute sensibility and penchant for incongruity surfaces. Additionally, the protagonist is a young man, so his using this particular uncommon expression rings incongruous as well. Perhaps the expression "doux seigneur" could also imply a certain sensibility and sensitivity about our narrator, and the author seems to play on this notion of the narrator as a sensual being through specific semantic choices. One of the most notable examples of this in the text appears in the form of certain adverbs such as délicieusement, savoureusement, doucement, and délicatement that recur throughout the novel and which, in their given context, enhance moments already somewhat tender or arousing and render even the blandest occurrences slightly erotic and thus subtly comical:

J'ôtai mes chaussures et mes longues chaussettes, que je rangeai avec soin contre le mur, et, tandis qu'elle [the masseuse] prenait place sur un tabouret, je m'assis en face d'elle et lovai délicieusement mon talon entre ses cuisses (AP 19-20)

Du moment que j'avais un siège, moi, du reste, il ne me fallait pas dix secondes pour que je m'éclipse dans le monde délicieusement flou et régulier que me proposait en permanence mon esprit (AP 31)

[...] je marchais la tête baissée en bougeant savoureusement les doigts de pied dans mes godasses (AP 22)

Pour plus de confort, j'avais également retiré mes chaussures sous la table et frottais doucement mes pieds en chaussettes l'un contre l'autre. (AP 23)

Puis, la regardant [the olive] distraitement ainsi plantée, je tournai lentement la fourchette devant moi et, délicatement, la cueillis entre mes lèvres. (AP 24)

The third quotation in particular is comical for its dénivellation seen in the vulgar signifier godasses juxtaposed with the adverb. Adverbs such as pensivement and songeusement that surface in the novel, for example, also help establish the narrator's purported gift of attention to detail and contemplative distance. The function of adverbs as semantic modifiers certainly flavors any given scene and alters the ambiance as a result of their meaning. If we extract the adverbs from the last quotation above, for example, so that it reads "Puis, la regardant [the olive] ainsi plantée, je tournai la fourchette devant moi et, la cueillis entre mes lèvres," the mood so subtly infused through this linguistic addition turns from sensual and/or calculated to absolutely matter-of-fact and bland, merely a direct report of information. As I said earlier, he fancies himself a profound thinker, a being very much in tune with his senses and surroundings. This penchant for savoring life, even the most banal aspects, and taking things slowly is directly related to the pace of the story itself incarnated in the semantic and thematic immobility that saturates the text.⁵²

⁵² The narrator lacks motility in a very literal sense since he is unable to drive. In this novel, nothing progresses, neither the characters physically nor the story itself. Paradoxically, however, there is much physical movement and motion in the novel in that the narrator and Pascale can be seen constantly in cars, cabs, car-ferries, trains,

Perhaps one of the most jarring scenes in the novel in terms of the saugrenu and incongruity happens early on in the novel just days after the narrator and Pascale have met. The scene begins with the two characters leaving the driving school to fill a canister with cooking gas:

[...] elle ferma les bureaux à clé et m'expliqua que, comme sa Volvo était garée assez loin, on allait plutôt prendre une voiture de l'auto-école, une petite voiture orange et blanche garée là, avec des doubles commandes et un écriteau fixé sur le capot. Je casai la bouteille dans le coffre, et allai prendre place à ses côtés tandis qu'elle démarrait (quelle équipe nous formions, doux seigneur). (*AP* 26)

Here again the expression “doux seigneur” to emote what a great team the narrator thinks that he and Pascale make is funny not just in the use of the expression but moreso due to the fact that these two characters barely know each other. How could he possibly know that they make a great team when they have only just met? Humor also resides in the banal circumstances in which the narrator and Pascale find themselves: they are merely getting into a car to go fill a propane canister, but evidently the simple fact that he contributes to the task by putting the container in the trunk while she gets behind the wheel to drive is enough to evoke some notable teamwork in his mind. Clearly, he is attracted to her and imbues a sense of familiarity with her to the reader through his declaration at the end of the paragraph.

The scene is only warming up at this point. The countless comical incongruities in content and style follow immediately during the first stop Pascale makes for a quick errand:

and airplanes. The traveling, though, only leads to various stations and hotels where the characters spend most of their time. Thus, mobility and movement are a mere illusion. We are constantly reminded of the stagnant characteristic of the text itself and the characters through the author's repetitive use of various forms of the adjective immobile and the verbs immobiliser and s'immobiliser, and it is interesting to see that no person or object of any sort is exempt from this semantic choice. Just a few examples in a short six-page span include “Nous immobilisâmes la voiture” (60), “il s'immobilisa sur le seuil” (64), and “sur les eaux immobiles du lac ... quelques véliplanchistes en combinaison de plongée semblaient stagner dans l'absence du vent, droits et immobiles” (66). We may also note that the French generally use the verb arrêter to express stopping a car. Therefore, immobiliser in the case of “Nous immobilisâmes la voiture” would seem to be a sort of hyperbole. Indeed, Toussaint plays perpetually on immobility throughout the entire novel.

J'en ai pour une seconde, dit-elle. Elle sortit, puis revint aussitôt, se penchant à ma vitre pour me demander de lui donner les clefs de l'école qui se trouvaient dans son sac à main. J'ouvris le sac sur mes genoux et commençai à chercher. C'est quoi, ça, dis-je en sortant une grande enveloppe. Laissez, c'est rien, dit-elle, c'est un frottis. Un petit frottis, dis-je, tout attendri. Mais vous devriez le poster, voyons, dis-je, il faut le poster. Vous êtes gentil, dit-elle. Ah oui, oui, dis-je, ça se poste, un frottis. Et il est là-dedans, dis-je, rêveur, en secouant l'enveloppe à côté de mon oreille. Oui, où voulez-vous qu'il soit, dit-elle. Je ne savais pas. Je remis l'enveloppe à sa place, sceptique, il devait pas être frais, le petit frottis, là-dedans, à mon avis, et me remis à la recherche des clefs. Je les trouvai au fond du sac et lui tendis le trousseau à travers la vitre. Puis, tandis que j'attendais dans la voiture ... je me déchaussai, songeur, et, ôtant une chaussette que je posai bien à plat sur la boîte à gants, examinai un instant mes orteils puis entrepris de me masser le pied avec un mélange de douceur et de fermeté en grimaçant de satisfaction. La jeune femme ouvrit la portière pour me rejoindre et, un peu gêné d'être pieds nus (c'est toujours gênant d'être pieds nus dans une voiture), je lui expliquais que j'avais le pied comme engourdi et m'ouvris à elle de ce qui me semblait être une manière de rhumatismes, dûs vraisemblablement à de la mauvaise circulation, j'y étais assez enclin en effet. Des rhumatismes, oui. Ou un peu d'arthrite, ce serait l'apothéose. Mais vous avez été voir un médecin, me demanda-t-elle. Non, non, dis-je. Parce que vous avez peut-être la goutte, dit-elle. La goutte! m'étranglai-je, la goutte aux pieds. Oui, oui, dit-elle, la goutte, et nous rîmes. On s'entendait assez bien, allez, elle et moi. (AP 27-8)

The exchange between these two characters in this scene offers a plethora of humorous elements. Let us begin at the level of content. The last thing the reader is likely expecting the narrator to take out of Pascale's purse when he looks inside for her keys is a pap smear. In itself, a woman's gynecological history is typically a subject left for discussion between her and her doctor. Many would certainly deem it taboo. However, Pascale is seemingly unphased by the narrator's discovery of her package and even tells him the truth about its contents. While that alone may surprise some, the narrator's response comes off as even more shocking. Let us not forget the context of the situation and the fact that these two people have just met. Rather than ignore it, the narrator proceeds to inquire further about the envelope and its contents and insists that Pascale mail it immediately. The narrator's imagining the cervical smear inside the envelope, be it interpreted as child-like curiosity or the more sophisticated audacity of an adult, serves to accentuate the humor of the situation in

its absurdity and inherent incongruity when he explains that “rêveur,” he shook the envelope next to his ear. Then, as if the situation were not already ridiculous enough, the reader perhaps cringes at his comment “il devait pas être frais, le petit frottis” for its blunt expression of something so seemingly distasteful.

In the next part of this scene, the narrator then takes off his shoes and socks in the car while waiting for Pascale. Again, this is not necessarily considered normal behavior and comes off as somewhat incongruous as well. Once the readers take in the idea of the narrator’s bare feet in the car, more comedy ensues in what he proceeds to do. The fact that he begins to massage his feet is playfully portrayed especially in the phrase “en grimaçant de satisfaction.” Rather than apologize, however, the narrator begins to tell her about the problems he has been having with his feet. Again, let us remember that these two characters are very much still perfect strangers. He goes into detail about the possible ailments at issue thereby diffusing any initial puzzlement Pascale may have had, and the two end up joking that he might have gout, not just the gout as it is simply known, but “la goutte aux pieds,” perhaps a gratuitous play on the expression la goutte au nez, which simply means when one suffers from a cold. This particular exchange is funny because while Pascale seems serious in her suggestion that the narrator should see a doctor because he might have gout, he chokes at the thought of this, and his reaction makes them both laugh: “Oui, oui, dit-elle, la goutte, et nous rîmes.” This sentence constitutes one of the most humorous aspects of the passage in my mind, not just for its content and everything leading up to it, but also and more distinctively for its style. The entire novel is written in the passé simple, a nobler literary tense in French and narrative sense of traditional fiction. In the sentence above, we see the subject, gout, which came up as a result of an incongruous situation, juxtaposed with the

utterly literary quality of the verb rire in the simple past as rîmes, and thus, the inherent banality and absurdity of this unabashedly real topic collides with a more distant and traditional literary world to create yet another incongruity. The blatant informality with which he speaks certainly draws the reader into his world, but this unapologetic familiarity contrasted with the traditional formality of the passé simple may solicit smiles of perplexity or even laughter from the reader for its incongruity.

The scene continues with another stop:

Arrivés au dépôt de gaz, qui se trouvait être une grande station-service, composée de plusieurs bâtiments et d'un atelier, à la porte duquel un mécanicien prenait le frais en soufflant sur ses mains, j'avisai derrière les pompes à essence les baies vitrées d'un magasin libre-service et, escomptant trouver là des cigarettes, je descendis de la voiture et dis à la jeune femme que j'allais en acheter, je n'en avais presque plus. Je fis quelques pas sur le terre-plein et, me retournant, lui demandai si elle voulait que je lui rapporte quelque chose, mars ou nuts, un milky-way, je ne sais pas moi, du crunch. Des chips, dit-elle, et elle sourit. Les quelques personnes qui nous avaient croisés à ce moment-là sur le parking s'étaient retournées, les unes vers moi les autres vers elle, et suivaient notre conversation avec intérêt. Vous ne voulez pas plutôt des petites saloperies plus marrantes, dis-je en me frottant assez suggestivement le bout des doigts, des noisettes salées, un mélange de fruits secs, des apéricubes. Oui, oui, dit-elle, comme vous voulez, et ouvrant le coffre, elle sortit la bouteille de gaz. Bon. Je n'étais guère plus avancé. Des apéricubes, doux seigneur. (*AP* 28-9)

Here again, we have the traditionalism of the passé simple contrasted with the mundane contemporary landscape, full of real world references intruding the fictive universe, such as actual brand names of candy bars. Furthermore, the infraliterary language used with expressions such as “saloperies plus marrantes,” the word “bon” used for affirmation, and of course again “doux seigneur” all contribute to the intimate tone the narrator creates. These two characters have just met, and neither the narrator nor the reader know Pascale's name yet. However, the constant infusion of familiarity into each scene through language, content and style downplays this fact to such a degree that it becomes quite easy to forget that they barely

know each other. The narrator even defends Pascale at the gas station referring to her as his wife. Pascale explains the situation to the narrator:

Elle m'expliqua que cet homme, qui était en train de nous épier du reste, avait non seulement refusé de la servir, mais l'avait presque insultée. Je regardai par terre, fataliste, et jouai pensivement de ma chaussure sur le sol. Bon, dis-je, je vais voir ce que je peux faire. J'allai le trouver (il allait m'entendre, celui-là, putain). (AP 52)

Once more, the above quote is particularly funny because the narrator is getting upset in the name of a woman he does not even truly know, and once again familiar language, including swearing this time, constitutes a major factor in tricking the readers into believing that the context justifies the emotion. In fact, it really does not and therefore results in another embodiment of incongruity. The bravado and machism of the narrator are unexpected. There is an argument over cooking gas, and more hilarity ensues as the narrator disputes with the clerk:

[...] il [the clerk] ne faisait que thermogaz, lui, et que, de ce fait, il n'avait pu lui reprendre sa bouteille, qui était une primagaz, car quand bien même il aurait accepté de la reprendre, disait-il, les livreurs de thermogaz ne la lui auraient certainement pas échangée, il avait déjà eu le coup avec une naphtagaz. Vous voulez dire une primagaz, dis-je, sans relever vraiment, comprenant volontiers qu'il y avait de quoi se planter. Non, non, dit-il, c'était une naphtagaz. Tiens. Mais dites-moi, dis-je en sortant une main de ma poche, si vous avez déjà connu un tel désagrément avec une naphtagaz, c'est qu'il vous est déjà arrivé de reprendre des bouteilles qui n'étaient pas des thermogaz. Il dut le reconnaître. Et vous refusez de rendre le même service à ma femme! Je buvais du petit lait. (AP 52-3)

Firstly, the banality of the subject renders the conversation droll. Secondly, the repetition of all the various products, that is to say the va-et-vient between thermogaz, naphtagaz, and primagaz, comically disorients the reader. Integrating the dialogue into the narrative text also contributes to this comedy of confusion. Additionally, the familiarity of the phrase "il y avait de quoi se planter" to express that the narrator understood how there was good reason to get it wrong, that is to say, to confuse naphtagaz with primagaz, constitutes a sort of amusing

metanarrative comment. We can see in the text that it is in fact the narrator who confuses the type of gas to which the clerk was referring, so it is funny that he is the one who makes the comment, a comment that playfully reminds the reader yet again of the slapstick va-et-vient that is occurring. Finally, his comment in the form of the colloquial expression boire du petit lait adds to his previous unexpected machism when he swore “putain,” as it signifies his savoring the victory. This further accentuates the farcical nature of the situation since his exclaiming “putain” did not really come off as true swearing so much as it was rather an intensifier that implied how proud he was of himself. Moments later, though, the greatest revelation occurs when the narrator returns to Pacale after the argument:

Au fait, dis-je, je lui ai dit que vous étiez ma femme. Vous avez bien fait, dit-elle. Vous vous appelez comment, à propos? Pascale, elle s’appelait Pascale Polougaïevski. Quelle journée. (*AP* 54)

It is only at this moment when one suddenly realizes that neither the narrator nor the reader had known Pascale’s name. However, Toussaint does such an effective job of relating these two characters, placing them in the most banal or intimate circumstances together, that the reader may not even consider this missing detail. Perhaps we assumed we would never know her name, that she would remain anonymous throughout the novel, but Toussaint’s decision to wait until almost the dead center of the book to reveal this makes it all the more playful.

It is clear that the narrator has a romantic interest in Pascale. The novel progresses very slowly, however, and this constant immobilizing of the action is also embodied through the characters. The narrator’s hope to make physical advances toward Pascale is constantly dashed by her own type of immobility manifested in the fact that she is always tired. In a hotel room in London where they have taken a trip together, however, the two are truly alone at last:

Je refermai les rideaux et, revenant vers le lit, je lui enlevai son manteau, doucement, pour ne pas la réveiller, en maintenant sa nuque droite sous ma main. J'enlevai sa robe ensuite, qu'elle m'aida à retirer en soulevant son corps à mesure, puis je voulus dégrafer son soutien-gorge, mais, n'y arrivant pas, je songeai que cela se détachait plus facilement les mains derrière le dos, et, m'asseyant dos à elle, nous étions dos à dos, le dégrafai facilement, enfin assez facilement. Quel métier. J'allai poser ses affaires sur un fauteuil ensuite, songeur. Pyjama, fit remarquer Pascale à voix basse. Je la regardai, les mains dans les poches, debout au milieu de la chambre. Pyjama, répéta-t-elle, les yeux fermés, et elle se laissa lassement tomber sur le côté en étendant un bras. Je sortis son pyjama du sac de voyage, un pyjama bleu marine, ample et repassé, avec un liséré blanc sur le col, et, la redressant dans le lit, lui fis revêtir la veste; elle se laissait faire, la tête penchée en face de moi, tandis que je boutonnais la veste jusqu'en haut, le dernier bouton bien fermé. Lumière, dit-elle, épuisée, qu'on éteigne la lumière. Elle esquissa un baiser en se grattant la petite culotte (bonsoir, dit-elle, et elle se laissa tomber). (AP 84-5)

This scene is playful for a number of reasons. There is of course the obvious slapstick humor of the situation. Imagining these two back to back so that the narrator can unfasten Pascale's bra comes off as ludicrous, and his comment "Quel métier" renders it even more comical as it brings attention to the act and portrays it as a task, work to be done. Then when he is helping her to put on her pyjamas, the detail about the pyjama top being buttoned all the way to the top, the last button "bien fermé" reinforces Pascale's unattainability. Ironically, however, he is the one who has buttoned it all the way, so his lack of foresight is funny, too. Finally, though, this unattainability is accentuated through a grammatical infraction in the last sentence of the passage. Se gratter is a reflexive verb used only with body parts in French, but this author places it with "la petite culotte." This is extremely comical if one views the underwear as a body part, something that will never come off, a permanent appendage on Pascale's body. Toussaint distorts grammar to highlight the ludic dimension of this scene, and the implication of this blatant misuse of a linguistic component is also comically contrasted with its own content, since the image of Pascale scratching her crotch rings utterly unromantic as well. Indeed, Toussaint's style seems to place a much higher

value on intellect than emotion: most of his narratives seem to value thought and language over feelings. In the author's third novel, it is amazing to see how often Pascale yawns, is falling asleep, or is actually sleeping, one of the many manifestations of immobility in the novel as I just evoked:

Elle [Pascale] portait un gros pull en laine blanche par-dessus sa robe, et paraissait **tout endormie**. . . quand son thé fut prêt, elle me demanda **en bâillant** si j'en voulais une tasse. (AP 11)

Elle avait repris place derrière son bureau et, occupée à classer quelques papiers, me dit **en bâillant** qu'à ce rythme-là je n'arriverais jamais à constituer le dossier. (AP 13-14)

Dans trente ans tout le monde parlera japonais. Tiens. Dans les affaires, précisa-t-elle **en bâillant** (elle était adorable), dans les affaires. (AP 15).

[...] Pascale regardait l'écran **en bâillant**. (AP 72)

[...] elle **bâillait**, la tête contre ma poitrine (AP 74)

[...] elle **dormait** à nulle autre pareille, mon amour (AP 98) [my emphases]

As I noted earlier, the lexical field that promotes immobility and saturates the entire text is absolutely remarkable. I will specifically return to Pascale's overwhelming penchant for sleep in a subsequent section on intertextual winks, in which I will also discuss briefly allusions to Proust.

2. The Perpetual Play on Pascal: lexicon and intertext

The Pascalian play seen in Toussaint's first two novels is elevated to yet another plane in his third novel where it is precisely the act of thinking, penser, the one thing truly evocative of Pascal's title *Les Pensées*. In *La Salle de bain*, the dominant theme is most certainly le divertissement. Although not as evident in *Monsieur* it is possible to detect a Pascalian play between l'esprit de finesse and l'esprit de géométrie, the pitting of reason against intuition, the mathematical mind versus the discerning mind. All of these

characteristics can be found in *L'appareil-photo* as well, but the perpetual play on Pascal seems to concentrate more precisely in this novel on the actual act of thinking and the narrator's thoughts. In this way, we can take the following of Pascal's thoughts as a sort of dictum for this entire text: "Métier. Pensées" (111). Furthermore, in this way the reader is treated to a definitive thematic and stylistic gradation that Bessard-Banquy claimed nonexistent from our author's first text to his third. Through this thematic gradation, there is so much humor at first that it seems as if Toussaint concentrates specifically on this aspect, pushing allusion aside and rather using the Pascalian intertext as a pretext, a springboard for the many ludic elements I will bring to light in this section. At first glance, it would seem that the lexical field so indicative of a Pascalian reading has been inserted merely to pose as a fausse piste since the exterior circumstances that surround these interior monologues are often so absurd that they distract the reader from the consideration of this reading as valid. However, the absurdity subsides and the true nature and often somber mood that so embody Pascal's *Pensées* when he exposes the misery of man without God, for instance, makes an appearance at the end of the novel, thereby verifying the real depth of the allusions.

Let us begin, however, with the distractingly humorous passages. We will commence with a discussion of one single scene in the guise of two separate scenes. When the reader reaches the second part of the scene, indeed, it almost appears that it constitutes yet another since Toussaint tends to have his narrator digress and disorient in this novel among others by dismantling any conventional chronology. Many authors use this technique, but with Toussaint, the reader is never warned, and the changes are very abrupt. I will first quote each scene in its entirety before dividing each up into blocks in order to compare and contrast the descriptive details, the language and vocabulary, as well as the author's playful treatment of

the act of thinking. These passages are extremely long, but the numerous components therein to be discussed merit the density of the quotations. Here is the first part in which the narrator of *L'appareil-photo* is at a propane filling station and goes to the bathroom there. The scene is set:

Ressortant du magasin, je fis le tour du bâtiment et aperçus non loin de là, en bordure d'un terrain vague où des pneus fumaient faiblement, le pavillon en chaux à toit plat des toilettes. C'était un local assez sale, en émail blanc, où, à côté d'un balai entouré d'une serpillière, était une rangée de pissotières fixées au mur à une hauteur idéale pour les types qui m'arrivaient à l'épaule. Il y avait également là plusieurs cabines individuelles, dont toutes les portes étaient ouvertes. Je passai la tête dans plusieurs d'entre elles avant d'arrêter mon choix sur la dernière visitée, c'était souvent ainsi que je procédais. Je refermai la porte derrière moi, la verrouillai et, rabattant le monocle en plastique du cabinet, je m'assis pour pisser. Mes yeux s'attardaient distraitement sur une lézarde dans un angle du mur. Un robinet coulait goutte à goutte derrière la paroi, on entendait au loin le bruit d'un transistor. Assis là depuis un moment déjà, le regard fixe, ma foi, je méditais tranquillement, idéalement pensif, pisser m'étant assez propice je dois dire, pour penser. Du moment que j'avais un siège, moi, du reste, il ne me fallait pas dix secondes pour que je m'éclipse dans le monde délicieusement flou et régulier que me proposait en permanence mon esprit, et quand, ainsi épaulé par mon corps au repos, je m'étais chaudement retranché dans mes pensées, pour parvenir à m'en extraire, bonjour. Je ramassai le sachet de chips que j'avais posé par terre et l'ouvris, regardai un instant dedans, sceptique. J'en pris quelques-unes et les portai à ma bouche. Il n'y avait pas de raison de se hâter de mettre fin à cette entéléchie. La pensée, me semblait-il, est un flux auquel il est bon de foutre la paix pour qu'il puisse s'épanouir dans l'ignorance de son propre écoulement et continuer d'affleurer naturellement en d'innombrables et merveilleuses ramifications qui finissent par converger mystérieusement vers un point immobile et fuyant. Que l'on désire au passage, si cela nous chante, isoler une pensée, une seule, et, l'ayant considérée et retournée dans tous les sens pour la contempler, que l'envie nous prenne de la travailler dans son esprit comme de la pâte à modeler, pourquoi pas, mais vouloir ensuite essayer de la formuler est aussi décevant, in fine, que le résultat d'une précipitation, où, autant le précipité chimique semble pauvre et pitoyable, petit dépôt poudreux sur une lamelle d'expérimentation. Non, mieux vaut laisser la pensée vaquer en paix à ses sereines occupations et, faisant mine de s'en désintéresser, se laisser doucement bercer par son murmure pour tendre sans bruit vers la connaissance de ce qui est. Telle était en tout cas, pour l'heure, ma ligne de conduite. (AP 30-2)

The second part takes place some eighteen pages later:

Les toilettes de la station-service étaient calmes, et, derrière la paroi de ma cabine, je continuais d'entendre des bruits d'eau, le son d'un transistor grésillant, au loin. La

porte, en face de moi, grise et sale, était fermée; un petit verrou la maintenait close, rabattu sur un support fixé au mur, brinquebalant, où manquaient trois vis sur quatre. Personne n'était venu me déranger jusqu'à présent, et je m'attardais là tranquillement, songeant à ce problème d'échecs qu'avait composé Breyer où toutes les pièces étaient en prise, ce qui tenait au fait que lors des cinquante derniers coups aucun pion n'avait été déplacé ni aucune pièce capturée.⁵³ Ce problème (je ne voyais pas le problème, personnellement), qui m'occupait délicieusement l'esprit pour l'heure, représentait à mes yeux un *modus vivendi* des plus raffinés. Dans ses parties officielles, du reste, Breyer faisait montre de la même courtoisie, confinant sagement toutes ses pièces derrière des lignes fermées et préparant des plans d'attaque à très long terme qui, dans un premier temps, consistaient simplement à accroître avec de minuscules raffinements infinis le degré de dynamisme potentiel de ses pièces (et dans un deuxième temps – à massacrer). Bien qu'elles aient été confirmées par de tels succès obtenus à l'épreuve de la réalité, les idées de Gyula Breyer suscitaient le scepticisme en général, voire une certaine suspicion, parfois, tant elles donnaient lieu à des lignes de jeux paradoxales, où les desseins poursuivis n'étaient jamais clairement définis et où les pièces, suivant une logique déroutante d'accumulation d'énergie mise sans fin en réserve, manquaient systématiquement à tous leurs devoirs de recherche d'espace et de liberté. Et, tandis que je continuais de m'attarder dans cette cabine en suivant tranquillement le cours de mes pensées, je sentais confusément que la réalité à laquelle je me heurtais commençait peu à peu à manifester quelques signes de lassitude ; elle commençait à fatiguer et à mollir oui, et je ne doutais pas que mes assauts répétés, dans leur tranquille ténacité, finiraient peu à peu par épuiser la réalité, comme on peut épuiser une olive avec une fourchette, si vous voulez, en appuyant très légèrement de temps à autre, et que lorsque, exténuée, la réalité n'offrirait enfin plus de résistance, je savais que plus rien ne pourrait alors arrêter mon élan, l'élan furieux que je savais en moi depuis toujours, fort de tous les accomplissements. Mais, pour l'heure, j'avais tout mon temps : dans le combat entre toi et la réalité, sois décourageant. Je sortis de la cabine finalement, toujours aussi pensif (je serais plutôt un gros penseur, oui), et, refermant la porte derrière moi, je me dirigeai vers la rangée

⁵³ Gyula Breyer, a world-class chess champion, was one of the founders of the Hypermodern School of Chess. This school was led by Aaron Nimzowitch (1886- 1935), Richard Reti (1889-1929), and Gyula Breyer (1893-1921) in the 1920's. They believed that putting pawns in the center early in the game was weak because it gave your opponent an object of attack. It is intriguing that Toussaint plays on Pascale's last name as well since Lev Polugayevsky (or Polougaïevski as the French spell his name) was also a world class chess player. According to Wikipedia, "Polugaevsky was a noted theorist whose work on a number of openings has stood the test of time. He is best remembered for a variation of the Sicilian Defense which bears his name This 'Polugaevsky Variation' of the Najdorf Sicilian leads to extraordinarily complicated tactical play. . . ." Thus, it seems that the narrator treats his pursuit of Pascale like a game of chess, something that needs to be handled delicately, tactically, and especially thoughtfully. Of course this is easily seen as a metaphor for the author's approach to writing as well. He takes things slowly and is very meticulous. On that note, it is pertinent to comment on the double-entendre of précipitation in the first part of the above passages. When the narrator says that wanting to try to formulate a thought like modeling clay will only end up being as "décevant, in fine, que le résultat d'une précipitation," he is concretely talking about precipitation as the formation of a suspension of an insoluble compound by mixing two solutions in the chemical sense; however, under the surface he is alluding to the precipitation of a thought in terms of bringing it about more suddenly than expected or desired. He is playing on the idea of precipitation as excessive haste as well. In this way, both narrator and author are criticizing haste in favor of a more well-developed thought that would result from taking one's time.

de miroirs des lavabos. Je m'étais mis une main devant la bouche, dans une pose qui me semblait avantageuse, et considérais dubitativement l'air impénétrable que j'avais cru bon d'affecter pour me regarder (regard dur, expression implacable), quand, derrière moi, un homme entra qui, m'ayant examiné un instant du coin de l'oeil, me dit qu'il y avait une jeune femme dehors qui cherchait quelqu'un depuis un moment. Je suppose que c'est vous, dit-il. Peut-être, en effet. (AP 48-51)

In the first passage, it is almost as if the narrator gives the reader a clear indication of what is to come, that is to say, a new and different spontaneous thought:

Il n'y avait pas de raison de se hâter de mettre fin à cette entéléchie. La pensée, me semblait-il, est un flux auquel il est bon de foutre la paix pour qu'il puisse s'épanouir dans l'ignorance de son propre écoulement et continuer d'affleurer naturellement en d'innombrables et merveilleuses ramifications qui finissent par converger mystérieusement vers un point immobile et fuyant. (AP 32)

Here, Pascal meets Aristotle who said that the soul was substance by necessity in the sense that it is the form of a physical body that has life and power. He calls this formal substance entéléchie, the state of a being fully realized and in action, like the narrator's thoughts in this passage. What is comically notable here, however, is the dénivellation that occurs between citing such serious philosophical thoughts of Aristotle and the sudden starkness of the familiar phrase foutre la paix. Moreover, the "innombrables et merveilleuses ramifications" in fact represent the story that interrupts his initial thought as he sits down to urinate. This in itself is funny because men typically stand to urinate, but our narrator needs time and comfort for meditation. Metaphors for the reader's possible experience with the text silently surface throughout the novel and add yet another ludic element to it. Furthermore, at the end of the eighteen-page analepsis, if the reader is left wondering what the ramifications of this digression are, therein lies their mysterious convergence "vers un point immobile et fuyant." The sentence directly following this then (see middle of page 107) seems to wink at Pascal since we know that Que is such a typical Pascalian opening in his *Thoughts*. This is humorous in itself as an obscure allusion, but then the insertion of "pourquoi pas" into all the seriousness

is felt as a rupture that undermines the depth of the thought. The story ends, and we are jerked back into the present, into the same scene, thus being immobilized for eighteen pages.

The narrator concludes this idea amusingly:

Non, mieux vaut laisser la pensée vaquer en paix à ses sereines occupations et, faisant mine de s'en désintéresser, se laisser doucement bercer par son murmure pour tendre sans bruit vers la connaissance de ce qui est. (*AP* 32)

This particular declaration, in a sense, becomes a metaphor for the entire reading of the novel. The disjointed structure and lack of traditional plot where a beginning, middle and end are detectable make the novel a series of free-flowing thoughts with no central story line. The interplay between the content of the text and the text itself provides a rich ludic subtext, apart from the obvious humor, and thus creates a multi-faceted reading of the work as a whole as we have already discussed in the first novels citing Riffaterre and his theory of context and effect.

In the same way that the narrator may warn of his impending digression in the first part of the bathroom scene, so, too, does Toussaint play with this idea in the second part when the narrator comments that “tant elles [the ideas of Gyula Breyer] donnaient lieu à des lignes de jeu paradoxales, où les desseins poursuivis n'étaient jamais clairement définis et où les pièces, suivant une logique déroutante d'accumulation d'énergie mise sans fin en réserve, manquaient systématiquement à tous leurs devoirs de recherche d'espace et de liberté” (*AP* 32). Just like the narrator's remark concerning Breyer, the author's “desseins poursuivis” are never “clairement définis” either.

It is also interesting to notice how these two parts of one scene mirror each other. The first part begins with a brief description of the place:

C'était un local assez sale, en émail blanc, où, à côté d'un balai entouré d'une serpillière, était une rangée de pissotières fixées au mur à une hauteur idéale pour les

types qui m'arrivaient à l'épaule. Il y avait également là plusieurs cabines individuelles, dont toutes les portes étaient ouvertes.⁵⁴ (AP 30)

In like manner, the second part resituates the décor:

Les toilettes de la station-service étaient calmes, et, derrière la paroi de ma cabine, je continuais d'entendre des bruits d'eau, le son d'un transistor grésillant, au loin. La porte, en face de moi, grise et sale, était fermée; un petit verrou la maintenait close, rabattu sur un support fixé au mur, brinquebalant, où manquaient trois vis sur quatre. (AP 48)

This second part also recalls the transistor and dripping water mentioned in the first part:

Un robinet coulait goutte à goutte derrière la paroi, on entendait au loin le bruit d'un transistor. (AP 31)

Moreover, in the first part of the passage the narrator uses the word sceptique to describe his feeling as he looked into the bag of chips, which will reflect the use of scepticisme in the second part to describe the reception of Breyer's ideas, skepticism being an attitude that Pascal condemned.⁵⁵ Also, the adverbs tranquillement and délicieusement are used in both parts of this passage, as are Latin expressions, in fine in the first part, modus vivendi in the second. The narrator's own comment that "[il] ne doutai[t] pas que [s]es assauts répétés, dans leur tranquille ténacité, finiraient peu à peu par épuiser la réalité" playfully reflects the repetitions in Toussaint's text itself. The narrator's looking in the mirror before he leaves the bathroom accentuates further this reflective device. This repetition in its various forms speaks to the sameness of our experiences and the cyclical nature of the novel as well as we have just seen in the first two novels.

⁵⁴ Perhaps this is the real reason why he needs to sit to urinate. However, there is also a contempt for shorter men present here, or figuratively inferior people, a common attitude on the part of intellectuals and thus a possible double-entendre.

⁵⁵ He insisted that any man who could remain neutral in the world regarding his own misery and relationship with God would make the perfect skeptic. This seems to come into play especially at the end of the novel when the narrator is clearly grappling with reality and feels lost. In Toussaint's novel, consolation through God is not an option, so the narrator, if not undecided, must wallow in his misery or find a solution to happiness that does not involve faith in God, a notion that would horrify Pascal.

Upon comparing these two parts of the same scene, countless interesting elements come into play. We notice the eighteen-page lapse that interrupts this single scene. This is Toussaint's manipulation of chronology in the text.⁵⁶ After the first installment of the scene, there is an analepsis, or flashback, in which the narrator goes into a long digression about the first time he took driving lessons ten years earlier. In delving deeper into that particular moment, the reader perhaps becomes confused, or even regrounded in this new reality such that when we return to the present moment to discover that the narrator is still in the bathroom stall at the gas station, the eighteen page digression seems like a sort of dream sequence. The original thought was halted, which thereby allows room for a new one, a sort of daydream, to ensue. Reality is distorted, and conventional chronology is rendered useless. As is evidenced throughout this text, a complete breakdown of chronology and concrete plot occur, and the reader soon realizes that the protagonist is moving no closer to progress in his leçons de conduite⁵⁷ even though the book itself progresses, that is to say, it has a first and last page. The reader has, after all, just read from page 27 to 54 of the novel, where the narrator and Pascale have been at the gas station the entire time. Twenty-seven pages have passed, and the protagonist and his companion have not moved at all. Additionally, the sentences in the second part of this passage in particular get progressively longer, so much so that the reader must go back to figure out where the main clause is, what the subject and verb are, in order to decipher some meaning. In sum, as Defays expresses it, "Le discours

⁵⁶ According to Defays' ideas, this novel could be ludicly self-destructing. He notes: "En perdant sa cohérence (chrono)logique et sa visée transitive (en faveur de la réflexivité), le texte, qui se déploie plus qu'il ne se déroule, finit par se déstructurer au point d'implorer, pour se reconstituer peu après, et de nouveau s'autodétruire. D'où sa structure «humoresque» qui est le symptôme le plus clair de l'indécision ou de la tension qui n'est pas ici provoquée par l'énoncé (la narration, l'argumentation) mais par l'énonciation qui passe sans cesse du déroulement au déploiement et vice versa" (41).

⁵⁷ In French, leçon de conduite can be extrapolated as how to conduct oneself as well, and this narrator is clearly not ready to progress.

progresse en zigzaguant de son début à son terme. Se trouve ainsi mise en question la finalité non seulement du texte, mais aussi celle de tout acte de parole” (41). This is another mechanism of disorientation.

It is interesting that *La Salle de bain* is the text in particular studied by several scholars in terms of the Pascalian reading since *L'appareil-photo* so clearly contains this fertile subtext, too. *La Télévision* is also cited in conjunction with *La Salle de bain* in Heidi Marek-Marburg's article “Pascal Im Bade”; however, it is *L'appareil-photo* that offers the most occurrences of the verb penser as well as a narrator who dwells on time and thought to the point of existential angst at the end, not to mention the female protagonist being named none other than Pascale. Indeed, pensivement and songeusement, as well as general commentary by the narrator on the act of thinking itself, occur throughout the text. This is no more evident than in the two passages cited above where the narrator and Pascale are at the propane filling station, but other instances are easily found, for example in the following scene which constitutes part of the flashback, the eighteen-page analepsis that occurs between the two parts of the bathroom scene cited above:

[...] nous [the narrator and his female neighbor] faisons de grands efforts pour trouver quelque question à nous poser, de temps à autre, dont je méditais chaque réponse les yeux baissés en jouant pensivement du bout des doigts avec la ceinture de son manteau. (AP 41)

Again, the verb méditer and adverb pensivement stand out here if we sense the play on Pascal's *Pensées*. Of course, if there were any doubt about this intertextual play at this point in the novel, it is cleared up with a big wink as the reader and the narrator discover that the woman with whom the narrator has been hanging out this whole time is named Pascale, as I just mentioned. This discovery represents the utmost playful act the author could initiate based on much of what the critics said about his first novel and the semantic field he firmly

establishes in this his third novel. To further saturate the semantic field, Toussaint even throws in a neologism in the form of an adverb to further accentuate this Pascalian playing field when the narrator says that he woke Pascale “qui dormait des plus pascablement en face de [lui]” (*AP* 91). Evrard affirms that the transgression of linguistic and stylistic norms by such things as neologisms is directly traced to the ludic, to humor as a game. He affirms: “L’écart humoristique par rapport à une norme sérieuse, possède une fonction ludique et se définit comme un jeu gratuit, divertissant, ne prêtant pas à conséquence” (73).

Obviously, the author’s creation of pascablement was not arbitrary, but the narrator describing Pascale sleeping in this way comes off as spontaneous and endearing. It is his free-flowing thought. As I have already suggested, the novel becomes a series of free-flowing and disjointed thoughts and snapshots of events, and thus, the lexical field of the propane station restroom passage, the words écoulement, flux, various forms of the verb couler, and flou serve further to characterize this ambiance and tone. It is equally important to note the inherent play on Pascal in this passage in terms of the narrator’s “pensées,” but also the lexical clues that seem to wink at this possible reading. We see words like esprit and méditant, contempler and sceptique, for example.

A more obvious and recognizable humor resides in these passages as well outside of a possible philosophical or intertextual reading. There is, of course, the incongruity present, the noble (penser) contrasted with the vulgar (pisser) in the phrase “idéalement pensif, pisser m’étant assez propice je dois dire, pour penser” (*AP* 31). Also present in this line is a play on the letter “p”: this alliteration is noticeable for its incongruity as well. Alliteration serves to poeticize a subject, but the subject, how urinating provides fertile ground for profound

reflection, is indeed not poetic in conventional terms.⁵⁸ The most humorous word play here, however, is not in these aforementioned elements, but rather in the auditory game Toussaint plays in placing these two words together. When broken into its two syllables, the word propice sounds like pro-pisse. This is an extremely amusing double-entendre that equally expresses the notion of urinating as an activity that favors the free flow of thoughts. If we are for urination or pro-pisse (the free flow of urine), then we are simultaneously for the free flow of our thoughts. In this case, excretion replaces expression.

Again, incongruity abounds when just a few lines later, we discover that the narrator has brought his open bag of chips into the stall with him and proceeds to eat some after having placed the bag on the floor, the floor of this restroom that he described as “assez sale.” Imagining a man passing by the urinals, entering into a bathroom stall, sitting down to urinate and think hard while eating a bag of chips embodies the saugrenu and not surprisingly, seems incongruous. Finally, he comes out from the stall and clearly satisfied with his reflections “(je serais plutôt un gros penseur, oui),” he approaches the mirror and strikes a pose, a pose playfully like that of Rodin’s *Le Penseur* with “une main devant la bouche” (*AP* 50). In that gesture, the humor shifts to the burlesque. Additionally, when the man comes in and tells him that a woman is looking for him, this reminds him and the reader how much time he has spent in the bathroom, that is to say, quite a bit.

3. From Playing on Pascal to Pastiching Proust: other intertextual winks in *L'appareil-photo*

In the scene at the train station where Pascale slept “pascablement,” the narrator finds

⁵⁸ Let us remember as I noted in the introduction that when Bessard-Banquy describes these poetic winks in relation to Jean Echenoz’s works, he explains that they are “un moyen ludique de rappeler au lecteur que l’écrivain reste conscient des mots qui sont les siens ...” (112).

an instant photo booth, makes sure he has the right amount of coins, and decides he might have some identification photos made for his driver's license dossier. The scene is set:

J'étais assis dans la cabine depuis un moment déjà, le tabouret réglé à la bonne hauteur, et je ne me pressais pas d'introduire les pièces dans la machine. Toutes les conditions étaient réunies maintenant, me semblait-il, — pour penser. Il y a quelques minutes, sur le quai de la gare maritime, je m'étais attardé pour regarder la pluie tomber dans le faisceau lumineux d'un projecteur, dans cet espace très précis que délimite la lumière, clos et pourtant aussi dénué de frontières matérielles que le tremblé ouvert d'un contour de Rothko, et, imaginant la pluie qui tombait à cet endroit du monde, et qui, sous les rafales de vent, passait maintenant dans mon esprit du cône de clarté à la pénombre voisine sans qu'il fût possible de déterminer de limites tangibles entre la lumière et les ténèbres, la pluie me semblait être une image du cours de la pensée, fixe un instant dans la lumière et disparaissant en même temps pour se succéder à elle-même. Car qu'est-ce que penser — si ce n'est à autre chose? C'est le cours qui est beau, oui, c'est le cours, et son murmure qui chemine hors du boucan du monde. Que l'on tâche d'arrêter la pensée pour en exprimer le contenu au grand jour, on aura, comment dire, comment ne pas dire plutôt, pour préserver le tremblé ouvert des contours insaisissables, on n'aura rien, de l'eau entre les doigts, quelques gouttes vidées de grâce brûlées dans la lumière. C'était la nuit maintenant dans mon esprit, j'étais seul dans la pénombre de la cabine et je pensais, apaisé des tourments du dehors. Les conditions les plus douces pour penser, en effet, les moments où la pensée se laisse le plus volontiers couler dans les méandres réguliers de son cours, sont précisément les moments où, ayant provisoirement renoncé à se mesurer à une réalité qui semble inépuisable, les tensions commencent à décroître peu à peu, toutes les tensions accumulées pour se garder des blessures qui menacent — et j'en savais des infimes — , et que, seul dans un endroit clos, seul et suivant le cours de ses pensées dans le soulagement naissant, on passe progressivement de la difficulté de vivre au désespoir d'être. (*AP* 93-4)

This passage comes off as very philosophical in all its eloquence of expression. This in itself is interesting to see in a text where, in my view, humor and the non-serious stand out above all. No concrete action occurs, as the narrator simply poeticizes the act of thinking, the passage of time, and ultimately the progression of the thought process. All this thought does lead to a Pascalian state of mind where “on passe progressivement de la difficulté de vivre au désespoir d'être.” The fact that the narrator is able to reach this point in the flow of his thoughts affirms that he is closer to the Pascalian notion of existence than ever before.

What is also quite remarkable is the mention of the closed space and various references to the light, as well as citing Mark Rothko, which almost seems to transform this narrative into a hybrid text. What I mean by this is that the boundaries between the verbal and the visual are almost blurred, as we can sense the verbal text emulating the painting the author evokes. The narrator's thoughts, like the layers of colors of a Rothko painting, bleed into one another seamlessly.⁵⁹ This sort of mimesis is also exemplified in the passage of *La Télévision* in which the protagonist is channel surfing. Toussaint's style in that particular scene captures so well the essence of this mimetic quality that the readers begin to feel authentically engaged in the act of channel surfing as will be seen in chapter four, just as we become engaged in the ebb and flow of thinking in *L'appareil-photo*. This description of the flow of thinking is also reflected in the flow of the author's writing, as many of the sentences are quite long and seem to follow a course that goes with the flow, so to speak. We might infer from this that the author does not subscribe to essentialist ideas of genre. Indeed, Toussaint's texts across the board contain other texts, artistic ones, discourses in the sciences, political references, popular culture references, images seen on television and the like. Oftentimes these references are inserted for satirical or parodic purposes, but they create a multifaceted narrative nonetheless, an intertextual play, which I address throughout this dissertation.

In this same passage, it also seems that Toussaint uses art, the evocation of Rothko and the unattainable contours of a painting, to elucidate reality. The narrator of *L'appareil-photo* is clearly grappling with reality at this point, and the novel does take a more serious

⁵⁹ This would not be the first time that Toussaint incorporates visual art into his narratives as is evidenced in *La Salle de bain*, referring to Mondrian and Soutine among others, and it will not be the last. Edmondsson, after all, works at an art gallery in the first novel, and in the fifth novel, the narrator is writing a book on Titien. In that novel, he also evokes Kienholz and Fragonard, for example.

turn toward the end. However, there is humor here: just before this passage, he finds himself in a very mundane situation waiting at a port while Pascale sleeps next to him. The sudden move from the mundane to the metaphysical is sadly funny in the way it is stylistically presented. The juxtaposition of the rain, a natural element, with the outside material world, “la réalité brute” that he often refers to, enhances the idea of retreating to a closed space as in *Les Pensées*. Although Toussaint’s protagonists would seem to represent a sort of pathetic postmodern Pascal who, try as they might, can only aspire to live the way the seventeenth century philosopher and mathematician wrote about and not actually do it, the narrator in *L’appareil-photo* seems to come a bit closer to the ideal in this scene. It is droll to compare the waxing on thought in this passage, as the narrator says that we should not stop the flow of our thoughts to express them to the world, because if we do, the “contours insaisissables” disappear, and we are left with nothing worth anything. If we just let ourselves be and think uninterrupted, we will find peace. Nevertheless, no matter how close the narrator comes to releasing all of his tension and distressing from the outside world, the last lines of the passage abruptly remind us that he cannot escape. Still, despite the harsh reality implied, the tone at the very end is deceptively optimistic, as we will soon see.

Just before any semblance of optimism seeps in, though, the modern world invades and the romantic vision is clouded by the narrator’s hands in his coat pockets feeling the photos he has just taken in the booth at the train station. Also amusing is the juxtaposition of the very detailed mock romantic with the lack of detail in the pictures taken, and the fact that a photograph is in fact a modern mode of representation.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ I have just said that Toussaint uses art in his text to elucidate reality, but let us not lose sight of the title of the novel. Images of both art and photography represent stagnant objects, moments captured in time, which attests to the ever-present theme of immobility. Photography assumes a very prominent role in the novel. In *Jean-Philippe Toussaint et la photographie*, Fauvel writes that “L’utilisation (et l’analyse) de photographies en

C'était quatre photos en noir et blanc, mon visage était de face, on voyait le col entrouvert de ma chemise, les épaules sombres de mon manteau. Je n'avais aucune expression particulière sur ces photos, si ce n'est une sorte de lassitude dans la manière d'être là. Assis sur le tabouret de la cabine, je regardais devant moi, simplement, la tête baissée et les yeux sur la défensive – et je souriais à l'objectif, enfin je souriais, c'est comme ça que je souris. (AP 96-7)

At the very end of this text, the narrator experiences a sort of existential angst (again a Pascalian undertone is present) when he develops the film from the camera he stole on the car-ferry. Furthermore, the narrator's "lassitude dans la manière d'être là" seems to be a playful allusion to Heidegger's concept of Dasein, which was brought forth in his seminal work *Being and Time*. It comes from the German da sein, which literally means being there in English, or as we have just seen in the French above d'être là. In short, Dasein is synonymous with existence.⁶¹ Again, photos, which are a representation of reality, serve to render the narrator quite anxious. The version of reality viewed in the photos appears to disturb him immensely. Flipping through the pictures, which he describes as "onze clichés en couleurs," (AP 115) he discovers one in which Pascale is sleeping in the background:

Ce qui me paraissait troublant, dans ces photos apparemment anodines ... c'était la sorte d'indécence involontaire qui se dégageait. La nature même des clichés, pour la plupart bâclés et cadrés sans recherche, leur conférait une apparence de réalité incontestable, une réalité brute et presque obscène qui s'affirmait là à moi dans toute sa force. Mais ce qui me troubla encore plus ... c'est de regarder de plus près une de ces photos ... Je me

littérature est plus controversée que celle de la peinture, d'une part parce que la photo n'a atteint le statut d'œuvre d'art que tard, au XXe siècle, mais aussi parce que la photographie semble être là pour remplacer les mots, ou bien les confirmer, les répéter" (38). She points out that Toussaint "exclut la photo tout en s'y référant" so that he can "développer une écriture profondément influencée par elle" (38). This is very playful indeed. Throughout the novel the reader encounters mentions of photos, old photos, the ones of his family that he shows to Pascale at the beginning of the novel, and the impending arrival of new ones that he needs for his driver's license. Of course, there is also the photomaton in the mall with the black and white pictures he takes there as well as the stolen camera he finds and the film from this camera that he develops.

⁶¹ Heidegger interpreted Dasein as the way we exist in our average everydayness. He meant for it to push human beings to actually question what it means to just be. He believed that when Dasein contemplates this idea, in the ontological sense, then, the notion of time is thrust to the center of attention. Thus, as this context relates to the novel, the narrator's existential angst due to a hyper-awareness of the passage of time perhaps makes him feel meaningless on the one hand. On the other hand, whether one feels at peace or angst-ridden, either way according to Heidegger's philosophy, both depend on pure existence, or Dasein. How we feel is secondary to simply feeling in the first place.

rendis soudain compte que, derrière la jeune femme qui se tenait au premier plan, on devinait les contours du présentoir des douanes, où apparaissait très nettement la silhouette endormie de Pascale. (AP 120)

The narrator acknowledges the presence of several levels of representation in the photograph. He knows that these tourists' poses for the camera are contrived, and it disturbs him. Even worse, though, is the fact that the woman he wants is immobilized in someone else's photo. She has become a sort of nature morte, literally a still life captured in time. Unlike a painting, however, she appears somewhat dehumanized through this technological process that lacks artistic vision, an object he cannot have.⁶² Suddenly, she is part of a ludic cliché. It also seems here, however, that our author is channeling Proust, as the character of Pascale may well be an allusion to Proust's Albertine who also sleeps through significant portions of Proust's *La Prisonnière*, tome 5 of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, "le passage, d'ailleurs très court, sur le sommeil d'Albertine publié sous le titre 'La regarder dormir' dans la N.R.F. du 1er novembre 1922," as Nathalie Mauriac Dyer explains. Marcel describes one particular evening with Albertine:

[...] sachant combien son sommeil était profond, son réveil tendre, je prenais un prétexte pour aller chercher quelque chose, je la faisais étendre sur mon lit. Quand je revenais elle était endormie et je voyais devant moi cette autre femme qu'elle devenait dès qu'elle était entièrement de face. Mais elle changeait bien vite de personnalité car je m'allongeais à côté d'elle et la retrouvais de profil. Je pouvais mettre ma main dans sa main, sur son épaule, sur sa joue, Albertine continuait de dormir. Je pouvais prendre sa tête, la renverser, la poser contre mes lèvres, entourer mon cou de ses bras, elle continuait à dormir comme une montre qui ne s'arrête pas, comme une bête qui continue de vivre quelque position qu'on lui donne, comme une plante grimpante, un volubilis qui continue de pousser ses branches quelque appui qu'on lui donne. Seul son souffle était modifié par chacun de mes attouchements,

⁶² Scholar Benjamin Woolley mentions one technological advancement in particular concerning photographic realism. He discusses Polaroid's announcement in 1990 of a new technique for creating what they called "museum quality reproductions." Woolley quoted Polaroid's description of the process: "Using a combination of very large format instant photography and state-of-the-art digital image processing," boasted the literature, "the Polaroid process had achieved a level of accuracy and faithfulness to detail never before available." According to Woolley, "The results were undoubtedly 'real'" (203). For our narrator in particular, the photographic realism he confronts in the picture with Pascale sleeping becomes a sort of symptom for what Woolley calls "an augmenting fear of losing the reality that sustained the modern world" (203).

comme si elle eût été un instrument dont j'eusse joué et à qui je faisais exécuter des modulations en tirant de l'une puis de l'autre de ses cordes, des notes différentes.
(208)

In Toussaint's passage, the narrator finally realizes Pascale's total inaccessibility to him. As he notices, "elle opposait ainsi en permanence à la vie une fatigue aussi sensationnelle" (*AP* 84), and thus not only do the two barely have a conversation, but any romantic encounter is rendered that much more difficult as a result of her overwhelming propensity for sleep. All of this fatigue certainly prevents the protagonist from making too many romantic advances toward his new friend as I discussed in section one of this part of the chapter. Of course, he has one sexual encounter with Pascale that we know of, but even then, it is initiated while she is still sleeping or at least half-asleep.

In the final scene of the novel, we witness once again the narrator in a closed space, as he finds himself in a telephone booth on the interstate in the middle of the night after having missed his train. He calls Pascale, and she does answer, but ends up, not surprisingly, falling asleep on the phone. Thus the narrator is left alone with himself and his thoughts:

Assis dans l'obscurité de la cabine, mon manteau serré autour de moi, je ne bougeais plus et je pensais. Je pensais, oui et, lorsque je pensais, les yeux fermés et le corps à l'abri, je simulais une autre vie dans ses formes et son souffle, sa respiration et son rythme, une vie en tous points comparable à la vie, mais sans blessure imaginable, sans agression et sans douleur possible, lointaine, une vie détachée qui s'épanouissait dans les décombres exténués de la réalité extérieure, et où une réalité tout autre, intérieure et docile, prenait la mesure de la douceur de chaque instant qui passait, et ce n'était guère des mots qui me venaient alors, ni murmure familier, mais des formes en mouvement qui suivaient leurs cours dans mon esprit comme le mouvement même du temps, avec la même évidence infinie et sereine, formes tremblantes aux contours insaisissables que je laissais s'écouler en moi en silence dans le calme et la douceur d'un flux inutile et grandiose. Je pensais oui, et c'était la grâce toujours recommencée, les terreurs étaient tues, les frayeurs disparues, et jusque dans mon esprit commençaient à s'effacer des traces brûlantes de parades potentielles. Les heures s'écoulaient dans une douceur égale et mes pensées continuaient d'entretenir entre elles un réseau de relations sensuelles et fluides comme si elles obéissaient en permanence à un jeu de forces mystérieuses et complexes qui venaient parfois les stabiliser en un point presque palpable de mon esprit et parfois les faisaient lutter un

instant contre le courant pour reprendre aussitôt leurs cours à l'infini dans le silence apaisé de mon esprit. (AP 125-6)

If we compare this passage to the one where the narrator is in the photo booth, the similarities are immediately evident in terms of both theme and lexicon. However, this time, something is different. Here he dreams of a world where he is free to live peacefully with no apparent purpose, with “un flux inutile.” He wants to “simuler une autre vie,” to simulate another reality.⁶³ He finds himself alone, wishing he were not, wishing he had been able to talk to Pascale. Baudrillard attests to this loneliness in *La transparence du mal* when he comments that “si l'individu ne se confronte plus à l'autre, c'est avec lui-même qu'il s'affronte” (127). Finally, he leaves the phone booth:

[...] je regardais le jour se lever et songeais simplement au présent, à l'instant présent, tâchant de fixer encore sa fugitive grâce – comme on immobiliserait l'extrémité d'une aiguille dans le corps d'un papillon vivant.

Vivant. (AP 127)

This is how the novel ends, and after all the grappling with reality, a character suddenly emerges who seems transformed. This last scene of the novel shows a changing outlook, an optimism we can perhaps relate to Proust. Then again, this brutal image seems to contradict the alleged optimism, as we will see in a moment. Of course Pascal proposed a way out of the misery through God, but this option does not exist here. Similarly as Brée and Lynes explain, “There is no God in Proust's universe, no finality in its workings, no explanation of its mystery; but there is an assertion, startling in its austere optimism”

⁶³ In his book *Simulacra and Simulations*, Jean Baudrillard discusses the significance of the word simulate as opposed to feign, for example. It should be noted here that seeming does not constitute being. Baudrillard writes that “To dissimulate is to feign not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn't. One implies a presence, the other an absence” (3). He warns, however, that “the matter is more complicated, since to simulate is not simply to feign.... Thus, feigning or dissimulating leaves the reality principle in tact: the difference is always clear, it is only masked; whereas simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and ‘false’, between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’” (3). It can certainly be concluded that the narrator of this novel pretends to have what he really does not, Pascale being the prime example.

(29). The scholars clarify this:

Our living contact with the world, inexplicable though it be, is a spiritual adventure of great beauty which can bring us absolute fulfillment. That fulfillment will elude us unless we have the strength and lucidity to remove systematically and courageously everything which, within us or outside, mask's life's essential quality. The quest for fulfillment becomes the quest for lucidity and truth ... joy in the face of the dual mystery of time, joy which is the triumph of life over death (29)

It should be noted that although humor may dominate the novel, it is scarce in the last pages.

Since my goal is to discuss playfulness and the various ludic dimensions, it is certainly relevant that we notice where there is a general lack thereof. Then again, the idea of a lack of anything ludic may not be correct, but rather a lack of purely comical elements.

It is then curious to notice that during the last eighteen pages of the novel, Toussaint's choice of words changes. Variations of the word immobile virtually disappear only to be replaced suddenly by different forms of ne pas bouger:

J'avais resserré mon manteau autour de moi, et je ne bougeais plus. (AP 110)
[...] je la regardais doucement, sans bouger, éteignis ma cigarette. (AP 111)
[...] je ne bougeais plus sur mon siège(AP 111)
[...] rien ne bougeait à proximité (AP 112)
[...] rien ne bougeait plus, ni ma présence, ni mon absence (AP 113)
[...] je ne bougeais plus et je pensais ... (AP 125)
[...] rien ne bougeait dans la campagne avoisinante⁶⁴ (AP 126)

The word immobile would seem to convey a more powerful meaning in that it evokes a sense of utter stillness. On the one hand, immobilization seems to allude to paralysis in so far as when we immobilize someone or something, we make him/her/it still. This also comes off as quite passive. On the other hand, not moving as in ne pas bouger, for example, strikes one as

⁶⁴ The lines that read "rien ne bougeait" in particular remind one of Rimbaud's famous poème en prose Aube from *Illuminations*. The poem begins as follows: "J'ai embrassé l'aube d'été. Rien ne bougeait encore au front des palais. L'eau était morte" (264). The end of Toussaint's novel also takes place at daybreak and evokes the stillness of the narrator's surroundings before the world awakens. We can also see a similarity in the sense of irreality that exists in both texts. As I just mentioned, the narrator of *L'appareil-photo* seems to be in a trance as he dreams of a world free of complications. Likewise, this same notion of a dream sequence is evoked especially when the speaker of *Aube* concludes the poem: "Au réveil il était midi" (265). With all of these similarities combined, then, it certainly seems plausible that indeed our author is subtly alluding to Rimbaud.

a more transitory state. To not move is to not make progress, to not take action, and in the quotes above in particular, to not change position or location. It is the difference between complete immobilization and only momentary immobilization with the possibility of movement in the future. I see immobilization as more passive and the notion of not moving as a more active choice. Toussaint's alteration of the semantic field directly reflects the shift in outlook that occurs at the end of the novel.

However, while the narrator's final thought seems optimistic at first glance with the accentuation of the word vivant, this word is ironically used in the context of killing. He has been up all night, and the sunrise and dawn of a new day are evoked throughout the last paragraph of the novel. The narrator has had some revelations, and the natural light emerging ever brighter from the rising sun seems to symbolize this. Still, this moment evolves into a ludic cliché as well precisely because of the idea of holding still the wing of a fluttering butterfly. Rather than letting this living creature fly and be free like the flow of time, he wants to capture its beauty. This image instantanée possesses the vibration of life, but the narrator wants to immobilize it like he would a snapshot photo. It seems then that the change in the semantic field I just mentioned is ludic in that it comes off as a trompe-l'œil. Before his revelatory moment in the phone booth, the narrator seemed much more passive in his lack of progress, almost unaware of it at times since he had Pascale to distract him. Now he is alone and must face reality himself. With the notion that the verb bouger is more active and transitive, it would seem that the narrator would be ready to make a move in life. However, the verb used is not simply bouger, but rather its negation ne pas bouger. As a result, the narrator is taking a more active role in his own immobility and lack of progress.

This idea of wanting to simulate another reality is remarkably similar to what Proust's narrator experiences in *Le Temps retrouvé*. Marcel believes that if the past and present can merge, they create a moment outside of time. In this way, we can transcend time in order to experience the past, but only because it is no longer the past, but rather a new moment recreated from it. According to Michael Wood, Proust's narrator also insists that "his liberation from time is also an accession to time, that a perception which takes place both in the past and the present allows us not only to escape from time, but to comprehend pure time" (163), "un peu de temps à l'état pur" as Marcel states in the fourth tome of *La recherche, Sodome et Gomorrhe* (451). Just like the split second it takes to snap a photo, Marcel feels like this new discovery of time is a fast and ephemeral moment. Like the image instantanée I just evoked on photography, he describes it as a fleeting contemplation of eternity: "C'était peut-être bien des fragments d'existence soustraits au temps, mais cette contemplation, quoique d'éternité, était fugitive" (*Sodome* 454).

While Marcel understands that these moments exist only for an instant and thus he cannot live in them for more than that, the narrator of *L'appareil-photo* seems to want to extend this moment beyond a mere instant. He has become more conscious of his desire to simulate another reality by replacing the truth with romanticized notions of it. In sum, this playfully subverts the idea of optimism that emerges at the end of Proust's text, Marcel's quest for fulfillment being "the quest for lucidity and truth." In fact, Toussaint's narrator desires just the opposite. Although immobility as a theme dominates this author's first three novels, *La Salle de bain* and *Monsieur* end on very light notes, and this constitutes a major difference, a definite thematic gradation in his third novel.

CHAPTER THREE

RETICENT NARRATIVES: *LA RÉTICENCE*, *LA TÉLÉVISION*, AND *AUTO PORTRAIT (À L'ÉTRANGER)*

A. Deceived Expectations : deciphering common threads in three seemingly different stories

Toussaint's fourth, fifth, and sixth texts *La réticence*, *La Télévision*, and *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)* published in 1991, 1997, and 2000, respectively, would not appear to have much in common at first glance. After the publication and success of the author's first three novels, all of which basked in deadpan humor and incongruous details that evoked both smiles of perplexity and more straightforward laughter at the comical absurdity of the situations the protagonists seemed to find themselves in, readers no doubt expected more of the same in his fourth novel *La réticence* when it appeared in 1991. Much to the dismay of many, however, this novel appeared to be nothing like the first three, and as a result, it was met with confusion on the part of many critics and readers. It still remains almost completely ignored by scholars of Toussaint's works: scarcely an article has been published on it, and articles and books that touch on all of this author's texts either ignore this book completely or they merely gloss over it all too briefly. Indeed, the reticence evoked throughout the novel has affected the readers and has ironically silenced scholars as well who are clearly reticent to talk about this work in particular, myself not excluded.

Let us first introduce all three works to be discussed in this chapter. *La réticence* tells the story, or rather several versions of it, of a thirty-three year old man who takes a trip to the

village of Sasuelo with his eight-month old son to visit his friends the Biaggis but never actually does. It is somewhat somber in tone and differs on stylistic levels as well. One notable difference between this and the first three novels is the lack of comical parenthetical commentary that surfaced sporadically in *La Salle de bain* and seemed to reach the height of its crescendo in *L'appareil-photo*. There are some side comments in parentheses in the fourth novel, but they are scarce and limited to mostly straightforward and uncomical observations.

La Télévision recounts the narrator's summer in Berlin without his family. He is an historian and writer who has received a grant to live in Berlin in order to complete his book, oddly enough on the Italian painter Tiziano Vecellio. [my emphasis] The novel begins with his decision to stop watching television, presumably so he can get his work done, and basically tells a tale of procrastination and lack of progress. This is a theme ever-present especially in *L'appareil-photo* and *La réticence*.

Toussaint's sixth text *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)* is a concise collection of episodes, the only one of his publications with Minuit not subtitled roman and the only one divided up into tidy little chapters with their own titles. Although the author makes no claims that this is pure autobiography, the readers cannot help but be curious to see what they may learn about Toussaint the man and Toussaint the writer. We undeniably expect something in this vein.

On the one hand, humor seems to be scarce at first glance, almost non-existent in *La réticence* while on the other hand, comical language, style, and situations seem to pervade *La Télévision* just as they did in *L'appareil-photo*. I mentioned the lack of parentheses differentiating *La réticence* from the others, but another common characteristic missing from the fourth text that is abundant in all of the others is the presence of the saugrenu. This seems a necessary exclusion for this text since the éléments saugrenus most often have comical

effects. The author certainly defied expectations with the publication of his fourth novel. He even acknowledged that there is “aucun recul d’humour,” admitting to Ammouche-Kremers that upon rereading the novel before submitting it for publication, he was obliged to “enlever ... certaines choses très drôles qu [’il] avai[t] insérées parce que la drôlerie ne collait pas avec le ton du livre” (32). The author’s fifth text, *La Télévision*, then, would seem to be a sort of return to his roots in terms of humorous content, but not necessarily in terms of the minimalism that critics used to define his first three novels, as we will see a little later. *La Télévision* received good reviews and was universally embraced by both critics and the general public.⁶⁵ By this point in our author’s career, he had become a well-respected writer whose works were translated into many different languages, from English, Spanish, and Italian to German and Japanese. Consequently, the appearance of his self-portrait in 2000 seemed to be timed perfectly for those avid readers thirsty to know more about his personal life, how he writes, how he approaches his art and craft. Some were perhaps disappointed by this text since it came off more as another one of his novels. However, for the more perceptive reader, this self-portrait does in fact give us the quintessential Toussaint. His reticence to talk about himself and his work is all part of his game.

On the surface, the three texts to be discussed in this chapter may not seem to have much in common, but looking a little closer, the similarities are striking. In spite of their disconnected contexts, all three texts deal specifically with the writer and the writing process in their own unique ways. All three texts also embody narratives that are characterized by a certain reticence. This reticence is also related to alienation and is directly reflected in the

⁶⁵ Marie-Laure Delorme began her review of Toussaint’s fifth novel in *Le Monde* on an enthusiastic note: “Pourquoi éteindre son téléviseur? Pour lire le dernier Jean-Philippe Toussaint!” According to Didier Jacob in his segment on Toussaint’s sixth text in *Le Nouvel observateur* in early 2000, by the time *Autoportrait* was published, *La Télévision* had sold more than 23,000 copies.

inherent dépaysement that each of the three narrators experiences. Indeed, all three stories take place outside of continental France for the entirety of the texts, and a sense of hesitation occasionally prevails both at the level of content and concrete literary production.⁶⁶ That is to say, the reader often senses reticence in the narrator's recounting of events: both narrator and author are reticent to tell the story. *La Télévision* makes this notion obvious in that it tells the story of a writer trying to complete, or rather actually begin, a book. He is enjoying his time in Germany and its many distractions; and yet he is supposed to be there for his research. Naturally since he is not getting much work done, he is very hesitant to discuss it with anyone. Essentially, it is a book about a man trying to write a book, and the reader is privy to all the procrastination in the guise of brainstorming and researching that takes place throughout this narrator's writing process. We imagine that the author uses his own narrator to perhaps channel all the real life anxiety that undoubtedly accompanies serious cases of writer's block. However as I just said, the narrator is reticent to talk about his work, even with colleagues. Therefore, the readers of this novel do not really experience the deep thought processes that he claims are involved in the production of his text despite the fact that these thought processes are just as important, if not more so, as putting words onto paper, according to him at least. Their importance remains elusive and unproven, and it could be more precisely that he tries to convince himself that his thoughts are very important. As I

⁶⁶ It should be noted that most of the author's texts reveal that the protagonists reside in Paris (*La Salle de bain*, *Monsieur*, *L'appareil-photo*, *Faire l'amour*, and *Fuir*). However, it should also be noted that although residing in Paris, the narrator of *La Salle de bain*, like our author as we learn, is not French, but Belgian. When *La réticence* was published, Toussaint was living in Corsica, and the village of Sasuelo in the novel seems to be an incarnation of a small Corsican village. He hints at this with in several different ways, his choice of the name Biaggi, for example, the fact that Sasuelo is on an island, and also having the novel revolve around deciphering crime scenes. Like its Italian neighbor the island of Sardinia, the French island of Corsica is known for its history of violence and ties to organized crime. If we read *Autoportrait* in a more autobiographical sense and read the narrator as an embodiment of the author, then it should be noted that upon its publication, Toussaint called Brussels his permanent home.

have already evoked, there is a gap between ideas and expression in his scholarly endeavor. Rather than thought processes, what readers see is a sort of rambling meditation, yet another example of gaps that surface in all of Toussaint's texts.

Autoportrait (à l'étranger) with its title alone constitutes a direct reference to the real person and author Jean-Philippe Toussaint, even though he never names himself as such in the actual text. Furthermore, in many of the chapters of the book, the narrator is indeed seen preparing for interviews and scholarly conferences with other real life authors such as Tahar Ben Jelloun. Thus, while seemingly secondary upon an initial reading of the text, the focus on the writer is highlighted. Ultimately, as I just stated, the joke is on the readers if they are unable to embrace the author's reluctance to get too personal. Indeed, this real writer is as reticent to talk about himself and his work as the fictive one he created in his previous novel.

What does one make of *La réticence*, then? How does this novel fit into the proposed schema at hand? Roy Caldwell characterizes this novel as one that "seems to be ... in search of a story" (379). I must disagree with Caldwell on this point and make the important distinction between story and plot here. As soon as there is a chronological string of events, no matter how meager, there is a story. It is a case of chronological function versus causal function, and the narrator seeks a plot that would organize reality. Simply stated, he is trying to change an amorphous reality into a plot; however, there is and will be no plot. There is no all-encompassing cause and effect structure. This effort to see a plot at work around him nonetheless constitutes the/a story, however thin it is, the story of his trying to make a novel out of a banal reality. Thus, Caldwell would be correct in positing rather that this novel (the story) seems to be in search of a plot. The narrator constantly asks questions about what

could have happened or what he thinks will happen and also hypothesizes incessantly in the form of statements about what is likely going on, which I will address directly in another section of the chapter. Rather than reading something that has already been written, then, reader, narrator, and author seem to be collaborating in the spontaneous creation of the story as every page is turned. The idea of creating a plot and the attempt at organizing reality in the form of a novel, though, becomes moot since, as we discover at the end, there is nothing going on. There is no mystery (plot) to be discovered or created in this story.

It is the narrator on the surface who seems to be the reticent one, reticent to visit his friends, reticent to say why he has come to visit them, as he expresses that it was “en quelque sorte” the reason why he came to Sasuelo. The story is written in the style of a mystery novel in the most literal sense. The details of the plot are, however, not just a mystery to the reader and the narrator, but also apparently the author as well. He expresses to Ammouche-Kremers that he never knows how his novels are going to end when he begins them. She asks him: “Comment pouvez-vous écrire sans savoir où vous allez—puisque vous dites que l’histoire vient en écrivant?” (29) To this he responds: “C’est un mystère” (29). He sees his fourth novel in particular as “une métaphore de la création ... une métaphore du travail de l’écrivain, de son imagination” (31). Read then from this perspective, the novel takes on new meaning. The questions and answers proposed but left unresolved in the story fail to lead to a plot and seem to suddenly reflect the doubt and questions the author himself experiences in the creation of his own texts, and this is precisely the unique angle from which I will approach this novel in the dissertation.⁶⁷ While some of my focus revolves around allusions to other texts within the author’s novels, in *La réticence* I will instead explore how the novel

⁶⁷ Ironically, however, that the narrator will not ultimately uncover a mysterious plot in this novel is playful in its inherent deceit.

actually alludes to itself and the process of its own creation. That said, we suddenly realize that like *La Télévision* and *Autoportrait*, this novel, which we thought would pan out to be a real mystery, or just a parody thereof, is in fact also a text that focuses, albeit indirectly, on the writer and literary production. No matter how different Toussaint's fourth, fifth and sixth texts appear to be from each other on the surface, they are all reticent narratives with reticent narrators, and the texts all seem to possess auto-fictive elements since they explore the act of writing and/or focus on the writer.⁶⁸

B. *La réticence*

1. The First Reading: confusion, conclusions, and comic catharsis

As I just mentioned, Toussaint's fourth novel tells the story of a thirty-three year old man who takes a trip to Sasuelo with his eight-month old son to visit his friends the Biaggis. He soon discovers, however, that the Biaggis are absent, their mailbox full of uncollected letters. For reasons unbeknownst to the reader since he never even tells us who the Biaggis are, he is reticent to do so and after a week on the island spent in a hotel and much sleuthing on his part as we will see, no progress is made, and he never does see his friends. We have no clue why he is so reluctant. His initial hesitation already not understood by the reader is taken to an even deeper level of obscurity and absurdity when he steals his own letter that had announced his visit from the Biaggis' mailbox. If visiting the Biaggis is why the protagonist

⁶⁸ Autofiction is a French term created by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 to designate a modern variation of the novelized autobiography. In English, the same literary genre is often referred to as faction, a combination of the words fact and fiction. Laurent Jenny characterizes autofiction in a multiplicity of manners in his brief study. He describes this relatively new genre: "Dans tous les cas, l'autofiction apparaît comme un détournement fictif de l'autobiographie. Mais selon un premier type de définition, stylistique, la métamorphose de l'autobiographie en autofiction tient à certains effets découlant du type de langage employé. Selon un second type de définition, référentielle, l'autobiographie se transforme en autofiction en fonction de son contenu, et du rapport de ce contenu à la réalité." Jenny then concludes that more precisely, "l'autofiction serait un récit d'apparence autobiographique mais où le pacte autobiographique (qui rappelons-le affirme l'identité de la triade auteur-narrateur-personnage) est faussé par des inexactitudes référentielles. Celles-ci concernent les événements de la vie racontée, ce qui a inévitablement des conséquences sur le statut de réalité du personnage, du narrateur ou de l'auteur."

came to Sasuelo in the first place as he alleges at the beginning of the novel, would not his stealing the letter announcing his visit then erase the whole idea behind the supposed story to come? Indeed, as the novel progresses, the narrator gradually becomes obsessed with the whereabouts of the Biaggis. Throughout his seven day stay on the island, he continues to ask hypothetical questions concerning where Paul Biaggi in particular could be at that moment, and this building cathexis constitutes the bulk of the novel. The mail remains uncollected as well. We soon realize that he himself is in the process of writing and re-writing the story that could have been told had he not stolen the letter announcing his visit. While the reader has no idea where the story is going, it soon becomes apparent that neither does the narrator. Ultimately, the novel seems to be spontaneously developing before our eyes. The questions the narrator asks regarding the alleged plot he attempts to uncover but ultimately does not exist may represent the very ones that Toussaint the author was asking as he wrote the text.

Although humor is scarce in this novel, it is presented as a sort of parody of the detective novel, and this in itself is playful.⁶⁹ The reader takes in the details of this so-called mystery from the first pages of the novel where the narrator comes upon a dead cat floating in the port nearby:

Ce matin, il y avait un chat mort dans le port, un chat noir qui flottait à la surface de l'eau, il était droit et raide, et il dérivait lentement le long d'une barque. Hors de sa

⁶⁹ Kathleen Belin Owen cites one important characteristic of the traditional detective story formula as “[a] reliable (often first-person) narrator who will provide all the details as he or she sees them” (78). She affirms that “this narrator must in fairness reveal *everything* he knows in order for readers to arrive at a solution on their own; however, the narrator’s understanding, hence the reader’s, must always be limited to comparison to the detective’s” (78). In the case of *La réticence*, the narrator is the detective, so to speak. “Therefore,” says Owen, “from an aficionado’s standpoint, a ‘proper’ detective story consists of the detective arriving at the solution before the reader with a greater understanding than the reader could have had” (78). Ironically, however, the narrator of *La réticence* does not know anything. Everything he reveals is pure conjecture, and his ideas evolve and regress to their points of origin over and over. As the readers see in the novel, the narrator as detective has no more understanding of the situations at hand than they do. While in a traditional detective novel the detective would arrive at a solution before anyone else, the readers would “remain confused and in suspense, willing victims in the delaying tactic” as Owen puts it. The narrator of this novel, however, remains just as confused as the readers throughout and comes off as deluded instead of clever.

gueule pendait une tête de poisson décomposée de laquelle dépassait un fil de pêche cassé d'une longueur de trois ou quatre centimètres. (LR 11)

This is the incipit of the novel, which opens in a prolepsis of the fourth day of the narrator's stay on the island. This development in the story of the dead black cat eventually becomes entangled with the main storyline that revolves around whether or not Paul Biaggi is in fact on the island, whether or not he is actually staying in the same hotel, whether or not he is a murderer, whether or not he is secretly watching the narrator, whether or not it is he who has in fact been murdered. In all its absurdity, the narrator, in trying to decode the mystery of the black cat's death, decides that it was not an accident after all, that "le chat avait été assassiné" (LR 37). The word assassinated is particularly funny here used to talk about an animal.⁷⁰ At this point, no matter how absurd the details seem, no matter how confusing the chronology of events, the reader must simply keep reading in earnest. However, it is only upon a second reading that we are able to detect and confirm the kitch quality of such mystery genre clichés as black cats, lighthouses, and deserted seaports by night. It is only upon a subsequent reading of the text that we can finally see through the absurdity of the story itself and its lack of progress in order to appreciate not only the more intricate details but also the bigger picture of the novel. In fact, it seems that on a larger scale, what the narrator is doing would be exposing a conspiracy behind an accidental chain of events, which all comes from the need to find reasons for everything. It is also during a second reading, then, that we may pause to reflect on what elements comprise a traditional detective novel in order to perhaps decipher the very traits that the author seems to be parodying. Toussaint

⁷⁰ Indeed, the idea of a murdered cat does ring ridiculous, but Toussaint is likely playing here on Edgar Allen Poe's story "The Black Cat," in which a man who loves all creatures is suddenly seen brutally murdering a cat who in turn comes back to seek revenge. Thus, perhaps the assassination of a cat is not such a ludicrous departure for a mystery after all, even if Toussaint's cat was not, in fact, murdered in the end.

insisted in his interview with Ammouche-Kremers that “l’essentiel de [son] travail vise effectivement plusieurs lectures” (31). He commented specifically on *La réticence*:

Je me suis laissé dire que le début de *La réticence* laissait trop à espérer—à cause d’ailleurs des allusions qui sont peut-être trop nombreuses—d’où un sentiment de frustration à la première lecture alors qu’à la relecture, sachant à l’avance que rien ne va se passer, on peut se concentrer sur le narrateur. (31)

In playing on the genre of the roman policier, the author provides semantic fields that support this, as well as a chronology and style dependent on hypothesizing and theorizing via the ultra-paranoid narrator. He seems to mock mystery in that he never actually does provide the story with a legitimate mystery. The reader may likely not realize this, though, until the very end when the narrator reveals that Paul Biaggi was not a murderer after all nor had he been murdered himself. The mysterious man in the grey Mercedes was just the Biaggis’ gardener from whom both narrator and reader learn that the cat’s death was in fact accidental, and the Biaggis had indeed been absent from the island the whole time. Finally, we know that nothing eventful happened. A cat died, but there was no mystery. Although readers may feel tricked since they vested themselves in the character of Paul Biaggi and really counted on meeting him, a certain relief comes when the novel ends. While some readers may be utterly disappointed and confused, even annoyed, by the conclusion to the novel, more curious readers may rather experience a sort of comic catharsis, a willingness to laugh at themselves as pawn in this game along with a desire to reread the novel armed with a newfound knowledge and vision.

2. Subsequent Readings: revelations, allusions, and ludic discoveries
a. “Figments of the imagination” or “What happens next? Nobody knows.”

There are several different ways that the novel plays on the detective genre while simultaneously alluding to its own production. Throughout the text, the narrator poses

questions and constantly hypothesizes and theorizes. This accentuates a lack of knowledge, the fact that everything is a mystery. Moreover, the author plays with language offering semantic choices, verb tenses, and ludic repetitions that emphasize not only the somber and suspenseful ambiance of the novel but also the writing process and the readers' experience as somber and mysterious. Although I will not discuss it in detail, distorting chronology also constitutes a primary element of both the concrete story and the notion of the inevitable va-et-vient that must take place when an author sits down to write a novel.⁷¹ Of course, all novels are not necessarily written from beginning to end with all the details worked out in order. With this in mind, one of the most remarkable things about this mostly somber novel is the presence of the narrator's son, who, as I will discuss, becomes one of the more profound symbols of the text as an allusion to the creative process and simultaneously lifts the tension that builds in the text if only for brief moments. Like the novel, this infant child can also be seen as a work in progress.

Throughout the novel, the narrator asks a variety of questions. His imagination truly runs wild. He thinks out loud and tries to decode the mystery, the mystery that he is ironically in the process of creating himself. He renders just about everything and everyone in the novel suspicious and worthy of questioning and investigation, starting with a dead black cat

⁷¹ Caldwell characterizes this novel in these terms: "All detective work is analeptic: the effort to reconstruct a series of events in the past from traces in the present" (379). Indeed, *La réticence* begins on the fourth day of the story, but then quickly shifts to recount days one through four in order. It then moves on to days five and six on the island, but then makes a quick analeptic digression back to day four before returning to the sixth day. We finally arrive at day seven with about twenty-five pages left in the text, and we realize that the narrator is still asking the same questions, still obsessing about the same thing: where is Biaggi and what is he up to? In light of the discussion to come on this text as a metaphor for literary production and the creative process, the choice of seven days seems an interesting detail as it could allude to the Bible and God having created the world in seven days. Indeed, seven days is what it took for the narrator to create (and then dismantle) his own story. Toussaint acknowledges the Biblical allusions in his interview with Ammouche-Kremers, revealing that it was no coincidence that since he was 33 when he wrote the text, he had his narrator be 33 as well, Christ's age when he died. The narrator called thirty-three years of age "l'âge où finit l'adolescence," thus the presence of the child and the need to grow up.

and including a fisherman, a man driving a grey Mercedes, and then finally his friend, Paul Biaggi himself. In light of the hypothesis that the author is alluding to the process of literary creation, the author himself must question every avenue that comes to mind to reach his final decisions regarding every facet of his fiction, including content, language, and style. No door must be left unopened, so to speak, and examining every single idea can be quite time-consuming and painstaking. For the narrator of the novel, upon deciding that the black cat he found dead in the port waters must have been assassinated he asks himself the following questions and then offers himself his own theory, again in the form of a question, simultaneously constructed as he works out the thought:

Comment en effet expliquer la présence de ce fragment de fil de pêche dans sa gueule? Comment expliquer qu'un fil de pêche aussi dur et résistant ait pu être rompu par l'animal lui-même? Comment même, à supposer qu'il y soit parvenu, expliquer la présence d'une ligne morte dans le port à quelques mètres du bord de la jetée alors qu'elle aurait dû reposer au large par dix ou vingt mètres de fond? Pourquoi, surtout, l'extrémité du fil était-elle coupée aussi proprement, comme sectionnée net par une lame, si ce n'est parce qu'une fois le chat pris au piège que Biaggi lui avait tendu la nuit dernière – **car Biaggi se trouvait dans le village, j'en avais la conviction maintenant** –, il avait lentement rembobiné sa ligne tandis que l'animal se débattait dans l'eau l'hameçon accroché dans la gueule, et qu'il l'avait ramené à quai à son rythme comme il aurait fait d'un très gros poisson, cessant de rembobiner lorsqu'il sentait une trop grande résistance et rembobinant à nouveau et très vite chaque fois que les efforts du chat se relâchaient, et que, le sortant de l'eau vivant et se convulsant de toutes ses forces au bout de ligne morte, il avait tranché net le fil avec un petit couteau, le chat retombant alors dans le port dans un fracas brutal, qui alla peu à peu en s'apaisant, quelques dernières vaguelettes venant mourir doucement contre ses flancs? (*LR* 37-8) [my emphasis]

Again, the narrator questions details of his story a little later:

Mais cette nuit, me demandais-je – **car j'étais certain que Biaggi était dans le village cette nuit** –, où Biaggi se trouvait-il cette nuit puisqu'il n'était pas chez lui? (*LR* 62) [my emphasis]

The narrator uses this formula throughout the novel. First he questions something. Then, he offers himself a theory based once again on hypothetical information, but in the end, he

decides that his theory must be truth. Initially, he feels sure of his ideas as I emphasized in the above quotations, but he can confirm nothing. None of his theories are based on reality, and yet he manages to convince himself of each new detail he creates on the spot. He constantly rationalizes every point specifically through the use of car. What is playful here is the fact that car is used to illustrate a causal relationship, but the way in which the narrator uses this word is more for justification of what he thinks might be true, not what really is true.⁷² An authentic cause and effect relationship does not exist in his deductive reasonings, and yet this becomes his technique throughout the novel. Unlike a traditional detective novel, the narrator of this text has no viable clues that would lead to the truth. He constantly introduces new theories to the same questions that serve as fausses pistes, and his desire to justify his hypotheses is particularly accentuated through repetition and perpetual self-reassurance:

Sur le petit chemin de graviers qui conduisait au garage, j'avais tout de suite aperçu la vieille Mercedes grise, et **je ne doutai plus** alors que Biaggi se trouvait dans le village, car, si la voiture était déjà garée là la première fois que j'étais venu, je l'avais également aperçue sur la place du village le matin où j'avais découvert le chat mort dans le port. Or, elle se trouvait de nouveau là maintenant, garée contre un arbre dans le pénombre de l'allée, et Biaggi se cachait selon toute vraisemblance, car comment expliquer sinon que je ne l'eusse pas encore croisé dans le village depuis mon arrivée? (LR 54) [my emphasis]

Car Biaggi se trouvait à l'hôtel en réalité, Biaggi ne pouvait être qu'à l'hôtel s'il se trouvait à Sasuelo. (LR 64)

Car Biaggi savait dans quelle chambre je me trouvais évidemment, et c'était lui en réalité qui s'était caché de moi pendant ces quelques jours, ne sortant de sa chambre que quand il était sûr de ne pas me croiser dans les couloirs, alors que, dans le même temps, je croyais me cacher moi-même et prenais parallèlement le même type de précautions pour éviter les parages de sa maison chaque fois que je quittais l'hôtel. (LR 64)

[...] et **c'était lui peut-être, c'était lui oui, j'en étais sûr à présent**, qui avait fermé la baie vitrée derrière moi pour m'empêcher de rentrer ... Mais ne l'avais-je pas

⁷² The playful and rhetorical use of car (and even or for that matter) as a justification technique is reminiscent of Voltaire's *Candide*. Pangloss is a man who wants to show that everything has a reason, that the world is based on cause-effect relationships. This certainly seems to be the preferred rationale of our narrator as well.

fermé avant de partir? ... **car j'étais presque certain** d'avoir fermé le volet de ma chambre avant de partir. (LR 64-5) [my emphasis]

Car Biaggi, **et maintenant j'en étais sûr**, avait dû s'installer à l'hôtel quelques jours avant mon arrivée. (LR 72) [my emphasis]

Mais surtout, me disais-je, où se serait-il trouvé la nuit dernière s'il n'avait pas pris de chambre à l'hôtel? Car la nuit dernière – **et de cela j'étais sûr** – Biaggi ne se trouvait pas chez lui. (LR 72) [my emphasis]

Finally:

Quatre tables avaient ainsi été occupées, et cela m'intrigua car il me semblait que les autres jours il n'y en avait pas autant. Se pouvait-il que quelqu'un qui ne prenait pas de petit déjeuner d'habitude fût descendu le prendre ce matin pour la première fois? Se pouvait-il que Biaggi – car je songeais immédiatement à Biaggi – fût descendu prendre le petit déjeuner ce matin dans la salle à manger? Mais si c'était Biaggi, me disais-je, pourquoi se serait-il descendu précisément ce matin pour la première fois? Pourquoi, s'il se trouvait à l'hôtel, ne s'était-il pas fait monter son petit déjeuner sans sa chambre comme il avait dû le faire les autres jours? Lui était-il égal maintenant que je sache qu'il se trouvait à l'hôtel, ou s'était-il rendu compte que je m'en doutais et ne cherchait-il plus désormais à s'en cacher? (LR 73)

The above examples show the va-et-vient that occurs between narrator's self-persuasion and self-doubt. The fact that a significant number of pages of the novel are dedicated to the same question, where Biaggi is, affirms the lack of certainty. The narrator needs to justify his ideas through the statements I emphasized, but ultimately, he cannot prove anything. The last quotation above undermines all of his previous confidence though the use of se pouvoir and the si clause that introduces a hypothetical situation: "si c'était Biaggi..." He is still unsure.

What is intriguing about all of these passages just quoted is that all of the narrator's hypothesizing and lack of certainty on the surface of the text would seem to mirror the creative process of the author. If we read the text from an authorial point of view, several things come to light based on the above quotes. The narrator asks a plethora of questions, but these questions could well be the very questions to which the author needs answers as well in order to make his novel progress from the standpoint of pure literary production. The narrator

often asks specifically “How do I explain this or that occurrence?” While from the protagonist’s point of view, he literally seeks an explanation that would answer the question regarding the plot concretely and the fictive world in which he is a character, from the perspective of the real world creative process, the author may be asking the same questions for his own purposes: “How do I put this into words? How, from a semantic, syntactic, and structural perspective, will I create this story? What will I say and how will I say it?” Still, the author, too, may also be wondering what will happen next in the story, as the details of the plot may seem elusive and remain a mystery to him as well. Thus, this novel could be said to have a sort of double plot, and both of these plots represent cause-effect constructions. Every author must resolve the questions just posed to make the plot credible. Cawelti posits that, apart from Faulkner whom he considers perhaps the modern writer most influenced by the detective story and the structure of the double plot, the double plot especially pervades the work of postmodernist writers. He elaborates this perspective:

In addition to the explicitly anti-detective novels of Robbe-Grillet, Stanislas Lem, and others, the duplicitous parading of clues and false solutions is a pervasive element in the writing of Borges, Nabokov, and Pynchon ... twentieth century authors find a way of artistically expressing the pervasive philosophical and cultural skepticism of modern times by using or inverting the double plot of the detective story to create a structure in which their own sense of the problems of truth and meaning can be embodied. (11-12)

Toussaint seems to be doing just that, his double plot being the absurd mystery that the narrator creates as well as the metaphor therein for the creative process and the difficulties that accompany that process. With this in mind, the author may then be playfully and so subtly alluding to the texts of two of his major influences, Faulkner and Nabokov, for example, if only for their use of this literary device.

The fact that a significant amount of pages are dedicated to the exact location of Biaggi as I just mentioned attests to the amount of time that Toussaint may possibly spend on one single detail of each text he writes. He describes the notion of *La réticence* as a metaphor for the work and imagination of the writer to Ammouche-Kremers: “C’est de la transformation de la réalité qu’il s’agit avec tout ce que cela peut avoir d’angoissant et d’inquiétant” (31). For Toussaint, “l’écriture est angoissante” and “Le travail sur *La réticence* a été pénible et difficile” (32). In sum, the slowness and lack of progress that occurs in the fictive text reflects directly the extremely lengthy and tedious process that writing represents for this author. While there exists only one reality, our perceptions and interpretations of this reality often seem limitless. Thus, despite the fact that the one true reality regarding Biaggi is divulged at the end of the novel, the narrator went through a lengthy and indirect process of perceptions in order to arrive at the truth. In creating a work of fiction, however, it is the writer who chooses the reality, and thus countless ideas for story and style inevitably cycle through an author’s imagination before making final decisions about the direction of a text. When asked about the notion of une réalité multiple in his works during the interview with Ammouche-Kremers, Toussaint insisted that “La réalité n’est pas multiple, non, mais l’art oui” (31). He confessed personally and thus concluded the idea behind his fourth novel: “Si je rentre chez moi et que j’observe des traces de lumière, mon imagination se met en marche et envisage les pires catastrophes; dans *La réticence*, ce réflexe est poussé très loin” (31).

b. Semantic Fields and Representations of Reality

The whole novel relies on the revelations of the narrator, what he perceives, what he believes to be truth or fiction based again on his own ever-emerging hypotheses. Toussaint’s semantic field is chosen precisely to fit this scenario, in particular his verbs. Rather than

actually being, everyone and thing must have been a certain way. That said, Toussaint scarcely uses the verb être, but rather employs constantly verbs such as devoir in particular combined with an infinitive, as well as sembler to describe what the narrator thinks is going on around him, not what actually is. Instead of saying, for example, that “someone approached the cadaver” as in the second quote below, the sentence is rather expressed as “someone must have approached the cadaver.” In this way at the level of grammar, what could constitute the concrete action remains stagnant and inactive in the form of an unconjugated verb. Here are some selected examples:

- 1- [...] le chat **avait dû se pencher** dans l’eau pour attraper le poisson (LR 11)
- 2- [...] quelqu’un] **avait dû approcher** le cadavre avec une barque... (LR 48)
- 3- Car Biaggi, et maintenant j’en étais sûr, **avait dû** s’installer à l’hôtel quelques jours avant mon arrivée. (LR 72)
- 4- Il [Biaggi] **avait dû s’absenter** maintenant (LR 77)
- 5- [...] et je songeais alors qu’il **avait certainement dû passer** ainsi plusieurs fois de chez lui à l’hôtel depuis mon arrivée (LR 86)
- 6- [...] Biaggi **avait dû être** étranglé avec cette cravate selon toute vraisemblance (LR 98)
- 7- [...] et je prenais le café en songeant que les Biaggi **avaient dû rentrer** chez eux maintenant (LR 111)
- 8- [...] il est certain que quelqu’un **avait dû se rendre** dans l’île un de ces deux derniers jours. (LR 127) [my emphases]

The occurrences he imagines are not rooted in reality, and he never knows for sure what is presently going on or what has actually happened. In sum, the entire text hypothesizes, theorizes, and analyzes based somewhat on concrete occurrences such as the Biaggis’ absence and the dead cat, which are at the core of all the narrator’s conspiracy theories, but also based very much on the paranoid wanderings of the narrator’s mind. The way that doubt

and certainty often co-exist in the text proves to be a playful contrast. For instance, despite the fact that the verb devoir is used in the plus-que-parfait to denote only possibility and not certainty, the narrator iterates “et maintenant j’en étais sûr” in the third quotation, while in the fifth quotation he breaks up the auxiliary verb and the past participle with the word certainement. Likewise, we see this amusing contrast in the sixth quote as well when he posits that Biaggi must have been strangled with a tie “selon toute vraisemblance.” Ultimately what we have here is a reticent lexicon. In the choice of devoir in the pluperfect over a conjugated action verb in the simple past tense, which would confirm as fact, we witness an overall reluctance to just be. The juxtaposition of the expressions of certainty I just mentioned with the hypothetical characteristic of the verbs only accentuates this textual reticence.

Toussaint also manipulates chronology and plays on paranoia with each passing page in this text, for example, with the sporadic use of the word auparavant combined with the plus-que-parfait:

Je n’avais jamais vu cette voiture auparavant, et j’étais en train de me demander ce qu’elle faisait là lorsque je crus entendre un bruit derrière la maison (LR 17)

[...] je n’avais jamais vu ce chat auparavant, une seule fois peut-être, mais sans doute sans témoin (LR 39)

[...] je m’apprêtais à rentrer dans ma chambre quand j’aperçus un petit escalier tout au fond du couloir dont je n’avais jamais remarqué l’existence auparavant. (LR 43)

Of course, auparavant ushers in a new situation in the present, thus contrasted with the past. It triggers some expectation: is the plot about to take shape? Here the narrator draws more attention to a detail, reiterating the fact that he had never before seen this car, this cat, or that stairwell. This seems to announce an imminent revelation, which never materializes.

Additionally, in the first and third quotations, the device of interruption is used in order to add yet another dimension to the mysterious tone. At the level of literary production and

the creative process, these passages seem to mimic the author's first encounter with the details as well. While the narrator says that he had never before noticed a certain stairwell, from the author's point of view, this could represent his initial encounter with this stairwell as a possible direction in the story he is writing.⁷³ In other words, these ideas just came to him; he had never thought of them before, and hence, it seems as though the text is one that is in the midst of spontaneously self-producing. Events are unfolding before not just the narrator's and the reader's eyes, but also the author's. One of the quotes I cited earlier attests to the reticence and spontaneous creation that may be favored over preconceived ideas for a novel. The narrator says "et c'était lui peut-être, c'était lui oui, j'en étais sûr à présent" in a scene where he is trying to figure out if Biaggi was the one who had closed the shutters to his hotel window. This is a perfect metaphor for the author in the process of working out the details of his own text as he writes it. No one, not the narrator nor the reader nor the author, knows what will happen next.

Throughout this dissertation, I discuss intertextual references in the author's novels, how he alludes to the texts of others. What is also very interesting is that in Toussaint's works we can see many intratextual winks as well, that is to say sporadic references to his own works. This represents another mirroring device that the author tends to use, but one that reflects back on his personal reality.⁷⁴ Despite the definitive evolution that this text repre-

⁷³ Of course, this hidden stairway also serves as a clichéd motif often found in mystery stories.

⁷⁴ In *La Salle de bain* there is mention of Titien, later incarnated as the topic of the narrator's research in *La Télévision*. In *Monsieur* when Monsieur has been injured after the confrontation at the bus stop, there is talk of the hospital and x-rays, just as we had just seen in the previous novel *La Salle de bain*. Furthermore, in *La réticence*, the reader encounters an octopus, just as in *La Salle de bain*, "Un poulpe affaîssé, violacé et rose" that a mysterious fisherman would take and reshape "comme un vieux torchon pour en couper un fragment avec un petit couteau, gardant le couteau entre ses lèvres le temps d'appâter son hameçon" (LR 28-9). This is interesting because no matter how different this book may be from the previous, it still mirrors them in some way. The mention of the fragment reflects the fragmentary nature of not only the writing style at times, but also the story itself and its own creation. There are and will be countless gaps left unfilled. If we recall the passages

sents, it still seems indicative of an author reticent to try something new, someone who needs to remain somewhat on familiar ground. Readers familiar with the Toussaint's previous text may then nod amusingly when the protagonist of *La réticence* finds a camera:

Un sac de voyage reposait près de la porte, mais ce qui me frappa surtout, c'est qu'il y avait **un appareil-photo** et deux objectifs sur la table, l'un des objectifs très court, qui pouvait être un vingt-huit millimètres, et l'autre plus allongé, une très longue focale, un deux-cents millimètres peut-être, que protégeait une gaine en cuir cylindrique et rembourrée. A côté, et également en cuir, se trouvait une sacoche rigide et carrée, qui devait aussi contenir des pellicules et des filtres, d'autres objectifs peut-être. (LR 93)

The author playfully places the camera in the context of his fourth novel specifically in order to add another facet to this mystery; however, it inevitably seems to recall the mystery of the camera in his third novel as well. These two different lenses seem to symbolize the different perspectives from which the author works as well as the different distances from which the reader can experience the novel. Through a 200mm lens, the photographer can view things very close up and in detail while still maintaining sharp focus due to the narrow angle. With a wide angle 28mm focal lens, the photographer can see things that are very far away, and he can perhaps also see without being seen. Close up, we have the surface reading of the fictive characters, but if we back up and distance ourselves a bit, we can see more details in the background, not just what is directly in front of us. This could also symbolize the way that the author was feeling regarding his critics. Perhaps he was feeling the pressure not only to produce, but also to produce something great after the initial success of his first three novels,

about the octopus from the author's first novel, he writes about the nature of the tentacles, going in all different directions, just hanging out in space, evoking the emptiness and fragmentary nature of the novel itself. Also evoked is the greyness, the obscurity of language and story. This is certainly accentuated in *La réticence*, as I will momentarily discuss. Finally, in several of Toussaint's novels, he makes use of the word réticent and/or réticence. In *La Télévision*, for example, the narrator explains "J'ai été toujours réticent de parler de mon travail." All of the protagonists indeed appear to be reticent in life, hesitant to act and react. In fact, the entire novel *La réticence* is rooted in the mere fact that the narrator is reticent to visit the Biaggis, the reason why he came to Sasuelo in the first place. The whole story takes off and results from that point.

and this explains in part why he said that the writing of his fourth novel in particular was very painful. The camera is not mentioned in passing, but rather theorized upon as well:

Était-ce moi, songeai-je soudain, que Biaggi photographiait ainsi, était-ce moi? Avec cette longue focale qui permet de se tenir à une très grande distance du sujet pour le photographier à son insu? Mais pourquoi Biaggi m'aurait-il photographié à mon insu dans le village? Ou bien, était-ce dans le port qu'il m'avait photographié, était-ce sur la jetée du port que Biaggi m'avait photographié à mon insu une de ces nuits dernières? (LR 93-4)

For the novel itself, this in turn questions yet again the idea of reality. What is real in this story? The author plays on the representation of reality not only through the semantic field that involves seeming instead of actually being as we have seen, but also through photography.⁷⁵ He attempts to come up with explanations in order to answer his own questions:

Mais pendant la nuit, me disais-je, même avec un clair de lune, car il y avait un clair de lune sur la jetée la nuit dernière, toutes ces nuits dernières il y avait un clair de lune sur la jetée, toujours le même exactement, avec les mêmes nuages noirs qui glissaient dans le ciel, et même avec une pellicule très sensible poussée au maximum, il devait être impossible d'identifier quiconque sur une photo. Car la photo serait nécessairement très sombre quand elle serait développée, avec juste un ciel tumultueux de nuit en arrière-plan, les longs nuages du halo de la lune à jamais immobiles dans le ciel, et une silhouette en manteau sombre et en cravate qui se découperait au loin dans la nuit sur les profils ombrés de la jetée. (LR 94)

In this portion of the passage, the repetition of the clair de lune and the nuages noirs stands out. The fact that the narrator emphasizes these details with même(s) also reiterates them as constants in the background. They have been mentioned several times at various points in the text, and so we can see that the author is not necessarily reticent about all of the details.

Clearly, he decided from the beginning that the novel's ambiance would be somber, with lots of black and gray, lots of rain and night, images of day and the sun practically

⁷⁵ In a traditional detective story, small details like the camera lens would be either emblematic or significant. Nothing is gratuitous. On the one hand, we see the narrator trying to build a plot in this scene by adding a suspicious camera, but it will never come together. On the other hand, changing lenses significantly alters the representation of reality. A 28 mm lens gives a wide angle and moves objects further into the background as I just evoked. It can also be said, though, that the art of photography, like all arts, is based on technicalities.

nonexistent. Conversely, the repetition of such elements also establishes a very cliché atmosphere, perfect for parodying the detective novel. Indeed, everything in this novel is somber, and this is incessantly reflected in the lexical field chosen. Between the fog, the rain, the lighthouse, the black cat, and all of the gray, Toussaint succeeds at creating the quint-essential detective landscape, pregnant with mystery and crime, especially given the fact that he seems to be alluding to Corsica as I mentioned in an earlier note. Additionally, readers may smile at the unlikely detail of “une silhouette en manteau sombre et en cravate.” It is almost as if he is suggesting the presence of ghosts. The landscape is conventional and predictable, and the reader experiences the stereotypical shiver of anticipation. He also succeeds in keeping the readers in perpetual darkness. However, the fact that literally just about everything in the novel is gray begins to seem suspect:

[...] un réseau touffu de racines noueuses et grisâtres (LR 17)
 Une vieille Mercedes grise était garée sur le petit chemin (LR 17)
 Il était vêtu d'un élégant costume gris (LR 27)
 Il faisait très gris sur le village (LR 30)
 [...] trois bancs en mauvais état . . . presque grisâtres maintenant (LR 31)
 [...] la lumière était si grise (LR 31)
 [...] une mer uniformément grise. (LR 32)
 [...] le cadavre du chat ... flottait dans une eau grise (LR 45)
 [...] les murs plâtreux étaient comme mangés d'efflorescences grisâtres. (LR 65)
 Je portais un manteau sombre, je me souviens, un costume gris et une cravate unie (LR 75-6)
 Dehors, il faisait très gris (LR 96)
 [...] le corps renversé dans l'eau grise (LR 97)
 Le ciel était très gris au-dessus du village (LR 126)
 C'était un homme d'allure massive, la carrure large et les cheveux gris coiffés en brosse. (LR 128-9)
 Il faisait toujours aussi gris dehors (LR 137)
 [...] laissant peu à peu entrer un jour gris dans la pièce. (LR 148)
 Une lumière très grise régnait toujours (LR 150)

The overuse of this color to describe objects and the weather has a ludic agenda that is two-fold: it confirms the clichéd aspect of the mystery, and it also serves to reinforce the

ambiguity of the author's intentions and his uncertainty regarding the writing of the novel. What we also notice in these references to the color gray is the repetition therein, for example with "Dehors, il faisait très gris" and "Il faisait toujours aussi gris dehors." This, among many other instances in this book attests to its cyclical nature. The narrator's hypothesizing gets him nowhere in the end, and reality does eventually surface on several different levels. Soon after he finds the camera in a hotel room that he thinks Biaggi inhabits, he finds himself at the port and realizes that the dead cat and the letters he stole from Biaggi's mailbox that fell into the water are no longer there. The water is still and empty. He realizes that if there is no dead cat and no missing letters, "nous étions en quelque sorte revenus à la situation initiale maintenant" (*LR* 102). Suddenly, "Tout [lui] paraissait curieusement simple ..." (*LR* 102).

Et il m'apparut alors de manière paradoxale que puisque nous étions ainsi revenus à la situation initiale et que tout se présentait de nouveau pour moi comme au premier jour, je pouvais de nouveau envisager d'aller voir les Biaggi maintenant, peut-être pas tout de suite non, il fallait que je rentre mon fils à l'hôtel et les Biaggi n'étaient peut-être pas encore de retour chez eux maintenant, mais un peu plus tard dans la soirée, juste pour leur signaler ma présence. (*LR* 103)

This is the realization that the narrator has in the middle of the book. Once again, we believe that he has finally come to his senses and that we will meet Paul Biaggi. However, this passage is playful for several reasons. First of all, the fact that everything seemed "curieusement simple" is playful. What seems, in fact, curious, surprising, or enigmatic is the lack of enigma. Of course, this passage is also a testament to the cyclical nature of not only the fictive universe of the novel, but also the real thought processes of the author as he writes. The phrase "juste pour leur signaler ma présence" is also taken verbatim from the beginning of the novel, another ludic repetition. While the story itself has not progressed, certainly the writer must find himself lacking direction and going in circles as well. Additionally, the

careful reader will immediately notice the reticence that still exists in this passage with the verb pouvoir and the adverb peut-être, both evocative of uncertainty. The narrator will not go see the Biaggis right away, and so once again the possibility that he will never go still exists. Before venturing out of the hotel to go to the Biaggis' villa, the narrator also has a second realization, a confirmation of the real reality, when he sees a young woman during breakfast at the hotel and notices that "un appareil-photo était posé sur sa table à côté d'elle, le même Nikon que celui que j'avais vu ce matin dans la dernière des chambres que j'avais visitées" (110). He now knows that this was not Biaggi's camera. It was not a camera being used to secretly observe him.

Of course, we never meet Paul Biaggi. The narrator goes to his house at night and finds no one there. He becomes paranoid once again that Biaggi must be there somewhere and that he knows the narrator is there. Once again, the imagination runs wild, and multiple interpretations of reality are presented. Furthermore, on his way to the villa, he encounters a black cat; however, this cat was alive and had gotten some fish bones from a dumpster. For the narrator, this could represent a sort of omen since he seems to be so superstitious. This is the second black cat he has seen. It provides him with yet another opportunity to create elaborate and sinister plots. In alluding to the writing process, however, this black cat constitutes yet another ludic insertion, an example of how the writer's ideas evolve throughout the entire progression of the creation of a text. When we realize that the whole conspiracy was not real, that this character was just a little paranoid, we are indeed back at square one for the second time. This is Toussaint's narrative game. It is also the game of literary production, which, like the fictive text, has its own life cycle as well.

Gray dominates as a part of the décor as I just discussed. However, although repetition abounds in the novel, not everything is gray. Tender passages involving this man and his child are interspersed sporadically amidst the suspense and ambiguity that pervade the text as a whole. Here are the first mentions of the narrator's son, which appear in the first pages of the novel:

[...] j'avais pris la direction de l'hôtel avec mon fils, que j'avais installé devant moi dans sa poussette et qui ne se préoccupait de rien, absorbé qu'il était dans la contemplation de son phoque en peluche, qu'il tournait et retournait entre ses mains pour l'examiner sous toutes les coutures en lâchant à l'occasion un rot imperturbable avec un naturel royal. (LR 13)

Je m'arrêtais parfois, je m'asseyais dans le sable, et, tandis que tout autour de moi des filaments d'algues sèches s'envolaient vers les dunes, je ramassais distraitement un ou deux cailloux, que je lançais paresseusement dans la mer. Mon fils me regardait faire, un biscuit à la main, solidement maintenu dans sa poussette par un petit harnais. Parfois, il se penchait en avant pour essayer de s'emparer de quelque objet échoué sur la plage, et je lui tendais à mesure tout ce qu'il convoitait, des morceaux de bois morts rejetés par la marée qui avaient pris des formes de talismans bizarres, des galets, des brindilles (une vieille sandale en plastique aussi, dont il embrassa la semelle pleine de sable en poussant des petits tayaut de joie). (LR 14)

These passages appear as little rays of light contrasted with the somber background and constant paranoid wanderings of the narrator's mind, since they are endearing and often contain little comical quips about the child. However, while the juxtaposition may be very playful, we realize that the author has no underlying ludic agenda for the passages in and of themselves. There are countless representations of reality in this novel. However, as I have emphasized, only one true reality exists, and perhaps the most remarkable anchorpost to reality in the novel is the presence of the narrator's eight month-old son. In terms of the story of the novel, the child serves as a soothing distraction from his pent up anxiety regarding the Biaggis. We see the narrator tending to his son's needs at several moments in the novel, feeding him, diapering him, dressing him, bathing him, and putting him to bed. In fact, the

child may well be the most profound symbol of creation in the novel, a veritable work in progress himself. In the same way that the narrator affords such tenderness and attention to his infant son in the novel, immersing himself in his son's care only to suddenly leave him alone in search for some clues in the mystery he has created, so, too, does writing fiction incessantly collide with the author's reality, one in which he, too, had an infant son of his own at the time he was working on this text.

Indeed, the narrator often leaves his son sleeping in their hotel room while he sits in the restaurant, café or bar, questioning and theorizing the various details of the mystery at hand: where is Paul Biaggi? One wonders where the mother is since she is nowhere to be seen or mentioned in the novel. The va-et-vient between the passages with his son and the ones where he is wandering the halls of the hotel wondering about Biaggi is undoubtedly indicative of the relationship all writers have to their work. Writers immersed in their creative worlds must still reside in the real world no matter how much this may disrupt the flow of their work and progress. What is particularly shocking in *La réticence* is the moment when the narrator actually leaves the hotel with his son left alone in the room. It is the middle of the night, and no one is aware that he has left the premises. He has left the child in no one's care. Indeed, for twenty pages of the text, the narrator is off on one of his paranoid adventures when, upon returning to the hotel in the middle of the night, he is jerked back into reality:

[Le patron de l'hôtel] s'agenouilla au pied de la porte pour la déverrouiller, et, comme il entrouvait en battant pour me laisser passer, il me dit que mon fils avait pleuré, qu'il l'avait entendu pleurer tout à l'heure. Je le regardais sans bouger. Et maintenant, demandai-je à voix basse, il dort? Il ne répondit pas tout de suite, et je scrutais intensément son visage dans la pénombre. Je ne sais pas, dit-il, je ne suis pas monté, je croyais que vous étiez avec lui. (LR 67)

This would seem to be a striking metaphor for a writer's obsession and immersion in his/her work, such that friends, family, and other real world responsibilities may be neglected as a result. One may even imagine our author working furiously in his office only to be interrupted by the cries of his own child, for example. Of course one must not limit this to Toussaint's life alone. One might suggest that within the writing process itself, there is also a contrast between flight of fancy and more or less mundane tasks as necessary as imagination.

Through the disjointed storyline that alternates between unabashedly real scenes with the narrator's son and the fanciful and unlikely ones the narrator creates and finds himself amidst, the author concentrates on his own writing, his way with words, his desire to play with language, to even poeticize it when we would least expect it. The mystery is banal, but as I have already discussed, this banality in the plot exists precisely in order to showcase language and style. The author does not want the story to overshadow the writing itself. For instance, when he writes, "[...] et tantôt à la découverte de la plage sauvage qui s'étendait derrière le village sur plusieurs kilomètres. Le bruit des vagues du vent se mêlaient dans mon esprit, et je progressais sur le rivage. C'était une plage immense..." (LR 14), the rhyming of the words plage, sauvage, village, and rivage truly stands out. Some other notable examples of creative language and poetic devices in the text are as follows:

1-[...] je remarquai une grande flaque d'eau immobile dans la pénombre, qui reflétait faiblement les arbres et les toits des maisons avoisinantes. Un léger souffle de vent faisait parfois frissonner la surface de la flaque, et l'eau était alors parcourue par une onde de frémissements qui brouillaient un instant les reflets. (LR 35)

2-[...] j'escaladai la petite porte de garage grillagée . . . (LR 50)

3-[...] derrière le canapé en cuir, je traversai la pièce sans bruit pour aller pousser la porte du bureau de Biaggi. (LR 59)

4-[...] seulement le ronronnement régulier du réfrigérateur . . . (LR 60)

5-[...] une sorte de mansarde nichée sous la corniche. (LR 63)

6-[...] petites portions de confiture et plaquettes de beurre entamées qui traînaient dans les assiettes, avec quelques miettes çà et là et des serviettes froissées abandonnées en boule sur les nappes. (LR 73)

In a novel where the repetition of so many elements calls the entire text and its purpose into question, Toussaint is able to demonstrate through all the banality exactly how poetic his pen can be. The first passage is saturated by the letter *f*, not just as an initial consonant, but seen in the middle of words as well. In passages two and three, the reader witnesses alliteration in couplets with “petite porte,” “garage grillagée,” “canapé en cuir,” “pousser la porte,” and “bureau de Biaggi.” The alliteration of the fourth phrase is perhaps the most obvious of all, while “nichée sous la corniche” shows Toussaint’s propensity for *jeux de mots*. Finally, the sixth passage begins with an alliteration of the letter *p*, but quickly turns to assonance as well as seen in *assiettes*, *miettes*, and *serviettes*. The poetic devices seen above show a mastery of style and boast a certain gracefulness. As a result, through all the grey areas of the text, many colorful moments like these shine through. These and many other examples certainly counter a minimalism in style often cited by the critics. Toussaint’s attention to style in *La réticence* emphasizes with formal preoccupation that writing takes precedence over storyline. As I quoted the author in the introduction to the dissertation, indeed, this novel represents a detectable evolution in his style. The poetic quality of writing seen here is one element that Toussaint continues to develop and play with in his subsequent texts and nowhere more than in *Faire l’amour*, as we will see in chapter four. Although the metaphors for the creative process and the work of the writer surface through the content of *La réticence*, indeed, the best way to allude to literary production would appear to be through literary language itself, as the author demonstrates. Toussaint certainly offers his more curious readers a multi-

faceted glimpse of both the abstract and more concrete sides of the writing process in this novel.

C. *La Télévision*

1. Introduction

When the readers of this novel open the book to the first page, they are faced with a narrator who is making a significant decision, one that ironically seems to become a moral issue, at least for him. He has decided to stop watching television. However, as the seasoned reader of Toussaint's works already understands and as the reader new to his works will soon discover, this author who has cited various influences such as "Flaubert pour la phrase" infuses neither politics nor philosophy nor morality into his texts to make serious statements therein. He tells Laurent Hanson that in this novel, "ce n'est pas du tout un moralisateur qui dirait qu'il faut arrêter, on voit bien qu'il la regarde aussi..."⁷⁶

We learn that the narrator of *La Télévision* has a partner, not a wife as he describes Delon as someone "avec qui je vis" (TV 8), has a child with another on the way, and is spending time alone in Berlin. At this point we do not know why he is not with his family. At first glance without even opening the book, perhaps we expect the entire story to be about TV, simply based on the title, ironically enough indeed, a book about television. Then upon reading that first page, we see that perhaps because the protagonist has stopped watching TV, the novel will not be about TV, maybe about self-discipline. Usually, staying away from the

⁷⁶ In his interview with Laurent Hanson at the Institut franco-japonais in Tokyo, Toussaint said that more philosophical and metaphysical topics such as time and death are approached "avec modestie, réticence presque," but that "cela n'empêche pas la présence de grandes questions. A peines traitées." He adds that "C'est plutôt en philosophie que ces questions doivent se traiter." He further comments that for him, literature "peut les aborder, mais pas les traiter," asserting that he will not do a "traité du temps." At the same time, he concludes the following: "Autant la sociologie et la politique sont complètement absentes de mes livres, autant la philosophie ou la métaphysique sont, non pas traitées, mais présentes. C'est un aspect important, sinon, il ne resterait que de frivolité, ou du vide. C'est important, ça donne une richesse au regard." Rather, then, he inserts commentary on discourses in the arts and sciences because the presence therein is interesting or at other other times as part of a ludic agenda, more to mock them and their particular jargons.

TV set is supposed to be a first step toward making more creative use of one's time.

However, the first several pages offer the reader nothing more than musings on the television set (even though he was not currently watching any), as well as how he never really watched that much anyway. The love-hate relationship that this character establishes with television is evidenced throughout the novel and presented to us from the very beginning when he describes each part of his TV set:

Le récepteur, qui présente sur le côté un petit compartiment réservé aux différents boutons de commande, est surmonté d'une grande antenne à deux branches en forme de V, assez comparable aux deux antennes d'une langouste, et offrant d'ailleurs le même type de prise pour le cas où l'on voudrait se saisir du téléviseur par les antennes et le plonger dans une casserole d'eau bouillante pour s'en débarrasser encore plus radicalement. (*TV* 8)

Ultimately, the narrator wants to watch TV, claims that he will stop, and then ends up reading TV guides and watching it in storefront windows, for example. He criticizes TV, seems to loathe what it can do to a person, and yet he will be unable to live without it. He ironically justifies his lack of dependence on TV, though, proclaiming the lack of challenge in giving it up, and then the reader is taken back in time, as the narrator shifts gears with an analepsis and begins to write about a moment previous to this one, one when the main character's family was still there.⁷⁷ Here, the narrator admits to watching more TV than ever at this time:

Depuis quelques mois, cependant, j'avais constaté une très légère dérive dans mon comportement. Je restais presque tous les après-midi à la maison, pas rasé et vêtu d'un vieux pull en laine des plus confortables, et je regardais la télévision pendant trois ou quatre heures d'affilée à moitié allongé dans le canapé, un peu comme un chat dans sa litière pour ce qui est des privautés que j'avais prises, les pieds nus, la main sous les parties. Moi, quoi. (*TV* 10)

⁷⁷ This sort of *in media res* is typical of Toussaint's narrative technique, and is quite common in many stories that often begin in the middle of things and fill in the background later. This author's narrative regularly rearranges discursively the basic chronology of its plot, especially in *La réticence*, as we have just seen.

This passage offers the reader an image of quintessential laziness and self-indulgence. Spending many afternoons alone in front of the set, unshaven, watching tennis, the narrator tries to justify to his partner Delon these hours upon hours of utter inactivity. This exchange makes him feel guilty perhaps, and forces him to examine more closely the choice he makes when he turns on the TV. One might also sense the presence of sarcasm on the part of the author, as he may well be making a commentary on the unhappy state of contemporary society in general. After all, Toussaint seems to have an historical perspective of his character, who, we soon learn, is an historian. He is supposed to be an historian, and yet he is living in the present, distracted by television, leading a life that consists only of eating, sleeping, and watching TV. The reader is confronted with a raw and somewhat loathsome image of modern life, a disturbing contrast of monotony and stagnancy with information overload. However, as is typical of his style, the author diffuses any gravity or serious examination of reality with a grain of humor as we see the narrator, “les mains sous les parties.” It should be said, however, that even though this image may seem comical for its coarseness and realism, it simultaneously contributes to the loathsome landscape of laziness the author undoubtedly wishes to create.

Eight pages into the novel, the reader discovers that the protagonist has received a grant to finish a book on Tiziano Vecellio. In this light, his decision to stop watching TV would seem a practical one. Furthermore, this must be why Delon and the child are vacationing in Italy. This is comical and a bit ironic, though, because with his topic being an Italian painter, he is the one who should be in Italy. Delon and his child are away so that he can get some work done, this must be why he needed to justify all the time spent in front of the TV. Perhaps this is rather what the novel will encompass, the narrator’s adventures in

writing his book and his summer alone in Berlin, not television. Of course, those familiar with Toussaint's novels know that any preconceived expectations will likely be shattered, as directions are often left unexplored in his texts, and/or perpetually diverted. The narrator will in fact talk about his work, the book he is supposed to be writing, but that it precisely my point: the book he is supposed to be writing is not being written. Like the narrator of *La réticence*, this one, too, will weave in and out of a false plot with digressions and flashbacks in order to talk about almost anything but his research. At the same time, however, he justifies and complacently analyzes any thought process regarding his work to mask his laziness. The lack of progress and procrastination he experiences is directly related to the distractions of contemporary society, and the notion of getting to work on this book is constantly evoked. However, while it is rather the absence of the writing process, or the difficulty of it, that is brought to the forefront of the text, what readers also end up perceiving is a conflict between writing and watching TV. They soon realize that the narrator is unable to do either one wholeheartedly.

2. Cultural Commentary through Narrative Style

In fact, Toussaint seems to satirize the loss of communication and reflection that occurs once one resigns oneself to a culture dominated by television. As a result of this domination, the narrator of the novel stops thinking altogether. Any subsequent thoughts and opinions he may have are then dictated by the media and a reality outside his own. The following scene portrays the narrator's revelation of such effects and the scene leading up to his decision to quit watching TV:

Très souvent, ainsi, le soir, ces derniers temps, comme pris d'une ivresse mauvaise, j'allumais la télévision et je regardais tout ce qu'il y avait sans réfléchir, je ne choisisais pas de programme particulier, je regardais le tout-venant, le mouvement, le scintillement, la variété. Je ne m'étais pas rendu compte de la dérive qu'était en

train de subir mon comportement à ce moment-là, mais, rétrospectivement, je juge cette petite surchauffe momentanée comme un signe avant-coureur tout à fait symptomatique de la décision radicale qui allait suivre, comme s'il fallait passer nécessairement par une telle phase de consommation excessive pour réussir par la suite son sevrage. (*TV* 21)

It is interesting to see that the narrator describes watching excessive amounts of television as analogous to a disease with real symptoms, something that adversely affects his behavior.

Toussaint satirizes society in this novel firstly through semantics, secondly through structure, and finally via syntax as well as I will show in the pages to follow.

From a semantic point of view, the narrator certainly implies a moral judgment.

Describing his state as a drunkenness (une ivresse) accentuates the negativity he attributes to the excessive TV watching, but it is rather the adjective mauvaise used to characterize this drunken state that provides the narrator's feelings concerning it with a definitive sense of morality: television is now seen as evil. Additional semantic indications of the moral judgment implied are seen in the phrase "subir mon comportement" and "une telle phase de consommation excessive." Let us not forget his concrete use of the word juge either when he says "je juge cette petite surchauffe...." All in all, Toussaint portrays his protagonist in the preceding passage as someone who has become extremely complacent and is quickly moving toward a vegetative state. On the one hand, he is transforming into a veritable couch potato. On the other hand, one might venture to see him as a sort of automaton, someone who has lost all power of judgment and thought, as the following quote seems to portray him:

Sans pouvoir réagir, j'avais conscience d'être en train de m'avilir en continuant à rester ainsi devant l'écran, la télécommande à la main que je ne pouvais lâcher, à changer de chaîne machinalement, frénétiquement, dans une recherche de plaisirs immédiats et mauvais (*TV* 22)

In fact, he is so overtaken by television's omnipresence that later in the novel he even notices other people's sets on through the windows of their apartments and watches from a distant window like a voyeur:

Un bloc d'immeubles, en face de nous, était si proche qu'on pouvait voir les téléviseurs allumés dans les petits encadrements métalliques des fenêtres, et je pouvais même voir assez distinctement ce que chacun était en train de regarder dans les différents appartements, ceux qui regardaient la même série que nous et ceux qui en avaient choisi une autre, ceux qui regardaient l'aérobic et ceux qui regardaient la messe dominicale, ceux qui regardaient le cyclo-cross et ceux qui avaient choisi une émission de télé-achat ... (*TV* 203)

From a structural point of view, there is a constant framing of television in the most literal sense throughout the novel. The window in this passage and others serves as its own type of frame, a metaphorical screen in its own right. At this point, the narrator has not watched TV in about a month, at least not in his own apartment. This obsession of not watching TV only fuels his desire for it, and going into other people's homes where it happens to be on, or looking across an apartment courtyard into the homes of strangers who happen to be watching TV, constitutes a way that the narrator can watch without technically breaking his vow not to watch in his mind. What is even more comical is that among all of the television sets he observes through the windows of others, he notices "la présence d'un téléviseur allumé tout seul dans un salon désert, nulle présence humaine ne se laissait deviner près de lui dans la pièce ..." (*TV* 203). He calls it a sort of phantom TV that happened to be on the same channel as the one in the apartment he was in at the moment. So now at this point, instead of watching the program on the set in front of him, he begins to watch it on the set in front of him across the courtyard in the deserted living room all the while able to understand what is going on through the sound of the set behind him.

This novel is not the author's first mention of television's domination. In his first published novel *La Salle de bain*, we witness a similar situation. Upon examination of the narrative structure here, the sudden ellipsis is particularly notable. Interruptions with no transitions are common in this author's texts, but most gaps occur between actual paragraphs, not right in the middle of them. In the following scene, the narrator of *La Salle de bain* sits in a hotel bar watching television. One paragraph ends with the narrator explaining that "Après le dîner, je me rendis dans le salon voisin et m'assis devant la télévision, où défilèrent silencieuses, incompréhensibles, des images de catastrophe" (SB 56). The next paragraph begins on an equally somber note:

En l'absence de son, l'image est impuissante à exprimer l'horreur. Si les dernières secondes de la vie des quatre-vingt-dix milliards d'hommes qui sont morts depuis que la terre existe avaient pu être filmées et projetées d'affilée dans une salle de cinéma, le spectacle, à mon sens, eût lassé assez vite. En revanche, si les cinq dernières secondes de leurs vies, les ultimes bruits de leurs souffrances, l'ensemble de leurs soufflés, de leurs râles, de leurs cris, avaient pu être enregistrés, mixés ensuite sur une bande unique et livrés au public, à pleine puissance, dans une salle de concert, ou dans un Opéra... Une vue générale d'un stade de football interrompit ma réflexion, deux équipes s'échauffaient sur le terrain. Je me levai précipitamment et accroupi en face de l'appareil, tâchai d'obtenir le son. (SB 56-7)

What begins on a somber note, however, ends lightly, and the reader is left smiling with perplexity or even laughing uneasily. The narrator's thought is completely interrupted. He does not even finish his sentence.

Toussaint satirizes society through his style via syntax as well. In the sentence that begins with "en revanche," the author uses a variety of techniques to capture the reader's attention. Here we have one-half of a phrase de condition, the introduction of a hypothetical situation through the word si. What is more, the anaphora stands out with the successive repetition of "de leurs" which helps provide a certain build-up in the tone. Finally, the author does not stop simply with the idea of making these recordings of the last five seconds of

people's lives, their screams, and their last breaths available to the public, but rather he specifies the possible venues where this footage would be shown, such as a concert hall, or even an opera house. This also serves to build up to something really fantastic or horrific that of course does not happen. The author does not provide the reader with the result clause of this conditional proposition, or rather it is a matter of not enunciating the consequence of the hypothesis. Instead, he undermines the gravity of the scenario, strips it of dignity by having a soccer game intrude and ultimately take over the text. He finishes neither his sentence describing the images of millions of people dying with their last moments left in limbo nor does he even accord a new paragraph to the newly introduced subject, the soccer game. This playfulness is indicative of a darker humor, which causes confusion and often appears scandalous. Morreall writes that "under certain circumstances, most notably in our appreciation of fiction, experiences of repulsion and fear can be enjoyed" (204). He goes on to say that this specifically involves "our repulsion and fear of things associated with death, especially corpses" (204). He concludes, however, that distinguishing between the grotesque and the amusing is difficult since the two often overlap "as in black humor" (205). We laugh perhaps in shock at the blatant disregard for humanity or perhaps out of insecurity and uneasiness. Even darker and more subversive would be the supposition that Toussaint intended in fact to portray TV as mainly a means of entertaining the viewers whose reaction could perhaps be just as dark as the author's descriptions and intentions: enough tragedy, give us football.

In *La Télévision*, however, the reader is confronted with a sense of urgency unlike anything previously seen in Toussaint's texts. Forgive the extreme density and length of the following passage, but as will be evident, any attempt to break it up would also destroy its

effect as a whole on the text. The passage merits and demands to be cited in its entirety as a result of the anaphora consistently employed and for the simple reason that up until the very end from a syntactical standpoint, it constitutes, in fact, one single sentence. Moreover, the anaphora infuses the passage with a cinematic quality since it is projected in an accelerated mode. Readers can certainly sense a rapid and regular motion here, seemingly staccato-like in movement:

Partout c'était les mêmes images indifférenciées, sans marges et sans en-têtes, sans explications, brutes, incompréhensibles, bruyantes et colorées, laides, tristes, agressives et joviales, syncopées, équivalentes, c'était des séries américaines stéréotypées, c'était des clips, c'était des chansons en anglais, c'était des jeux télévisés, c'était des documentaires, c'était des scènes de film sorties de leur contexte, des extraits, c'était des extraits, c'était de la chansonnette, c'était vivant, le public battait des mains en rythme, c'était des hommes politiques autour d'une table, c'était un débat, c'était du cirque, c'était des acrobaties, c'était un jeu télévisé, c'était le bonheur, des rires de stupéfaction incrédule, des embrassades et des larmes, c'était le gain d'une voiture en direct, des lèvres qui tremblaient d'émotion, c'était des documentaires, c'était la deuxième guerre mondiale, c'était une marche funèbre, c'était des colonnes de prisonniers allemands qui marchaient lentement sur le bord de la route, c'était la libération des camps de la mort, c'était des tas d'ossements sur la terre, c'était dans toutes les langues, il y avait plus de trente-deux chaînes, c'était en allemand, c'était surtout en allemand, c'était partout de la violence et des coups de feu, c'était des cadavres étendus dans les rues, c'était des informations, c'était des inondations, c'était du football, c'était des jeux télévisés, c'était un animateur avec ses fiches, c'était un compteur qui tournait que tout le monde regardait la tête levée dans le studio, le neuf, c'était le neuf, c'était des applaudissements, c'était la publicité, c'était des variétés, c'était des débats, c'était des animaux, c'était de l'aviron en studio, l'athlète ramait et les animateurs le regardaient faire d'un air soucieux assis autour d'une table ronde, il y avait un chronomètre en surimpression, c'était des images de guerre, la prise de vue et le son manquaient singulièrement d'assise, tout cela semblait avoir été fait à la va-vite, l'image tremblait, le caméraman devait courir lui aussi, c'était quelques personnes qui couraient dans une rue et on leur tirait dessus, c'était une dame qui était touchée, une dame d'une cinquantaine d'années allongée sur le trottoir dans son manteau gris un peu passé légèrement entrouvert et le bas déchiré, elle avait été touchée à la cuisse et elle criait, elle criait simplement, elle posait de simples cris d'horreur parce que sa cuisse était ouverte, c'était les cris de cette dame qui avait mal, elle appelait au secours, ce n'était pas de la fiction, deux ou trois hommes revenaient pour l'aider et la soulevaient sur le bord du trottoir, on continuait à tirer, c'était des images d'archives, c'était des informations, c'était la publicité, c'était des voitures neuves qui serpentaient lentement au flanc de routes idylliques au coucher du soleil, c'était un concert de

hard-rock, c'était des séries télévisées, c'était de la musique classique, c'était un flash spécial d'informations, c'était du saut à ski, le skieur accroupi qui donnait l'impulsion et se lançait sur le tremplin, il se laissait glisser lentement sur la piste d'envol et quittait le monde en se figeant dans les airs, il volait, il volait, c'était magnifique, ce corps figé et courbé en avant, immobile et immuable dans les airs. C'était fini. C'était fini, j'avais éteint le téléviseur et je ne bougeais plus dans le canapé. (TV 22-5)

This is the defining moment, the one in which the narrator decides that he has had enough.

He makes his decision: he will stop watching TV. In the preceding passage, Toussaint manages to create a mimetic portrayal of television's fragmentary nature through language.

Portraying the act of channel surfing in a novel, that is to say the continuous changing of channels on a television set with a remote control is playful. Consequently, while certainly displaying similarities to the author's previous works with its typical interior monologues recited by an anonymous first-person narrator, *La Télévision* does in fact mark further development in the writing techniques of the author. Also, the fact that he goes on for three pages with no period in sight, just the countless descriptions of what can be seen on each channel for a second or two divided by commas, helps to create the fast pace, the whole tone of the passive act and its reception. These descriptions and the way they are presented here certainly influence the reader's vision of the content.

Nevertheless, these seemingly caricatural targets are not randomly displayed: Toussaint always has stylistic devices at work that co-exist with the objects and ideas he plays on. For instance, the order of the images adds an element of play to the passage when we see things like hommes politiques and a débat side by side with du cirque and acrobaties. The possible implication that the world of politics is like a circus where politicians jump through hoops, so to speak, to win voters is of course not spelled out for us, but the subtle possibility of this interpretation of the structure constitutes a ludic wink in the text. One also perceives possible winks via semantics. The beginning of the passage in particular offers a host of adjectives

describing the images, but these adjectives such as colorées, agressives, and stéréotypées may also doubly function precisely as characteristics of caricature, or even more specifically as we begin to realize here, characteristics of satire. While caricatures offer more amusing detached commentary, satire is biting, and this seems to be the author's aim here. All in all what we see is a kaleidoscope of images that decompose and recombine, and this structural effect is dizzying. We end up going in circles as the narrator cycles through the same channels over and over, and due to the fact that different channels are showing much of the same thing, attesting to the monotony of our culture. There is much violence therein, but a ludic side does co-exist with this violence. This passage undeniably serves to satirize contemporary society with the information overload, which paradoxically ends up not informing at all. It also comments on the plethora of available trivialities and diversions, not to mention our desensitization to violence, as it can be seen in graphic images on our television sets from around the world.

The violence depicted on some of the channels only fuels the violence of the author's style here as a result of, for example, anaphora [“c'était des”] and the lack of a pause to breathe and reflect on what we are in the process of reading. By violence of style, I mean to say that this repetition is relentless. It is quick and ungraceful, a veritable spewing of information that does not have time to be processed because it will not allow readers to process it. The anaphora serves to reinforce the mundane quality of television. Furthermore, the clause connectors that are so expressive in French are utterly lacking here, and because this is so unusual in this language, the mundane quality and inexpressiveness are enhanced. This also helps the reader gain a sense of time in that with each new c'était comes a different image, and thus confirmation that the channels are being changed quite rapidly. We have no

time to think, but the narrator/viewer does not want to bother thinking. In any case, he is bored, and clearly nothing he sees holds his attention for more than a few seconds.⁷⁸

On the one hand, what the lack of grammatical complexity shows is the absence of relationship between one thing and another on the screen when the viewer is surfing, and how on a mimetic level, it makes no sense. It privileges juxtaposition over subordination. On the other hand, however, from a semiotic standpoint, it makes a lot of sense. Although the images Toussaint chooses for the passage are contrasted in such a way that some (WWII and concentration camps) seem raw, while others (game shows and car commercials) seem superficial, the arbitrariness of them is precisely the author's design as suggested above, expressly meant to overturn assumptions about culture and reality. What is most striking about this passage is the way that everything is placed on the same plane: absolutely anything can be the equivalent of anything else, be it Auschwitz or an auto commercial, and while this is quite sobering, it is also part of the author's ludic agenda. A distinction is no longer made between things like war and gameshows. Their physical place and emotional significance in society are equal. That is to say, there is no hierarchy in this value system, or rather the system does not exist. However, quite characteristic of Toussaint is inserting traces of humor behind a wall of seriousness. The contrasts of serious and trivial images may be interpreted as playful, representative of a black humor since they may also be viewed as disturbing. Once again, Toussaint infuses the mundane into the tragic, as we see in all of his texts, and

⁷⁸ Even though some of the violence seen in Toussaint's channel surfing passage is real life footage, it is edited and pasted together by reporters and journalists, the media, in order to present a desired image and to evoke a desired reaction. Ironically, however, since this narrator is surfing quickly, he is not really watching. There is no time for him to react to anything. Nevertheless, the author seems to aim at a portrayal of the media as a manipulator of reality and culture through heavy exaggeration, and this makes for a biting commentary. He exaggerates disharmony and ridicules it. The point is that TV is usually superficial because airtime is so costly; however, this narrator surfs and therefore never gives anything even the most minimal coherence it might have shown. This may not seem comical on the surface, but it certainly constitutes another playful characteristic in the novel if we read between the lines.

this incongruity creates the cultural satires I have presented here. Indeed, despite the multiplicity of more serious interpretations I suggest concerning both the form and content of this passage, little bits of the author's comic sensibility more derivative of a black humor emerge and are able to lighten (or darken) up the tone for the reader who notices. Ultimately, it is apparent reality against reality. The narrator says to this effect that television "offre le spectacle, non pas de la réalité, quoiqu'elle en ait toutes les apparences . . . mais de sa représentation" (*TV* 13).⁷⁹

3. Satirical Perspectives on Academia and Psychiatry

Although the novel begins with the main character proclaiming that "[il a] arrêté de regarder la télévision" (*TV* 7) and then mentions the Tour de France as the last thing he watched, the society's relationship with television and the narrator's possible addiction to it are not the only targets of satire in the book. Academia is playfully mocked, abuses in fields of research in particular and the awarding of grant monies for questionable projects. Psychiatry is ridiculed as well as we will see in a moment.

At the opening of the novel, the narrator mentions that the TV is still in the living room, turned off. Definitively so, he affirms that it was over: "je n'ai plus jamais regardé la télévision" (*TV* 7). This is a strong statement, and it is only in rereading the text that the comical element of this expression may be recognized, as "plus jamais" becomes a hyperbole

⁷⁹ One cannot help but realize that the ideologies and dominant paradigms of a culture will then certainly be found somewhere in their cultural codes. The two become inseparable, and thus all humans cannot help but become a product of their own culture. If we are a TV nation, we are presented daily with images that we often do not even question and just accept at face value as real. Reality becomes a construction and we are prisoners of this encoded world, doomed to be influenced by the codes and values of our society. For more on this idea, see Fiske's *Reading Television* where he elaborates that reality "is always encoded, or rather the only way we can perceive and make sense of reality is by the codes of our culture," and that while there may be "an objective, empiricist reality out there," he posits that "there is no universal, objective way of perceiving and making sense of it" (4). He concludes: "What passes for reality in any culture is the product of the culture's codes, so 'reality' is always already encoded, it is never 'raw'" (5).

for just a few weeks since we do learn that he does watch TV again. Similarly, Toussaint makes fun of the gravity of the narrator's claim and the difficulty of quitting TV by portraying a character tormented:

C'est cet après-midi-là, pour la première fois, que j'ai ressenti un manque, la première manifestation de la privation. J'avais arrêté de regarder la télévision la veille Il [le manque] se manifestait en général par bouffées courtes et violentes, qui m'assaillaient à l'improviste et me laissaient un instant sans réaction, encore que, dans l'instant même où j'en subissais les élancements, je pouvais très bien les supporter. (*TV* 112-13)

The lack is undermined most comically when we learn that he has only stopped watching TV for a day. Moreover, the fact that Toussaint uses the word deprivation to describe the lack makes one think more of a fast or a hunger strike, or even quitting smoking or drug detoxification rather than forcing oneself to stop watching television, and therefore his reaction is comically exaggerated. Let us recall that he does mention the symptoms shown from too much TV near the beginning of the novel. Nevertheless, his "bouffées courtes et violentes" are amusing and the whole seriousness of his claims of "douleur impalpable" seems ridiculous in this context.⁸⁰ This lexical field is playful. The story line presented here may seem to be a bit shallow, and just as the plot may seem thin in Toussaint's novel, so too does the crux of his character's research:

Cela faisait quelques années que je projetais d'écrire un vaste essai sur les relations entre les arts et le pouvoir politique. Mon projet s'était peu à peu concentré sur le seizième siècle en Italie, et plus particulièrement sur Titien Vecellio et Charles Quint, jusqu'à prendre l'épisode apocryphe du pinceau, selon lequel Charles Quint se serait baissé dans l'atelier de Titien pour ramasser un pinceau qui venait de tomber des mains du peintre, comme centre emblématique de mon étude et lui donner son titre, *Le Pinceau*. (*TV* 15-16)

Indeed, the narrator had initially been considering "un vaste essai," but now his topic has

⁸⁰ Then again, this is precisely his point: television is like a drug in our society, one that has become detrimental to culture and that is, in fact, addictive.

evolved, or rather contracted down to one compact detail. The vastness of his original idea dwindling down to the ridiculously thin thesis of *Le Pinceau* creates quite the comical contrast. The fact that this history professor plans to conduct research and write a book based largely on this anecdote in which Charles Quint goes back into Titien's studio to pick up a paint brush that had fallen from the artist's hands is amusing in itself. First off, he calls it an "épisode apocryphe," so he is basing his thesis, which is already visibly weak, on speculation. It does not really matter, though since he is planning to use this as an image. What is funny is that it is a bit of a cliché approach, unlike the author's own approach to writing, which is very disciplined since he writes every day, and which is based on the artistic creation of language, downplaying the anecdotal nature of the plot of the work in favor of concentrating more on the writing itself. Other amusing details that should force the reader to question the authenticity of the narrator's project follow. For one, as an historian, he certainly does not seem to be that concerned with accuracy:

[...] j'avais fait une demande de bourse et constitué un dossier dans lequel je décrivais minutieusement mon projet, insistant en particulier sur la nécessité qu'il y avait de me rendre à Augsbourg pour mes recherches, ville où Charles Quint avait résidé entre 1530 et je ne sais plus quelle date (moi, les dates), et où, surtout, Titien avait peint plusieurs portraits les plus fameux de Charles Quint (TV 16)

Equally interesting in this passage and pertinent to the novel as a whole is the fact that the narrator says specifically that in his grant application, he described his project "minutieusement," something he never does throughout the text. Secondly, the narrator admits that his project does not even have as much of a relationship to Berlin as he had described it in order to obtain the grant:

Il va sans dire qu'un séjour à Augsbourg aurait pu être des plus précieux et des plus enrichissants pour moi, mais j'étais tout à fait prêt à admettre, aussi, que ce projet sur le Titien Vecellio n'était pas aussi spécifiquement allemand que j'avais bien voulu essayer de le faire accroire dans le petit mémoire habilement tourné que j'avais rédigé

pour présenter ma candidature à l'obtention de la bourse, et qu'il n'était pas fondamentalement plus difficile, par exemple, de gagner Augsburg depuis Paris que depuis Berlin. L'idéal eût été Munich, mais j'avais eu la bourse, finalement (comme quoi) (TV 17)

Toussaint certainly seems to be satirizing the way research grant money is often wasted. If there is no overwhelming need for the narrator to be in Berlin for his research, then why is he there? By the same token, this could render the completion of his book even more difficult if he is in a place that may not have the resources to which he needs access. The author mocks academia in this passage, as in other passages of the novel, and openly undercuts scholarly research processes, ranging from obtaining free money through grants, as we have just seen here, to the actual research, reflection and writing on an intellectual topic.

Another example of the cultural caricature of academia is no more evident and rendered funny than in the scene at the nude park where he is swimming one morning and happens to run into Hans Heinrich Mechelius, the president of the foundation that gave him his grant. The narrator never wants to talk about his work, neither in the narration itself nor in a more direct conversation with another character. This constitutes once again a certain reticence that pervades Toussaint's fourth novel of the same title, of course. This theme also reigns in *La Télévision* and *Autoportrait à l'étranger* and will continue to be discussed in this chapter. Mechelius introduces the narrator to his friend, "lui expliquant, avec une nuance d'ironie retenue" that this was the professor who was preparing the work on Titien, and it is intriguing to see the use of the emblematic words reticence and reticent extend so concretely from the fourth novel into this fifth text:

Cees Nooteboom hochla la tête poliment en faisant mine de s'intéresser à mon objet d'étude (Titien, oui, oui, il voyait très bien), tandis que Mechelius nous regardait tous les deux à distance, visiblement satisfait de ces présentations.
[...] il s'enquit avec beaucoup d'amabilité de l'état de mes travaux, cette rencontre fortuite devant lui paraître une excellente occasion de s'entretenir un instant avec moi

de l'évolution de mes recherches, et remplir ainsi de façon informelle, à la bonne franquette, pourrait-on dire, le rôle de conseiller amical qu'il jouait auprès de ses boursiers. Et comment avance votre travail, cher ami? me dit-il en avançant vers moi pour retirer un brin d'herbe qui était resté accroché à mon épaule. Il regarda un instant pensivement le brin d'herbe entre ses doigts avec le pouce tandis que je commençais à répondre à sa question (avec réticence, Il est vrai, j'ai toujours été assez réticent à devoir parler de mon travail). (*TV* 70-1)

This scene continues for another page and a half, and the thought of the narrator nude in the park trying to discuss his work with two men who are fully dressed is funny. Of course, Toussaint does not supply the reader with any details of the narrator's work. He does mention, however, that Mechelius's friend "lui, regardait les canards" while the narrator was attempting to answer Mechelius's question. Additionally amusing in this little comedy is Toussaint's approach to contrast, a narrative technique used as a ludic device in all of his texts. The image of a supposedly sophisticated intellectual engaging in what we can assume to be an intellectual conversation with the nude narrator is funny enough, but the fact that the author contrasts the purported dignity of academia with the banality and the saugrenu of Mechelius picking a blade of grass off the narrator's bare shoulder, and then examining it between his fingers is even funnier. The lightness of this scene is comically refreshing. A little later, we see him again take out a tissue and proceed to wipe his fingertips for a long time (perhaps because the narrator was wearing sunblock, but we do not really know), while the narrator himself "[se gratta] la cuisse" (*TV* 72). It is the expressive details like these that ultimately may render the literary experience more fun for the reader. They are light on the surface, but underneath, they weave a more complex ludic tapestry.⁸¹

⁸¹ Yet another layer underneath this ludic tapestry is the fact that Cees Nooteboom is a real writer. The blurring of fiction and reality is extremely playful, as I will continue to show throughout this chapter. Nooteboom is Dutch, and one might wonder if Toussaint, who is Belgian, may have read Nooteboom in the original since Flemish and Dutch are very similar languages. Furthermore, in Robert Buckeye's review of Nooteboom's work, he wrote that all of his texts possess "an erudition, a command of language and skill that we find in America in Nabokov," for example, and that some cons of his work are that it is "vague" and "often elusive" with the "playful texts" trying too hard "with modern literary trickery." Coincidentally enough, these descriptions could

Yet another facet of the aforementioned passage that provides comical commentary on academia is the fact that the two men in this scene are feigning interest in the narrator's work. Additionally, the scene in which the narrator reminisces about when he lived in Paris relates a similar situation. He had gone to the library at Beaubourg to research Musset: "Alfred de Musset, selon l'ordinateur du département de peinture de la bibliothèque de Beaubourg, était l'auteur d'une quinzaine de livres, rien de bien intéressant pour nous, d'après mon interlocuteur" (TV 78). The librarian clearly does not have the slightest care for the narrator's inquiry and sends him to the literature department where advanced computer and microfilm searches are also unfruitful. The librarian in the literature department explains that "en principe le rôle des bibliothécaires du Centre n'était pas d'aider les lecteurs dans leurs recherches (non, non, bien sûr! dis-je) ... (TV 80). Structurally, this passage occurs as a comical analeptic anecdote that explains where the narrator found the book he is currently reading entitled *Le Fils du Titien*. The passage contains several parenthetical comments like the one just quoted, which add to its sarcastic playfulness. It is humorous to see once again (and only pages later in the novel) this apathetic attitude displayed by the scholarly community. Furthermore, the narrator ends up finding the article he needs on his own just by browsing the aisles with Musset books himself. The scene ends there and represents a defeat for the technology behind scholarly searches, which comes off as ridiculous and ironic as well.

One can accuse the narrator of slight inauthenticity: he has already expressed discomfort about his spending a nice summer all expenses paid in Berlin. However, one can

certainly be used to characterize Toussaint's texts as well, not to mention the fact that our author has been influenced by Nabokov, as he says himself and as we have already seen in this dissertation. In the passage above, what we seem to have at work is a ludic characterization of real intellectuals sort of living in the clouds, and the fact that Toussaint would cite a real author and place him in this situation is undeniably playful.

also accuse the givers of the grant of a similar lack of sincerity regarding the nature of the narrator's work. Toussaint seems to mock all facets of academia. In the end, the two men at the park are impatient to get to the café where they plan to have lunch, and in a final ironic twist, when they invite the narrator to come with, he replies saying that “c'était très gentil, mais qu'[il] avai[t] du travail” (TV 73). He constantly stifles any interlocution, mainly because he needs to hide his laziness. Ultimately, the author points out that in these academic matters, no one really cares: it is all just a game, a comedy. The narrator is not progressing in his work because quite literally, he does not work at all. He says as much twice at the beginning of the novel: one passage begins with “je ne faisais rien, par ailleurs” (TV 11) while in another he says that he was “tout occupé à ne rien faire” (TV 13). This amusing oxymoron becomes the perfect metaphor, in fact, for the novel as a whole, a comical summary as the reader discovers at the end.

One reason the narrator does not get any work done is that he is constantly digressing. In one scene he calls up his friend John Dory. Basically, he recounts the story of how John Dory was asked by a psychiatrist he knew to replace him two days a week. Of course, not only is John Dory not a doctor, but also, he does not speak German well at all and cannot even understand what the patients tell him.⁸² Most of the patients are aware of the doctor's replacement, but in the rarest of cases, Doctor von M. advises John Dory to “répondre le plus évasivement possible, d'une simple inclinaison des yeux affirmative, ou d'un petit sourire

⁸² Whether or not Toussaint is alluding to Lacan's book *Télévision* is debatable, but its existence is intriguing. In 1973 Jacques Lacan was asked by the Service de la Recherche de l'O.R.T.F. (Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française) to make a television appearance that would be broadcast in two parts under the title *Psychanalyse*. A transcription of the interview was published in 1974 as the book I just mentioned. Lacan agreed to do it, but began by stating that “il n'y pas de différence entre la télévision et le public devant lequel je parle depuis longtemps, ce qu'on appelle mon séminaire” (9). His book has nothing to do with television, but rather suggests that “La télévision, comme l'analyste public du séminaire, n'est que l'objet qui évite au locuteur de tomber dans l'auto-analyse.” (13 July 2006 <<http://histv2.free.fr/litterature/psychanalyse.htm>>.) In the end, it is all about evasion, avoiding reality and not telling the truth.

pensif qui n'engageait à rien . . ." (TV 130).⁸³ This mirrors directly the way that the narrator deals with questions on his own work, and so this anecdote, seemingly just a digression into another past moment, actually serves to reinforce the inherent evasion of reality that pervades the entire novel. John Dory is getting away with something that could be judged as unethical in the same way that the narrator is getting away with doing nothing in Berlin all summer on someone else's tab. Toussaint, again, makes fun of people's apathy regarding others: no one really listens to the patients' speeches, and there is no cure. This satire mocks both the analyst and the analyzed, so no one is spared here. At any rate, the shrink viewed as a quack is nothing new and represents a sort of stock character that has been around for ages.

4. Reticent Narrator, Reticent Narrative, and the Illusion of Progress

The narrative technique of this novel is not unlike the others. Toussaint chooses to present the story in a series of snapshots so that any consistency in the plot is difficult to trace. Chronology can be confusing in Toussaint's books since he often begins with the second or third part of his story and then goes back to the first part later. This is significant since a large part of the comic dimension of the novels comes from the way that the author arranges the events. The narrator of *La Télévision* actually begins the story at the end, the present moment of the telling of past events. His year in Berlin is over at this point. The reader will not even end up in this moment at the very end of the novel since it ends at a point that occurs only weeks after the beginning of the year with Delon and their son having returned to Berlin from vacationing in Italy. Here, the reader detects a logical starting point in terms of the narrator's work, but it will soon be interrupted:

⁸³ John Dory's name is significant here as well. In fact, John Dory is also the name of a type of fish, a light, flaky variety like sole or flounder. Fish do not speak, and therefore we can relate this directly to our character's mute performance with the patients. Quite simply, it is almost silly that Toussaint gives this character such a name. It is certainly a ludic choice.

De retour chez moi, j'avais mis un peu d'ordre dans mes affaires, j'avais rangé mon bureau avec soin pour tout préparer dans la perspective de mon travail (j'avais projeté d'attaquer mon étude le lendemain matin très tôt). [...]

Je donnai ensuite un petit coup de balai dans la pièce, ouvris la porte-fenêtre qui donnait sur le balcon pour bien aérer mon bureau, allai secouer les carpettes à l'air libre, et débarrassai le lit de ma mallette et du carton à dessin qui étaient posés dessus. Ces différents préparatifs accomplis, j'allai mettre le réveil à sept heures moins le quart dans ma chambre, et, après avoir vérifié une dernière fois que tout était en ordre dans l'appartement, que tout était prêt dans mon bureau, ma table de travail bien rangée et une rame de papier vierge posée à côté de l'ordinateur, mes livres et ma documentation bien agencés et prêts à être ouverts, **je refermai tout doucement la porte de mon bureau et me rendis dans le salon, m'assis dans le canapé et allumai la télévision.** (TV 20-21) [my emphasis]

Whom is he trying to not disturb? The fact that this narrator put so much care into his preparations for work leads one to believe that he is going to sit down and begin. The amount of detail the narrator accords to the so-called preparations will become quite ironic when contrasted with the lack of details he is willing or able to supply about the project itself. Most notably, however, is the fact that after all this meticulous preparation he sits down to watch TV. This is extremely comical because it is the last thing the reader is expecting him to do, especially after having read his proclamation on the first page of the novel, that he has stopped watching television. Furthermore, what is at work in the above quote from the vantage point of comedy is the contrast between lengthy, meticulous, almost obsessive-compulsive preparations and the resolution, which is expedited in a mere two anti-climactic lines.

In sort of mirroring the crux of *La réticence*, just as the narrator's work does not progress, neither does the novel itself. Instead of having the narrator attack his project, as the author so astutely chose the term attaquer himself, Toussaint chooses to digress for twenty more pages of the text as the reader meets the Dreschers, Uwe and Inge, the couple who lives

right upstairs. They have coffee, and it is decided that the narrator will take care of their plants while they are out of town:

Au début de la semaine, tandis que je m'apprêtais à aborder enfin mon étude sur Titien Vecellio et Charles Quint, mes voisins du dessus, Uwe et Inge Drescher (que l'on pourrait traduire approximativement en français par Guy et Luce Perreire), vinrent sonner chez moi la veille de leur départ en vacances pour me demander de bien vouloir m'occuper de leurs plantes pendant leur absence. On peut imaginer ma consternation. (*TV* 26-7)

The narrator has stopped watching TV in order to help in his writing a book, so the last thing he needs is another responsibility that takes up some of his newfound free time. The scene is set: Delon and his son have gone on vacation. The neighbors are gone as well, having asked the narrator to house-sit, so what does inserting the parenthetical comment on what the Dreschers' names might be if they were French do for it? Technically, not much, but again, Toussaint infuses quirky humor into the most banal and serious moments throughout all of his texts. Quite simply, the insertion is absurd. Also, let us remember that chronologically, this scene takes place after the day when he prepared his office for work the next morning, after that first evening when the Dreschers asked him to take care of the plants in the first place. Therefore, the disruption of chronological sequence is comical here because the narrator reacts to the Drescher's request with consternation. This text represents a constant va-et-vient, and the act of reading and writing seem to playfully mimic this gesture, not unlike channel surfing, going back and forth, flipping around from scene to scene. Now instead of going backward with analepsis, we move forward a bit with prolepsis:

La première fois que je suis remonté chez les Drescher après leur départ en vacances (pour arroser leurs plantes et leur faire un peu de conversation, comme ils me l'avaient demandé), fut ce jour du début du mois de juillet où j'ai arrêté de regarder la télévision. Ce soir-là, après le dîner, je m'étais allongé dans le canapé avec mon journal, bien décidé à ne pas allumer la télévision. Le téléviseur était éteint en face de moi, et je lisais tranquillement le journal dans la douce pénombre de la pièce, isolé dans le petit îlot de clarté oblique de la lampe de lecture halogène que j'avais allumée

à côté de moi (la chaude lumière dorée de la lampe tombait sur mon crâne avec exactitude et auréolait ma calvitie d'une sorte de duvet de caneton du meilleur effet). Ce n'était évidemment pas pour me mortifier que je m'étais assis juste en face du téléviseur éteint, mais je tenais à éprouver mes capacités de résistance en présence même de l'objet de la tentation, de manière à pouvoir allumer la télévision à tout instant si ma volonté venait à me faire défaut. Autant, d'ordinaire, il m'arrivait souvent de ne pas regarder la télévision le soir quand je restais tout seul à la maison, et de faire autre chose très simplement, lire ou écouter de la musique, par exemple, pour rester décent, autant ce soir-là la télévision avait pris une importance démesurée pour moi du simple fait que j'avais pris la décision d'arrêter de la regarder, et, quoiqu'il m'en coûtât, je devais bien avouer qu'elle occupait à présent toutes mes pensées. Mais je faisais semblant de rien. **J'avais ouvert mon journal et, un bon petit coussin calé derrière la nuque, je lisais tranquillement les programmes de télévision en face du téléviseur éteint.** (TV 33-4) [my emphasis]

In this scene, the narrator ends up in a very uncomfortable situation, sort of torturing himself, as he insists on the fact that he has stopped watching TV and yet sits down in front of the set to read the TV guide. Toussaint's opting to portray this narrator's decision with such a tone of gravity places the situation at hand in a comically absurd light. Moreover, he could work after dinner as well. The day is not over yet. Moreover, the saturation of the context by the two words téléviseur and télévision adds another ludic dimension as does the va-et-vient between invariant ("je lisais tranquillement le journal) and variant (je lisais tranquillement les programmes de télévision). This technique represents an efficient way of creating comic shock.

In terms of humor and undermining the serious, we could cite the narrator's mention of the lamp shining on his head and how it created "une sorte de duvet de caneton du meilleur effet." This is a recurring confidence on the part of both narrator and author and yet another example of comical self-derision. We should additionally illuminate the narrator's mention of his preferred activities when not watching television. He lists reading and listening to music as examples, but then nonchalantly inserts the phrase "pour rester décent" just after. This is funny because he alludes to activities that cannot be mentioned in a novel.

Everything leads to self-indulgence and ultimately, perhaps, sloth. One might even posit that this narrator embodies the quintessential hedonist. If we recall his “main sous les parties,” for example, it is not difficult to imagine what he is talking about, a good example of the saugrenu I have already discussed regarding his first three texts and which will play a significant role in *Autoportrait* and *Faire l’amour* as well.

5. The Plight of the Writer as Ludic Subtext

a. The Role of Thought in the Writing Process

Toussaint is clearly poking fun of his protagonist’s project. In theory, the narrator does eventually begin to work on his book, but once he actually sits down to do it, he cannot think clearly:

J’ai bu pensivement une gorgée de café, reposa la tasse dans la soucoupe. Mais rien ne venait.⁸⁴ (*TV* 48)

Immediately following the sentence that ends the paragraph is this declaration, we learn the following:

Cela faisait trois semaines maintenant que j’essayais vainement de me mettre au travail. (*TV* 48)

⁸⁴ This quote could well be an allusion to Proust and “la petite madeleine.” Although we cannot know for sure, the idea that this character drinks “pensivement une gorgée de café” is certainly reminiscent of this now almost mythical scene:

Et bientôt, machinalement, accablé par la morne journée et la perspective d’un triste lendemain, je portai à mes lèvres une cuillerée du thé où j’avais laissé s’amollir un morceau de madeleine. Mais à l’instant même où la gorgée mêlée des miettes du gâteau toucha mon palais, je tressaillis, attentif à ce qui se passait d’extraordinaire en moi. Un plaisir délicieux m’avait envahi, isolé, sans la notion de sa cause. Il m’avait aussitôt rendu les vicissitudes de la vie indifférentes, ses désastres inoffensifs, sa brièveté illusoire, de la même façon qu’opère l’amour, en me remplissant d’une essence précieuse: ou plutôt cette essence n’était pas en moi, elle était moi. J’avais de cesser de me sentir médiocre, contingent, mortel. (*Combray* 80)

The amusing thing, however, if Toussaint is indeed playing subtly on Proust, is the fact that while Marcel’s sip of tea mixed with the madeleine inspires him, takes him to some sort of magical and peaceful place where his angst dissipates, Toussaint’s narrator ironically and painfully realizes after his sip of coffee that “rien ne venait.” He finds himself in the same place he always is, uninspired, and eventually, as he says three weeks later, “complètement bloqué” (*TV* 48). Nothing extraordinary happens to this narrator. Contrary to Marcel, the narrator experiences no such “plaisir délicieux” and feels as “médiocre” as ever.

Why is this scholar having so much trouble getting started? As it turns out, he is concerned about how he will refer to Titien, the subject of his research. Three weeks spent supposedly reflecting upon a title, and still he has nothing. Like the narrator of *La réticence* who is reticent to visit his friend and metaphorically the author himself who seems reticent to write the novel, so, too, is the narrator of this novel reticent to embark on his project. He recalls the day when the idea for the book came to him and remarks that “le projet n’avait fait que mûrir dans [son] esprit” (TV 52). However, given the narrator’s uncanny gravitation toward distractions, and let us not forget, the seemingly limp nature of his project in general, this is not so surprising. Toussaint seeks to undermine any purported reflection involved in research by accentuating the frequency of it in his own character, or more accurately, by accentuating the lack of any concrete progress, for the narrator has written nothing.

In *La Télévision* Toussaint has written a book about a professor trying to write a book. As a result, elements of the character’s creative initiative emerge from the author’s narrative process to become part of the narration itself, along with the narrator’s decision to stop watching television. In simultaneously becoming a commentary on the difficulty many writers face in their work, this novel embodies not only characteristics of meta-fiction, but a sort of autofiction as well as I mentioned earlier in this chapter:

[...] je continuais de rêvasser ainsi aristotéliennement à mon étude. J’ai toujours remarquablement bien travaillé mentalement, il est vrai, me laissant peu à peu imprégner par le livre que je projetais d’écrire en suivant simplement le fil de mes pensées, tandis que, sans que j’agisse le moins du monde pour en perturber le cours, affluaient tout doucement dans mon esprit une multitude d’impressions et de rêveries, de structures et d’idées, souvent inachevées, éparses, inaccomplies, en gestation ou déjà abouties, d’intuitions et de bribes, de douleurs et d’émotions, auxquels il ne me restait plus qu’à donner leur forme définitive. (TV 89-90)

Immediately perceptible in the first line of this passage is the presence of an oxymoron, the verb revâsser juxtaposed with the adverb aristotéliennement. The verb revâsser literally

means to daydream, which implies a very unstructured way of thinking about things.

However, Aristotle was a categorizer of knowledge. He developed trees of knowledge based on the notions of genus and species, and then categorized the species of animals as rational versus irrational, and so on and so forth. To create an adverb based on Aristotle implies meticulous structure and the fact that for him, form was essence. Thus, the unstructured sense of the verb in this passage contrasted side-by-side with an adverb that implies great structure is oxymoronic, and amusingly so given the context. Moreover, as if the narrator's comment "J'ai toujours remarquablement bien travaillé" is not bombastic enough, the fact that he continues in the same phrase to say "mentalement, il est vrai" strikes as quite funny at this juncture in the novel. After the hyperbole here, restricting how well he works to mentally in the context of procrastination seems ridiculous, but then again, this mental process is crucial in his mind. The ambivalence in this passage suggests irony, but after all, meditation can lead to discovery like Archimedes in his bathtub as I noted in chapter two. In fact, the narrator explains and defends the importance and difficulty of his mental work at several points in the novel. For example, at the very beginning when he says that he was not really doing anything during his summer in Berlin, he is quick to explain that by doing nothing he means "rien d'irréfléchi ou de contraint" (*TV* 11). He elaborates this justification:

Par ne rien faire, j'entends ne rien faire que l'essentiel, penser, lire, écouter la musique, faire l'amour, me promener, aller à la piscine, cueillir des champignons. Ne rien faire, contrairement à ce que l'on pourrait imaginer un peu vite, exige méthode et discipline, ouverture d'esprit et concentration. (*TV* 11).

It is very amusing, then, to realize how much value this narrator places on "ne rien faire."

The last part of the previous quote in which the narrator says that "il ne me restait plus qu'à donner leur forme définitive" completely devalues writing as a relatively unimportant task in contrast to the invention stage, the mental preparation. This is how Toussaint

playfully unmask the narrator since he is unable to reconcile the two stages of intellectual work. What is precisely fore-grounded in this passage is the writing of the narrator's text as principally the most problematic aspect of the plot of Toussaint's text. Indeed, this is what Toussaint's novel ends up encapsulating. Perhaps this is a way for him to deal with his own issues of writer's block and lack of productivity. It is amusing to note that while most of the author's novels are quite short, *La Télévision* is by far the longest, spanning just under 270 pages, more than twice as long as all the others, with the exception of *Faire l'amour* which ends on page 183. The fact that he writes so much about a professor who cannot even seem to get started is indeed interesting and yields a rich paradox. The key issue in the book is the narrator trying to give the reader the illusion that he is accomplishing something. Essentially, Toussaint ends up writing a sort of manual on the art of procrastination, and while his book was a critical and modest commercial success, his narrator does not fare so well.

b. Allusions to Gide and the Writing Process

Additionally, one must not ignore the striking parallel between this book and its author and *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* by André Gide. Toussaint is undoubtedly familiar with the works of Gide and seems to play somewhat on the creation of the aforementioned novel that was published in 1925. This novel, like *La Télévision* tells the story of a failed writer and the difficulty confronted by aspiring novelists, and even those who have already experienced some degree of success. As I just said, Toussaint has written a sort of manual on the art of procrastination with his fifth novel: in theory, the narrator lets the reader follow him on his journey in Berlin where he is supposed to be writing the book on Titien, but instead of a chronicle of his writing process and progress, we encounter the exact opposite, a sort of journal of avoiding work and thinking about TV, for example. This becomes more interesting

concerning Gide's novel since many of the chapters are entitled *Journal d'Edouard*, with one in particular entitled *Edouard expose ses idées sur le roman*. Even more interesting is the fact that Gide, too, kept of journal of his own writing process and progress throughout his life, most notably while creating *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, which was later published as *Journal des Faux-Monnayeurs*.

In Gide's novel, Edouard seems to reflect some of Gide's ideas on the writing process and that of the novel in particular as well. J.C. Davies says that "for Gide, the novel is 'une oeuvre déconcentrée', one which presents by means of a variety of techniques, a multiplicity of characters and a multiplicity of themes, all subtly interwoven within the complex fabric of its structure" (36). In *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, Edouard's concept of the novel appears to embody this idea as well:

Je voudrais tout y faire entrer, dans ce roman Depuis plus d'un an que j'y travaille, il ne m'arrive rien que je n'y verse et que je n'y veuille faire entrer: ce que je vois, ce que je sais, tout ce que m'apprend la vie des autres et la mienne ... (233)

However, if this writer wants to include absolutely everything in his novel, at what point will he stop observing life to sit down to write? Edouard and Toussaint's narrator have a lot in common here. Edouard admits his lack of concrete progress, but dismisses this, saying that he has in fact made a lot of progress, that the progress is his reflection on what he will write still brewing in his mind:

A vrai dire, du livre même, je n'ai pas encore écrit une ligne. Mais j'y ai déjà beaucoup travaillé. J'y pense chaque jour et sans cesse. J'y travaille d'une façon très curieuse, que je m'en vais vous dire: sur un carnet, je note au jour le jour l'état de ce roman dans mon esprit; oui, c'est une sorte de journal que je tiens, comme on ferait celui d'un enfant ... C'est à dire qu'au lieu de me contenter de résoudre, à mesure qu'elle se propose, chaque difficulté (et toute oeuvre d'art n'est que la somme ou le produit des solutions d'une quantité de menues difficultés successives), chacune de ces difficultés, je l'expose, je l'étudie. (234)

This reminds us of Toussaint's narrator who was daydreaming aristotéliennement about his work. Like Edouard, he insists on the value of initial thought over hastily putting things into writing: "On aurait tort de croire que ces moments de paisible mise en condition à l'écriture sont sans importance pour le travail lui-même" (TV 99). Unlike Edouard, though, our narrator refuses to talk about his work and his methods, and he has no one there criticizing him either. His academic benefactors do not seem to care about his progress, and his family is away. Edouard, however, is ignorant and flagrant in his illogical approaches to his work and wants attention from his friends: "Edouard espérait confusément qu'on lui demanderait de lire ces notes" (235). In the end, whereas Toussaint's narrator has no one to discourage him but himself, Edouard's friend Laura says frankly: "Mon pauvre ami ... ce roman, je vois bien que jamais vous ne l'écrirez" (235).

Indeed the parallels are worth mentioning, for example, the manner in which Gide describes his own philosophy on creating a literary work, his own work ethic. He wrote in his *Journal* to this effect on October 3rd, 1921, "Retour à Cuverville," explaining that "le mieux est de laisser l'oeuvre se composer et s'ordonner elle-même, et surtout ne pas la forcer." Similarly, as I have already noted, the unfolding of a novel for Toussaint is a mystery, and he likes to take his time. The narrator of *La Télévision* wonders if "n'était-ce pas précisément cela travailler ... cette lente et progressive ouverture de l'esprit et cette totale disponibilité des sens qui me gagnait peu à peu?" (TV 89) Edouard would certainly say yes. Our narrator goes to great lengths throughout the novel to justify the act of thinking, and how crucial it is to the research process as a whole, but compared to Gide's journal of the writing of his novel, which is mirrored directly through Edouard in his actual novel, Toussaint's narrator's process becomes ironic, a sort of parody of Gide. Gide writes from the same day just quoted, that he

thinks that “le majeur défaut des littérateurs et des artistes d’aujourd’hui est l’impatience : s’ils savaient attendre, leur sujet se composerait lentement de lui-même dans leur esprit...”

His comments and observations are sincere and serious, and if we give credence to this proposed intertextual reading, Toussaint takes these ideas on the significance of reflection and patience and twists them, exaggerates them in order to create a ludic version of them.

Like the narrator of *La Télévision*, Gide mentions himself in his *Journal* the temptation that distractions offer:

[...] Je devrais à présent m’attaquer aux *Faux-Monnayeurs*, mais par timidité, par indolence, par lâcheté, je souris à toutes les distractions qui se proposent et ne sais pas comment étreindre mon sujet. Je me conseille d’arpenter ma chambre de long en large, une heure durant en m’interdisant toute lecture.

Let us note Gide’s use of the word attaquer, just as the narrator of Toussaint’s novel used in a passage I cited earlier [“j’avais projeté d’attaquer mon étude le lendemain matin très tôt” (20).] Like the narrator of *La Télévision* who finds himself distracted by TV, but also sunbathing in parks, among other things, Gide falls prey to a similar predicament and thus has trouble grasping his topic, simply beginning. However, unlike Toussaint’s narrator, Gide admits that his reluctance to begin work has to do with timidity and cowardice, while Toussaint twists this idea completely to express that his narrator is in fact brave and wise by not beginning to write: one must take as much time as needed to think about the writing and the subject before actually attacking it with the pen. Of course, Toussaint’s narrator is in denial, as is Gide’s Edouard. Indeed, like Edouard, the narrator of Toussaint’s fifth novel reflects for long periods of time as well, although the authenticity and actual productivity of Toussaint’s narrator must certainly be called into question. At least Edouard kept a written journal. More amusing, though, is the entry in Gide’s journal from October 8th, 1922 in which he writes “[...] Je reprends enfin les *Faux-Monnayeurs*.” At the rate of taking hiatuses

of nine months, will the novel ever get written? Well, of course, in Gide's case, we know that it was completed and subsequently published in 1925. Likewise, Toussaint's novel was completed, published, and well received. Will the narrator of *La Télévision* ever finish his work? We will never know. Like Gide's failed novelist Edouard, Toussaint's narrator does not leave room for much hope of finishing either, or ever really starting for that matter. Given the similar autotextual and metatextual aspects of both *La Télévision* and *Les Faux-monnayeurs*, the Gidian intertext would seem to be one of the more subtle ludic devices at work here.

Consequently, when the reader approaches the half-way point of *La Télévision*, it is indeed disconcerting, and yet at the same time enlightening and amusing, to see him in the same place we left him some seventy pages earlier:

Assis dans le canapé du salon, je remis alors à songer distraitement au petit problème qui m'occupait l'esprit par intermittence depuis bientôt trois semaines, à savoir le nom qu'il convenait de donner à Titien dans mon étude, et j'essayais de me consoler de ne pas encore avoir arrêté de choix définitif en pensant que, paradoxalement, c'est plutôt si je m'étais mis à écrire tout de suite, sans me poser vraiment à fond la question du choix du nom, qu'on aurait pu me soupçonner de vouloir me dérober à l'effort pour me la couler douce à Berlin cet été, et qu'il y avait plutôt lieu de se réjouir, dans le fond, que, depuis bientôt trois semaines, par scrupules exagérés et souci d'exigence perfectionniste, je m'étais ainsi contenté de me disposer en permanence à écrire, **sans jamais céder à la paresse de m'y mettre.** (*TV* 115) [my emphasis]

This expression "sans jamais céder à la paresse de m'y mettre [au travail]" becomes the key factor in the development of the paradox of the narrator's writing process. It is very playful on the part of Toussaint to describe how much importance a writer places on the act of thinking, so much so that, it would be lazy and undisciplined to actually begin writing when clearly, there is much thinking to do about the work to come. This is warped logic, but this narrator explains this method in all seriousness so as to justify his lack of writing. He needs

to stress that although he has not written anything, he is indeed working very hard. He still has nothing to show for all his mental work and is paranoid that others will think that he applied for the grant just to spend a nice summer in Berlin. This passage also occurs the same day we left the narrator almost seventy pages earlier, so digression has taken up most of Toussaint's novel thus far.

When the narrator finally does begin to write concretely, the scene unfolds, and Toussaint offers his readers an extremely comical image, a complete mockery of the writing process, not to mention making fun of the satisfaction of making any progress at all, even a couple of words:

De retour à la maison, toujours très concentré, l'esprit tendu vers le travail à venir, soucieux de ne pas me laisser distraire avant d'avoir rejoint ma table de travail, j'ôtai ma veste dans le couloir et me rendis aussitôt dans mon bureau. Je m'assis à ma table de travail et mis mon ordinateur sous tension. Déjà un début de phrases m'était venu en chemin en revenant du parc. Je me répétais la phrase mentalement, mes doigts s'apprêtaient à la taper sur le clavier. «Quand Musset, abordant dans sa nouvelle...» Non, cela n'allait pas, «abordant» n'allait pas. Je levai la tête et regardai le plafond. «Evoquant», peut-être? Non, «évoquant» n'allait pas non plus. «Quand», par contre, me semblait assez bon. «Quand» était irréprochable, je trouvais. Et «Musset» c'était Musset, je pouvais difficilement l'améliorer. Quand Musset, dis-je à voix basse. Oui, ce n'était pas mal. Je me relevai, fis quelques pas dans mon bureau, ouvris la porte du balcon et me rendis pensivement sur la terrasse. Quand Musset, répétais-je à voix basse. Non, rien à dire, c'était un bon début. Je le dis un peu plus fort. Quand Musset. Je m'accoudai à la balustrade du balcon et le gueulai⁸⁵ un petit coup: Quand Musset! Quand Musset! répétais-je au balcon. Quand Musset! Silence! Entendis-je soudain, silence, s'il vous plaît! Cela venait d'en bas. Je me penchai au balcon. C'était le propriétaire de l'immeuble, un vieux monsieur qui était en train de lire dans le jardin sur une chaise pliante. Il avait posé son livre sur ses genoux, et il me regardait, la tête levée, très surpris, comme si quelque chose lui échappait. Je soulevai mon chapeau poliment pour le saluer, je ne sais pas si j'avais encore mon chapeau sur la tête à ce moment-là (sans chapeau, mon geste ne devait être que plus surprenant). Au même

⁸⁵ Toussaint may well be playing on Flaubert with the verb gueuler. Like Gide and Toussaint, Flaubert also took years to complete his works, painstakingly scrutinizing every detail. He was a perfectionist and would submit all of his ideas to what he called his gueuloir where they could brew and develop. He wanted to take time to appreciate the merits and faults of the written text, reading them out loud even before committing himself to their completion. Flaubert's gueuloir has become a quasi-mythical place that implies an obsession with literary style. Toussaint undermines the mythical nature of this place by having his narrator be absolutely delighted by only two simple words "Quand Musset." How pleased he is with this comes off as utterly absurd.

instant, de toute façon, le téléphone se mit à sonner dans l'appartement, et je dus interrompre mon travail. (*TV* 102)

Several things are notable in this passage. First of all, the first few details mentioned concern once again the process of preparation, not the actual work, which, as the narrator notes is “à venir.” Secondly, while grappling over word choices such as abondant and évoquant as this narrator does seems perfectly normal in a writerly process, justifying how the word when works well is undeniably ridiculous, as is questioning the choice of Musset, when clearly Musset is the subject he is dealing with in regard to Titien in his book. The way that Toussaint dramatizes the protagonist’s revelation that he has decided on the first two words of his book “Quand Musset” is extremely comical. Two sentences would be one thing, or even just one complete sentence, but the overjoyousness of this narrator upon having written two words and screaming those two words so loudly that he is told to be quiet by his neighbor is utterly farcical. The comic aspect of this scene is recalled when he speaks to Delon on the phone and tells her that he has finally started working, that he has, in fact, written a half a page as the reader reads in parentheses “(Quand Musset),” this being his own acknowledgement of exaggerating to Delon. Thirdly, there is the obvious humorous detail about his hat, and the fact that he cannot remember whether or not he was actually wearing his hat when he tipped it to salute his neighbor. Finally, in the last sentence of the paragraph, the phone rings thereby forcing the narrator to interrupt his work. Not only is this funny because the work that he has done consists merely of two words, but it is also funny because the narrator being interrupted from working becomes the main plot of the novel. It is nothing new anymore.

Although this novel is not autobiographical in the purest sense, it may well parallel Toussaint’s own life at the time, and the narrator even refers to himself as “un chauve” in one

scene, which is amusing if one knows that the author himself is bald. Toussaint is also a writer who had one child with another on the way at the time this fifth novel was written. Let us recall that like the narrator of *La réticence*, the author also had an infant son when he was writing that novel. As I mentioned earlier, then, both could feasibly be the author's own way of expressing the difficulties all writers face in their work.⁸⁶ He never wants to get serious and talk about it. This narrator, like that of *La réticence*, embodies a reflection of the author himself. Consequently, it is quite intriguing on the one hand that Toussaint would write texts that would seem to deal with the creative process and the work of a writer since discussing this is what he ultimately seems to want to avoid.⁸⁷ This blurring of fiction and reality

⁸⁶ The author also simultaneously mixes apparent autofictional references discussed earlier with chronological discrepancies. The narrator is playing soccer with his son when his wife Delon interjects: "Mais laisse-le gagner, il a cinq ans!" (TV 254). The narrator remarks: "Il a déjà cinq ans! dis-je (c'était incroyable, ça changeait tout le temps: il n'y a pas quinze pages, il avait quatre ans et demi)" (TV 254). This parenthetical comment is intriguing and commands a plethora of interpretations. It could be the narrator himself making fun of himself and his lack of productivity, meaning that it has taken him six months to write only fifteen pages of his book. Or could he be commenting on the general fleetingness of time, which fifteen pages ago in the actual novel, the narrator's son was still four years old? Well, it certainly becomes a joke, as only four pages later in the novel the narrator writes about his son adapting to life in Berlin. He says: "Mon fils s'était tout de suite adapté à sa nouvelle vie à Berlin, c'était un régal de voir comment il s'était immédiatement lié à ses nouvelles maîtresses et avait établi des tas de petits contacts complexes avec les autres enfants de l'école, mondains et claniques comme le sont les enfants à cet âge, quatre ans, quatre ans et demi, je ne sais plus très bien quel âge pouvait avoir mon fils à l'époque (il avait six ans maintenant)" (TV 258). This subsequent parenthetical mention is also playful and represents yet another commentary on time and the difficulties that writers face in producing their work. From pages 254 to 257, the narrator is still talking about that same day where he and his son played soccer. Then on page 257, we see "le lendemain matin" as a temporal indicator. This is where we are in the novel on page 258 when the narrator inserts the aforementioned parenthetical comment, the fact that his son was now six years old. There is a twenty-four hour lapse of time in the story where he is five and then suddenly six years old. It makes no sense, and so one must wonder if Toussaint is purposely playing with the reader by destroying chronology, by interfering with the fictive world in making reference to his own work, or at least merely making a joke about how long it takes to write a book, as I mentioned earlier through evoking Gide. According to Genette's narratological studies, it would seem that Toussaint is mixing the diegesis and the heterodiegesis, that is to say, the narrator's plan for his work and the writing of it. At any rate, once again we have a classic example of an unreliable narrator, one who cannot be trusted and whose rendition of events must be taken lightly.

⁸⁷ On the other hand, one would think that he would not want to discuss TV since this is exactly what he claims to want to avoid in the novel. Still, this is the title of the novel, and if we recall what I said earlier about writing being pitted against TV, a new perspective arises. In fact, the creative process is not discussed much: the narrator's left brain cannot seem to get past organizing pens and papers on his desk much less his thoughts. Not much space is dedicated to his work on Titien. What the book privileges (as it should, based on the title!) is discussing the narrator's thoughts on and relationship with TV. Its presence is massive in the narrator's apartment complex, as we saw TV sets on in all the windows. This is his environment in Berlin, at home, and

reaches a crescendo in *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)*, as I will discuss in the following section of this chapter.

D. *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)*
1. Subverting Genre ?

Before one even opens the sixth book published by Jean-Philippe Toussaint, the title draws attention to itself for a couple of reasons.⁸⁸ Firstly, a paradox is inherent in the fact that we are given an unfamiliar background [(à l'étranger)] to something that is supposed to be familiar [Autoportrait]. It would seem more typical for the backdrop of a self-portrait, a snapshot of oneself, a glimpse into one's own life, to constitute a familiar environment like one's hometown or favorite hangouts; however, as we should point out, there are no rules in literature nor does a standard exist for this type of writing. Moreover, as I insist throughout the dissertation, Toussaint systematically surprises readers book after book, so why should this one be any different? In further examining the title, the restriction of the field à l'étranger, which means abroad (as in other countries), comes off as curious, if not overtly playful. Secondly, Toussaint inserts parentheses in the title, something that the reader familiar with his work may understand as humorous as well. The author makes frequent use of parentheses in his writing, so it should not be surprising. Then again, this is not a novel. It does seem amusing here that already in the title, perhaps a wink on the part of the author, we encounter this stylistic trait. The seasoned reader of this author's texts must immediately

outside. It is interesting, then, to realize that perhaps stopping watching TV is not the solution to the narrator's lack of productivity after all. By the same token, perhaps the author suggests that TV is not the root of all evil as some would tend to say.

⁸⁸ Although *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)* is Toussaint's sixth book published with Les Editions de Minuit, it should be noted that many of the events that take place in the book are based on ones that occurred in 1995, as well as the fact that several of the chapters were previously published in *Subaru*, a Japanese publication. Thus, although this text was published in January 2000, much of it was conceived and written before the publication of the author's fifth novel *La Télévision*.

question the difference between something in parentheses and something that is not. Since, more often than not, the comments in parentheses in Toussaint's texts are ludic, be they overtly comical or subtly playful, the appearance of à l'étranger in parentheses should force us to suspect it as ludic as well. Even the experienced reader of this Belgian author's texts who expects to see numerous parenthetical comments throughout may not necessarily expect it in the title itself. He plays from not page one, but rather the cover of the book, and therefore this can and should be suspect as part of a broader ludic agenda. If the reader senses this already evident playfulness before even cracking the cover open, it certainly sheds light on what is to come inside the actual pages.

Since Toussaint always surprises readers, subverting genre would seem to be one of the primary functions of this text. Indeed, illusion of reality is what Toussaint offers up in his self-portrait, and it paradoxically represents a concession, albeit a very ambiguous one for that matter, for the author to shed his skin, to show more of himself. While Toussaint's own life experiences tend to bleed into the novels that he writes as we see especially in his previous novel *La Télévision*, he says that although there is a proximity to himself, it is not at all autobiographical. For example, his protagonists visit or reside in the same foreign countries that he himself has visited or lived in, and once the author began to have children, so did his main characters. So far, his narrators have also followed the same age trajectory as the author himself, and he admits that he does feel very close to his narrators, despite the fact that his texts are not at all autobiographical. He explains this point of view:

Je ne raconte pas des événements qui me sont arrivés. C'est plus proche de ce que peut-être l'auto-portrait en peinture. **Le peintre se prend pour sujet, mais il traite plus de la peinture que de lui-même. C'est ça qui m'intéresse.** Ce n'est pas de parler de moi, au sens de ce qui m'est arrivé, de qui j'ai rencontré, de qui j'ai vu et de ce que je pense. C'est plutôt d'essayer de faire un portrait de moi à travers la

littérature. Il y a donc des constantes qui font que les personnages sont assez proches de ce que je suis, notamment ils vieillissent un peu comme moi.⁸⁹ [my emphasis]

He characterizes a self-portrait in writing as analogous to a painter who uses himself as a subject, but rather concentrates more on the actual painting techniques than creating a perfect likeness of his own image. This has been our author's artistic goal all along as I have emphasized. In terms of writing, this statement reiterates the fact that he privileges style over story. The authenticity of Toussaint's self-portrait becomes doubtful, then, as he novelizes the chosen random events of his various trips abroad, writing in a similar style to his previous works, namely with the use of parentheses indicative of an intrusive narrator, but also in the banality and slapstick humor apparent in many of the situations. Let us not forget the narrator's self-deprecating and derisive comments, which are often found in parentheses. That said, parentheses almost always seem to suggest another point of view, a sort of doublespeak, and we do know that this author's texts can often seem intentionally ambiguous. In *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)*, the reader perhaps expects traditional elements indicative of autobiographical works, but what we encounter seems to embody, rather, an auto-fiction, which plays on its resemblance to a novel in the first person.

Furthermore, although we may immediately read the subtitle (*à l'étranger*) as signifying abroad, which it does, it playfully invites a secondary sense in evoking Camus' novel *L'Etranger*. What was and still is so intriguing about Camus' famous text is that it never assumes its own fictionality. As I quoted Jenny in the introduction, "Sa *feintise* consiste à toujours se présenter comme un récit factuel et non comme une histoire imaginaire." The author may be playfully alluding to this text with the use of à as well, which seems

⁸⁹ See "Interview de Jean-Philippe Toussaint." Le 19 janvier 1998, Institut franco-japonais de Tokyo, par Laurent Hanson.

to evoke a possible dedication, or the notion that our author's text will be written in similar style to that of Camus. Indeed, the style of *Autoportrait* resembles that of Toussaint's previous works all subtitled Roman, and consequently, it becomes difficult to decipher what is real and what has been created for the literary purposes of the author, many of the meta-diegetic narratives quite far-fetched as I will show momentarily. On that note, let us recall that auto-fiction presents itself in the guise of autobiography, but where le pacte autobiographique is undermined by inexact references.

2. First Impressions: structure and approach

Since it is not a novel, in fact, this particular text is organized by destination, with a title page for each new chapter and a table of contents at the end to guide the reader. Then, each chapter recounts an isolated event that took place in this city at that time. The mini-stories are not difficult to follow, and because there is a logical beginning and ending to each musing or anecdote with a chapter title, temporal relationships are not confusing as in his novels. In his previous works, it is oftentimes in the guise of disorder and twisted chronology that some of the playful elements reside. This is not the case here. In his study *L'autofiction*, Jenny explains that according to Alain Robbe-Grillet, "non seulement le récit autobiographique, sélectionne, mais **il a tendance à organiser le passé selon une logique causale** qui n'était nullement perçue au moment des événements. De ce point de vue, il opérerait une *falsification*."

With this perspective in mind, then, what is ludic about Toussaint's *Autoportrait* is the fact that within all this organization (a self-portrait of a writer with a table of contents and delineated chapters), we see neither a writer being interviewed nor a writer writing, neither the story of how he became inspired to write nor the details we might expect from this genre,

nothing about his childhood or his love life, and barely a word about his wife and children.⁹⁰

What we do see is an author ordering sliced meat in a deli in Berlin, an author waiting to be interviewed in his hotel room in Tokyo, an author who wins a gigantic ham in a bocci ball tournament in Cap Corse, and one who visits a strip-club in Nara, Japan with the scholars who invited him there. Generally speaking, he avoids the approach that focuses on the man and his work, as well as the supposed influence of one's culture on one's own life and work.

In addition, despite the title of the book, one cannot even be sure that it will be a first person narration upon reading the first paragraph. Let us examine the incipit of the text for a more detailed analysis:

On arrive à Tokyo comme à Bastia, par le ciel, l'avion amorce un long virage au-dessus de la baie et prend l'axe de la piste pour atterrir. Vu de haut, à quatre mille pieds d'altitude, il n'y a pas beaucoup de différence entre le Pacifique et la Méditerranée. (*AE* 9)

From the very beginning of the book, local differences appear to be erased, at least this may be our initial impression, and it is precisely this kind of reasoning (that finally everything is like everything else) that Toussaint appears to be mocking. The narrator does not distinguish Tokyo from any other place; however, he chooses to open the entire text from an airplane and present the reader with his view of the city from the sky in order to highlight its supposed indistinct characteristics when he remarks that “Vu de haut, à quatre mille pieds d'altitude, il n'y a pas beaucoup de différence entre le Pacifique et la Méditerranée” (*AE* 9). He is expressing more or less that be it Tokyo or Bastia, there is not really that much difference, at least

⁹⁰ The only mention of any of Toussaint's children occurs at the end of the bocci ball game in Cap Corse where “Madeleine accourut à [sa] rencontre avec le bébé Anna dans ses bras” (*AE* 44). . . Even then, Toussaint infuses humor into the moment when he describes the baby Anna, saying that “d'enthousiasme, [elle] prononça là ses premières paroles («papa», ou «prizuttu» [the Corsican word for the big ham that he won in the boules match]; dans la confusion, personne ne sut très bien)” (*AE* 44). As has happened in all of his novels and will happen again in this text, Toussaint diffuses any seriousness and pure emotion with a comical commentary on the moment. He also mentions that his bad back in Tokyo could be the result of carrying his two year-old daughter, but just like that, in passing.

from the sky. Indeed, he is playing here because one certainly cannot grant much credibility to a view from four thousand feet in the air. He says that you can get to both Tokyo and Bastia by plane, both are on islands, water is water and also looks the same from the sky. Only the obvious surface similarities are highlighted. In ironical manner, then, the author playfully presents these two distinctively different cities (and bodies of water and geographic locations) and cultures as non-lieux, or nonplaces, places of transition and waiting such as train stations, cafés, hotel rooms and the like.⁹¹ Although all of the landscapes in his novels may be rife with non-lieux, as I mentioned earlier, this book does not exclusively privilege this notion despite what some critics say, which I will touch on briefly in the following section.

3. Cultural Collision as Theme

a. Cultural Collision vs. the Non-lieu

Many of the scenes in Toussaint's books take place in non-descript locales and often while the characters are in transit from one place to another as critics have pointed out. As a result, then, one might be led to believe that many of the scenes in Tokyo, Hong Kong, Cap Corse, and Hanoi, for instance, could ironically take place almost anywhere in the world, but Toussaint playfully turns this idea upside down in his self-portrait and makes a ludic counterpoint. While the presence of non-lieux is a valid argument, not every place in this text becomes a nonplace as some critics seem to believe. Jean-Louis Hippolyte is one scholar who sees the snapshots in the author's self-portrait very much in terms of non-lieux, as he explains in "A Tokyo comme à Bastia: le non-lieu chez Jean-Philippe Toussaint":

Si le monde est irreprésentable, ce n'est pas seulement parce que ses frontières, ses limites, sont équivoques ou indéfinies, [...] c'est aussi et surtout parce que l'uniformité, son excès en quelque sorte, plongent l'observateur pascalien des romans de Toussaint dans le désœuvrement et l'angoisse. Ainsi, le narrateur itinérant

⁹¹ See note on p. 60.

d'Autoportrait (à l'étranger) nous peint-il sur un ton ludique (et passablement inquiet) l'image d'un monde d'autant plus étrange qu'il est (paradoxalement) universellement ordinaire, de Berlin à Prague, en passant par Nara (Japon), le Cap Corse, Hanoi (Vietnam) et Tunis. (117-18)

This may be an accurate description for some of the destinations in our author's book; for instance, the airport in Hong Kong would undeniably be considered a non-place as a transitory space, a place of waiting, one in which others from all over the world are also waiting to go somewhere else. With its dirty linoleum floors and plastic chairs, it could be anywhere in the world. However, not all of the spaces and places in this self-portrait can be fairly and generally classified as "universellement ordinaire," as Hippolyte appears to oversimplify. He summarizes the above quotation:

Si le narrateur voyageur de ce roman ne sait plus où il va (APE, 17), c'est peut-être parce que le monde, autrefois riche de lieux connus ou inconnus, cultivés ou en friche, est devenu ce "village" que l'on dit "global", totalement ouvert et accessible donc, surabondant de sens, quadrillé par des voies de traverse, voies de transit, où l'excursionniste ne fait que passer. (118)

First of all, the scholar calls *Autoportrait* a novel, which it is not, not even a roman de voyages. It is a self-portrait. Secondly, just because technology has opened up the world and made it globally accessible does not mean that this newfound accessibility has stripped all cultures of their unquities nor that Toussaint has not offered us an authentic glimpse into some of these foreign places. Although many of the narrator's musings may be unexpected and perceived by some as unconventional and banal considering that he is traveling abroad, this alone does not render the background for these musings a non-place. Cultural disorientation and incongruity absolutely abound as other languages invade and pervade the text, and the critic acknowledges the cultural mingling that I will cite in a moment. However, it seems to me that what some may completely box in and confuse as a text riddled with non-lieux is

really a text inundated with cultural collisions, and I do not believe that they represent exactly the same thing.

b. Cap Corse

Let us take the example of Corsica, the chapter entitled “Cap Corse (Le plus beau jour de ma vie),” in which we spend time with the Corsican Christian Pietrantoni and meet his Japanese girlfriend Noriko. Cultural collisions thrive in this chapter especially. The only language these two characters share is Spanish, so although this chapter entails a bocci ball game in Corsica, there are several Spanish sentences strewn in for good measure. At first glance, this may seem to distance the reader further from the Corsican context, but it is not necessarily so as we will explore.⁹²

With a parenthetical subtitle like “Le plus beau jour de ma vie,” the reader may feel like guessing that something special will be mentioned here. It certainly peaks curiosity and raises expectations. We soon learn that it is the season for boules and that the narrator and friends will play in a local tournament. The playfulness of incongruity enters full force when the narrator and his partner actually win the competition:

Je reçus alors le premier prix du concours, le jambon corse, des mains des organisateurs. Je le reçus à deux mains, ému, et le portai à mes lèvres avant de le tendre à bout de bras pour le montrer à la foule, tandis qu’on tirait en l’air de toutes parts et que les cloches du village s’étaient mises à sonner. Puis, passant le jambon à mon partenaire, il le baisa à son tour en le frôlant de la moustache, et, dans la liesse générale, accompagnés de Noriko qui trottaient à côté de moi pour me faire signer un autographe sur sa planche de surf, nous entamâmes un petit tour d’honneur sur la place du village, suivis d’un chien qui boitait et de quelques enfants. (AE 44-5)

⁹² On this note, it might be important to mention that although Christian Pietrantoni travels all over the world, he carries his home with him everywhere, and thus Corsica dominates the text on some levels. In the first chapter “Tokyo,” “parfaitement indifférent à l’atmosphère ambiante” of the Japanese teahouse, all he reports is the news from Corsica. We then learn that even in foreign countries, he has a subscription to *Corse-Matin*. In the above scene in Cap Corse, then, Pietrantoni would represent local color and something more authentic about the place. Additionally, in a later chapter also entitled “Tokyo,” the narrator complains about problems with his back, but does not know exactly how to express it in French. He calls his malady la scruchjèta and says “(le mot est corse)” (47). Thus, this Corsican subtext that looms in the background of some of the scenes is notable.

On the one hand, this scene comes off as parodic and certainly adheres to Toussaint's overturning the reader's expectations with the contrast between the grandiloquence of the ceremony and the paltriness of the grand prize, a ham. Moreover, Corsica has an abundance of literature; with Mérimée and the Corsican notion of the vendetta evoked in *La réticence* already, we may have expectations because of this preconception and the parodic aspects of that novel. Furthermore, the blending of cultures rings ever-present. In this chapter, the weaving of Corsica and Japan into one another surfaces through Christian Pietrantoni's girlfriend Noriko. Witnessing a young Japanese woman autographing her surfboard for the narrator embodies the saugrenu and presents yet another level of contrast. A final incongruity appears in the comical contrast of the narrator's tour d'honneur with the only public following them being a barking dog and some children. Once again in this work of autofiction, the reader ironically senses a certain autodérision.⁹³

On the other hand, if we put the parodic reading aside for a moment, we can see local color here. Although Hippolyte seems to dismiss Cap Corse in this scene as a non-lieu because "on parle espagnol avec une Japonaise en villégiature" (118), I must respectfully disagree. Yes, we have several degrees of cultural collision as I prefer to express it, but not a non-lieu in this case. First off, they are playing bocci ball in a Corsican village, which offers a nice cultural representation. We also see (and hear) "les cloches du village." In terms of the more authentic Corsican aspects of the scene, we learn a couple words from the language, mainly prizuttu, the word for a Corsican ham, and as we have just seen, first prize in the bocci ball tournament. Moreover, shooting in the air as they do in this scene is most certainly

⁹³ Of modern derision, Defays writes that it can be characterized as not only individualist, but also "désinvolte, désabusée [et] autosuffisante" (28). He explains that "la dérision moderne consiste surtout à jouer avec le monde de manière à le tenir à distance" (28). Of self-derision then, we could say that Toussaint keeps himself at bay, not the world, and this seems ironic to distance oneself in a work called *Autoportrait*.

not a French habit. Most Corsican customs that remain are based on religion in this country, and the procession, particularly at Easter, is one of the most important. Therefore, even if the author seems to be parodying this by transforming the tour d'honneur into some mock procession through the village, it still rings particular and distinguishable as part of that culture. Honor holds a very important place in Corsican culture, so this tour of honor, parodic or not, is significant.

While it may be true that what happens in each section is sometimes surprising and even jarring because we do not always see what we would expect from the countries that the narrator claims to be visiting, we cannot simplify each situation and merely condemn it to being a non-place, and the author of *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)* appears to be playing with this notion. Although I do not deny the presence of non-places in this text, I would argue that often what is at work in this book yet mistaken for non-lieux is the idea of cultural collision. The chapter on Kyoto begins immediately with the narrator saying that he really never got the chance to improve his German in Kyoto. As if this were not illogical enough, then, he is visited by his friend Romano Tomasini “qui est violoniste à l’orchestre philharmonique de Berlin (d’origine italienne, Romano est luxembourgeois, mais nous parlons généralement français entre nous)” (AE 57). The reader is suddenly presented with a cascade of unexpected details. In Vietnam when the narrator hails a taxi, the driver obviously thinks that he looks German and begins to speak German with him. This scene ends comically when the driver asks him in German where in Germany he is from, the narrator replying back in German to the driver whom he knows is Vietnamese: “Und Sie?” [and you?] “Il me regarda (lui, non plus, apparemment, n’était pas allemand)” (AE 80). Toussaint’s narrators all play an annoyingly self-assertive character at some point in his texts, and this

one is no exception. Cultural collisions do not always render a place indistinct, and not all spaces of this self-portrait can accurately be called non-places.

c. Vietnam

This chapter that takes place in Hanoi constitutes one of the lengthier ones of the book, and although it is a long chapter, it can basically be divided up into two main parts. First, the narrator talks about the ride he took on the back of a scooter with a young woman named Solange, which leads to a long description of the nature of traffic in Hanoi with all the scooters weaving in and out as well as the thousands of horns being honked simultaneously. Indeed, the narrator is in transit, and he is in traffic, a situation readers may not expect from a destination as exotic as Vietnam.⁹⁴ However, this is a very accurate description of Hanoi today, and this scene could not take place anywhere in the world. It is not just anywhere in the world that one finds scooters as taxis, not to mention a sea of them with no delineated lanes or end in sight. On the contrary, this is a vivid depiction of an Asian metropolis and offers the reader a colorful view of this particular urban landscape. Moreover, we have a quintessential cultural collision between the Belgian narrator and the Vietnamese young lady of small stature, Solange. The narrator needs to be somewhere and as he explains, “A Hanoi, on se déplace plutôt en motocyclette” (*AE* 80). So, one morning, a young woman named Solange is charged with picking him up at his hotel on her scooter. The contrast of Solange “qui ne mesurait pas plus d’un mètre cinquante pour quarante kilos” and the narrator, “[lui] et [ses] quatre-vingts kilos” (*AE* 82) is comical in its contrastive cultural collision, and the mere idea of such a little girl taking a big man on the back of her scooter comes off as saugrenu indeed. As the scene unfolds, though, more humor ensues when the narrator feels unbalanced

⁹⁴ Then again, this chapter is toward the end of the book, so perhaps the reader is finally getting wise to Toussaint’s techniques and is not surprised by this scene after all.

when Solange accelerates suddenly into traffic. He explains that “ne sachant que faire de mes mains, après un rapide regard circulaire, ma foi, je les posai sur le hanches de Solange” (*AE* 81). The scene progresses in this way:

Moi, je trouvais ça agréable, finalement, de rouler comme ça dans Hanoi en tenant Solange par la taille et en lui parlant à l’oreille à voix basse, en sentant sous mes doigts le tissu très léger de sa robe. Je compris cependant, par la suite, que ce n’était pas exactement l’usage de tenir ainsi sa conductrice par la taille, quand on n’était pas intimes, ni d’ailleurs de fermer les yeux et de poser sa tête avec mélancolie sur son épaule (en chantonnant mentalement quelque sérénade italienne), mais qu’il y avait en fait une poignée à l’arrière pour se tenir. (*AE* 81)

The point seems to be that the streets of Hanoi are flooded with scooters that serve as the Vietnamese taxicab, but in the narrator’s passage, the humor is derived from his inversion of something more exciting or glamorous with the description of his interaction with Solange. It seems a bit ludicrous. His awkwardness and all of the details come off as very funny in their incongruity. Imagining this Belgian man on the back of a little scooter, holding the waist of his driver who is a much smaller woman is funny. The fact that he is singing an Italian serenade with his eyes closed and head propped on her shoulder also appears to be comically out of place.

The second part of the chapter takes place at a conference, which the narrator is attending along with other francophone writers at a university. This second scenes is comical for its incongruities seen in cultural collisions as well. Despite the difficulty, the narrator does arrive at his conference, and just as in *La Télévision*, for example, academia and France, in fact, are mocked. For instance, “Au bas de la jambe du U, à l’endroit de la chaussette, disons, se tenait l’ambassadeur de France, impassible, qui était en train de suçoter placidement quelque pastille pour la toux” (*AE* 89). Then we see the francophone conference participants, “notre délégation presque au complet, trois sur quatre (le quatrième dormait à

l'hôtel), sages et sérieux, perplexes, le sourcil vigilant et l'œil intéressé, un peu trop pour l'être vraiment" (AE 89). Already, the French ambassador is caricatured and the role of the writer as serious scholar is undermined since one of their own is apparently still sleeping back at the hotel. The conference begins, but instead of diving into a discussion of literature, the participants are subjected to long introductions to the event:

Depuis une dizaine de minutes, plus personne n'écoutait ce qu'il disait, d'ailleurs, et quelques petits papiers circulaient discrètement dans les rangs, qui passaient devant nous ou qu'il fallait faire passer à son voisin, de la part du conseiller culturel pour le responsable du bureau du livre, ou du responsable du bureau du livre pour l'attaché culturel, l'heureux destinataire ouvrait alors distraitement le petit papier entre ses doigts et le lisait songeusement, les pouces ouverts, les yeux dans le vague, tout en faisant semblant de continuer à écouter l'orateur. (AE 90-1)

They are bored, and their pretending to be listening diligently is amusing.

In the final pages of the scene, the French ambassador is mocked once again. We are still in the midst of introductions. He takes the podium, looks intensely at everyone and "attaqua d'entrée, assez racinien et *destroy*, avec de grandes mains et un regard de feu, la voix enrouée, éraillée, dans laquelle on sentait comme l'éraflure constante d'un bonbon à l'eucalyptus ..." (93). This caricature continues, and the narrator notes that the Vietnamese participants listened to him seriously, nodding their heads in approval, "[prenant] même quelques notes à l'occasion (écrivant sagement dans leurs carnets : «rayonnement non seulement économique, mais culturel» et ils soulignaient «culturel»)" (AE 93). In the ultimate ludic act, it seems that the author takes the opportunity here to accentuate the very thing that he undermines in this text, real cultural exchanges. The ambassador's speech comes off as diplomatic double-speak in the end, and Toussaint mocks the note-taking that occurs to illuminate this further. The scene ends on a farcical note when, for reasons unknown, the actress and singer Jane Birkin just happens to be at the conference. Everyone realizes this and

soon enough the whole room is chanting “Une chanson, une chanson!” (95) She eventually accepts, and the chapter concludes with her singing: “*Et quand tu as plongé dans la lagune/Nous étions tous deux nus...*”(AE 96). So much for the conference. Yet again, the author seems to have also undermined the literature and the idea of talking about his work on the one hand, since no literature is ever discussed. On the other hand, perhaps Toussaint is not undermining literature per se, but rather what he considers an obsolete idea of literature. In so doing, he is actually practicing literature, and this is quite ludic. All in all, through the cultural collisions present in this self-portrait, the author portrays life as a comedy, including his own. Everything seems like a game people play in the end, and his use of incongruity, particularly in the next section on Berlin, accentuates this idea.

4. Incongru, Saugrenu: decentering culture through contrast a. Berlin and Prague

Incongruity and the saugrenu as a related contrastive device play major roles in all of Toussaint’s novels and serve to reinforce ludic undertones, and his self-portrait is no different in this respect. The entire chapter in Berlin occurs in a delicatessen, and this scene portrays the narrator as a little bit rude, a customer who comes off as utterly overdemanding; however, he clearly goes into the deli with the intention of being assertive since he has heard that “Les Berlinois ont la réputation d’être secs, impatients, peu aimables” (AE 21). The female clerk waiting on him, “car c’était une jeune femme, une méchante et corpulente jeune femme,” just cannot seem to slice his ham the way he wants it, and thus some slapstick humor and sarcasm ensue as the narrator has her redo it several times:

Elle m’a coupé une tranche de jambon et l’a jetée sur le comptoir. *Noch einen Wunsch? Das*, j’ai dit, et j’ai montré une terrine d’aspic. Elle m’a coupé à toute vitesse une minuscule tranche d’aspic mais vraiment minuscule, on pouvait plastifier un passeport avec une telle épaisseur de gelée, nettoyer ses lunettes. [...] elle obtempérait et me coupait ma tranche comme je voulais. Elle m’a obéi. Elle a mis à

l'écart sa tranche minuscule, pour se la manger plus tard, qui sait, se la rouler en boule et se l'avaler en douce, et elle a sorti toute la terrine de la vitrine. [...] Elle transpirait, de grosses gouttes tombaient dans la terrine. (AE 22-3)

Finally, the clerk gets it right and the narrator remarks:

Elle m'a emballé ma tranche avec beaucoup de prévenance, m'a rendu la monnaie avec infiniment de respect, elle ne savait plus quoi faire pour moi, quoi me proposer, quelle faveur m'accorder, un sac en plastique, un petit apéritif, voulais-je qu'elle m'appelât un taxi. (AE 24).

We first notice the narrator's brash sarcasm in several of his comments: that one could laminate a passport with a thinness of the slice of aspic the clerk cut, that perhaps the clerk was going to take the tiny discarded slice and eat it herself later, and that in the end, the clerk did not know what else she could do for the narrator. To the last comment, offering a plastic bag to him for his purchase is standard, but the narrator sarcastically adds that perhaps the clerk could offer him a drink or even call a taxi for him. He plays the quintessential smart-aleck here, and more than comical, the scene is a bit jarring in its audacity. Early in the scene, we sense the narrator's defiance, a certain machismo shining though when he says especially that the clerk would have to cut his slice how he wanted and that in the end "Elle [lui] a obéi." The intensity of the situation and the tone taken by both characters are completely incongruous. If this situation were to occur in reality, it might render anyone witnessing it a bit uncomfortable. Besides, the lines between fiction and reality are blurred in this self-portrait, so it is natural to imagine that this actually happened. The reader is perhaps made to understand that the narrator is embellishing his story as he gains the respect he sought, and it is funny; but what is also funny in that same zone of discomfort is the shocking detail about the clerk's sweat dropping onto the terrine. No matter how many times Toussaint surprises the reader, details like this are still unexpected. The scene begins and ends in this deli, and thus it is perhaps not the picture of Berlin with which the reader expected to be presented.

The narrator offers us a cultural stereotype and uses slapstick humor and the saugrenu in an attempt to diffuse the mock intensity of the atmosphere. Without seeing the chapter title, one might assume that the scene takes place in Germany because of words exchanged in German, but as we have seen with the cultural collisions in this text, this may not necessarily be the case. We do know that the scene takes place in Berlin, but this one in effect really could take place anywhere in the world. This deli could be called a non-place here, but not because it is a non-descript deli. Rather Toussaint plays on the stereotype but seems to want to say that if we really think about it, yes, this could happen to anyone anywhere. The people of Berlin are not the only people in the world who have a reputation for being sullen, and in fact, an American visiting Paris, for example, could easily experience the same thing. Perhaps Toussaint wants to destroy the stereotype, and in so doing, he decenters culture through this confrontation and his use of incongruity.

From Berlin, the narrator and his wife travel on to Prague. The passage begins as such:

Prague, n'en parlons pas. Nous y passâmes un week-end en amoureux, Madeleine et moi, aux alentours de Pâques, dans une mansarde quasiment sans fenêtre qui laissait une impression malsaine de chambre de claque, avec sa mezzanine et ses stores mi-clos, sombre, poussiéreuse, un peu puante (en partant nous laissâmes sur une table basse une enveloppe avec quelques deutschemarks à l'adresse du petit trafiquant qui nous avait sous-loué sa mansarde). (AE 25)

From the initial description, the reader knows that the intended “week-end en amoureux” could not have been real romantic since the room stank and was reminiscent of a whorehouse. Once again, the saugrenu stands out, and once again, the readers perhaps find themselves in a zone between delight and disgust from the above description. Left with a sour impression of the stay, the narrator wishes to talk about the train ride on the way there instead. The reader witnesses the first class compartment of the train, as well as the dining car

and various descriptions of the menu offerings. Again, this may not be what readers are expecting to discover about the narrator's trip to Prague. The ending is amusing since we see the narrator and his wife, full of hope, "la plénitude de [leurs] espoirs intacts" (*AE* 29), headed for "la promesse imminente de Prague (que nulle réalité, si infime fût-elle, n'était encore venue ternir)" (*AE* 29). Thus, this little analeptic episode is funny since the reader already knows that the accommodations in Prague were quite questionable. Also, Toussaint paints a romantic picture of the train ride and this hope, but in his typical style decides to mix it or rather downgrade it at the end with the mundane and/or the vulgar:

[...] l'air miroitait autour de nous, qui flottait avec douceur et légèreté tout au long des petits rideaux en dentelle ajourée de la fenêtre du compartiment, au-dessus de nos assiettes, sur les couverts, sur les verres, sur nos mains enlacées sur la table, sur les mouches. (*AE* 29)

It appeared to be leading up to something beautiful, but instead we are left with the image of flies. Juxtaposing the noble with the vulgar to create situations that, due to the contrasting incongruous elements, come off as ridiculous and playful as we have just seen may be the most recurrent theme of this particular text, one with which this author is well acquainted. Details like these that are saugrenus are not uncommon, except that here it is reality that we sense as well.

Although these scenes in Berlin and Prague do possess a certain verisimilitude in their decentering of culture, the naïve reader might wonder what to think of this narrator who describes his time in these foreign capitals in such limited terms. One's vision is undeniably limited when abroad, and thus it is not difficult to see negativity in everything. Berlin and Prague have reputations as artistic havens, and so before reading what the narrator has to say, these two chapters seem so promising in terms of artistic endeavor. Both Berlin and Prague are full of cultural possibilities, and thus so is Toussaint's literary project here. With the

banality of the events contrasted with the preconceived cultural notions, however, both culture and literature are playfully undermined.⁹⁵

b. Nara, Japan

I discuss the author's use of incongruity and the saugrenu, that is to say his approach to contrast, throughout this section as one of the main elements of playfulness in his texts. When we read something unexpected, we smile or laugh often times out of pure discomfort, as I have evoked throughout. We do not know how else to react. Laughter is a sort of irritation of the psyche, and so just because we laugh does not necessarily mean that what we laugh at is actually funny, as I emphasized earlier in citing O'Neill and Morrell. With this in mind, no scene is perhaps more jarring in *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)* than the one in which the narrator and his hosts go to a strip club in Nara, "capitale historique du Japon," as it is named in the chapter title. Referred to specifically as the historic capital of Japan, one might well expect to see ruins, monuments, and other important architectural vestiges, for instance, in Nara. Instead, the narrator has an awkward conversation with a young female Japanese admirer, whom the professor tries to get rid of nonchalantly so that the men can all head to the strip club. Of course, knowing that the group of men will go to a strip club is one thing, but the concrete descriptions of the dancer are enough to shock anyone, the narrator himself feeling repulsed by what he witnesses:

Nous posâmes nos sacs de Noël à côté de nous dans la pénombre, les répartissant bien de chaque côté de nos sièges, avant de relever la tête vers la scène, sur laquelle une strip-teaseuse entièrement nue assise par terre les jambes écartées s'enfonçait une petite balle de ping-pong rouge dans le vagin et le faisait sauter comme un bouchon de champagne, flop, qui retombait mollement sur son ventre et qu'elle se renfonçait dans le fion séance tenante pour réactiver son bilboquet intime. (AE 75)

⁹⁵ This may also be reminiscent of Meursault in Camus' *L'Étranger* since he is a character who is always in touch with the most immediate present and oblivious to anything else.

The vulgar vocabulary is the most obvious incongruity here, with words like con and fion, for example. The narrator explains that the stripper comes to the edge of the stage, legs wide open, offering the front row some little transparent plastic wipes so that they can clean their fingers “si d’aventure leur venait l’envie de les enfoncer dans son con pour y fourrager un instant librement” (*AE* 76). As if this were not enough, he continues to the end of the chapter in wonderment that the stripper continues to smile, almost oblivious to the fact that three men “étaient en train de lui pétrir les seins et de lui travailler le con avec des assiduités de manchots aveugles, bornés et répétitifs . . .” (*AE* 76-7). All of this “[lui] semblait le plus répugnant,” and he ends the scene on a light sarcastic note: “Eh bien, joyeux Noël” (*AE* 77). His acceptance of the situation may come off as surprising, but he really does not have a choice. He is with colleagues, his Japanese hosts, and so he adapts to his background. He may be disgusted, but it is the author’s use of the coarse vocabulary that enhances the reader’s disgust.

Everything about this scene down to the smallest details is not only vulgar, but completely unexpected, especially in a chapter on the historic capital of Japan. Perhaps the reader laughs, but if so, it is likely more out of shock at the audacity this author has. He is bold, and that is often what enhances the ludic character of his works. Even the initial descriptions of the club evoke the physical senses, and Toussaint’s way with words brings the sights and smells of the place to life. For example, he says that the old theater “sentait l’urine et le soja fermenté” and that the restrooms, “sentaient autant la pisse que le miso, la merde que le potage . . .” (*AE* 73-4). The evocation of the scent of soy and miso are perhaps unconventional examples of local color we get here. Another incongruous detail is the fact that the narrator and his friend have just been Christmas shopping for their families, so the

mention of putting their Christmas packages down next to them also provides a jarring juxtaposition with the strip club. Once again, the noble, Nara portrayed in the chapter title as the historic capital of Japan, contrasted with the vulgar, the visit to the strip club instead of the “temple Shin Yakushiji” is what the reader comes away with. It seems at first glance that Japanese culture has been decentered in this scene.

Nevertheless, one must not assume that the space (the strip club) of this place is not typical of Japan. In fact, what we can see in this episode is the self-portrait of a visitor who decided to acknowledge his reactions. If the spectacle is disgusting, so be it. Therefore, we are left to suspect that Nara embodies not only the historic capital of Japan, but that it also embodies the vulgar scene that takes place in the strip club. We begin to sense that both of these perspectives may well be accurate portrayals of Japanese culture, and thus Nara, in this sense, might not be a culturally decentered non-place after all.

5. Same Old Story? Slapstick and Style

In the second passage of the opening chapter, we see Toussaint’s standard repertoire, minute details about clothing as well as a seemingly inconsequential deadpan detail in parentheses, in other words, his recognizably quirky humor:

Dès le lendemain du jour de mon arrivée au Japon, me laissant à peine le temps de défaire mes valises, [Christian Pietrantonio] m’a téléphoné dans ma chambre d’hôtel, tandis que, en chemise blanche et petit gilet bleu d’instituteur à la retraite (le cadeau de nouvel an de mes parents), j’étais en train de feuilleter un magazine sportif en chaussettes sur mon lit, attendant la visite imminente d’un journaliste qui devait m’interviewer. (*AE* 9-10)

Here we sense no literary endeavor whatsoever from this man, as he seems to announce “Here is Monsieur tout le monde in person.” Not only does the narrator seem humble as is evidenced by a bit of self-deprecation, he also comes off as completely uncool with his gilet d’instituteur à la retraite transforming him into a petit-bourgeois. The description of what he

is wearing is funny in itself and is indicative of this author's previous novels where he so meticulously describes what the characters are wearing down to the exact shade and texture of whatever color and material it may be. Additionally, we notice that the narrator is expecting a visitor, and yet he does not find it necessary to sit in a chair. The image of this author lounging on a bed expecting his interviewer any minute is amusing, perhaps a little bit odd, like the behavior of the characters of Toussaint's novels. Moreover, this takes place in Japan, which is a very formal country, and consequently, this contrast adds to the humor. Does the reader expect this from his self-portrait? Perhaps not, but it seems that in giving readers what they would otherwise expect from him in his other works, this author paradoxically satisfies and defies the expectations of his readership. This passage shows someone who does not change himself into a larger-than-life character. The difference with the above citation is that he actually does give us the autobiographical tidbit needed to confirm the title and purpose of the work, the fact that he waits for a journalist who will arrive soon to interview him. In waiting in a very foreign place for a foreign journalist, he is and stays himself. He seems to want to convey that his life as a writer is no more interesting or special than others as I just suggested. Rather than seeing him organized headed to a café appropriately dressed for an official interview, or sitting at the desk in his hotel room preparing for his guest's arrival, we gather a lazier, more nonchalant and disheveled image of this man not unlike the narrators of his fictive texts. What we have at work here is a sort of parti-pris de banalité, not to mention authenticity. Our author is ironic and subtle. He shows a more intimate side of himself, but ironically once again, nothing really distinguishes him from most people. Furthermore, his affectation of nonchalance playfully comes off as a sort of reverse snobbism.

At this point, we are only on the second page of the book. Just as the readers of *La Télévision*, for example, try to orient themselves in the first pages of that text, try to figure out just what it is that the author wants to say about TV, so, too, do the readers of this sixth text wonder what Toussaint will say about himself. In *La Télévision*, the author does not intend to philosophize, over-analyze and politicize television and leaves us with a ludic landscape of evasion and procrastination concerning the narrator's scholarly work. Likewise, we soon realize that the same thing occurs in *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)*: instead of something more expected in connection with the life of the writer, we are often offered up a landscape of banality, but one in which a ludic dimension is almost incessantly decipherable. This is the dimension in which the elements that perhaps seem fictionalized reside, but not all of the text is banal and seemingly ludic, and thus this overturning of the expectation that it will all be banal and ludic is ludic in itself. Furthermore, just because some of the details are so banal that they seem fictional does not mean that they are. In fact, we could see Toussaint's laid back portrait of himself and his self-derision as the ultimate audacity of authenticity. His depiction of himself in an often less-than-flattering light rings much more true than other writers' more flattering perspectives of themselves. If we are expecting something perhaps a bit more romanticized, expectations may be disappointed, and in the end it ironically seems that expectations of something less banal are naïve and themselves banal. Then again, with this author, the reader learns not to have expectations fulfilled, or for that matter, to have any set expectations at all. Just when one may begin to sense a certain predictability in this author's unpredictability, he fools us again. It is all part of his game, and really part of the function of all real artists, that is to say, showing us things in another way.

On the same page in the very next sentence, “assis à la table ronde, se tenait M. Hirotani, de la maison d’édition Shueisha, qui me servait depuis le début de mon séjour, en relais avec Mme Funabiki, d’accompagnateur et de confident, de guide et de garde du corps...” (AE 10). This scene is subtly slapstick for a variety of reasons. The use of confident is funny in itself, but to imply that a writer of his stature [read ironically] needs a bodyguard seems utterly ridiculous, and he plays on this.⁹⁶ Furthermore, the way he so nonchalantly makes this statement, as if he were some kind of international superstar, how his need of a bodyguard seems so natural, is also very funny. On the one hand, the humor can be interpreted as deadpan, and it is precisely in the order of things, the decision of where to put what words, the whole style and syntax of the sentence that creates this effect. That is to say, it is the nonchalance of the tone contrasted with the ludicrousness or illogicality of the idea that renders this sentence so amusing. On the other hand, he also seems to be playfully implying that the representation of his Japanese publisher, his “guide,” his “confident,” and his “garde du corps” is holding him prisoner, the way he would be held in a totalitarian state. In this playful context, these descriptions of M. Hirotani become sort of code words with double meanings and constitute another possible game that Toussaint wishes to create.

On the following page, we witness Toussaint’s definitive mastery of slapstick humor, as well as the art of inserting ridiculousness into what would seem a perfectly normal action. His use of adverbs renders the following scene amusing as we see the narrator “[tournant] paresseusement les pages de [sa] revue en croisant et décroisant voluptueusement [ses] pieds en chaussettes sur le couvre-lit ...” (AE 11). Then, the telephone rings:

D’un bond, lâchant ses fleurs sur la moquette, M. Hirotani se précipita sur le téléphone. Passant le bras au-dessus de moi, il saisit le combiné sur la table de nuit,

⁹⁶ Of course, while a guide may be understandably necessary in such a different place, a body guard still seems farcical.

tirant discrètement, courtoisement, le fil du téléphone qui s'était malencontreusement enroulé autour de mon cou et de mon épaule, m'étrangla un instant en essayant de le dégager, et, s'emparant précautionneusement du fil à deux mains, le fit passer par-dessus ma tête et répondit au téléphone en s'excusant du regard. (AE 11)

There are several adverbs that play off of each other in the passage. The adverbs discrètement and courtoisement that reinforce each other and describe Hirotoni's action juxtaposed with the adverb malencontreusement to describe the way the phone cord is wrapped around the protagonist's neck are entertaining. It displays the effort to be graceful, discreet and courteous, and yet how in actuality, clumsiness and awkwardness reign over the scene. In this, we may also sense that the art of Japanese floral arrangements is being caricatured as well. Toussaint seems to relish involving his characters in farcical situations, but the difference here, as I reiterate in this work, is that the character is now an auto-fictional Toussaint. Moreover, the fact that M. Hirotoni throws his flowers on the floor in order to race to the phone, passing his arm over the narrator to retrieve the phone from the nightstand, reads as mock dramatic and thus enhances the situational humor.

Untangling himself from the phone cord, the narrator wonders with whom M.

Hirotoni could be speaking:

[M. Hirotoni] écoutait gravement, debout à côté de moi, renouant machinalement le noeud de sa cravate. *Yes*, disait-il, *yes*. *It's for you*, me dit-il, et il me tendit le combiné: Christian Pietrantoni. (AE 12)

Here we see the build-up of suspense created through the use of gravement and the repetition of yes, and what is more, in English. Moreover, the word gravement also shows that Hirotoni has no sense of humor whatsoever, and in that, he paradoxically becomes a comic character. Ultimately, this is all so that Toussaint may achieve an anti-climactic end as is seen in his previous novels. As we are only on the third page of the book at this point and already see so many familiar characteristics of Toussaint's fictional novels, one may wonder what is going

on. The foundational events, perhaps, such as the interview, as well as the character Christian Pietrantoni, “un ami corse de Madeleine,” and Toussaint’s wife’s name — “j’appellerai Madeleine Madeleine dans ces pages pour m’y retrouver”—are rooted in the reality of Jean-Philippe Toussaint the non-fictional author. However, the smaller yet more comical details that abound already in this text seem also to be the stuff of the fictional worlds that Toussaint the author creates, and thus fiction and reality seem to bleed into one another. Ultimately, self-portrait or not, this is a book and Toussaint is a writer, so these playful effects are very real stylistic techniques that show off the author’s mastery of his craft.

In this same section, it may seem as if we are introduced more to the minor characters, Christian Pietrantoni and M. Hirotani, than to the narrator himself, but this is not necessarily true. We are not really given a complete picture of them either in this brief beginning, but the author chooses to reinforce their presence by writing them more actively into the plot. At the very least, the intrusion of this man [Christian Pietrantoni] from Corsica in the Japanese context appears somewhat bizarre. In the final paragraph of the first chapter, the reader finally learns that the narrator has had “des expériences étranges” with his hands in Japan, that each time he goes to grasp the handle to a door or push the elevator button, he receives a charge of static electricity. This seems suddenly incongruous as a quirky anecdote. He ends the previous paragraph by shaking hands with Christian Pietrantoni and then transitions into a passage about hands. However, after finally divulging something remotely personal, something that happened to him, the narrator simultaneously ends this paragraph and the chapter with the statement “Mais, trêve de confidences” (*AE* 14). He is clearly addressing the audience in saying “enough secrets,” as if supplying the reader with

this random yet personal detail was perhaps too personal. In brief, he is making fun with this statement. This becomes quite ironical considering that this is what one would typically expect from something remotely autobiographical in nature: personal information, anecdotes, even secrets. This is an example of a pragmatic signal that the reader will see throughout this text and represents a key indicator of this narrative discourse's distinctive voice. In the end, what we see here is an individual who enjoys himself à l'étranger, but in ways unexpected from most people who are perhaps more run-of-the-mill. Toussaint initiates a playful tone immediately from the title on into the first chapter.

6. *Le combat avec la réalité*: allusions to Rothko and Barthes
a. Contrast and syntax

The second chapter takes place in Hongkong. On the first two pages, Toussaint paints a picture of his arrival from the sky, but this one is different from his description of Tokyo from four thousand feet in the air:

Nous avons atterri à Hongkong quelques minutes plus tôt en survolant la ville à une altitude dérisoire, un dizaine de mètres tout au plus, l'immense masse du Boeing fondant sur la piste d'atterrissage en rasant le sommet des buildings et survolant à l'arraché quelque dernière rue commerçante dans laquelle on pouvait apercevoir des types en chemise blanche une cigarette aux lèvres qui traversaient la rue sans même prêter attention au spectacle démentiel que devait être cet avion gigantesque en mouvement au-dessus de leur tête, ou qui se trouvaient tranquillement sur le pas de leur porte, les bras croisés, à prendre le frais dans cette rue animée de Hongkong, où des milliers d'idéogrammes multicolores clignotaient continûment dans la nuit.

The next sentence appears as follows:

Peu avant, alors que l'avion était encore beaucoup plus haut dans le ciel et tournait lentement dans les airs pour commencer sa descente, c'est toute la baie de Hongkong qui m'était soudain apparue au hublot dans un scintillement de points lumineux bleus et blancs, laissant deviner au loin la présence d'autres concentrations urbaines, Macao ou Kowloon, dont les agglomérations illuminées se dessinaient sur un fond de montagnes bleutées dont on n'apercevait que les profils d'ombre dans la nuit, tandis que, à la surface de l'eau, juste en dessous de nous, parmi les silhouettes des paquebots et des barges, des cargos, des porte-conteneurs, des casinos flottants et des salles de spectacle où l'on dansait la salsa et le mambo-mambo sous des lignes

pointillées de guirlandes, se balançaient très lentement les fanaux de milliers de jonques individuelles qui piquetaient les eaux noires de la baie comme autant de lucioles. (*AE* 15-16)

In two pages we have only two sentences divided up by commas and subordinate clauses. These two dense sentences force the reader to continue to the end of this panoramic description like a camera spanning the landscape. It is as if Toussaint is writing a film script with these first two pages destined to be viewed and not read. These pages are very literary, as the change in syntax suggests. This is the only chapter in this homodiegetic text that begins as such, the first person narrator scarcely present. The tone is very sober, really the only time until the last pages of this text that the author narrates in such picturesque detail, truly painting the landscape with words. Despite the narrator's playful statement at the end of this chapter "Mais trêve de vraisemblance," here we seem to have arrived at some semblance of verisimilitude. His description is so vivid that he makes it all seem very real on the one hand through the beautiful imagery. On the other hand, such poetic imagery could also be evocative of fantasizing. There is a sense of wonder at seeing with our own eyes what we know only from pictures or stories, and this is another facet of himself that he seems to be willing to share with readers.

The juxtaposition of this passage with the one that follows it is striking since we go from a poetic description of the city from the sky to the plastic chairs and the dirty linoleum floor in an airport terminal, the poeticized image from the sky to the réalité brute and stark contrast of where he is actually going on the ground. The narrator is very disoriented and evokes his "perte momentanée [des] repères temporels et spatiaux" throughout. At the end of the chapter after much disorientation and jet lag, he concludes: "Car j'étais à Hongkong, oui, j'aurais tout aussi bien pu être dans un roman. Mais trêve de vraisemblance" (*AE* 19). These

last two sentences are particularly intriguing. The mention of verisimilitude attests to the sentiment the reader may sense throughout the chapter. For just a brief moment, we are able to glimpse the banal reality and utter disorientation that comes from traveling constantly. Let us not be mistaken, however: this chapter is just as much if not moreso about the writing itself and style than the character. Even if Toussaint does seem vraisemblable for a moment in terms of his own observations, he is also simultaneously presenting a more real side of himself as a writer and stylist above all. The descriptions are eloquent, the personal statements absolutely serious with no hint of humor. Then, it is as if he realizes on the one hand that he has given us too much reality, which is pretty banal. On the other hand, perhaps it is all a part of his game: his intention is to tease the reader with some realistic details, only to suddenly pull away with “trêve de vraisemblance.” Enough verisimilitude. Let us get back to the fictionalizing of my tour. When he says “Mais trêve de vraisemblance,” it almost seems as if he is characterizing vraisemblance and realism as boring if not balanced by something else, and this is undeniably ludic.

From an artistic point of view, the narrator’s reference to Rothko is quite redolent. He expounds upon it:

Je ne savais pas où j’étais, je ne savais plus vraiment où j’allais ... je m’étais soudain rendu compte en regardant par le hublot qu’il ne faisait plus ni jour ni nuit dehors, mais tout à la fois jour et nuit, que je pouvais tout aussi bien apercevoir la lune sur la droite de l’appareil qui brillait dans le ciel dans le prolongement de l’aile de l’avion, que le soleil, au loin, vers lequel nous nous dirigeons, et qui n’était encore pour l’instant qu’une lueur trouble rose orangée pareille à ces contours cotonneux de Rothko qui embrasait l’horizon de ce ciel immense régulièrement partagé entre le jour et la nuit, entre l’Europe et l’Asie. (*AE* 17-18)

This passage represents so much more for this text than just the moment in which we read it.

Many of Rothko’s paintings resemble a colored rectangle with no people or objects, no natural elements of flora and fauna, no distinct brushstrokes or texture since they were

watercolors and not oil on canvas, for example. In discussing banality and a lack of distinction, one may assume fairly that for someone who is not an artist, Rothko might not seem very interesting, or even more bluntly, might be boring. Like the rose orangée mentioned in the passage, neither rose nor orange, but a blending of the two, nothing is simply black and white, so to speak. Concrete delinations seem artificial and impossible in this text. The author does not always distinguish between the colors of the local cultures in his text, and events do tend to bleed into each other like the contours of a Rothko painting. The day is indistinguishable from the night as we see in the above passage. The visits to so many different countries should be quite different in theory, but Toussaint blends them in a field of ambiguity so that they are mingling and related. Ultimately, the reference to Rothko embodies the perfect metaphor for a self-portrait since reality and fiction bleed seamlessly into each other in order to create a an artistic work indistinguishable from both the real world in which the author is living as writer and the fictive universe he has created through his writing. Toussaint has basically created a beautiful piece in this passage having artistically transformed twilight outside an airplane through his poetic style and vivid language.

b. Writing Self-Reflective Texts: the artist and the process

At first glance, it would seem that the author might be alluding to Roland Barthes' autobiographical work *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, ironical in itself since Barthes specifically discusses the impossibility of autobiography in that text.⁹⁷ Barthes writes that “tout ceci doit être considéré comme dit par un personnage de roman,” and this is exactly the feeling the reader acquires upon reading Toussaint's self-portrait. The author essentially

⁹⁷ Roland Barthes did not invent autofiction, but he certainly placed it on the radar. Of course this type of writing existed long before the term, so although I cannot exclusively presuppose a link to Barthes, it definitely seems suspect.

invents a character called Jean-Philippe, and although the chapters are based on events that actually occurred, many of the details are probably fictionalized. It would seem, then, that Toussaint may well be reenacting the famous quote from Barthes in the writing of his texts, using it as a sort of dictum. He seems to seize the opportunity to novelize himself as well to create this auto-fictional text. The protagonist of *La réticence* desperately and obsessively tries to decipher what is real and what is not, but as I discussed earlier, he can also be read as a sort of creator. Just like the author who is writing the story, scrutinizing every semantic and syntactic choice as a matter of style, so, too, is the narrator of Toussaint's fourth text creating the story in which he is the main character. Likewise, the narrator of *La Télévision* is a scholar who is supposed to be writing a book in the fictive universe of that novel. Both are extremely reticent to talk about what the book is supposed to be about. In the case of the fourth novel, the narrator is reticent to tell us why he came to see the Biaggis and even who they are. He never does. In the fifth text, the narrator is reticent to get to work on his book and will not talk about it in any detail. Does he finish it? We never know. Consequently, our author seems to twist this into something that is supposed to be more realistic in his self-portrait by writing "oui, j'aurais tout aussi bien pu être dans un roman," but ironically, it has already been done: indeed, the creator as character can be seen in Toussaint's two previous works. Just like the narrators of *La réticence* and *La Télévision*, the narrator of *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)* is reticent to talk about himself and his work. In the chapters in Vietnam and Tunisia, for instance, where he is going to conferences, no work will be discussed as we will see in a moment. Much like the narrators of *La réticence* and *La Télévision*, the narrator of *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)* is constantly manipulating reality: all of the characters are in a "combat avec la réalité." With verisimilitude functioning as a general acceptance of altered

reality, it often seems as though many of the details have been created by the author for this text; while some readers might choose to see this as quite ludic, for others, it may be disappointing. As a result, he incarnates the quintessential unreliable narrator who is not trustworthy and whose rendition of events must be taken with a grain of salt.

Christophe Grossi reminds the reader in a review of the book that “Même s’il se dévoile un peu, n’allez donc pas croire que Toussaint va vous faire entrer dans sa vie privée. Il joue encore de son air de sainte nitouche avec la banalité du quotidien ou des événements, avec fausse froideur, fausse distance.” While I tend to agree with the critic’s statement for the most part, Toussaint’s *Autoportrait* is not, in fact, all banality, and his approach is not exclusively a “fausse froideur” as I just showed through the narrator’s exposing his own sense of wonder from the plane as well as his poetic description of this. The reference to Rothko only seems fitting for a scene so vibrantly painted by the author. Grossi also posits that “Le dernier livre de Jean-Philippe Toussaint n’est pas plus un roman qu’un récit autobiographique,” and that “On s’en serait douté malgré les apparences.” Indeed, as I already mentioned, Toussaint does seem to novelize certain events that take place, but unlike a novel, there is no plot here, no story. However, no plot and seemingly no story could also characterize some of his novels at times. Like his novels, his self-portrait is also full of anecdotes, but unlike the novels that do follow the protagonist from the beginning to the end of a sequence of events, there is no sequence of events here, no story. Each city visited merely seems to engender recollections and musings. This book that is no more a novel than it is an autobiography traverses the space of both genres, and thus the term autofiction certainly does seem to be the most suitable for this text.

7. Conclusion

Ultimately, what this self-portrait offers the reader is again, not a full view of scholarly life and the travails of a successful writer, but rather for the most part, an exposition of a character caught up in the more banal everyday places of his life in the narrative, and as we see, he is often in transit. In Tokyo, he is in a hotel room; in Hongkong, he is in an airplane, and then an airport; in Berlin, he is in a deli; in the chapter entitled *Prague*, he is in a train on the way to Prague; in Tokyo again, he talks about his bad back; in Kyoto, he is in a taxi; and in Nara, he goes to a strip club.

While the reader may be shocked by the scene in the strip club, Toussaint surprises us still where we would least expect it as the book progresses. In Vietnam he is actually at an academic conference, which would seem at first glance even more banal in its realism, and it is at the beginning; however, this part ends up being playfully undermined by the fact that his work is never discussed as well as the surprise appearance and performance of Jane Birkin. In Tunisia, he also attends another conference briefly, but spends much of the chapter in a car with two strangers. Back in Kyoto, he overturns all expectations once again when he becomes nostalgic for the Kyoto he visited two years prior. This elegiac tone is completely incongruous with the rest of the text and leaves the reader reflecting upon the apparent emotion itself and its effect on the text as a whole. Despite the sudden turn to a more somber tone, however, do not believe that it will be completely consistent and pure. Toussaint, as is typical, takes a seemingly solemn moment and shocks the audience by interrupting the beauty of the moment. The final chapter begins as follows:

Les larmes ne me sont pas venues, j'ai pourtant recherché la volupté des pleurs.
J'étais accoudé à la rambarde du pont de Sanjo, la poitrine fragile et les doigts

immobiles qui tremblaient légèrement (**j'avais trop bu la veille**), et je regardais le Kamo en contrebas dont les eaux coulaient en silence [...] De ce moment de mélancolie très pur je n'ai su que faire, je me demandais comment en conserver l'essence. J'avais conscience de sa nature exceptionnelle, du concours de circonstance unique qui en avait été à l'origine (c'était la veille exactement que j'étais revenu à Kyoto après deux ans d'absence). (*AE* 115-16) [my emphasis]

Despite that the parenthetical mention that the narrator's chest is fragile and his fingers are immobile yet trembling from having drunk too much the day before (not due to fragile emotions as he was leading us on to believe), the rest of the chapter does remain rather sober in its tone, as we see the narrator's "esprit en pleurs" and the "vague de mélancolie, chaude et sensuelle" that overtakes him. In the end, what he expresses "pas uniquement parce que [ses] sens [étaient] engourdis par . . . l'alcool qu'[il] avai[t] dans le sang" (*AE* 119), is that "le temps avait passé" and he felt "triste et impuissant devant ce brusque témoignage du passage du temps" (*AE* 119). He reminds us again of his haziness from too much alcohol, which may make us smile, but he keeps to the task and tone at hand. This may surprise the reader in the end because upon arrival at the end of text that boasted plenty of more ludic moments, we glimpse a seemingly sincere sadness on the part of this character, and a sense of reflection not previously encountered to this degree in the text. Finally, he does, in fact, mention the act of writing with the last sentence of the book:

Jusqu'à présent, cette sensation d'être emporté par le temps avait toujours été atténuée par le fait que j'écrivais, écrire était en quelque sorte une façon de résister au courant qui m'emportait, une manière de m'inscrire dans le temps, de marquer des repères dans l'immatérialité de son cours, des incisions, des égratignures. (*AE* 120)

What he describes in this passage is indeed what he was writing in the previous chapters. Since the tone and content change so abruptly here, one may be apt to believe that this author is finally giving in at the end and offering his audience the more traditional autobiographical aspect it somehow expects, but do not be fooled. What makes Toussaint's playfulness so

smart and therefore subtle is that we will never truly know what is real and what is not. Jenny affirms that “Ce non sérieux veut cependant sérieusement mettre en doute la vérité naïve de l’autobiographie.” The scholar says further of the autofictive text that “Il plaide pour le caractère indécidable de la vérité d’une vie, qui se laisse peut-être mieux saisir dans les détours de la transposition fictionnelle ou dans les relâchements de l’écriture associative que dans la maîtrise d’un récit ordonné et prétendument fidèle,” and this is just what we see in *Autoportrait (à l’étranger)*.

On the whole, there is an inherent undermining of the authorial role here. That said, Toussaint named his work an autoportrait and certainly does not claim to have written an autobiography. Whatever the initial events were, whatever the inspiration for the initial creation, the autobiographical work passes through many filters, interpretations, distortions, etc. The line between reality and fiction is inevitably and irreversibly blurred. What we learn underneath it all in *Autoportrait*, however, is that this author has a sense of humor about himself and his own writing. What we must also remember, however, is that underneath it all, behind the playful scenes and comical commentary, the writing itself still emerges as simultaneously the most ludic and serious aspect of the book.

The irony of this text is that it is not a novel. Toussaint has confessed that he could have almost named the narrator/protagonist of his *Autoportrait* Jean-Philippe. The text projects a narrative voice, but its narrator is temporally, spatially, and ontologically distant from the real reader. He belongs to a different world, one that is fictional. Jean-Philippe the narrator is merely invented by Toussaint the author. That said, the narrative voice projected is certainly one with a sense of humor, and despite the ontological distance, this narrator indeed takes on a tone of familiarity just like that of the narrators in his novels. In the end, however,

despite the fact that the author will, in fact, give us a glimpse into his life at conferences and touring as a writer, he has likely embellished details and seems to novelize the whole experience. On the one hand, his message could be a testament to the monotony that truly exists in real life, that banality surrounds everyone, and that just because he has become a successful writer, his life is no less subject to this banality than anyone else's. Perhaps he seeks to demystify the life of an author traveling for conferences and doing book tours. This is evident immediately from the first pages of the text. Better yet, the author may even be suggesting here that the very banality of life can become the stuff of literary prowesses. On the other hand, the opposite pole always exists. Indeed, banality is everywhere, but it co-exists with its contrasting elements, which he chooses to show from time to time. With this in mind, not every destination can be correctly characterized as banal and indistinguishable from another, that is to say, not every place in this text becomes a non-place, as some critics would have us believe. Each place that the narrator visits does show something unexpected and incongruous, though, and this is where readers may find some of the more comical elements.

In sum, Toussaint does not reveal what the reader would expect concerning literary production and the creative process in *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)*. Similarly, *La Télévision*, while having a main character who is supposed to be writing a book, avoids a discussion of this in the content as well. Moreover, while *La Télévision* does contain a few brief mentions of the narrator's child, *Autoportrait* in seemingly ironic manner contains just one brief mention of the narrator's daughter. *La réticence*, however, contains something unique to all of Toussaint's works: a dedication. Not only is this the only text of his to be dedicated to someone, it happens to be dedicated to his wife Madeleine. This, in combination with the fact

that the presence of the infant child looms dominant in the psyche of the narrator, could imply the biggest irony of all: *La réticence* may well be the most autobiographical work that Toussaint has ever written. In this light, this author's paradoxes could be interpreted as attempts to simultaneously expose and break the mold.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CASE OF *FAIRE L'AMOUR*

A. Introduction

With the publication by Editions de Minuit of his seventh text, *Faire l'amour*, in September 2002, questioning the validity of all of the previous literary classifications of Toussaint's works seems inevitable. This novel in particular is somewhat of a departure from his previous works, even if not a large one. Nevertheless, critics, readers, and scholars often take for granted what they perhaps believe to be a certain consistency in his writing. For many critics, this author's writing becomes predictable; many of them tend to read his novels the same way, often seeing the same things. While the presence of similarities and certain stylistic consistencies is definitely not unfounded, authors change, texts change, and the way we read must therefore follow suit and evolve according to these cues. Despite the fact that we may have smiled a lot and even laughed out loud in the midst of Toussaint's previous books, *Faire l'amour* does not provoke laughter or smiles on every other page, and the story is in fact quite somber and serious. Nevertheless, there is some humor therein, and although this novel cannot be described as comical, the author's ludic sensibilities are still abundantly infused throughout.

The novel tells the story of Marie, an artist and designer of haute couture, and her boyfriend, the narrator of the story. We learn some small details of the beginning of their relationship seven years prior to the present moment of the narrative through a few analepses,

but they are kept brief and relevant to the main story. We also learn that they are in Tokyo for an exhibit of contemporary art at which Marie will show her new collection of dresses. Their relationship is in peril, and the reader is led thus through all the ups and downs, both the banality and the drama of the life of a couple on the verge of breaking up. There are arguments and violent thoughts and emotions; there are tender thoughts and strong desires. Eventually, the narrator leaves Tokyo and Marie behind to stay with his friend Bernard in Kyoto. However, the question of the break-up is left inconclusive at the end of the book. There is talk of the end of their love affair throughout the novel, but it is never actually concretized. An ending that leaves the reader wondering is certainly no new technique for this author. Like his others, this text is rich in intertextuality, linguistic play, contrastive elements, and incongruities. The author has undeniably possessed a propensity for humor in most of his works up to this point in time. Despite an overwhelming lack of surface humor at first glance in *Faire l'amour*, as we are able to see immediately in his other works, Toussaint's sense of humor is sharp in this novel, too. In fact, this text rather embraces numerous elements of a more subtle and darker humor, and intertextuality, in particular, constitutes one of its principal characteristics. Indeed, the ludic spirit abounds, and we do laugh in this book. However, we laugh more often in the novel because something has violated our expectations. This reaction is a central characteristic of black humor in which, as I have already discussed in this dissertation in relation to Toussaint's previous works, characters cope with events and situations that are simultaneously comical and brutal. It is often used to illuminate the absurdity or bizarre nature of a situation. Moreover, intertextuality as a ludic device, although present in all of this author's works, is richer than ever for those who detect this playful relationship in this novel. In short, while the author's works can be seen

as quite humorous on the surface for the most part, it is rather beneath the surface that one must loom to see what is the darker side of humor in Toussaint's seventh *Minuit* publication.⁹⁸

The title itself of *Faire l'amour* is quite curious and provocative when placed next to Toussaint's previous texts because the act of making love is presented in an undeniably erotic light. This expression in French refers unambiguously to the physical act of having sex. On this note, let us take a detour for a moment to see examples of Toussaint's treatment of love and sex in previous novels.

Most of his previous texts entail some sort of love story with love scenes, but these scenes almost always become parodies of the romantic, as scholars point out.⁹⁹ In fact, they often represent a sort of anti-romanticism. Interruptions abound in some cases, while in others Toussaint wishes to reach an anti-climax, putting an abrupt halt to these scenes and thereby enhancing the ludic dimension around which his novels revolve. In *La Salle de bain*, Edmondsson (the narrator's wife) wants to make love:

Faire l'amour maintenant? Je refermai mon livre posément, laissant un doigt entre deux feuilles pour me garder la page. Edmondsson riait, sautait à pieds joints. Elle déboutonna sa blouse. Derrière la porte, Kabrowinski dit d'une voix grave qu'il attendait la peinture depuis ce matin; il parla d'une journée de perdue, d'incohérence. Tout naturellement, Edmondsson, qui riait toujours, ouvrit la porte et [lui] proposa de partager notre dîner. (*SB* 17)

⁹⁸ Warren Motte expresses this very sentiment in his review of the novel in *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. He writes that "This tale is darker than any he has told in the past," explaining that "The absurdist qualities that Toussaint has always put on display in his writing are present here, but they are considerably leavened by the grimness of the problem with which the narrator and Marie grapple" (144).

⁹⁹ On the one hand, however, for the readers unfamiliar with this author's work, the title will not necessarily seem notable. On the other hand, for the ones well acquainted with Toussaint it is a different story. The first time they see this title, they do not necessarily expect the novel to be serious. Thus, the surprise and/or shock that will occur is derived from something else. We do not know what this novel will hold. Will it be a graphic representation of love making, will it be an injunction, etc.? The title, although an action verb, is an infinitive, and infinitives may have a multiplicity of meanings depending on the context – but there is no context yet, except for an experienced reader's expectations and preconceived notions based on the author's previous works, as well as the previous works themselves.

At this point, Toussaint teases his readers, as they are perhaps led to expect a threesome, which, of course, does not occur.¹⁰⁰ The detail of the narrator keeping his finger in the book he is reading to save his place is equally amusing, enhancing the theme of the non-sérieux. To say the least, he does not show much interest in sex.

In *L'appareil-photo*, Toussaint depicts a romantic scene between the narrator and Pascale in which they are in a hotel room together. We think they might make love for the first time, but instead the author presents us with this image:

Elle esquissa un baiser en se grattant la petite culotte (bonsoir, dit-elle, et elle se laissa retomber). (*AP* 85)

Therefore, the reader is left with the impression that the two will never share a physically intimate moment; but if the author surprises the reader in the aforementioned paragraph, he does so even further in the scene that immediately follows it:

Le lendemain matin, je me réveillai tout endormi dans la pénombre de la chambre, Pascale dans mes bras, dont je caressais doucement les seins sous la veste de pyjama. Elle n'était guère plus réveillée que moi et, dormant encore l'un et l'autre, nous nous unîmes dans le sommeil, les mains sur les joues ou dans les cheveux, parcourant notre peau au hasard, mon sexe dans son corps encore tout chaud du sommeil de la nuit. Nous dormîmes encore un peu ainsi, serrés fragilement dans les bras l'un de l'autre, avec de temps à autre d'imperceptibles frissons du corps et de douces ardeurs qui pouvaient témoigner d'un sommeil agité. Elle se réveilla la première, finalement, ouvrant un oeil tout étonné lorsque j'éjaculai. (*AP* 85-6)

At first, when the narrator buttons Pascale's pajamas all the way up to her neck, the reader is led to believe that perhaps the narrator thinks that she is not interested in him the same way that he wants her, or at least that it will not be that easy. However, a complete reversal of the situation seems to be occurring, as the next morning a romantic portrayal of the couple unfolds with the use of phrases like "je caressais doucement les seins" and "les mains sur les

¹⁰⁰ With the idea that Toussaint is teasing the reader in mind, one may sense an eroticism between the narrative and the reader, which could be coupled with the teasing in the narrative.

joues ou dans les cheveux,” as well as “serrés fragilement dans les bras l’un de l’autre.”

These images appear to be quite tender and indicative of a beautiful moment to come.

Nevertheless, Toussaint undermines any purported seriousness in this scene when he inserts another brutal dénivellation, a stark contrast, as we discover that Pascale is astonished to awaken with the narrator ejaculating. The word éjaculai is so crude that it surprises the reader. It is not only crude, it is medically correct, and in fact, jouis would better fit the context. The word ejaculated is so crude because it is so discursively jarring. It is as if since she is half asleep, Pascale does not even realize that he is making love to her. This could further suggest that the narrator has taken advantage of her because, as we learn in this novel from beginning to end, Pascale’s sleep and ability to fall asleep anywhere are indeed profound. Thus, for a brief moment, the author shocks the readers and perhaps leaves them feeling a bit ill at ease before they read that Pascale “laissa aller son visage contre [sa] joue et [lui] sourit avec beaucoup de douceur . . .” (AP 86). This does not mean that Pascale has reached orgasm because she is quite passive herself, but rather it merely eases the tension by showing that she is not bothered by the narrator’s act.

In *La Salle de bain* and *L’appareil-photo*, there are scenes in which lovemaking is sparsely narrated but undermined in the end and still others where it is merely implied, no details or descriptions of the act ever supplied. In *Autoportrait (à l’étranger)*, we see the latter, rather, on a train with the narrator’s wife. The narrator does give details of what seems to be foreplay, “mêlant [leurs] pieds et [leurs] bras tout à la joie désordonnée de [leurs] sens, unissant [leurs] bouches dans l’euphorie du voyage commençant, [leurs] jambes, [leurs] mains . . . [leurs] cuisses, [leurs] entrecuisses ,” but then his wife says to him suddenly “Tu ne sais pas faire l’amour dans un train, toi . . .” (AE 27). This is the last sentence of the

paragraph, and as the reader moves to the first sentence of the next paragraph, we see the narrator and his wife in the dining car.¹⁰¹ We are not privy to whether or not they actually made love and are thus left to guess. Either way, whether they do it or not, he is evidently not up to the task, and this may come off as humorous.

Additionally, although flirtation abounds, there are no sex scenes in *Monsieur*, for example, nor in *La réticence*, where although the narrator's child is ever-present, his mother is nowhere to be seen or mentioned. It should be noted, however, that there is one scene in *La Salle de bain* that mentions Edmondsson and the narrator making love that does, in fact, begin to describe the act. The narrator has just been out looking for tennis balls, purchases some and upon returning to his hotel room, places them on the bedspread as he feels his way around in the dark and climbs into the bed to join Edmondsson:

Elle me recueillit et ouvrit mon manteau, en silence, déboutonna ma chemise. Ses joues étaient chaudes de sommeil. Je soulevai les draps et me déposai dans son corps, nu contre sa peau, ventre contre ventre, le manteau ouvert par-dessus nous. Nous commençâmes à bouger; nous bougions lentement et nous nous en savions gré. Plus tard, les couvertures se retournèrent: en tombant sur le sol, la boîte s'ouvrit et toutes les balles de tennis s'éparpillèrent sur le parquet. (*SB* 74-5)

This is the end of the scene. Indeed, their lovemaking is narrated, but it is not graphic at all, especially when compared to what will come in *Faire l'amour*. This passage is also brief with an incongruous conclusion, as it ends on a farcical note with tennis balls falling out of a canister, bouncing on the floor, a possible metaphor for premature ejaculation. This is typical of Toussaint and thus part of the reason why his seventh text will surprise readers and critics. This scene in *La Salle de bain*, like the others I have just mentioned, begins seriously, but any sentimentality and emotion is undermined by the physical comedy that the tennis

¹⁰¹ This scene might be playfully read as an allusion to Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, with the events reversed, and Hitchcock representing the act of lovemaking through an overtly obvious image of the train entering a tunnel.

balls create. Again, the noble juxtaposed with the mundane sets the tone. If one takes the scene at face value, one smiles or even laughs at the idea of these tennis balls interrupting a romantic encounter. Perhaps the two lovers are embraced, sharing a quiet moment. However, if we push our analysis further and imagine the scene from a more filmic perspective, the balls falling from the cannister, not unlike the classic cliché of fireworks going off or waves breaking when two people kiss, could be a visual metaphor for orgasm, which would be even more playful on Toussaint's part, not to mention totally feasible as this writer is also a film maker.¹⁰² Whatever the interpretation, the point is that the reader comes away from this scene smiling, and any seriousness previously established is pushed to the wayside by the final image.

That said, the author always plays and disappoints expectations. So far, at least, he plays and disappoints expectations in a way that builds on expectations as well, as I have just shown a pattern in the lovemaking scenes from one novel to the next. Thus, why should we expect a novel with the title *Faire l'amour* to be any different? Let us now leave Toussaint's previous texts and return to *Faire l'amour*. In fact, it is about the nearing end of a long-term love affair. Nevertheless, despite the title I did not expect an eight-page lovemaking scene sparing no details since none of the author's previous works do not tend toward the romantic or the serious on the whole, certainly not unabashedly erotic. Indeed, I, too, gave into my own preconceived notions of what Toussaint's works are about, and the love making scene that occurs soon after the opening of the novel proves to be a telling departure. In describing physical anatomy and bodily fluids, saliva and tears, this scene is slow and deliberate,

¹⁰² Here again, this seems to be taken straight from Hitchcock. It is certainly reminiscent of his film *Vertigo*, in which we see the waves breaking as metaphor. The fact that I reference this scene in terms of a more filmic perspective seems to offer a little more credence to this possible allusion.

sensual and sexual, violent, desperate, and raw, unlike anything we have yet seen from this author. I will not quote eight pages, obviously, but here are some selected details from the entire scene:

Quand elle eut fini de boire, elle tendit le bras au loin hors du lit pour déposer la flûte, qui tomba à la renverse sur la moquette, et, sans transition, d'un geste autoritaire, sûr et précis, elle s'empara de ma main et l'enfonça dans son slip, resserra les cuisses autour de sa prise. Et, passée la première surprise, passé le premier saisissement, je sentis soudain sous la peau de mon doigt le contact légèrement électrique, éminemment vivant, meuble et humide, de l'intérieur de son sexe. (FA 28-9)

[...] ma langue s'était enfoncée dans son sexe, et elle gémissait très doucement, apaisée, accompagnant simplement les mouvements de ma langue en soulevant en rythme le bassin imperceptiblement. (FA 29-30)

J'ai regardé la larme se dissiper sur sa joue, et j'ai fermé les yeux – en pensant que peut-être, en effet, je ne l'aimais plus. (FA 32)

Car seul son sexe semblait participer à notre étreinte, son sexe chaud que j'avais pénétré et qui bougeait de façon presque autonome, âpre et hargneuse, avide, tandis qu'elle serrait les jambes pour enfermer ma verge dans l'étau de ses cuisses et se frottait éperduement contre mon pubis à la recherche d'une jouissance que je la sentais prête à conquérir de façon de plus en plus agressive. (FA 33)

Here the author lays out in detail, on both an emotional and physical level as never before, the graphic nature of two people engaged in sex. Additionally, desire becomes an omnipresent aspect for the first time in his texts, the third quotation above in particular separating sex and desire from love, at least for this narrator.

However, as I have said throughout this dissertation, interruptions abound in Toussaint's texts, and this one, while somewhat different, is still no exception. Another amusing example of a serious tone being undermined is seen in the sentence that begins with "le désir grandissait toujours, la jouissance nous gagnait, et, les lèvres serrées, gémissant dans les bras l'un de l'autre, nous continuions de nous aimer dans l'obscurité de cette chambre d'hôtel" but ends with "quand j'entendis soudain un minuscule dé clic derrière moi,

et, dans le même temps, la pénombre de la chambre fut envahie par une clartée bleutée d'aquarium, silencieuse et inquiétante" (FA 34). There is nothing funny in the content, until the moment when the scene is interrupted by a television coming on with a message in English flashing across the screen: "*You have a fax. Please contact the central desk*" (FA 35). It is both humorous and absurd, as we see the narrator begin to dwell on this fax, wondering from whom it could be. The seriousness of this scene is severely undermined by this interruption, as we have seen in all of Toussaint's previous texts when a seemingly romantic scene, in this case, not romantic but rather quite intense and erotic, ends on a farcical note. Both narrator and reader are distracted by this, but just when the reader suspects that Toussaint is up to his old tricks, so to speak, the scene returns to its intensity with the narrator expressing that "elle prit mon interruption pour une agression, une volonté délibérée de la priver de son plaisir, de lui voler la jouissance" (FA 36). The narrator has likely lost his erection because of this distraction, but since Marie, unaware of the TV screen, cannot understand how this would possibly happen, she takes personal offense at the abrupt halt to their lovemaking, believing that he does not want her. Unable to console her, unable to continue their encounter, the narrator must endure the sting of Marie's angry words, as the passage ends on a very sobering note, Marie screaming at him: "Tu me dégoûtes . . ." (FA 36).¹⁰³ So much for the impassibility that this author's critics have used in the past to generally characterize all of his works. This scene ends quite seriously without a trace of humor. There is nothing funny about it; yet, because one might suspect that the scene will turn lighter but does not, on a certain level we have once again expectations that have been

¹⁰³ One might see Marie as a sort of reverse of the stereotype of females being more interested in sharing pleasure. What she seems to be doing is making her pleasure the sole object of their sex. This seems to be an inversion of the masculine/feminine divide.

deceived, the author's playfulness still present. Situational humor alone is so predominant in his novels, not to mention stylistic play as well, that it is quite unexpected to come across a scene like the one just quoted. At this point, the seasoned reader of Toussaint's texts has no idea what to expect: this is a completely different experience for that reason. Although stylistic similarities between all of this author's works are evident, the difference here is that since concrete humor is scarce, the writing comes to the forefront. Although Toussaint has always stressed style over content and story-line,¹⁰⁴ for the reader who simply takes his works at face-value, an appreciation of the rigor involved in crafting his novels as well as the writing itself may be easily overlooked, mainly because concrete comic elements have always been so prevalent. This is, therefore, what is so different about *Faire l'amour*.

B. Semantics and Narrative Style

After the initial love making scene in which Marie tells the narrator to leave, he goes swimming, and they both end up calming down. He decides to retrieve the fax that had been announced in their room and heads to the reception desk: "Room 1619, dis-je, assez sèchement, de Montalte, ajoutai-je" (*FA* 54). Having pronounced Marie's last name, the narrator then goes into an aside about her name, explaining that "Marie s'appelait de Montalte, Marie de Montalte, Marie Madeleine Marguerite de Montalte (elle aurait pu signer ses collections comme ça, M.M.M.M., en hommage sibyllin à la Maison du docteur Angus Killiecrankie)" (*FA* 54). Toussaint is referring to Samuel Beckett's novel Murphy, in which a character named Dr. Angus Killiecrankie, "R.M.S. to an institution on the outskirts of

¹⁰⁴ Toussaint explains to Arnaud Moulhiac in an interview at the Librairie L'écriture in Vaucresson for *La Page* on September 8, 2002 that "[s]i les histoires sont si ténues dans [ses] livres, c'est parce que tout ce qui se rapproche d'une histoire fait oublier le style ou la dimension poétique et métaphysique de la littérature, qui sont pour [lui] l'essentiel." He concludes that "pour qu'ils soient au premier plan, il ne faut pas que l'anecdote capte toute l'attention."

London known as the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat,” (88) appears several times. Throughout Beckett’s French translation of the novel, “La Maison Madeleine de Miséricorde Mentale” is referred to as M.M.M.M., thus Toussaint’s playful intertextual wink.¹⁰⁵ The phrase “en hommage sibyllin” enhances the playful undertone if the reader is familiar with the reference,

¹⁰⁵ The allusions do not end there, as Toussaint is likely playing with every one of Marie’s names. The narrator gives an explanation of all her names, telling us that “Marie, c’était son prénom, Marguerite, celui de sa grand-mère, de Montalte, le nom de son père (et Madeleine, je ne sais pas, elle ne l’avait pas volé . . .)” (FA 55). Marguerite and Montalte are intriguing for those familiar with our author’s oeuvre and the critical works surrounding it. Several articles have been published on the intertextual play with Pascal’s *Pensées*, particularly in *La Salle de bain*, but also in *La Télévision*. The author undoubtedly is often asked about Pascal and how he came upon this, critics always searching for more Pascalian winks in his texts, which as I have shown in this dissertation, are indeed present. It is as if with the dawning of this idea in his first novel and the reaction to it, Toussaint almost seeks to place Pascal in some way in all of his works now, just as a joke.

If that is the case, he certainly succeeds with his seventh novel because as it turns out, Montalte was the pseudonym under which Pascal published *Les Provinciales*. The author actually verifies his choice of Montalte in an interview, but we are left to make what we want of the other names. Marguerite, amusingly enough, was the name of Blaise Pascal’s mother. Those who know enough not only about Toussaint’s works, but also Toussaint the man, will know that Madeleine is the name of his real-life wife.

But what about Marie? Is there anything to this choice? We cannot know for sure, but I would suggest that the author is playing here on Apollinaire. I have not discussed Apollinaire as an intertextual allusion at this juncture in the dissertation, but I will do so below. I suggest a little later that an intertextual link exists between *Faire l’amour* and Apollinaire’s poem *Pont Mirabeau*. Going from this possibility, critics point out that Apollinaire is in fact alluding to his break-up with Marie Laurencin in *Pont Mirabeau*. This is intriguing in itself, but the similarities do not stop there. While Laurencin was a “painter, designer, illustrator, etcher and lithographer” who had the first “one-woman exhibition at the Galeries Barbazanges” in Paris, she also “designed sets and costumes for the ballet and the theatre” and “dresses and textiles for the couturier Poiret.” [see <http://higginsmaxwell.com/laurencin.htm>] The character Marie de Montalte is in Tokyo with her boyfriend, the narrator, for her own show. In the hotel room, the narrator describes Marie’s “huit valises métalliques rembourrées et quatre malles identiques qui contenaient un choix de robes de sa dernière collection, plus une série de cantines effilées, moitié en osier, moitié en acier, spécialement conçues pour le transport des oeuvres d’art et qui renfermaient des vêtements expérimentaux en titane et en Kevlar qu’elle avait conçus pour une exposition d’art contemporain qu’elle devait inaugurer le week-end prochain au *Contemporary Art Space* de Shinagawa” (FA 21-2). He then simply explains that “Marie était à la fois styliste et plasticienne . . .” (FA 22).

Finally, let us not forget after all this that the first two names Marie Madeleine are also likely a playful biblical reference to Marie Madeleine, or as we know her in English, Mary Magdalen, the sinner. In fact, the expression “pleurer comme une Madeleine” in French, which means to cry copiously, is directly derived from this biblical character. She was a prostitute, which will also be intriguing in the discussion to follow in this dissertation on intertextuality as a ludic device. When she learned of the coming of Jesus, she went to him, knelt before him and bathed his feet with her tears then wiping them with her hair before anointing them with perfume, all the while admitting her sins. The depth of her repentance shown through her tears and her contrition led Jesus to forgive her for all her past sins. She then became one of his most devoted disciples. In *Faire l’amour* our character Marie does appear to “pleurer comme une Madeleine” at the beginning of the novel as the narrator comments that her father had died several weeks earlier and “tant de larmes se mêlaient maintenant dans son coeur, qui coulaient depuis des semaines dans le cours tumultueux de nos vies, des larmes de tristesse et d’amour, de deuil et d’étonnement” (FA 22). Also, in the very passage in which he explains all of her names, he cites Madeleine, saying that “personne n’avait comme elle un tel lacrymal, ce don inné de larmes” (FA 55). Marie Madeleine also wept copious tears for a death, the crucifixion of Jesus, until she discovered that he had disappeared from his tomb and understood that he had been resurrected.

as the adjective sibylline is often defined as having a secret or hidden meaning, a word to describe something that is cryptic in nature. Thus, those who understand the reference are able to “get the joke,” so to speak, as it can be characterized as cryptic and will remain elusive, a secret kept from those unfamiliar with Beckett’s text. Case in point, as I just stated, concrete comic elements found in the action are scarce in *Faire l’amour*, so if the reader can detect this intertext, clearly a symbol of not only the author’s ludic sensibility but also his cleverness in the craft of writing, it becomes apparent that indeed there is humor. Of course, for the mainstream reader, this reference may be quite obscure. Toussaint is constantly playing with words, allusions or not, and there are countless examples to cite from this text. For example, when the narrator describes Marie as always having “ces goûts d’une exquisite simplicité” (FA 26), while one reader may overlook this phrase, another may smile at the playful oxymoronic nature of “exquisite simplicité,” an ironical pairing of contrary terms. In the same paragraph, Marie is once again described as a “figure vaincue et ophélienne dans son lit mortuaire” (FA 27). Toussaint’s choice of “ophélienne” is far from insignificant, and in fact plays directly into the plot of the novel as an allusion to *Hamlet*.¹⁰⁶ One of the main characters of Shakespeare’s famous play, Ophelia goes mad with grief as a result of the death of her father and eventually dies by drowning. As we learn, then, it is no coincidence that Marie is distraught with grief over the death of her own father and that symbolically she has been drowning in her own tears for weeks because of it. Ultimately, one has only to gain by noticing these references and understanding them, that is to say, however, that in the big picture, nothing is lost: neither the comprehension nor the enjoyment of the text are

¹⁰⁶ Toussaint might be doubly referring to Rimbaud’s *Ophélie*. Inspired by Shakespeare as well, Rimbaud calls her “la triste Ophélie” and refers to her “douce folie.” He also twice mentions snow, “belle comme la neige” and “une neige au feu,” in his poem, which would certainly be evocative of our author’s novel as we will see in a moment. The snow plays a significant role in *Faire l’amour*.

compromised. Samoyault affirms this notion in her study *L'Intertextualité: Mémoire de la littérature*:

Pas pleinement visible, [l'allusion/la référence] peut permettre une connivence entre l'auteur et le lecteur qui parvient à l'identifier. L'allusion dépend plus de l'effet de lecture que les autres pratiques intertextuelles: **tout en pouvant ne pas être lue, elle peut aussi l'être là où elle n'est pas. La perception de l'allusion est souvent subjective et son dévoilement rarement nécessaire à la compréhension du texte.** (36) [my emphasis]

While it may be true that the perception of an intertext is often subjective and thus seeing it not necessary in the grand scheme of things, Samoyault's point that the allusion "peut aussi l'être là où elle n'est pas" is also very important. She is implying that readers might actually add to the text, hence collaborate, and this is certainly part of Toussaint's playfulness. Even though he welcomes even the most casual readers to enjoy his texts merely on the raw surface, the author himself knows that Minuit tends to attract a much more intellectual audience, this in part one of the reasons why he initially had reservations when Minuit wanted to publish his first novel.¹⁰⁷ With countless allusions abounding throughout his works, he is then able to keep his more engaged readers on their toes.

Let us return to the text at hand. Upon retrieving the fax from the front desk, the narrator who is a little disheveled himself and barely dressed eventually finds Marie in the hotel lobby: it is the middle of the night, she has no make-up on and is randomly wearing some pink mule sandals from the hotel as well as one of the sumptuous dresses from her collection for her show at the museum:

Elle me sourit. Elle avait un sourire ambigu que je ne lui connaissais pas, un peu inquiétant, légèrement dingue. Viens, on sort, me dit-elle en se levant brusquement, je n'en peux plus, de cet hôtel. [...] elle s'arrêta dans le hall pour me toiser et m'adresser un beau sourire vampant, d'ingénuité et de défi. Et, dans l'éclair de plaisir

¹⁰⁷ In the interview with Ammouche-Kremers, Toussaint revealed that he thought Minuit was at first "franchement trop intellectuelle" (28) for his writing, which he considered to be quite humorous.

très vif qui brilla dans ses yeux, il me parut alors la retrouver soudain intégralement , imprévisible et fantasque, tuante, incomparable. (FA 60)

This semantic field of this scene renders it interesting and enables Toussaint to portray the narrator's uneasiness in observing a side of Marie that appears to be a little crazy. She prods him to go out into the night with her, inappropriately dressed for the weather, not to mention the fact that she is donning one of the dresses from her own collection, a twenty-thousand-dollar garment destined for an art exhibition. The phrase "sourire vampant" rings quite playful in itself, as the word vampant is an invention, a neologism furnished by the author serving to connote Marie's ravaging air. This neologism, along with the narrator finding her "tuante," reminds one perhaps more literally of a vampire about to seduce and then swoop down on its victim or quite appropriately here of a more iconic figure like Marilyn Monroe, the classic image of the vamp incarnated in Marie's power of charm and seduction, her abilities to lure and exploit: this narrator does not have a chance. At the same time, however, he is under her spell and seems to like it.

Moreover, the author really does portray the highs and lows that accompany emotions in any relationship, particularly one that is unstable and apparently constantly on the verge of ending. The fickle nature of this couple's feelings is shown several times in the span of a couple of hours in the scene in which the narrator and Marie go out into the Tokyo night. As we have just seen, despite the violence of emotions that occurred in the hotel room while the two were making love, the narrator now finds Marie only hours later as unpredictable in her spontaneity, somewhat different, "tuante, incomparable." They do go out together where they get a bite to eat, buy socks because it starts to snow and their feet are wet and cold, get little bottles of cappuccino from a beverage machine, try to get a taxi back to the hotel, and then ultimately end up caught outside during an earthquake. Here are other examples of the

instantaneous and ever-changing emotions of this couple as they venture out into the night,---
or the or the very early morning, as is actually the case:

Marie se blottissait contre moi, la tête contre ma poitrine, de sorte que nous ne formions plus qu'un seul corps bicéphale étroitement imbriqué. (FA 61)

Et, malgré mon immense fatigue, je me mis à espérer que le jour ne se lève pas à Tokyo ce matin, ne se lève plus jamais et que le temps s'arrête là à l'instant dans ce restaurant de Shinjuku où nous étions si bien (FA 69)

[...] dans l'impuissance immense que je ressentais à ne pouvoir empêcher le temps de passer, je pressentis alors qu'avec la fin de la nuit se terminerait notre amour. (FA 70-1)

[...] elle me dévisagea avec gravité, me scruta intensément du regard, avant de laisser tomber sa tête sur mon épaule et de trinquer avec moi avec beaucoup de féminité et d'abandon, heurtant ma canette avec délicatesse, avec reconnaissance, beaucoup plus gravement qu'il n'eût fallu, tendrement, amoureusement. (FA 73-4)

[...] Marie, derrière moi, les mains autour des bras, transie de froid sur le trottoir, lasse d'attendre et exaspérée de mon inefficacité, m'avait fait remarquer d'une voix aigre que, si je ne hélais que des taxis occupés, nous n'étions pas rentrés à l'hôtel, je m'étais tourné vers elle et lui avais dit de fermer sa gueule. [...] Nous avons marché quelques minutes ainsi sans un mot, et, au premier mot de Marie – me reprochant encore quelque chose, ou se plaignant, je ne sais pas, peu importe, rien que le son de sa voix m'était devenu insupportable (FA 80)

Je la regardais [Marie] dans les yeux, lui planter mon plus mauvais regard dans les yeux. Je ne bougeais pas. [...] Je ressentais des picotements des tempes, j'avais envie de la frapper. (FA 81)

[...] me tournant vers Marie qui marchait à côté de moi en silence . . . je m'apprêtais à avoir un geste envers elle, lui toucher le bras ou lui prendre la main (FA 85)

In the first three quotations above, we see narrator's hope degenerate. First, the two lovers are one, as "un seul corps bicéphale." Then, the narrator expresses that he wants time to stop "dans ce restaurant de Shinjuku où [ils étaient] si bien" because the two are clearly feeling better getting warm and nourished after their earlier debacle. However, the narrator and Marie seem to understand that their relationship is doomed, so this night is bittersweet. In the third quote, he expresses that he is powerless to stop time and that with the termination of

night would also come the end of their love. Still out in the freezing snowy darkness of Tokyo, the two lovers clink their cappuccino bottles in a tragically ironic manner, as they are in a sense toasting the end of their love, just as they did the very beginning of their relationship seven years earlier with wine glasses in Paris.¹⁰⁸ As the night is gradually turning into morning, the two also slip back into the violent emotions that have clearly marked their relationship, as the narrator says that he found the sound of Marie's voice "insupportable" and as a result felt an overwhelming desire to hit her. Soon thereafter, however, again he wants to offer her a gentle touch, some sort of peace offering, perhaps. Their emotions are in a constant state of flux, and in the end, they both seem to realize that this degree of instability is exhausting them.

Then, in exemplary metaphorical fashion, an earthquake occurs, so the violence of this natural phenomenon is subsequently reflected in the impending break-up of this couple. They believe that they are breaking up, but somehow the break-up begins to become more

¹⁰⁸ The image of this couple's first toast is burned in Marie's memory. The narrator describes Marie's perception of this moment seven years earlier:

[...] elle m'avait expliqué qu'elle n'avait jamais ressenti un tel sentiment avec personne, une telle émotion, une telle vague de douce et chaude mélancolie qui l'avait envahie en me voyant faire ce geste si simple, si apparemment anodin, de rapprocher très lentement mon verre à pied du sien pendant le repas, très prudemment, et de façon tout à fait incongrue en même temps pour deux personnes qui ne se connaissaient pas encore très bien, qui ne s'étaient rencontrées qu'une seule fois auparavant, de rapprocher mon verre à pied du sien pour aller caresser le galbe de son verre, l'incliner pour le heurter délicatement dans un simulacre de trinquer sitôt entamé qu'interrompu, il était impossible d'être à la fois plus entreprenant, plus délicat et plus explicite, m'avait-elle expliqué, un concentré d'intelligence, de douceur et de style. Elle m'avait souri, elle m'avait avoué par la suite qu'elle était tombée amoureuse de moi dès cet instant. (FA 19-20)

The amount of detail accorded this moment, this passage in the text, is certainly a testament to the effect it had on Marie. Additionally, from a stylistic point of view, the actual moment makes up a single sentence. The lack of hesitation in describing the moment reflects the spontaneity of that moment when it actually occurred, and the poetic quality of the description with the numerous anaphorae as in "un **tel** sentiment," "une **telle** émotion," "une **telle** vague," "ce geste **si** simple, **si** apparemment anodin," "**plus** entreprenant, **plus** délicat et **plus** explicite" [my emphasis] attests to the beauty of the moment in Marie's mind. Anaphora often produces an effect of insistence and symmetry in order to underline an idea, and that certainly seems to be the case here. Ricalens-Pourchot writes in her *Dictionnaire des figures de style* that the anaphora is not only a poetic device but also quite predominant in contemporary written and spoken prose. She explains that in the context of prose, the anaphora "vise à l'éloquence persuasive et passionnée" (28). Indeed, Marie certainly seems to have convinced both narrator and reader of the power and passion of this moment.

complex, emotionally violent and profound than perhaps the love affair itself ever was.¹⁰⁹

After the earth stops trembling, Marie is terrified and emotional from fear and lack of sleep, she grabs onto the narrator, all the while sobbing, asking him why he would not kiss her.

Despite Marie's evident fear mixed with desire and neediness, the narrator admits: "je ne l'embrassais pas, je ne me penchais pas vers elle pour l'embrasser, et la caresser, la calmer et l'empêcher de pleurer . . ." (FA 88). Here again, the author gives neither the reader nor Marie what she wants. A moment later, however, the narrator counters with this realization:

Et, pourtant dieu sait combien j'avais envie de l'embrasser maintenant – et tellement plus maintenant que nous nous séparions pour toujours que la première fois que je l'avais embrassée. Et je compris alors, tandis qu'elle se blottissait toujours plus fort contre moi, que le désir charnel resté inassouvi après notre étreinte de cette nuit, interrompue, inaboutie, avait maintenant besoin d'un exutoire pour qu'elle puisse libérer les tensions qu'elle avait accumulées. (FA 89)

Subsequently, another sexual encounter begins, this one perhaps even more desperate due to the adrenaline rush from the earthquake. Here, sex is used as a pacifier and again, we are far from romantic love. Perhaps the narrator will finally satisfy Marie's physical desires at this moment. She is over-stressed, and it appears at this point that all she wants is physical contact, right there in public at that moment. It is the only thing that will calm her, and perhaps it will work two ways, both within the narrative for Marie and outside of it for the reader. That is to say, Marie's sexual needs being met could also fulfill the expectations of the readers and release some of their tension that has built up as well in this scene that has lasted thirty pages. Here is how it ends:

¹⁰⁹ Despite Tokyo's instability with the occurrence of the earthquake, life in the city continues. In like manner, despite the unstable nature of this couple's relationship, somehow they manage to drag it out and remain together. After this natural disaster, we do not read fantastic details about a city in ruins, nor do we hear anything regarding deaths or injuries that likely resulted from the quake. Life goes on, and perhaps this sort of anti-climaticism will seem more pertinent at the end of the novel when the narrator's so-called victim of his vial of acid turns out to be a flower.

La terre venait de trembler, et, indifférent aux passants, Marie se serrait contre moi en frottant lascivement son sexe contre ma cuisse, soulevant fiévreusement mon tee-shirt pour me masser le ventre en me plaquant contre le parapet, puis elle saisit ma main et la guida sous sa robe, la fit remonter le long de sa cuisse et je sentis alors le contact brûlant de sa chair nue, je sentis, dans ce corps froid et mouillé de neige qui se collait contre moi en tremblant, le contact incroyablement chaud de la chair de sa cuisse et la proximité ardente de son sexe mouillé de désir, j'avais enfoncé la main dans son slip et je sentais maintenant sous mes doigts la douceur humide et électrique de l'intérieur de son sexe qui se contractait sous ma main, le jour se levait et je la désirais très fort moi aussi maintenant, je me collais contre elle dans les clartés du jour naissant, je caressais son sexe, je pétrissais ses fesses. Le jour se levait sur Tokyo, et je lui enfonçais un doigt dans le trou du cul. (FA 90-1)

First of all, any encounter like this in all its intensity occurring in a public place renders it extremely erotic. The images of cold, wet bodies clinging to each other in search of warmth, Marie's hand lifting the narrator's shirt to touch him and her guiding his hand up her dress, all of this, plus the fact that they are in public, could come off as melodramatic, a parody of seduction. A melodramatic interpretation of the passage would suggest that the behavior of these two characters is more dramatic, shocking, or highly emotional than the situation demands, and given our author's previous texts, this would not be unexpected. However, since a strong bond has already been established between these two characters, and we have seen them in serious conflict and conversation, tender at times, and on each other's nerves at other times, not to mention the earthquake they have just experienced together, a melodramatic reading here does not seem feasible on the surface. What I mean to say here is that in the context of our author's story, this scene does not necessarily come off as parodic. However, it is quite possible that Toussaint's decision to have such explicit sex scenes in this novel is in part a reaction to the profound proliferation of erotic and overtly sexual literature in France and the Francophone world in recent years, especially from female authors Catherine Millet, Virginie Despentes, Christine Angot, and Nelly Arcan, to name a few, as I will briefly discuss momentarily. While their themes may vary somewhat, from general

eroticism (Millet) to incest (Angot) to prostitution (Arcan), these novels all share the characteristic of sexually explicit scenes throughout. Thus this scene in *Faire l'amour*, along with the first one in the hotel, might be construed as reactions to other recent works.

Any consistency in the tone throughout the post-earthquake scene, as we see with the last sentence of the passage, is suddenly broken. Not only does the reader not know whether or not these two characters finally obtained the pleasure they were so frantically seeking at this moment, it is as if the narrator's "doigt dans le trou du cul [de Marie]" could also be read as a playfully obscene gesture toward the critics, a message expressing to them to expect the unexpected, that the time has come for something completely different.¹¹⁰ Here again, Toussaint turns an extremely erotic moment around completely, changes it into something quite vulgar, at least on the signifier's level. In this instance, however, the scene does not take an overtly ridiculous or comical turn, but rather the final image in itself becomes pornographic. While this change in tone may fit into the whole passage taken together and may fit into accepted registers of erotica in English, changes in this level of speech are usually much more expressive in French. Consequently, if the reader smiles or laughs this time, it is more out of discomfort and the shock of what this author has just written, indeed another indicator of the wry black humor inherent in this text.¹¹¹ He seems to be experimenting himself with a new style of writing, and it would appear that reader reaction to this

¹¹⁰ The author/critic Pierre Jourde in particular whose book *La littérature sans estomac* published by L'esprit des péninsules in 2002 comes to mind in this regard. In his scathing critique of the state of contemporary literature of French expression, he criticizes Toussaint among so many others, writing that these contemporary authors provide him with the opportunity to "s'apercevoir que, de plus en plus, les choix éditoriaux tendent à brouiller les pistes. Des ouvrages médiocres, simples produits d'opérations publicitaires, sont présentés par leurs éditeurs, de manière explicite ou implicite, comme de la « vraie littérature »." In his book, he puts Toussaint in the category of *Écriture blanche*, literature for which Jourde cites central characteristics as "la parataxe voyante, minimalisme syntaxique, lexical et rhétorique."

¹¹¹ Let us not lose sight either of the taboo concerning anal pleasures as is presented to us here. Something that is taboo can be defined as banned on grounds of morality or taste, a prohibition imposed by social custom, etc.

writing, at least the textual images that appear before the final sentence of this scene, may be perhaps more shocking than reactions to visual images. What I mean to say is that erotic writing is inherently more sexual in my mind than an erotic film, for instance. It can portray things that mere images cannot. If there is less to see, there is more to imagine. However, the last image changes everything. The erotic ambiance previously established dissipates with this final image, and thus the narrator's gesture gives the scene a more pornographic perspective. Contrary to what I have just posited about the power of the written text, in terms of leaving more to the imagination, then, there is nothing left for us to imagine here. It is as concrete as the written text can be without a visual reference and as a result is extremely jarring.

On that note, let us now examine a little further the possibility that Toussaint may be parodying some contemporary French and Francophone authors who write very explicit sex scenes throughout their works, as I suggested earlier. With a title like *Baise-moi*, for example, Virginie Despentes' first novel naturally received much attention when Florent-Massot decided to publish it in 1994. It was subsequently turned into a film and has been translated under such titles as *Fuck me* and *Rape me*. Despentes is considered one of the most controversial of contemporary writers in France, and her style has been characterized as a mixing of the detective novel and pornography. However, she has also been criticized for perpetuating stereotypes and literary schemas, making her female characters "l'éternelle vamp," as quoted by Wikipedia. Toussaint's creation of the neologism vampant to describe Marie and this general characterization of her as I have just discussed then could appear suspect. It might seem that the black humor already present as I suggest may possibly be

When things are taboo, they are shunned or shyed away from by society, and thus when one dares to mention or do something that is considered taboo, it becomes that much more shocking.

expanded into a larger critique of some of the recent directions in contemporary French fiction; however, the author refutes this idea of critique or parody for the most part, as I will show in a moment.

Another intriguing take on this new contemporary so-called sexual literature is that of the young Canadian writer Nelly Arcan. In an interview with Geneviève Paiement, Arcan answered to comparisons of her recent work *Putain* with that of Catherine Millet, for example. She explained:

I read *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*, which I loved, but I find that it is the opposite of my book. Our books are compared because they have sexuality as a theme, which is really such a vast theme, and a theme that used to be private but now is quite public. But in my book, sexuality is conflictual, it isn't pleasurable. It's the sexuality of a prostitute who is sick of sex, sick of repeating the same gesture. Whereas in Catherine Millet's book, it's the opposite—she always wants the sex, she invests in it, she can't get enough. For me, it's more about the writing. The moment that the theme overshadows the writing, it's the wrong approach to literature. There's nothing erotic or pornographic about my book. I'd even go so far as to call it puritanical. That's the paradox of the book—there may be sexual words, but there is no pleasure. Because of the title, people jump to conclusions.¹¹²

Although the theme of prostitution is not concretely relevant to *Faire l'amour*, it is noteworthy that Marie is portrayed in the scene after the earthquake as a “femme inconnue.” This remark is illuminated further in my discussion of intertextuality later in this chapter, in which I mention the parallels between Beckett's character Celia who is a prostitute and Kawabata's character Komako who is a geisha¹¹³ in relation to Toussaint's often overtly sexual portrayal of Marie. One can see eroticism and a glimpse of pornography in *Faire*

¹¹² From the front page story of the *Montreal Mirror* entitled “No Bed of Roses.”

¹¹³ While a geisha may have fewer sexual connotations than a prostitute, dictionaries describing her as a Japanese woman educated to accompany men as a hostess, with such skills as dancing, conversation, and music, dictionaries also offer an alternative or second definition which defines a geisha as a Japanese prostitute. Furthermore, in the same way that Beckett offers us contradictory images of his character Celia by having her name play on the idea of a celestial body while writing her as a prostitute, so, too does Toussaint play the same game with Marie's name if we reflect back on the idea of Mary Magdalen, or Marie-Madeleine in French, as saint and sinner.

l'amour unlike *Putain* as Arcan claims. These two authors' novels do seem to share some similarities, though. *Faire l'amour*, like Arcan's novel *Putain*, because of its title, conjures up a plethora of preconceived notions, the eternal testament to the effect of word choice. It is quite fascinating to see that Arcan describes her work as "puritanical" and pleasureless for the protagonist. While her novel is quite different from our author's seventh text, ultimately it is not difficult to determine in the end that Toussaint's novel is also one lacking in pleasure for the characters on a contextual level. Just as his novel does not revolve around the act of making love, nor does it portray the sexual act as something tender, beautiful, and giving, Arcan's novel does not portray her character's life as a prostitute as adventurous and erotic. In fact, she affirmed what Toussaint constantly stresses in his interviews when she said to Paiement that "it's more about the writing." I believe our author would have whole-heartedly agreed with his much younger counterpart when she explained that "The moment that the theme overshadows the writing, it's the wrong approach to literature."

In October 2005, I wrote an e-mail letter to the author asking him specifically about the possible link between parody and the explicitly sexual scenes in his novel, and he replied, explaining that "Il n'y a jamais eu d'intention de ma part de parodier quoi que ce soit, ni de jouer sur des genres . . . Loin de moi de telles préoccupations." He explains this further in the same letter:

Je suis, de ce point de vue, naïf. Je n'écris pas "autour" "sur" "avec" ou "contre", je n'écris pas pour me confronter, détourner ou renouveler tel ou tel genre. J'écris, un point c'est tout. Mes références (mes influences), je vais les chercher dans la littérature du passé, chez les grands modèles (Kafka, Beckett, Proust, Nabokov, Faulkner). J'essaie de poursuivre une tradition de précision et d'exigence, je m'inscris dans la littérature.

Toussaint's novel, as I will insist later in the chapter, is pure literature, and it is indeed the presence of allusions, of paradoxes and incongruities, that offers the reader a richer

experience with the text itself. Therefore, any semblance of allusion, parodic or otherwise would appear to be coincidence; or rather, perhaps we have a more collaborative interpretation of the text on the part of the reader, the reader sensing allusions where they do not intentionally exist as suggested earlier by Samoyault. It is interesting to note here that this author does seem to offer mostly elusive responses to interviews, which keeps curious people at bay and his inner sanctum and artistic freedom all to himself. In spite of his denegations regarding parody in this novel, critics are free to see what the text can support, even in the alleged absence of authorial intention.

Arcan's novel was published by Seuil in September 2001, exactly one year before *Faire l'amour. Putain* caused quite a stir, and in turn it sold more than 50,000 copies, an amazing feat for a first novel. It is not inconceivable then that while writing his novel, Toussaint could have been inspired further by the publicity revolving around Arcan's novel, enriching any allusions, intentional or not, already present in his work in progress even more so. He responded to this effect in the aforementioned letter of October 29, 2005 that indeed "[i] est vrai, cependant, de façon ponctuelle et quasi anecdotique, que la multiplication de textes très sexuels écrits à la fin des années 90 a pu en quelque sorte [le] stimuler pour [l]'engager [lui] aussi sur ce terrain. Et [qu'il a] en quelque sorte, subi là une influence du temps, du présent, de l'époque. Ni plus ni moins." With works such as Despentès' *Baise-moi* and Arcan's *Putain*, readers and critics, in sum, do seem to revel in the immediate shock value of their titles, as well as the explicit material inside the texts. Explicitly sexual scenes, and especially topics that were quite taboo once upon a time, such as prostitution and sex for what it is as more of an animal act rather than a romantic one, can often make people very uncomfortable, and yet they remain engaged.

John Morreall discusses incongruity and confronting the unexpected in his article “Amusement and Other Mental States.” He lays out the details of two different reactions to incongruity, the first being negative emotion, and the second being reality assimilation. He cites specifically negative emotions, “such unpleasant or painful emotions as fear, anger, disgust, and sadness” (190). He describes the reaction of reality assimilation as “puzzlement at the strange” (192). He explains that “the incongruity is treated not as emotionally upsetting, nor as amusing, but as a problem in cognitive processing, a problem in making sense of what has been experienced” (192). In short, “Something has been presented to our consciousness that does not fit our conceptual schemata, and we try to make it fit” (192). The fact that the narrator evoked several times previously the end of the night, the dawn of a new day and how it would be symbolic of the end of his relationship with Marie, certainly leads the reader to believe with the phrase “le jour se levait à Tokyo” that something sentimental or tragically romantic is about to occur, or at least that the result, no matter how melancholic, will be poetic and graceful. Instead we are left with a surprisingly harsh image, Breton affirming on that note in his *Anthologie de l’humour noir* that black humor is “par excellence l’ennemi mortel de la sentimentalité” (16), and Morreall describing it as an overlapping of the amusing and the grotesque.

Despite the fact that this thirty-page passage which brutally portrays the reality and emotions of two lovers on the verge of separation does not typify this author’s standard repertoire of tongue-in-cheek commentary often strewn randomly throughout, it exemplifies nonetheless his recurrent use of contrast and incongruity, the difference here being the effect. This time, instead of a humorous interruption or a sudden incongruity inserted to emphasize the less serious trademark of previous texts, for instance, instead of a comical effect meant to

make us laugh as in his previous works, the effect can be silencing with the reader perhaps left speechless. We pause when we read “le doigt dans le trou du cul” perhaps as a result of Morreall’s concept of reality assimilation. He posits that anomalous occurrences “can be disturbing because they suspend our confidence in our ability to predict, and so to anticipate, what will happen next” (193). The nonsérieux here does not really exist. That said, however, we should note that this line of reasoning may follow Morreall’s argument a little too closely. After all, there is a lot of ribald humor associated with this orifice, and thus, what might leave one speechless may actually elicit a smile from another. Regardless of reader reaction, any perceived tension is subsequently relieved when we turn the page of the novel and realize that the two characters are back at the hotel, exhausted but playful in “une brève altercation dans la salle de bain, plutôt facétieuse et comique, un ballet de gestes tendres et somnambuliques sur le carrelage” (*FA* 96), having likely fulfilled their physical desires.

What is also interesting about this passage is in fact its length. In thirty pages, the unity of tone is scarcely broken by playfulness. Granted, there is a plethora of parenthetical commentary within the first half of this scene that spans a couple of hours at most with Marie and the narrator wandering aimlessly around Tokyo in the middle of the night. However, not all of these comments are funny, and the story is so serious, the scene so lengthy, that even an aside here and there is not enough to undermine the reality of the events taking place:

Je m’étais avancé vers le bord de la chaussée pour héler un taxi dans la circulation (même si nous n’étions sans doute plus qu’à quelques minutes de l’hôtel, je trouvais préférable d’en finir au plus vite), et un taxi, obéissant aussitôt à mon injonction, avait quitté la file centrale pour venir se garer devant nous sur le trottoir (*FA* 78-9)

This is the last set of parentheses in the passage. The dissipation of the parentheses seems to correspond directly with the final dissipation of patience between the narrator and Marie in this scene, as their rage toward each other culminates in the earthquake that takes place only

a moment later. What rings mildly humorous here is his hailing occupied taxis, but he is exhausted and the insertion of this small comical anecdote remains powerless against the undeniable disgust these two are apparently feeling toward each other. Eventually, the narrator will take a train to Kyoto, and so the two lovers will no longer be together. In this way, emotions that gradually surface and intensify in a steady crescendo up to the earthquake are thrust definitively to the forefront of the novel, rather than actions between the two lovers despite the title with the action verb faire. The narrator sums it up as such when he finds himself alone and lonely in Kyoto at his friend Bernard's house, realizing that breaking up, "c'était plutôt un état qu'une action, un deuil qu'une agonie" (FA 129). When asked by Moulhiac about the earthquake in the novel, the author responded that since he is only at ease "lorsqu'il ne se passe pas grand-chose," he sought to minimize it "sans pouvoir nier sa force émotionnelle."

From a stylistic perspective, the occurrence of the earthquake is quite rich. As I just quoted above, the author sought to minimize the earthquake, and he does so by writing it into one single sentence. The sentence is extremely long, however, and thus becomes its own passage and in turn has quite a cascading effect. It must be quoted in its entirety in order to portray not only the chaos of the moment, but also the brevity, not to mention maintaining its stylistic integrity:

Nous nous étions remis en route, toujours sans un mot, et nous n'avions pas encore quitté le pont que, me tournant vers Marie **qui** marchait à côté de moi en silence dans le crachin glacé de neige fondue **qui** continuait de tomber sur la ville, je m'apprêtais à avoir un geste envers elle, lui toucher le bras ou lui prendre la main, quand j'eus le sentiment que ma tête vacillait, et, dans le prolongement même de ce vertige, le grondement d'un train invisible commença à tout faire trembler sur son passage en secouant bruyamment les grillages métalliques du parapet du pont **qui** se mirent à trembler de bas en haut à côté de moi dans des gerbes d'étincelles bleuâtres et des éclairs de feu **que** je vis soudain sortir de la boîte d'un générateur en contrebas **qui** implosa sur place dans une épaisse fumée noire **qui** se mit à s'élever sur les voies

ferrées **où** un train lancé à pleine vitesse freinait en catastrophe pour essayer de s'arrêter, tandis que, dans le rapide regard circulaire **que** je jetai derrière moi sur le pont au milieu des lumières des lampadaires **qui** vacillaient, je vis les passants **qui** tanguaient comme sur le pont d'un navire soulevé par une vague énorme, brève et violente, certains perdant l'équilibre et luttant pour garder leur trajectoire en accélérant comme s'ils se précipitaient à la poursuite de leur parapluie, d'autres s'accroupissant, la plupart s'arrêtant sur place, comme figés, paralysés, se protégeant la tête avec un bras, avec leur serviette, leur mallette. Et ce fut tout, ce fut absolument tout. Ce ne fut rien d'autre. (FA 85-6) [my emphasis]

The rhythm of the sentence certainly contributes to the dramatization of the earthquake, as well as the portrayal of emotions that will follow. The sentence is quite complex, containing numerous subordinate clauses. It is interesting to note that while many sentences run on and gain length due to conjunctions, there are only a few in this one that actually link independent clauses, the sentence's length attributed for the most part to relative clauses that serve as descriptors. As a result, the sentence is not at all closed, and the lack of groupings or organization of the relative clauses reproduces further the apparent disorder of the scene and quite literally the movement of the earth. It incarnates a cascading sequence with one thing bringing up another, only to come to an abrupt stop. If we strip down this sentence and deprive it of its relative clauses, here is what we are left with:

Nous nous étions remis en route, toujours sans un mot, et nous n'avions pas encore quitté le pont que, me tournant vers Marie [...], je m'apprêtais à avoir un geste envers elle, lui toucher le bras ou lui prendre la main, quand j'eus le sentiment que ma tête vacillait, et, dans le prolongement même de ce vertige, le grondement d'un train invisible commença à tout faire trembler sur son passage en secouant bruyamment les grillages métalliques du parapet du pont [...], tandis que, dans le rapide regard circulaire [...], je vis les passants [...] certains perdant l'équilibre et luttant pour garder leur trajectoire en accélérant comme s'ils se précipitaient à la poursuite de leur parapluie, d'autres s'accroupissant, la plupart s'arrêtant sur place, comme figés, paralysés, se protégeant la tête avec un bras, avec leur serviette, leur mallette. Et ce fut tout, ce fut absolument tout. Ce ne fut rien d'autre. (FA 85-6)

The passage loses almost half of its length, which is quite significant, not to mention its intensity without these relative pronouns helping to create the landscape of disorder and fear.

Reading the passage as Toussaint wrote it, the reader is then plunged beyond the actual event being narrated into a sort of stylistic game in a moment of crisis in the book, the syntactic crisis of the narration rendered to the reader being symbolic and reflective of the natural crisis of the narrative content itself. It is no coincidence here that the author has language function doubly, yet another testament to his playful spirit despite the apparent gravity of the tone.¹¹⁴ Moreover, the abrupt halt with “ce fut tout” seems unexpected and marks a contrast between the lengthy evocation of the dramatic event unfolding. After such a detailed display of panic and disorder, the drama is cut off completely and even toned down by this sudden declaration.

Also interesting in this brief yet dense passage is the fact that although earthquakes by nature are always quite short in duration, often lasting only seconds, the lack of definitive ending in the sentence, all of the relative clauses divided by commas, may paradoxically cause the quake to seem longer than it really is in the text. It is all about perception, and if we reveal certain verbs of time and perspective, such as continuer de, commencer à, and se mettre à that occur in the passage, it also becomes apparent that description as a pretext is also double. It serves also as a meditation or reflection on time, a theme that pervades all of the author’s works. We can see even before the sentence that details the earthquake, as well as ones after it, terms that designate these moments in time, such as the “couleurs délavées dans la nuit finissante” (FA 85) that directly precedes the earthquake and the invisible dog that “aboyait au loin dans le matin grisâtre” (FA 87) right after the initial panic subsided.

¹¹⁴ On this note, Motte cites Huizinga’s *Homo ludens* in his own book entitled *Ludics in Contemporary Literature*:

‘The contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid’ (8). Further along, it is cast as a matter of performance: ‘all play, both of children and of grown-ups, can be performed in the most perfect seriousness’ (18); elsewhere, a matter of accommodation: ‘The play-concept as such is of a higher order than is seriousness. **For seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness**’ (45). (17-18) [my emphasis]

Evoking both night and morning in a single passage attests to the brevity of life, night quickly fading into morning, this tense moment has passed in fact quite quickly.¹¹⁵

Another particular distinction between *Faire l'amour* and the other texts is the general lack of analepsis, a narrative technique often used throughout Toussaint's books. Analepses in previous texts often serve to disorient the reader, they confuse chronology, but they may also shed light on a situation occurring in the present as well. They are not always seemingly useless digressions. That said, it is striking in this seventh text to have a scene that is thirty pages in length that barely flashes back to any other moment in time since this has been typical in this author's previous works. Only once in the entire scene in which Marie and the narrator are out in the snowy Tokyo night after their initial fight at the hotel is a previous moment in time mentioned, and even then it is kept brief and does not have a disorienting effect on the reader. Marie expresses her worries about her upcoming show in Shinagawa, and the narrator elaborates a bit the reasons for her overall fatigue and concerns:

Ce matin, quand nous étions arrivés à Tokyo, par une confusion regrettable due aux nombreux changements de vols que Marie avait effectués jusqu'au dernier moment, personne n'était venu nous attendre à l'aéroport. Nous nous étions retrouvés seuls dans le grand hall de réception des bagages de Narita à réunir nos cent quarante kilos de bagages répartis en diverses malles et cantines, cylindres à photos et cartons à chapeaux, qui tournaient sur le tapis à bagages et que nous réceptionnions pour les entasser sur trois ou quatre chariots, guettant sans relâche l'hypothétique arrivée de renforts qui ne parurent jamais.

¹¹⁵The narrator is always conscious of the passage of time, particularly during his visit to Kyoto when he is quite ill with a severe cold. He is unable to leave the house and evokes the heaviness of time when one has nothing with which to fill it. On page 150, he starts a paragraph with "Les heures passaient." Then on the very next page he laments that "Les heures étaient vides, lentes et lourdes, le temps semblait s'être arrêté, il ne se passait plus rien dans ma vie." He expresses this heaviness of time, though, in terms of his relationship with Marie: "Ne plus être avec Marie, c'était comme si, après neuf jours de tempête, le vent était tombé" (FA 151). He concludes that now that they are no longer physically together, he feels "plus rien, le calme des après-midi, la fatigue, et l'ennui, la succession des heures" (FA 152). This only serves further to back up my arguments for an intertextual reading of Apollinaire, whose poem *Pont Mirabeau* will be quoted in full in the first section of part C in this chapter. When we compare this narrator's waxing on time as just cited above with *Mirabeau's* declaration that "viennent la nuit, sonne l'heure/les jours s'en vont, je demeure," the parallel is undeniable.

In the author's previous novels, one would imagine any number of absurdities occurring in this situation, perhaps some burlesque humor, but rather, Toussaint takes the opportunity to portray the result of the mix-up at the airport as sort of prophetic: the narrator and Marie end up having to deal with all the baggage themselves, taking two separate taxis to the hotel, "image emblématique de [leur] arrivée au Japon . . ." (*FA* 68). Indeed, they arrive at the hotel separately. At the end of this brief analepsis, the narrator then says that "Marie avait dit qu'elle allait dormir et qu'elle ne voulait plus être dérangée avant le lendemain matin," and then directly adds amusingly in parentheses that "mais, le lendemain matin, c'était maintenant, c'était précisément maintenant, mon amour" (*FA* 69). This comment also serves to emphasize the fact that these two characters have been up all night and that sleep has not come, a large factor in the high emotions that will result from the earthquake. Additionally, his moniker for Marie, "mon amour," is seen throughout the novel and counters the intensity of the mood and the violent and somber tones in general that pervade the novel with a touch of tenderness. In the end, the lack of analepses affects both the structure and the content of the text: structurally, as I just mentioned, the reader does not really experience the disorientation inflicted in the author's previous works. In terms of content, this lack of flashing back binds Marie and the narrator to the present moment and serves to augment the intensity of this present reality even further. The fact that they are in Japan accentuates their inability to avoid reality: since they are in an unfamiliar environment with an unfamiliar language, they cannot retreat to the comfort zones of their life in Paris. They must truly be with each other and deal with the situations that they are presented with. Again, the content here is not funny, but Toussaint's manipulating his writing in terms of both style and content in this novel can be seen as playful since he constantly defies expectations.

Furthermore, this passage is full of stylistic jewels, poetic phrasings, and alliterative plays that should not go unnoticed, yet another bout of virtuosity casting doubt on the author's minimalist writing. For example, when they are choosing beverages from the machine, Marie "se tenait là debout, les yeux dans la vague, sous le porche de cette boutique en bois abandonnée aux volets fermés, et elle regardait tristement devant elle, les cheveux mouillés et le visage parsemé de vestiges de neige fondue" (FA 73). Firstly, while not pure rhyme in the written literary sense, there is the auditory rhyme of the last syllable of abandonnée, volets, fermés, mouillés, and parsemé, but we see additionally not only the alliteration with the letters b and v, but also the soft g in the middle of the words visage, vestige, and neige. There are eloquently expressed sentences like this throughout this novel, and even in Toussaint's other texts, but the difference here is that they seem to stand out more since they are coupled with this particularly non-comical context.¹¹⁶ We see the same play on the letters v and the soft g and j sounds in the sentence "[u]ne voiture de la voirie avançait au ralenti sous la neige au milieu de la chaussée, dont le gyrophare orange jetait ses lueurs allongées sur le haut des façades" (FA 76). Another sort of amusing example that does not seem as much poetic as perhaps simply playful can be found in the phrase "un ondoisement d'anoraks sombres et transparents, de parkas, de pardessus et de parapluies" (FA 78). While the subject of this phrase may not seem poetic, the poetical aspect of it is found

¹¹⁶ For example, even in *La Salle de bain*, poetical passages are present, despite perhaps being eclipsed by the undeniably more minimalist style and comical content:

"Le sol semblait sombre . . ." (SB 32)

"J'époussetais mes manches, marchais en secouant mon manteau" (SB 52).

"Des rideaux lourds, en velours bordeaux, étaient tirés et renforçaient le sentiment d'intimité, d'exiguïté" (SB 55).

"Elle, elle se cantonnait à Kant, se beurrant une tartine" (SB 58).

"Mais, comme nous avons tous les deux plusieurs heures à perdre dans cet aéroport, après avoir vadrouillé l'un à côté de l'autre dans une partie éloignée du hall, nous nous retrouvâmes à la buvette pour boire des bières. Debout devant nos verres . . ." (SB 119).

not in the subject matter, but rather in the choice and assembly of the words. Moreover, while the referent of the text itself is not at all funny, the more collaborative readers might find some amusement on the part of the author, a playful message to them verifying his expert eloquence with words and his mastery of evocative poetic imagery. It is humorous to imagine that the author may be showing off, perhaps strategizing simultaneously the shedding of his minimalist image.

C. Intertextual Readings as Ludic Device 1. Apollinaire

What resonates as quite striking about the entire text in general is its stylistic and poetic qualities and the elegiac passages found throughout, mixed in with deliberately shocking elements. The novel is also different for this additional reason from the author's previous texts, it is pure literature, an ironic finger pointed to anyone who will prematurely put a label on this author's texts. All of the musings on time itself evoke an Apollinarian tension between the flow of time that takes love away and the efforts of the lovers to stop time. Although it may sound trite, Toussaint seems to be offering the reader another possible intertext by alluding to Apollinaire's famous poem *Pont Mirabeau*. What makes this intertextual reading even more plausibly playful, apart from the fact that Apollinaire was alluding to his break-up with his lover who was also named Marie, is the fact that as the earthquake occurs, Marie and the narrator are, in fact, on a bridge:

Nous nous étions arrêtés sur un pont, et je regardais le jour se lever devant moi. Le jour se levait, et je songeais que c'en était fini de notre amour, c'était comme si je regardais notre amour se défaire devant moi, se dissiper avec la nuit, au rythme quasiment immobile du temps qui passe quand on en prend la mesure . . . Marie se tenait en silence à côté de moi, et nous demeurions immobiles, comme figés sur cette passerelle métallique réservée aux piétons . . . (FA 83-4)

If we examine Apollinaire's poem published in 1913 as part of the volume *Alcools*, the

similarities immediately surface:

Sous le pont Mirabeau coule la Seine
Et nos amours
Faut-il qu'il m'en souviene
La joie venait toujours après la peine

Vienne la nuit sonne l'heure
Les jours s'en vont je demeure

Les mains dans les mains restons face à face
Tandis que sous
Le pont de nos bras passe
Des éternels regards l'onde si lasse

Vienne la nuit sonne l'heure
Les jours s'en vont je demeure

L'amour s'en va comme cette eau courante
L'amour s'en va
Comme la vie est lente
Et comme l'Espérance est violente

Vienne la nuit sonne l'heure
Les jours s'en vont je demeure

Passent les jours et passent les semaines
Ni temps passé
Ni les amours reviennent
Sous le pont Mirabeau coule la Seine

Vienne la nuit sonne l'heure
Les jours s'en vont je demeure

In the above passage from the novel as well as Apollinaire's poem, the expression of a terminated love is present, a nostalgic tone pervading. There is also an undeniable immobility found in both the above scene and the poem in the static quality of the bridge: the poet in *Pont Mirabeau* is stuck in his lamentable melancholic state as he expresses "je demeure" in the same way that Marie and this narrator "demeur[ai]ent immobiles, comme figés sur cette passerelle métallique," in limbo left with unresolved feelings. Both works' constant

evocation of “le jour” and “la nuit” is truly indicative of the powerlessness of the characters faced with time.¹¹⁷ Like *Pont Mirabeau, Faire l’amour* seems to embody a sort of elegy, itself a pensive and reflective poem. The words “l’Espérance est violente” are quite applicable to the relationship between Marie and the narrator as they constantly struggle with their emotions, yet always end up staying together.¹¹⁸ There is certainly nothing funny about this scene. What is also remarkable are the similarities between Apollinaire’s bridge and Toussaint’s bridge, despite the passing of almost a century. Today, the Mirabeau bridge over the Seine River in Paris embodies a romantic image with picturesque views of the city, but before Apollinaire, it was quite modern and industrial, a bridge made of metal, just like the image Toussaint offers. The bridge in *Faire l’amour* is described as a “passerelle métallique,” one that is easily shaken any time a train is coming or going, not to mention the harsh auditory intrusion of the trains in this setting. The constant flux and flow of trains stands in contrast to the flow of water by the Mirabeau bridge. Toussaint seems to imbue some sort of intertextual play into all of his works; meanwhile, however, he is careful to distinguish himself by infusing his own contemporary context and cultural sensibilities into his texts. Intertextuality, whether outwardly humorous or not, is always inherently playful. This is why, asserts Samoyault, “la mémoire de la littérature ne se contente pas d’être contemplation narcissique ou répétition d’elle-même et qu’intervient – dimension importante

¹¹⁷ The main difference between the two can be seen in the fact that Marie and the narrator almost seem to need the earthquake as an impetus to stir up their emotions even further. Evidently there was no earthquake in Paris to shake up Apollinaire’s melancholy. Nevertheless, emotional violence is present in both instances.

¹¹⁸ This idea will prove particularly pertinent at the end of the novel as well when the narrator speaks to Marie on the phone from Kyoto, is appeased by her voice, perhaps hopeful, and yet “infiniment heureux et malheureux” (*FA* 167). That realization marks the beginning of the end, the narrator’s rush of violent feelings overtaking him as he quickly returns to Tokyo to find Marie.

de toute réflexion sur l'intertextualité – son caractère ludique” (58).¹¹⁹

2. Kawabata

With the end of the earthquake, the intensity of emotions takes over as the sexual encounter I quoted earlier begins immediately afterwards. Indeed, Toussaint does not want the event here to take center stage and told Moulhiac on that note that “les personnages de *Faire l'amour* ont une épaisseur psychologique que [s]es autres personnages ne possédaient pas” After the two return to the hotel to bathe and try to sleep, the phone rings. They have been up all night, and now it is 9 a.m. Marie is to meet with a group of Japanese designers and artists and has a full day planned:

[...] c'était Yamda Kenji [qui] nous attendait comme convenu à neuf heures à la réception en compagnie de messieurs Maruyama, Tanaka, Kawabata et Morita. (*FA* 97)

When Marie finally meets everyone, “Seul le nom de Kawabata, associé au physique du personnage cheveux raides et roses à la Andy Warhol et pantalon en cuir noir moultant, sembla l'intéresser un instant” (*FA* 108). Throughout the entire scene in which Marie meets with her Japanese hosts, Kawabata stands out in particular, as the narrator chooses to distinguish him among the other men by using a descriptor each time his name is mentioned. Examples include “personnage influent” (108), “ce Kawabata en cuir” (109), “le taciturne Kawabata” (112), and “l'imprévisible Kawabata” (113).

In the novel, we have the Japanese context and setting in Tokyo, the snowy landscape of the early morning scene of the earthquake, and the train station as the backdrop to this

¹¹⁹ Samoyault elaborates this notion of the ludic aspect of intertextuality:

La mémoire de la bibliothèque, la conscience de la répétition et de la modélisation par autrui sont aussi le substrat de nombreux jeux littéraires Il est intéressant [...] que le roman moderne [...] repose sur le détournement des romans de chevalerie : le roman serait ainsi né de la parodie des romans, ce qui, paradoxe suprême mais qui ne nous surprend plus, placerait l'intertextualité à l'origine. (58)

context and setting. All of these factors combined ring reminiscent to Yasunari Kawabata's novel *Snow Country*, and thus with the introduction of this character named Kawabata, it appears that Toussaint is alluding to yet another influential writer. *Snow Country* is the story of a middle-aged man named Shimamura and his affair with a geisha named Komako. Komako is violently in love with him, but Shimamura is unable to fulfill and truly reciprocate this love. The story's action centers on the train station and hotel in the winter, the landscape covered with snow. Kawabata evokes this immediately in the first sentences of his novel:

The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country. The earth lay white under the night sky. The train pulled up at a signal stop. (3)

Of further interest is the fact that regarding action and plot, Kawabata's novel has been characterized by some critics as relatively plotless, containing almost no concrete action. Mei Nakano counters, however, in explaining that there is indeed regard for story and plot, just that the plot of *Snow Country* "centers on the continuity and development of the main character's thought rather than specific actions." If we examine this statement in the context of our author, when the narrator wonders, for example, "Qu'avais-je à faire ces jours-ci à Tokyo?" it becomes clear that this idea of thoughts and emotions taking priority over actions is exactly the case. He responds, as I quoted in part earlier: "Rien. Rompre. Mais rompre, je commençais à m'en rendre compte, c'était plutôt un état qu'une action, un deuil qu'une agonie" (*FA* 129). Although we never truly know if Marie and the narrator break up, a question I will touch on momentarily, with this characterization of breaking up as rather "un deuil qu'une agonie," it seems as if in the narrator's mind that the rupture has already occurred.

Kawabata is one of Japan's most respected authors, and *Snow Country* is considered his masterpiece. Also extremely noteworthy are the remarkable thematic parallels with Toussaint's novel, loneliness, impossible love, the tragic waste of a woman's love for an unworthy lover, as well as the nostalgic tone that pervades, and the poetic-visual style of Kawabata's novel that critics all cite as growing out of the tradition of haiku. Kawabata also conjures up images of day fading into night and vice versa, evoking the more metaphysical characteristics of time throughout his novel, just as Toussaint does in his text as I have already discussed. Here are some examples from Kawabata's text:

Surprised anew at the morning cold, Shimamura raised his head from the pillow. The sky was still the color of night, but in the mountains it was already morning. (47)

She [Komako] seemed on edge, like some restless night beast that fears the approach of morning. It was as though a strange, magical wildness had taken her. (47)

The color of evening was descending from chasms between the peaks. The dim brightness of the winter afternoon seemed to have been sucked into the earth, and the battered old train had shed its bright shell in the tunnel. There was no snow on the south slope. (85)

The solid, integral shape of the mountain, taking up the whole of the evening landscape there at the end of the plain, was set off in a deep purple against the pale light of the sky. The moon was no longer an afternoon white, but, faintly colored, it had not yet taken on the clear coldness of the winter night . . . Where the mountain swept down to meet the river, a stark white building, a hydroelectric plant perhaps, stood out sharply from the withered scene the train window framed, one last spot saved from the night. (85-6)

The second quote in particular reminds us of the narrator of Toussaint's text describing Marie the night that they went out into the snowy city of Tokyo. Having described Marie's smile as vampant is reminiscent of Komako being described as "some restless night beast that fears the approach of morning" (47). Moreover, we can certainly relate the "strange, magical wildness" that overtakes Komako to Marie's "sourire ambigu . . . un peu inquiétant,

légèrement dingue” (*FA* 60). Both narrators seem to detect something unrecognizable in their lovers in these scenes.

Without even detecting this intertext, it is not difficult to see the poetic quality of *Faire l’amour* as I have just discussed it in connection with Apollinaire. Also notable is the definition of haiku in relation to our author’s text. Haiku poems are seventeen-syllable poems that seek to convey a sudden awareness of beauty by a mating of opposite or incongruous terms, poems that fuse motion and stillness. If we apply this description (apart from the obvious seventeen syllables) to passages in *Faire l’amour*, the similarities are immediately evident. In terms of conveying a sudden awareness of beauty by mating incongruous elements, the example par excellence in our author’s novel is the end of the earthquake: this violent force of nature that has occurred just after Marie and the narrator have been arguing. The narrator predicts the end of their love, and this is paired with the intense sexual encounter that occurs directly after it in the middle of the train station. Toussaint seems to twist this, though, when he mates the intensity and eroticism of this scene with the vulgarity of the final gesture, the narrator plunging his finger into “le trou du cul [de Marie].”¹²⁰

Furthermore, the metallic pedestrian bridge where Marie and the narrator are standing when the earthquake occurs embodies immobility as an immovable object, and yet motion is fused with it not only in the passing trains which cause it to vibrate, but also the earthquake that shakes it violently. In addition, the constant flux of emotions is ironically part of the cause of the stagnation of their relationship. Will they break up or not? It seems as though a stalemate is inevitable. Of course, the reader reading this text for the first time does not yet know that this couple will not technically break up by the end of the novel. It may seem that

¹²⁰ Indeed, this is incongruous; however, from a somewhat different point of view, it also continues and extends the eroticism of the scene and inscribes all of it in an erotica that surpasses the erotica/pornography divide.

they do, that they have, or that they will, but close examination of the end reveals most certainly an ambiguity regarding this question. The revelation, or rather the assumption, since it is not clear either way on the last page, that Marie and the narrator have not in fact broken up, becomes even more interesting upon retrospective reflection on the Apollinarian intertext, as this idea, the idea that the couple does not actually break up, ironically subverts *Pont Mirabeau*. All the angst, sorrow, and nostalgia evoked in Apollinaire's poem are present precisely because he and Marie Laurencin have broken up definitively. In contrast, if we believe that the narrator of *Faire l'amour* and Marie de Montalte have not truly broken up, then all the angst, sorrow, and nostalgia experienced by these lovers occurs amusingly enough because they are still together. Also amusing is that despite the fact that Apollinaire and Marie Laurencin have broken up, the poet keeps hope against all reason. Our narrator, on the other hand, has not broken up with his girlfriend, and yet he possesses a staggering lack of hope for their future together.

Many critics have tagged this author's texts with the label ironic. Muecke writes to this effect:

[An ironist] may go beyond the occasional use of a word or a phrase and adopt *in toto* the style of a different cultural level or a different way of thinking or even invent a style, his purpose being not simply to 'place' what the adopted or invented style represents, not simply to indicate its distance from him, but to distance and liberate himself. (CI 78)

Toussaint told Arnaud Moulhiac in the above-mentioned interview that indeed, although his characters "bougent, évoluent avec [lui]," in *Faire l'amour*, "la distanciation est plus grande." While this author's seventh book is rich in antithesis and contradiction, I would not say that he adopts a completely different style *in toto*. He himself expresses as much to Moulhiac, explaining quite simply that "Le narrateur [de *Faire l'amour*] est effectivement

dans la lignée de [ses] précédents personnages,” and that “si [ses] personnages sont moins désincarnés¹²¹ que dans [ses] précédents livres, *Faire l’amour* se situe tout de même dans leur lignée.”¹²² Unlike his previous novels, Toussaint does not digress so much here: he infuses an even deeper black humor into the novel than in his previous ones, and as a result, his style evolves somewhat. Indeed a new and different voice surfaces surprisingly in this novel. This narrator does not seem to embody fully the playful personality of the previous ones in the same way. I do not mean to imply that the narrator of *Faire l’amour* is not playful. He is playful; it is just that the playful moments are more isolated and overshadowed

¹²¹ We can certainly detect an amusing irony in our author’s statement and his particular use of the word “désincarnés” since the relationship between the narrator and Marie is clearly very carnal.

¹²² I feel it pertinent to suggest also here that Toussaint’s descriptions of Kawabata the character in the novel that I cited earlier seem to be perfectly calculated to reflect Kawabata the real-life author. For example, he was considered unpredictable in some ways since he is most well known for his traditionalist style and adherence to what is purely Japanese but also flirted with modernism, this perhaps Toussaint’s “Kawabata en cuir,” the one with the pink hair. Roy Starrs, author of *Soundings in Time: The Fictive Art of Yasunari Kawabata*, explains that most of Kawabata’s early works “easily fall within the mainstream literary tradition of autobiographical writing in a lyrical mode – though, as we have seen, some differ considerably from others in mood and style” (68). He concludes that “[s]ince these were the works that established him quickly as an important and up-and-coming writer, no doubt it would have been expedient for him to go on indefinitely writing in this mode. At least one would not have expected him to break away from it [...]” (68). The way that Kawabata’s early works still contained some that differed in mood and style certainly reminds us of *La réticence*, for example. Kawabata was seen as a risk taker in departing from the familiar methods, and Starrs believes that his staunch traditionalism is a misconception and “consequently underestimates the depth and persistence of Kawabata’s modernism” (70). He argues this influence further:

In a work of Kawabata’s ‘modernist period’ such as *Crystal Fantasies* they are all too obviously, perhaps even crudely, Joycean. In a work such as *Snow Country*, written just a few years later in his ‘traditionalist period’, they seem to belong more to the native tradition – and thereby to benefit greatly in terms of aesthetic subtlety. And yet, can we assume that the fact that Kawabata experimented at one point with Joycean stream of consciousness has no relation whatsoever to the fact that, in writing *Snow Country* just a few years later, he developed his own form of this narrative technique, albeit in a more subtle and traditional way? This seems to me an extremely unconvincing assumption. What seems far more likely is that Kawabata did learn some lasting lessons from his encounter with modernism (71)

It is interesting to relate Kawabata’s modernist period to Toussaint’s minimalist period, if we can call it that. He, like Kawabata, has been placed into a certain category, but one that made him very successful. Readers and critics come to expect more of the same from their beloved authors because it is familiar, but Toussaint is clearly moving away from some of the narrative traits indicative of the first fifteen years of his career. What is also intriguing here is the fact that Kawabata, like Beckett whose intertext is present as well in Toussaint’s seventh text, was influenced by Joyce, and that all three writers made serious departures from their early works, Toussaint’s major departure occurring with *Faire l’amour* in particular. He seems to have found his creative soul-mates of sorts in Beckett and Kawabata, and in the same way that Joyce seeped into their writings, so too are they seeping into Toussaint’s.

by the heaviness of the content and thus do not pervade this novel like the others. This narrator is certainly socially alienated like the others, as nothing could suggest this more than the vial of acid, which I will discuss at length in the pages to come, and much of Toussaint's situational humor can be found in the moments when his protagonists are seen acting or feeling awkward. Moreover, Marie is the first female character in a relationship with one of Toussaint's narrators who does not accept him and does not console him. For the first time, it seems as if there are actually two main characters, as Marie stands as much at the center of this story as the narrator. These strong female characters make evident yet another striking parallel between *Faire l'amour* and *Snow Country*. Indeed, there is a love affair in both novels, and in both it is a love that can never be fulfilled. Shimamura, like our narrator, tends to observe and participate in life from a detached, aesthetic distance that allows him to separate himself from the realities of human existence. For example, Toussaint's narrator does not even acknowledge Marie's tears when they are making love, confessing that "je regardais la larme se dissiper sur sa joue, et j'ai fermé les yeux – en pensant que peut-être, en effet, je ne l'aimais plus" (*FA* 32). Similarly in Kawabata's text, "Were he to give himself quite up to that consciousness of wasted effort, Shimamura felt, he would be drawn into a remote emotionalism that would make his own life a waste" (43). In the end, both men are, it seems, incapable of love. Komako, just like Marie, on the other hand, lives in the center of love and life, vulnerable to her emotions and the forces of life. She, like Marie in *Faire l'amour*, is the heart of this story. In sum, there are similarities to previous texts, and yet Toussaint still succeeds at transgressing himself, destroying many of the preconceived notions the reader carries throughout the reading of this novel.

3. Beckett

The author has already alluded to *Murphy* in mentioning Dr. Angus Killiecrankie, but the intertextual wink is much more present than Toussaint concretely indicates through the citation of a single name in the first part of the novel. Beckett's *Murphy* also deals with the dilemma of desire for his mistress and for absolute escape into the black depths of his mind. His lover Celia, believing that he has left her for good, explains it as such:

He had to leave me to be what he was before he met me, only worse, or better, no matter what I did. (234)

Tragically, *Murphy* forever leaves Celia, and everyone else for that matter, just moments later in the novel. This conflict of desires, which at first seems insoluble, is finally resolved, abstract though it is described, when he is killed in a gas explosion.¹²³

The narrator of *Faire l'amour* also grapples with the desire for Marie and a more seemingly sinister desire involving the vial of hydrochloric acid he carries around with him throughout the novel. The intertextual wink at Beckett's text is worth noting, but the end is somewhat different: Toussaint tweaks the more sinister implications of the acid into something more poetic but no less tragically comic. There are a few clichéd references to the possible sinister outcome with this acid, but they have a parodic quality to them, which makes them funny, the author's black humor present therein. For example, at the very beginning of the novel when the presence of the acid is mentioned immediately, Marie

¹²³ The text reads:

At one of the rock's dead points he saw, for a second, far beneath, the dip and radiator, gleam and grin; at the other the skylight, open to no stars. Slowly he felt better, astir in his mind, in the freedom of that light and dark that did not clash, nor alternate, nor fade nor lighten except to their communion. The rock got faster and faster, shorter and shorter, the gleam was gone, the grin was gone, the starlessness was gone, soon his body would be quiet. Most things under the moon got slower and slower and then stopped, a rock got faster and faster and then stopped. Soon his body would be quiet, soon he would be free.

The gas went on in the w.c., excellent gas, superfine chaos.
Soon his body was quiet. (252-3)

worries that the acid will not end up on someone else's face, but rather more likely the narrator's, or even hers for that matter. To this we witness the narrator's reply:

Non, je ne crois pas, lui disais-je avec un gentil sourire de dénégation. Non, je ne crois pas, Marie, et, de la main, sans la quitter des yeux, je caressais doucement le galbe du flacon dans la poche de ma veste. (FA 12)

Then a little later after he mentions the vial of acid in his hand, standing naked in front of the mirror in the bathroom, the paragraph ends and one single sentence is set apart to form its own complete and unique thought, its own paragraph: "Et, peu à peu, la menace s'était précisée" (FA 38). The narrator also has nightmares about the acid, that he is again naked in the bathroom in front of the mirror and then throws the acid on his reflection in the window, or upon staring at Marie naked in the hotel bed, blinded by the silk mask of the hotel with her legs open and genitalia exposed:

[...] moi qui luttais intérieurement, et qui, dans un mouvement ample et un hurlement, me détournant d'elle, aspergeais la baie vitrée de la chambre d'une giclée d'acide qui bouillonnait sur le verre et se mettait à crisser et à fumer autour de cratère dans une mélasse gluante de verre fondu et boursoufflé qui dégoulinait sur la vitre en longues traînées sirupeuses et noirâtres. (FA 42-3)

These scenes are almost melodramatic in their violence, the narrator caressing the vial of acid, and then ultimately having nightmares that end with the acid on a mirror and a window, again rich from the perspective of black humor.¹²⁴ If we take the scene at face value, it could be, quite naturally, disturbing. However, when read as melodramatic, the tone adds a parodic quality to the scene, thereby, perhaps, causing the reader to laugh despite the serious circumstances. As the reader learns, though, no one is killed then nor at the end of the novel,

¹²⁴ This narrator, like Beckett's Murphy, seems to go mad at the end of the novel. The narrator of *Faire l'amour* is certainly unstable at the end and goes on a sort of rampage looking for Marie with his vial of acid in tow. By the same token, Murphy's behavior seems erratic at the end of Beckett's text: we also read that "the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat remembers Murphy to this day, with pity, derision, contempt and a touch of awe, as the male nurse that went mad with his colours nailed to the mast" (248).

and the threat that randomly surfaces throughout the novel subsides when the narrator empties the vial of acid onto a flower. Instead of the protagonist being killed in a gas explosion, or rather throwing the acid in his own face as Marie so amusingly predicted as a possible outcome, it is rather a delicate plant in Toussaint's text whose ill fate it is to be victim of the vial of acid:

Je m'arrêtai contre un arbre et je retins mon souffle. Je ne bougeais plus. Il y avait là près de moi, dans l'ombre, fragile, minuscule, une toute petite fleur isolée dans la terre. Je la regardais, la lumière de la lune l'éclairait doucement et faisait luire ses pétales blancs et mauves de reflets pâles et délicats. Je ne savais pas ce que c'était comme fleur, une fleur sauvage, une violette, une pensée, et, sans faire un pas de plus, las, brisé, épuisé, pour en finir, je vidai le flacon d'acide chlorhydrique sur la fleur, qui se contracta d'un coup, se rétracta, se recroquevilla dans un nuage de fumée et une odeur épouvantable. Il ne restait plus rien, qu'un cratère qui fumait dans la faible lumière du clair de lune, et le sentiment d'avoir été à l'origine de ce désastre infinitésimal. (*FA* 179)

This is how the novel ends, and once again it is indicative of a black humor that I have evoked throughout. On the surface, there seems to be nothing funny whatsoever in witnessing a distraught man dumping a vial of acid out onto a flower. What rings humorous, however, is the fact that while Beckett's Murphy, whom I just invoked, is able to escape his hell on earth, his conflict of desires, through the gas explosion, Toussaint's narrator is not so lucky. Not only is it farcical and pitiful that the victim of the acid is a flower, but it also proves how weak the narrator is. He cannot throw this acid in someone's face as he claims to desire to do at the beginning of the novel, nor can he escape the clutches of Marie. Clearly, the relationship needs to end, but because of his weakness, the vicious circle will not be broken. Thus, on some darker level, this is quite amusing, tragically comic as I just stated. Also abundantly playful is the fact that the flower in the above passage is in fact "une pensée." Acknowledgement of this double meaning and the implication therein should not go unmentioned. A pensée in the botanical sense in French is a pansy, but a pensée is also a

thought. Therefore, by destroying this delicate flower, the narrator seems also to be symbolically destroying his own thoughts and the refuge of his own mind. Furthermore, it seems with the reference to his reflection that it is, in fact, his own face that the narrator seeks to escape, his own gaze, his own compulsion to think and desire, his entire existence. It is too complicated. While he often wants to retreat to this inner world, the world of his own thoughts to which no one else has access, he is unable to let go of Marie and the pain of his immediate physical world. Perhaps this is the secret of the “hommage sibyllin” the narrator cites on page 54. As I mentioned earlier, this phrase possibly makes reference to something secret or cryptic. It is a teaser to readers, and as such, it suggests a riddle, something more than meets the eye, a certain complexity.

With this in mind, we begin to realize that the initial allusion to Murphy through mention of Dr. Angus Killiecrankie is not random nor an isolated reference. More and more, the reader familiar with the works of Beckett, and *Murphy* in particular, begins to realize that Toussaint’s intertextual play is, in fact, much more tacitly profound than a simple wink about Marie’s names. (Knowing that our author is an avid admirer of Beckett does not hurt either.) Indeed more tacit and subtle, the links our author seems to be creating between his and Beckett’s text are more general references, musing of course on the unstable and often farcical nature of love, while the links between Toussaint’s text and those of Apollinaire and Kawabata are distinctly more concrete. It is perhaps this idea, then, the idea of referencing Beckett so obscurely and generally, that embodies our author’s “hommage sybillin.”¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Another contributing factor to the subtlety of the references is certainly style, since an obvious difference between *Faire l’amour* and *Murphy* is indeed the way in which they are written. Toussaint’s novel is clearly a love story written in a style accessible to the most mainstream readers not necessarily searching for more intellectual adventures with the text. On the contrary, Beckett’s text is riddled with abstractions and philosophical ramblings, mainly used to satirize language and thought, so while the allusions to his text within Toussaint’s text are fascinating, let us be clear about the obvious differences.

Retrospectively, it becomes evident that Toussaint's intertextual references are not only well crafted in and of themselves, but are also part of an intricate structure meant to enhance the thematic flow of the novel. For example, let us go back to the scene at the hotel swimming pool after the narrator and Marie have their huge fight and Marie asks him to leave. As we have just discussed the playfully symbolic nature of our author's choice of a pensée for a flower, it is pertinent to notice here the overwhelming presence of the pensée as thought:

Je nageais comme en apesanteur dans le ciel, respirant doucement en laissant mes pensées se fondre dans l'harmonie de l'univers. J'avais fini par me déprendre de moi, mes pensées procédaient de l'eau qui m'entourait, elles en étaient l'émanation, elles en avaient l'évidence et la fluidité, elles s'écoulaient au gré du temps qui passe et coulaient sans objet dans l'ivresse de leur simple écoulement, la grandeur de leur cours, comme des pulsations sanguines inconscientes, rythmées, douces et régulières, et je pensais, mais c'est déjà trop dire, non, je ne pensais pas, je faisais maintenant corps avec l'infini des pensées, j'étais moi-même le mouvement de la pensée, j'étais le cours du temps. (FA 51-2)

What is also worth noting here is the mind/body theme that pervades the passage, as well as an absence/presence dichotomy. The narrator really calms down, and for this brief moment he seems to have reached a sort of nirvana, to have escaped himself and the outside world. The swimming pool is his "little world"¹²⁶ in which he is simultaneously present and absent – his physical body present, but his mind absent from the difficulty of his earthly existence.

Angela B. Moorjani writes in *Abysmal Games in the Novels of Samuel Beckett* that the clash between Eros and Narcissus is striking in *Murphy*. She elaborates on this:

[...] narcissism is further linked to the philosophy of introspection and dualism: the Cartesian *cogito* repeats the Narcissus myth through its reduplication of consciousness – I think/I am. On the other hand, Narcissus represents the rejection of others for love of self. Finally, however, the desire of Narcissus to become one with his reflected image in the water points to a Nirvana motif: ultimately, Narcissus aims to reenter the oneness of the womb also identified with death. Eros versus Narcissus is finally Eros versus Thanatos. (74-5)

¹²⁶ Murphy often makes reference to his "little world" and his "big world" and the conflicts between the two.

The narrator of *Faire l'amour* seems to experience the same conflicting sentiments. The need to escape, be it through death or whatever, is not outside the realm of his imagination. This is made clear with his fantasy of throwing the vial of acid at his reflection in the mirror even if that is not where it ends up, but also in his waxing on the catastrophic earthquake that occurred in Tokyo in 1923. He feels a very small tremor while swimming, and this makes him wonder if it is not merely a precursor to a much larger one, as tremors often occur in series. He has an extraordinary view of Tokyo from the atrium where the pool is located, and this pushes him further to imagine the complete destruction that a serious earthquake would inflict. He then sort of morbidly fantasizes this event, “souhaitant dans une sorte d'élan grandiose qu'il survînt à l'instant devant [lui], à la seconde même, et fît tout disparaître sous [ses] yeux, réduisant là Tokyo en cendres, en ruines et en désolation, **abolissant la ville et [sa] fatigue, le temps et [ses] amours mortes**” (FA 49). [my emphasis]

In a way, the narrator's self is compromised by continuing to be with Marie. He is not at peace, and yet for this fleeting moment, he feels at one with the universe, mind and body together, the ability just to be: he obtains the quietude he so desperately wants. Unfortunately, it is only temporary, and he goes to look for Marie. In examining *Murphy*, an eerily similar theme surfaces in Murphy's relationship with his lover Celia: “The part of him that he hated craved for Celia, the part he loved shrivelled up at the thought of her” (*Murphy* 8). Celia for Murphy, like Marie for our narrator, is both necessary and repellent. This part of Murphy shrivels up at the thought of Celia in the same way that the flower shrivels up at the end of *Faire l'amour*. It is interesting as well that there is a death in Celia's life that sends her into her tail-spin because this is exactly what the narrator of *Faire l'amour* relays to us about Marie at the beginning of the novel, that her father died a few months ago and that she has

not really stopped crying since. Also evidenced in both texts is the compulsion to think and the Pascalian desire to obtain a meditative state. In both texts, metaphysical aspects come to the foreground as well as we have just seen in the above-quoted passage from *Faire l'amour*. In *Murphy*, for example, “[his] mind pictured itself as a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without” (*Murphy* 107). The description continues:

This was not an impoverishment, for it excluded nothing that it did not itself contain. Nothing had ever been, was or would be in the universe outside it but was already present as virtual, or actual, or virtual rising into actual, or actual falling into virtual, in the universe inside it. (107)

Uncovering the more profound similarities may then give rise to the discovery of even more simple playful winks to *Murphy* in *Faire l'amour*, as, for example, Toussaint writes “EXIT, EXIT, EXIT” (43) three times in all capital letters simply to describe the emergency exit sign the narrator sees lit up in the dark hotel in the same way that Beckett writes “Music, MUSIC, MUSIC” (*Murphy* 236). Toussaint’s “EXIT, EXIT, EXIT” is doubly playful though: there is the aforementioned play on Beckett’s text, but it could also playfully allude to the narrator’s relationship, a sign telling him to get out of it. The humor behind the idea of this sign from above (both literally and figuratively!) imploring this man to end his relationship truly surfaces as an ironically prophetic warning retrospectively, as the reader discovers at the end of the novel that perhaps there is no way out.

Another undeniable allusion occurs in *Faire l'amour* at the end of the earthquake when everything finally stops and is quiet, all the people experiencing a sort of abject self-awareness of themselves, their lives maybe flashing before them, the narrator saying that “ce fut tout, ce fut absolument tout. Ce ne fut rien d’autre” (*FA* 86). Similarly in *Murphy*, upon experiencing a sort of epiphany of the senses and awareness of his own self, Beckett writes

that “there was nothing but he, the unintelligible gulf and they. That was all. All. ALL” (*Murphy* 240).

4. Narrative Structure and the Intertextual Dialogue between Apollinaire, Kawabata, and Beckett

The final scene of *Faire l'amour* with the acid and the flower represents yet again one of the countless instances of Toussaint's clever integration of intertextual references. I mentioned that this author's intertexts are not only well crafted in and of themselves, but are also part of an intricate structure meant to enhance the thematic flow of the novel. With this in mind, we can see the seamless transitions between the ebb and flow of time and the water in the swimming pool that seem to convey metaphysical similarities to *Murphy* and the allusion to Apollinaire's poem about the flow of the Seine as a metaphor for the flow of time. Apollinaire's poem is wrapped up in this whole scene that precedes the earthquake, the snow country that Tokyo has become in the early morning of the earthquake. All three of these intertexts are intricately intertwined to create the most intense scene in the novel and to create a transition from the most peaceful scene at the swimming pool to the most violent one at the train station during and after the earthquake.¹²⁷

Additionally, there seems to be a mingling of *Snow Country* and *Pont Mirabeau* in Kyoto when the narrator finally ventures out upon recovery from his severe cold. He

¹²⁷ Also intriguing is realizing that Kawabata's Komako in *Snow Country* is a geisha and that Beckett's Celia in *Murphy* is a prostitute. This perhaps sheds more light on Toussaint's portrayal of Marie as such a sexual creature, as the narrator indeed mentions a couple of times that he felt as though he was with a “femme inconnue,” especially in the scene after the earthquake in which she attaches herself to his body and begins to masturbate against him:

[...] j'eus alors le sentiment que c'était une femme inconnue que j'avais dans les bras, qui se collait contre moi, mouillée de désir et de larmes, ses hanches s'enroulant contre mon ventre avec une détermination mauvaise à la recherche de la jouissance . . . (*FA* 89-90)

evokes the “superbe lumière d’hiver” as he heads toward the river and remarks a certain emerging clarity: “L’air était pur et glacé, et je n’avais plus de fièvre, je me sentais reposé” (FA 155). Then he finds himself in a familiar place:

Je venais de rejoindre les abords du vieux canal et j’avais commencé de le longer, quand je reconnus avec émotion la silhouette rouge orangée du sanctuaire Heian, dont le portique se dressait au loin parmi les arbres. De ma vie, je n’avais jamais vu une telle nuance de rouge, cette couleur indéfinissable, ni rose ni vraiment orange, ce rouge dissous, crémeux, exténué – le vermillon du soleil couchant de certaines nuits d’été, quand l’astre rond à l’horizon, pâle et jetant ses dernières lueurs orangées, s’enfonce lentement dans la mer au-dessus d’un ciel bleu clair presque laiteux. L’auberge où nous avons séjourné avec Marie se trouvait à deux pas de là, nous passions par ici tous les jours à l’époque, tous les matins nous traversions le petit pont de bois rouge orangé qui enjambait le canal. Je traversai le pont dans la lumière déjà déclinante du jour, et je sentais que je me rapprochais des ombres du passé (FA 157)

In this scene, not unlike *Pont Mirabeau*, nostalgia sets in as the sudden realization of something beautiful and recognizable spawns a memory of times past. The narrator flashes back to a photo in Paris that was taken of him and Marie, the woman he seems to love for a split second in the moment of this memory, but whom we are led to believe he no longer loves. The strong emotions that surface in this scene are certainly reminiscent of those in Apollinaire’s poem. We witness not only the meeting of contradictory forces in nature and life and the opposing scenes of day and night evoked in the setting sun, but also the contradictory feelings the narrator experiences when he no longer feels he is in love with Marie. Still, he clearly seems to experience this fleeting emotion through his sudden memory. There is an inherent intertextual hybridity with the presence of this bridge and the evocation of lost love, mixed with the Japanese backdrop and the cold and wintery landscape. Vermillions, scarlets and other shades of red recur in Kawabata’s text, as with “[t]he mountain sky still carried traces of evening red,” (9) for example. Plays on light and their dream-like evocations also take a strong place in *Snow Country*.

Toussaint's use of allusions not only to literary texts, scientific texts, artists, paintings, and philosophical ideas, but also to texts of popular culture such as brand names and political discourse, need not all be divulged and understood by the reader in order to gain pleasure from and understand his novels in general, to be able to come away with something meaningful, as invoked earlier. Some allusions are so subtle that even the most well read and culturally aware readers may not catch them all. Genette evokes the relationship between the reader and the text in his work *Palimpsestes*, where he draws into his own definition of intertextuality the seminal works of Kristeva and Riffaterre, among others. While our author does make use of what Genette calls intertextuality's "forme la plus explicite et la plus littérale [...] la pratique traditionnelle de la *citation*," (8) he also often makes use of what Genette labels as a much less explicit and literal form, "celle de l'*allusion*." The critic characterizes this as "un énoncé dont la pleine intelligence suppose la perception d'un rapport entre lui et un autre auquel renvoie nécessairement telle ou telle de ses inflexions, autrement non recevable . . ." (8). Our author himself has expressed, as I have already mentioned in the dissertation, that his ideal reader is one who quite simply just enjoys his books. He does not write his novels in such a way that they become constant games to be decoded.¹²⁸ Thus, on the one hand, although the readers do not need to understand these intertexts in order to enjoy fully the novel, on the other hand, certainly the ones who can decipher these playful allusions gain access to a vast world of implication and ultimately pleasure of the text.

¹²⁸ Toussaint seemed to want to clarify this to Michèle Ammouche-Kremers in her interview with him in 1994, explaining that indeed "Dans *La salle de bain* comme dans *La réticence*, c'est une constante, il y a beaucoup d'allusions," however, "Il ne faut pas tomber dans l'excès." He admits that while many things in his novels "sont effectivement préméditées [...] ce n'est pas non plus en jeu à décoder. Certains éléments sont toutefois intéressants" (31).

In terms of narrative structure apart from any allusions, this novel appears to have a decipherable plot, a story that seems to have a logical beginning and end, something that, many critics would argue, the previous texts lack, with the exception of perhaps *La réticence*. However, despite the fact that we think we can detect a plot—the breaking up of Marie and the narrator—the inner details and glimpses into the psyches of the characters are limited, and the plot is thus still thin. Much of the plot resides in the banality of the narrator’s trip to Kyoto where he spends most of his time in bed with a cold.

Furthermore, despite the fact that we are led to believe that the concrete plot in the traditional sense of the word revolves around the end of a love affair in which we can find the author’s subtly playful allusions to Apollinaire, Kawabata, and Beckett, it is not what we think. The novel does not begin with anything like “Marie and I were going to break up . . . for good this time.” In actuality, the one thing that is resolved is precisely the thing that begins the novel and will recur to add an element of seemingly sinister mystery for the duration of the text. That said, the book starts with the hydrochloric acid, mentions it throughout, and reaches its conclusion focusing on this acid. The incipit of the novel tells us that the narrator “avai[t] fait remplir un flacon d’acide chlorhydrique” and that “[il] le gardai[t] sur [lui] en permanence, avec l’idée de le jeter un jour à la gueule de quelqu’un” (*FA* 11). Although the acid is then evoked several times in the duration of the text, in the grand scheme of things, it is an object scarcely mentioned, an element of suspense looming distantly:

Je considérais dans la pénombre de la chambre toutes ces robes désincarnées aux reflets des flammes et de ténèbres qui semblaient faire cercle autour de son corps [le corps de Marie] à moitié dénudé, et, las, moi aussi – très las maintenant, rompu par le décalage horaire –, je songeais de nouveau au flacon d’acide chlorhydrique qui se trouvait dans ma trousse de toilette. (*FA* 23)

Debout dans l'obscurité de la salle de bain, j'étais nu en face de moi-même, un flacon d'acide chlorhydrique à la main. (FA 38)

J'étais assis à côté d'elle [de Marie], le flacon d'acide chlorhydrique ouvert à la main. (FA 41)

[...] je me souvenais de l'inquiétude que j'avais éprouvée la veille au passage de la douane quand les douaniers nous avaient arrêtés pour contrôler nos bagages – et la peur, très vive, que j'avais ressentie qu'ils pussent découvrir l'acide chlorhydrique que je transportais. (FA 100)

[...] [j'] allai m'habiller, passer prendre le flacon d'acide chlorhydrique dans ma trousse de toilette et mis mon grand manteau noir. (FA 105)

[...] elle se tourna vers moi et me dit avec difficulté, d'une voix quelque peu étranglée, qu'elle était d'accord pour qu'on se sépare. Je ne répondis rien. Je la regardais, je mis les mains dans les poches de mon manteau et je sentis en tressaillant le contact du flacon d'acide chlorhydrique sous mes doigts. Mais, maintenant, je ne peux pas, me dit-elle, maintenant c'est trop dur. (FA 117)

It is almost as if the narrator needs to mention it in passing several times in order to force the reader to remember that this vial of acid still exists in the text and is indeed still a threat.

Eventually, however, one begins to wonder if the the threat is even genuine, since nothing seems to be coming of these fleeting reminders of its presence. What may not be as obvious, though, is again the author's clever integration of this acid on a deeper thematic level for the whole text. In the first sex scene, the narrator equivocates sexual pleasure with acid explaining that “le plaisir sexuel montait en [eux] **comme de l'acide**” and then that he could feel “la terrible violence sous-jacente” (FA 34) [my emphasis] growing from their encounter.

We will see throughout the novel that since he always carries the vial of acid, it can be inferred that this violence is always just under the surface and not simply during sexual encounters. Toward the end of the novel, the suspense finally mounts. The narrator has just gotten off the phone with Marie and has been seduced once again by her voice. He does not

want to hang up, and with Marie having told him that she wrote him a love letter, he simultaneously feels elated and sad, a violent torrent of emotions overtaking him:

[...] je me sentais happé par des pulsions contradictoires, exacerbées, irrationnelles. Je m'étais assis sur un banc dans l'allée qui longeait les berges, et j'avais sorti l'acide chlorhydrique de la poche de mon manteau, je regardais pensivement le flacon entre mes mains. Je tentais de résister à la violence des sentiments qui me portaient vers Marie, mais il était trop tard évidemment, son charme avait de nouveau opéré, et je sentais que j'allais encore une fois me laisser entraîner dans la spirale, si ce n'est des déchirements et des drames, de la passion. (*FA* 167)

In this quotation, we see specifically the indications that foreshadow the lack of resolve to come at the end of the novel regarding the relationship. Certainly, the reader wonders what will come of this vial of acid, but as a suspense mechanism, it is somewhat fleeting, the main story-line revolving specifically around the emotions between the two lovers, the threat of this acid being a by-product of the narrator's own violent feelings. All this time, we have been led to believe that the narrator and Marie were breaking up, that the end was near and definitive, "douloureuse comme une longue brûlure et tragique comme le feu de la rupture qu[']ils] ét[']aient] en train de consommer" (*FA* 33), however, as implied above, this will not necessarily be the case. The threat still exists, though, and the narrator returns immediately to Tokyo late at night and ends up at the art space where Marie's dresses are on display. The narrator is fragile and unstable at this moment, searching for Marie and unable to contact her. He encounters a security guard at the art space who tells the narrator that it is closed. He ignores the guard and heads directly through the gates and to the control room where all surveillance of the space takes place. Amusingly enough, the room full of surveillance screens is the last place he has seen Marie—not Marie's physical body, but rather her virtual face and body on not one, but several screens broadcast from security cameras in the big

exhibition halls. This image of virtual reality is full of irony in its lack of romanticism and its lack of true reality, for the last time he saw her, it was not really her whom he saw.

When the security guard approaches him, he uncorks the vial of acid and the odor overtakes both men, the narrator holding the vial as far from his face as possible so as not to burn his eyes, nasal and respiratory passages. The guard is confused by the horrible smell and not understanding the narrator's state of mind, he decides that he will be the one to leave. Then, the narrator continues on, "les yeux hallucinants," likely from the brief exposure to the acid, not to mention his recently declining mental state after the telephone conversation with Marie. He carries on in the museum, "le flacon d'acide chlorhydrique à la main [qu'il] tenai[t] devant [lui] comme une bougie" (*FA* 176), and this association of the vial to a candle becomes a sign of not only the narrator's hallucinatory state, but also an opportunity for the author to mention it several more times in a playful manner:

[...] j'avancais lentement dans les ténèbres des salles entre les oeuvres de Marie accrochées aux cimaises, promenant l'incandescence de **ma bougie** [the vial] devant leurs surfaces silencieuses comme pour les illuminer et en éclairer le sens, des photos de très grand format, quatre mètres sur six, qui représentaient des visages en très gros plans, parfois le visage de Marie, des détails agrandis du visage de Marie. (*FA* 176) [my emphasis]

[...] je passais de salle d'exposition en salle d'exposition, **ma pauvre bougie impuissante à la main** . . . C'est alors que j'entendis des pas dans la salle voisine. Je ne voyais rien, **ma pauvre bougie** n'éclairait absolument rien (*FA* 176-7) [my emphasis]

This last quote expressing that his poor candle gave absolutely no light could certainly be read as a double-entendre, as the acid itself sheds no light in relation to the story. The narrator leaves the art space and wanders around aimlessly, but when he quickly decides to return to the museum, there are presumably two other security guards perhaps waiting to apprehend or question this man with the putrid vial. He panics: having wanted to close the

vial, but unable to find the cork, the narrator stops dead in his tracks. Ultimately, we do not know if Marie and the narrator break up. With the publication of *Fuir* in September 2005, the first sentence states: “Serait-ce jamais fini avec Marie?” (F 11). This would seem to reveal that indeed they did not break up, as this novel clearly involves the same narrator and the same character Marie de Montalte from *Faire l’amour*. This in itself is intriguing, constituting something completely new in our author’s books. However, what becomes one the most fascinating discoveries of all for the careful reader regarding these two novels as a sort of diptych is the fact that chronologically, *Fuir* takes place a few months before the events of *Faire l’amour*, and this will be touched on briefly in chapter five. Therefore, the incipit of this eighth text, which would lead readers to believe that these two characters never did break up, is actually referring to a prior period of time. This also indicates, then, that struggling in their relationship is nothing new for them. There is talk of breaking up throughout *Faire l’amour*, but the final act never occurs. Although there may be a sense of relief provided by the resolution involving the vial of acid, the readers are more likely vested in the immediate story line involving the love affair between Marie and the narrator. What will happen to them as characters? What decision have they reached? Furthermore, if we thought that *Fuir* would resolve some of this, we were simply wrong. These questions are left unanswered at the end of the novel, just as the endings of all of Toussaint’s other works leave us hanging and pondering. So, what do readers and critics think of this?

D. Critical Reactions to *Faire l’amour*

It is curious to note that despite the fact that this novel boasts being among the ten best novels of 2002 according to *Le Point*, a few critics were still baffled and disappointed by

it.¹²⁹ Aude Lancelin, for example, wanted to know in her review from the *Nouvel observateur* why there is “tant d’amour” for *Faire l’amour*. In like manner, the title of François Busnel’s article “Amour déçu; On avait attendu le dernier roman de Jean-Philippe Toussaint. On avait tort,” tells a story in itself. Busnel saw this latest novel as “vide, lent et lourd,” these being Toussaint’s exact words in the novel to describe how the narrator was feeling after having left Marie, and lamented the humorous days of *La Salle de bain*. In like manner, Joëlle Neige wrote that “Le résultat n’est pourtant pas très convaincant,” and that “on est loin du plaisir procuré par la douce ironie quotidienne de *La salle de bains* ou de *L’appareil-photo*.”

Reactions to this book were mostly favorable. Many critics said that Toussaint really proved himself a great writer with this novel, and Amette, for example, declared this novel to be “du grand art.” However, some critics like Lancelin and Busnel were puzzled by *Faire l’amour*: those already familiar with the author’s texts perhaps hoped for another quirky text full of unrelated anecdotes and good situational humor, while those unfamiliar with Toussaint perhaps expected an erotic romance due to the title of the book. Whatever the reactions, although this novel is somewhat of a departure for this writer, there are still many similarities to previous texts as well. Michel Picard addresses the difficulty of change and what he calls “la communication écrite” in *La lecture comme jeu*. He asks, “s’adressant simultanément à plusieurs images de lecteur spécialisé, comment se soustraire à la crainte d’irriter l’un par l’évidence banale d’un développement que l’autre au contraire, trouvera bien trop rapide et allusif?” (7-8) He follows up, wondering “Comment ne pas rebuter tous ces intellectuels qui aiment la littérature mais n’en font pas profession – et satisfaire les

¹²⁹ See www.lepoint.fr/litterature/doc_1579meilleurs.html.

légitimes exigences historiennes de celui-ci, sociologues ou formalistes de ceux-là, psychologiques de cet autre?” (8)¹³⁰ The action of *Faire l’amour* may be characterized as minimalist, but in terms of emotion, drama and style, minimalism no longer seems to fit, as critics have previously described Toussaint’s works.¹³¹ In the novel itself without a doubt in

¹³⁰ With this in mind, examining the development of narrative and stylistic techniques in order to trace the evolution therein up to *Faire l’amour* in this author’s novels would be an intriguing task. Whereas scholars such as Westphal, for example, favor a singularly synchronic reading of Toussaint, a diachronic view of Toussaint’s narrative voice could shed some interesting light on the critical perspective of the author’s works.

For instance, as I just mentioned, some critics cite *Faire l’amour* as a sort of final proof that he is in fact an excellent writer, which may come off as a back-handed compliment. He received some high praise for his writing with this novel, but it seems that although his previous works were mostly also well received, the move to a more serious and discernible plot seemed to captivate more critics. Patrick Kéchichian described the novel in *Le Monde*, 30 août 2002 as a book “de la pleine maturité.” He expressed that “Avec une impressionnante et magnifique maîtrise, Toussaint a fondu ensemble tous ses dons. Du grand art qui devrait assurer sa consécration.” I find this interesting because although all writers will grow and evolve over time, seventeen years as would be the case spanning from *La Salle de bain* in 1985 to *Faire l’amour* in 2002, there are actually quite a few similarities between Toussaint’s first novel and his seventh Minuit publication, *Faire l’amour*. Stylistically, it is obvious that *La Salle de bain* is more simple, with shorter sentences in general, neatly divided paragraphs and the like. It is also a very funny book, and yet underneath the humor there is a dark side. Despite the apparent simplicity in syntax and sentence structure, there are beautifully written passages that boast poetic prowess and a stylistically playful edge in Toussaint’s first novel as well, but perhaps the surface playfulness of the situations overshadows them.

Toussaint’s first novel, like his seventh, also portrays a male narrator and his girlfriend. This first novel is also the only one until *Faire l’amour* to actually describe making love in any concrete detail. There is also a violent side to the feelings of the narrator toward Edmondsson when he throws a dart that hits her in the forehead, landing her in the hospital. Their relationship, while seemingly healthy and normal at the beginning of the novel, perhaps seems doomed to failure; but she does try to console him, and the fate of their relationship is not known. Like the narrator of *Faire l’amour* who will not kiss Marie, the narrator of *La Salle de bain* does not return to Paris with Edmondsson after the accident. Neither male protagonist does what one would expect. At any rate, the outlook for the couple in *La Salle de bain* is certainly more optimistic, the tone of the novel as a whole quite different. In the first novel, just as the narrator decided to leave the bathroom at the beginning, he decides to leave the bathroom again at the end, a testament to the cyclical nature of life, his behavior. Therefore, if we had to guess, one would be led to believe that this narrator and Edmondsson will remain together.

The main difference between these two novels is certainly found in the female characters. The male protagonists share many similar characteristics, but Edmondsson and Marie are quite different. Edmondsson works part-time at an art gallery, while Marie works full-time on her own collections, having her own brand called *Allons-y, Allons-o* (the humor of this name of which I do address later in this chapter). She is clearly ambitious, business-savvy, and driven. She needs a strong man who can console her when she needs it, not the other way around apparently. Edmondsson is quite willing to put up with the whimsical nature and idiosyncracies of *La Salle de bain*’s protagonist. She seems to want to make love quite often, but this book is not about a break-up, or even a love affair for that matter. It concentrates on the aimless wanderings of its narrator, unlike Toussaint’s seventh text which clearly announces the story of a couple. This time, the female protagonist seems to play as much of a central role as the male narrator. Nevertheless, the similarities are there, and it seems in a way that Toussaint is actually going back to his roots somewhat with *Faire l’amour*, or at least using these roots as a point of departure or a source of inspiration for this novel in particular. Otherwise, the coincidences would be somewhat striking.

¹³¹ Amette notes similarly in his review of the novel that “Depuis son premier roman très réussi, « La salle de bain », publié en 1985, on avait vite classé Toussaint dans ce minimalisme chic à la prose en Kevlar, légère.”

my mind, it is certainly plausible that the author is winking when he describes Marie, saying that “Elle fut encore plus minimaliste que moi . . .” (FA 98). One may only assume that certain declarations are actually metanarrative commentary. Nonetheless, many of them seem a little too easy to smile at for the true connoisseur of Toussaint’s works. *Faire l’amour* effectively creates a springboard for the author to shed his minimalist image, become unpredictable in a new way, disorient, and thus recover his artistic freedom. Toussaint does transgress himself and the corners he has been boxed into by critics, and while this transgression may not be huge, it is enough to have critics and readers alike take notice, whether they like it or not. Something has changed; something is different.

As I have already suggested, many would say that the lack of clear-cut humor represents the most noticeable difference in the seventh text. In *Politis* (jeudi 17 octobre 2002), Christophe Kantcheff wrote that “Jean-Philippe Toussaint aurait pu continuer à écrire des romans burlesques à l’autodérision élégante, avec en légers pointillés une dimension existentielle, comme *L’Appareil-photo* (Minuit, 1989), l’un de ses plus réussis. Avec le danger de s’autoparodier, il évite le piège.” Kantcheff posits that “*Faire l’amour* marque une inflexion dans l’univers Toussaint.” In this novel, the author pokes a little fun at himself, his previous literary devices, and the readers and critics who think they know what to expect, and in doing so he offers them what they never expected: no obvious fun and games and no strings of non-sequiturs—just a beautifully written love story. The literary and stylistic aspects of this novel come clearly to the forefront since they are masked neither by too much slapstick humor nor by too many chronological discrepancies that disrupt the main story lines. However, despite the more serious psychological aspects of the characters and the subject matter, this story is still filled with the banality of everyday life and the non-places

that invade all of the author's texts, so much so that even an earthquake cannot help shake them for more than a few seconds. Nevertheless, because Toussaint remains unpredictable, he retains his playful edge. The intricate structural and thematic dialogue between his own text and those of Beckett, Kawabata, and Apollinaire is a testament to this, and it exemplifies a masterful and complex ludic sensibility. Humor is inarguably present therein, the playfulness merely more subtle, more textual.

E. Surface Humor and the Saugrenu: the more obvious playful aspects

1. Introduction

I have already mentioned the scarcity of concrete comic elements in Toussaint's seventh text in this chapter, but scarcity is not synonymous with utter lack. Although surface playfulness seems scarce at first glance in *Faire l'amour*, it does indeed exist. If we examine the various brief playful instances that occur throughout the novel and what it is that creates their humorous effect, we must cite an undeniable relationship between incongruity, the saugrenu, and dénivellation, the idea of disappointed expectations. I established in the introduction that incongruous situations are ones in which something violates our expectations, specifically our expectations of what is proper, of what is the norm. Let us recall that this is a central characteristic of black humor, a technique often used in literature of the absurd, in which characters cope with events and situations that are simultaneously comical, brutal, and horrifying. Let us now look closer at some of these instances involving the saugrenu and incongruities in general in *Faire l'amour*.

2. Demystifying Marie

The reader learns very soon into the novel that Marie is a designer, "styliste et plasticienne" (*FA* 22), and that she and the narrator are in Tokyo for a special exhibition on contemporary art of a collection of dresses she has designed, very modern haute couture, as

many of the garments are made of experimental materials such as Kevlar. She created her own label several years back in Tokyo, but the label is called *Allons-y, Allons-o*, a comical contrast to the context. In fact this French expression is very low-brow, a sort of campy way of departing and is thus in complete contradiction to the world of haute couture and art in general. Some may liken this to the English expression “see you later, alligator,” but regardless it is a cliché. Expressions become clichés upon their excessive use, such that a culture then often attaches a certain banality, sometimes humorous or ironic, to them. A variety of comical aspects arises in scrutinizing Marie’s choice of name for her label. First of all, clichés by nature seem unoriginal, an ironic contrast to the innovative spirit and creativity that Marie as an artist is supposed to embody. However, in reality, clichés are expressive, and that is precisely why they are used again and again and subsequently attain their status as clichés. Secondly, this lack of originality also suggests laziness, the lack of effort to create one’s own name. The danger in all of this is that Marie would seem to risk potential customers remembering the clichéd name more than the high design of her collections. That said, what enhances a clichés expressivity is a sort of displacement. Any seriousness, dignity, or other intellectual air concerning Marie’s career as an artist and designer, a picture of grace, elegance, and style, is suddenly undermined by the stark contrast of her label name which comes off as absolutely ludicrous. As a result, Toussaint mocks the high-brow atmosphere of the fashion world. Moreover, the narrator perhaps exposes Marie for someone not quite as sophisticated as she would seem, and this is very playful.¹³²

¹³² We may want to note here that Toussaint chooses the name of Marie’s label for its humorous and contrastive elements. However, it could also be read as, given our Beckettian intertext, yet another “hommage sybillin” since the very last line of Beckett’s famous play *En attendant Godot* happens to be “Allons-y.” Additionally intriguing is the fact that neither Vladimir nor Estragon, who have been waiting and waiting together throughout the play, has accomplished anything, has gone anywhere. In like manner, in *Faire l’amour* the narrator and Marie seem to be waiting incessantly for a good time to break up, both thinking that they would do it in Tokyo, but then Marie sort of pleading with her boyfriend that indeed she agrees that they should separate, but not then

With this in mind, it does appear that the author seeks to portray Marie in her raw human state and to demystify her otherwise seemingly stylish and aristocratic persona. When dealing with colleagues, art directors and museum curators, she dons stylish clothing, perfect hair and make-up, portrays a distinctive poise and beauty, and carries herself with confidence. The narrator describes her at the beginning of the novel as possessing a “silhouette des allures de star énigmatique” (FA 27). Here is an example from later on in the novel:

Marie reparut dans la chambre. Elle était habillée et maquillée. Ses traits étaient tirés, mais elle était métamorphosée, elle portait un pantalon gris impeccable et un col roulé noir, des bottillons en chevreau à lacets croisés. Elle avait son grand manteau en cuir sous le bras, un volumineux agenda à la main, ses lèvres étaient légèrement maquillées, elle portait des lunettes de soleil, une autre paire que la veille, plus sobres, plus effilées. (FA 104)

This description is amusing when contrasted with her previous disheveled state that begins with her arrival in Tokyo and her unfulfilled desires back in the hotel. It continues with the outing in the middle of the night: we see Marie wearing one of the dresses from her collection valued at \$20,000 with a pair of white tennis socks with red and blue stripes purchased at a drugstore and a pair of pink satin mules that belong to the hotel, ultimately getting drenched from the heavy snow that begins to fall. Furthermore, just as the long sex scene in the hotel room is about to occur, the narrator sets the scene with Marie drinking from a champagne glass:

Sentant ma présence à ses côtés, Marie releva lassement le bras et me prit la flûte des mains, qu'elle porta aussitôt à sa bouche pour boire une gorgée d'eau sans ôter ses lunettes de soie, avant de se recoucher lentement en arrière, la flûte à la main, de l'eau glissant à l'encoignure de ses lèvres dans un frimas de petites bulles frémissantes, puis, comme elle buvait toujours, l'eau se mit à dégouliner en fontaine le long de ses joues,

and there in Tokyo. She needs him too much at that moment. So nothing accomplished for them either. Finally, what is quite fascinating in the context of *Godot* and our author's text is an excerpt from the final scene of *Godot* in which Estragon declares: “Je ne peux plus continuer comme ça” (133). He then follows up proposing to Vladimir “Si on se quittait? Ça irait peut-être mieux” (133). This is indeed striking in relation to Toussaint's text because this seems to be the thinking that dominates the protagonists throughout, and yet, they stay together. They wait just like Vladimir and Estragon.

sur son menton, dans son cou et sur ses clavicules. (*FA* 28)

This is an amusing description of Marie, as again it contradicts possible preconceived notions of how she would or should comport herself. Here, she is not graceful and regal despite the setting of the nice hotel and her drinking from a champagne glass. Instead of slow, savored sips of champagne, Toussaint paints a picture of Marie more or less trying to guzzle water in a reclined state, the water then running down her cheeks, onto her chin and her neck, “la fontaine” cascading to her collarbones. Of course, this could be another subtle allusion to Ophelia drowning as well, this time, though, a more playfully obscure reference to it.

3. Caricature as comic device

This author is a gifted caricaturist. For instance, he paints an amusing portrait of the character Kawabata when Marie meets him for the first time:

Seul le nom de Kawabata, associé au physique du personnage, cheveux raides et roses à la Andy Warhol et pantalon en cuir noir moulant, sembla l'intéresser un instant. (*FA* 108)

This description is amusing in and of itself: certainly, any purported business man who has pink hair and wears black leather pants will be noticed. This portrait, however, merits further commentary in the context of this chapter. This description stands in quiet contrast to the Kawabata whose intertextual references this dissertation discusses. Yasunari Kawabata is sort of an iconic representative of traditionalism in Japanese literature and culture, so the juxtaposition of the character with the real-life author comes off as amusing. However, soon after, another description of the character Kawabata seems to be more in harmony with the image we have of the author: when everyone begins to discuss the earthquake, the conversation switches between Japanese, English, and French. Marie's business associates try to translate for her and the narrator, but only “l'imprévisible Kawabata” adheres to Japanese.

He makes no attempt to translate for them, and his insistence on discussion in Japanese sort of cues the others around him, such that only Yamada Kenji is left attempting to sporadically translate certain anecdotes. This description of the character Kawabata serves not only to accentuate his impetuosity but also seems to play into the idea of not giving in to Western influence as much, with the exception of his clothing, of course. Ironically, despite the fact that Yasunari Kawabata was greatly influenced by Joyce and Beckett, for example, he was and still is known for his staunch traditionalism. Portraying the character's impetuosity is the main comical element of this passage, though.

Additionally amusing in the same general scene in which Marie meets her business associates is yet another juxtaposition with Kawabata. This time “ce Kawabata en cuir” is contrasted with a couple of younger professionals, “des subalternes apparemment, des subordonnés ou des stagiaires, tous deux très jeunes et très sérieux, et même cérémonieux, engoncés dans des costumes trois-pièces, non pas trop grands mais comme trop vieux pour eux” (*FA* 109). Here, the narrator seems to make fun of the way Asians dress in Western clothes. Yet another caricature can be seen in the description of the director of the museum who is depicted as “barbe poivre et sel et veste pied-de-poule assortie, [...] [portant] de surprenantes Puma blanches flamboyantes, avec un fauve stylisé sur chaque pied prêt à bondir de ses talons au moindre relâchement” (*FA* 120). Consequently, it appears as though the observations of the narrator throughout this whole section in which he meets Marie's business associates in Japan do nothing but mock these characters.

With caricatures in full swing, another funny moment in this mostly somber novel occurs when the narrator meets his guide from the French embassy: “La jeune chargée de mission auprès de l'ambassade de France avait fini par nous rejoindre (elle s'était

apparemment éclipsée un moment où nous arrivions dans le hall), et elle marchait à côté de moi, laissant Marie à ses collaborateurs et aux responsables du musée de Shinagawa” (FA 110). The narrator then proceeds to offer a fairly lengthy description of this woman: he describes her as elegant and very serious, someone who seems to inundate him with vacuous details embellished by meaningless verbosity, “comme si on l’avait chargée d’accompagner Monsieur Thatcher pendant une visite officielle” (FA 110). The narrator explains this further:

[...] elle me faisait une petite cour frivole et sans conséquence tandis que nous traversions le hall, m’effleurait le bras en riant et repartait de plus belle dans une longue phrase en relevant à l’occasion un de ses innocents sourcils noirs pour marquer sa surprise, voire sa stupéfaction, devant quelque objection que je n’avais même pas faite, qu’elle avait simplement anticipée. Elle pouvait avoir vingt-sept, vingt-huit ans, mais sembler fréquenter les allées de la diplomatie depuis le double, son indéniable assurance et ses sourires charmeurs étaient décourageants. Je la regardais, épuisé, me passais la main sur mon menton rugueux et mal rasé, exaspéré par sa voix enjouée que nimbait un charmant zeste de zézaïement (*sarzée de miction*). Et vous étiez où, dis-je, justement, quand nous sommes arrivés dans le hall? (FA 110-11)

In this woman’s lispy accent, the author offers a comical contrast to her purported serious role and demeanor. This play on the word mission made to sound like miction is subtle slapstick, the word miction, or micturition in English, defined as the act of urinating. Thus, it sounds like this ambassador is in charge of urination, not the mission of accompanying our narrator during his stay in Tokyo. Clearly, the narrator is playing the role of smart-aleck with her, asking her where she has been before meeting him after her lispy pronunciation of miction. Moreover, he stands in quiet contrast to her, he with his stubbly face, tired and exasperated, she with her fake and calculated charm, bubbly yet professional. With the last lines of this passage, the reader recognizes the Toussaint of his first novels such as *La Salle de bain*: let us recall one scene in particular in which the narrator of the first novel silences a similarly annoying character (who also seems to speak incessantly) by iterating some

inappropriate, perhaps even rude, comment. In the first novel, the narrator silences a man who is annoying him by commenting that he does not particularly like the way he is dressed. In like manner, the narrator of the *Faire l'amour* uses a similar tactic: he silences the woman from the French Embassy with a stifling allusion to her activities in the bathroom. This is not the type of subject to which one refers, especially to a female representative of the embassy who has been officially charged to accompany this man. Remarks such as the narrator's asking where this young woman has been ring even more taboo in a country like Japan known for its seriousness and stoicism.

Let us cite another similarity between the first and seventh texts. In *La Salle de bain* the narrator makes fun of a couple staying in the same hotel as him, opining that they are most certainly “des parisiens de longue date,” in other words, native Parisians, and accentuates their aristocratic (read boring) air. In like manner, the narrator of *Faire l'amour* does not hesitate to jab at Paris. He finds himself in the Shinjuku subway station and remarks on his surroundings:

De nombreux clochards avaient investi les couloirs du métro, qui s'étaient installés là le long des murs, sur des couvertures ou dans de simples cartons, dans des tentes de fortune, sur des vieux matelas auréolés de taches de graisse ou de traînées de pisse, des casseroles abandonnées par terre, un pantalon qui sèche, des cordelettes, des canettes vides, des plateaux de bentos entassés, des chiens immobiles, la gueule bornée, le poil fumant d'humidité, une infecte odeur de couloir de métro et d'animal mouillé qui faisait remonter à la narine d'inattendues réminiscences de Paris. (*FA* 131)

Here we witness a double dénivellation, as the narrator himself describes the odors of the metro as “d'inattendues réminiscences de Paris.” Not only are the odors unexpected for the narrator, but so, too, perhaps is the description of the metro itself and its odors an unexpected encounter for the reader. The passage is raw and blunt and truly provides a loathsome image of Tokyo, or at least a vivid image of the more sordid and sadder parts of Tokyo's reality

through the narrator's eyes at this moment. It also displays the lack of difference between the city the narrator and Marie come from (Paris) and Tokyo and thus represents yet another jab at the picturesque. Juxtapose this with the nice hotel in which he and Marie are staying and the art galleries they are frequenting, along with the elegant clothes they wear, and the stark contrast between the two worlds of Tokyo becomes quite clear. Of course, comparing the smell of urine to Paris is biting funny in its own right, but imagining the reality of this sort of underworld is enough to make anyone uncomfortable. This is a definitive effect of black humor.

4. Juxtaposition as Comical Contrast

Yet another amusing contrast occurs when the reader witnesses the narrator perusing a copy of the bible in English in his underwear: "J'étais toujours en caleçon, assis au bord du lit, et je feuilletais une Bible en anglais reliée en cuir bleu, que j'avais trouvée dans le tiroir de la table de nuit" (FA 105). This is certainly reminiscent of the narrator of *L'appareil-photo* who is seen reading a copy of Pascal's *Les Pensées* in English, a copy found in the hotel room in which he was staying as well in that particular novel. The image of a man in his underwear casually flipping through a bible in a foreign language has its own comical aspects, but yet another contrast is created as we see the narrator close the Bible distractedly. He then gets dressed, and suddenly he retrieves the vial of acid from his toiletries bag and takes it with him as he leaves:

Je refermai distraitemment le volume (je n'avais pas l'esprit très clair), que j'abandonnai derrière moi sur le lit défait, et allai m'habiller, passai prendre le flacon d'acide chlorhydrique dans ma trousse de toilette et mis mon grand manteau noir. (FA 105)

This mention of the acid stops there. The author supplies us with this one single sentence, and it is not remarked again for another twelve pages. Then, when it is mentioned again, once

more the readers are given one single sentence, just to tease them, just to remind them of this possible impending threat. Toussaint seems to be creating a sort of anti-suspense, though, in having such brief and sporadic references to the acid. Once the acid is mentioned, the reader perhaps expects something to come of it, but instead, the author leads us on, and the suspense dissipates, as the acid will not be mentioned for who knows how many more pages. Then the reader is constantly deceived by the author, as the slope of the tone perpetually goes up and down.

Furthermore, while the narrator stays with his friend Bernard in Kyoto, several moments of sharp contrast occur there as well. The first amusing one surfaces when the narrator wants to send a fax to Marie in Tokyo. Bernard comes back to the kitchen where the narrator is waiting for him and “[lui] tendit un bloc de papier, et un pinceau (par facétie, avec un sourire prudent, si d’aventure [il] voulais[t] calligraphier [s]on fax)” (*FA* 144). The narrator smiles, “[prend] le pinceau” and replies “Oui, pourquoi pas” (*FA* 144) The contrast between the ancient art of calligraphy and the technological sterility of a fax is playful, and the image of this narrator delicately writing each individual letter of the words in his message seems absurd when one realizes that not only is the letter destined to be run through a machine, but also that in the end, Marie will not receive the copy with the original ink on it, but rather a facsimile. In addition, this is an ironic concession, pathetic yet humorous, to the image of Kyoto as the cultural capital of the country.

During most of his time in Kyoto, the narrator is sick, and in these pages of the novel, references to his severe cold ring quite amusing as well. He essentially describes his physical state in luxurious terms, which creates an absurd contrast. Here is an ample excerpt that details as much:

Je restais des heures au lit sous l'épaisse couverture du futon bien enroulée autour de mes épaules, je savourais la fragilité de ma poitrine, l'apathie de mes membres, je me réfugiais au fond de l'édredon pour m'imprégner de sa douceur et de sa chaleur, je me levais parfois, chancelant jusqu'à la cuisine pour me faire du thé, que je buvais brûlant dans mon lit pour conjurer des frissons. Je mangeais de minuscules quartiers de pommes que je pelais sans force dans la chambre en déposant les épluchures à côté de moi dans une soucoupe, je me levais pour aller faire pipi, la verge froncée, endolorie, fragile, comme fiévreuse elle aussi, je grelottais pieds nus dans la coursière, retournais rapidement me coucher et m'enrouler sous les couvertures pour me réchauffer. Je prenais ce refroidissement pour un luxe, une expérience. Je ne m'habillais pas de la journée, je ne me rasais pas, je rêvassais dans le lit, les yeux au plafond, je me recroquevillais sous la couette, je somnolais quelques minutes, je me préparais des médicaments effervescents que j'avalais en grimaçant, je tâchais d'extraire de mon corps affaibli et souffrant des voluptés inconnues, des sensations inédites . . . (FA 150-1)

The semantic field of this passage certainly supports the notion that his illness is luxurious with words such as savourer, douceur, luxe, rêvasser, and voluptés describing his experience. In the end he admits that he prefers the sweetness of women to the “subtils raffinements du rhume et de la fièvre” (FA 151). Nevertheless, the mere fact that he even characterizes a cold and fever as having subtle refinements in the first place is comically absurd. Also notable concerning contrasting elements is the moment in the passage in which he mentions that he would get up from time to time to urinate, commenting there on the sickly state of his penis as well, “la verge froncée, endolorie, fragile.” One may notice, given the title of the novel, that his specific mention of this could imply that he is unable to make love, before emotionally, and now both emotionally and physically. The narrator precedes this description with the mundane fact that he is peeling apples and throwing the peels into a little bowl next to the bed, so the placement of a detail regarding the narrator's sexual member may take the reader off guard! The anatomical mentions do not end there, either. When the narrator finally emerges from his room after almost thirty-six hours in bed, having barely seen Bernard the entire time, he begins to believe that he is in fact alone in the house. He comes out of his

room for breakfast “en [se] rajustant nonchalamment les couilles dans [s]on caleçon fané” adding the parenthetical comment “(quel homme d’action, vraiment)” (*FA* 152-3) and eventually encounters Bernard. The narrator has been in Kyoto for three days now and has yet to leave the house. The reader is given no images of the city, and the first thing the narrator does upon his recovery and subsequent exit from the bed he has essentially inhabited for three days is put his hand down his underwear to adjust his testicles! However, couilles is not the technical word for testicles, but rather a slang version thereof, more specifically as in English, balls. The vulgarity of language and representation is certainly noteworthy here. Again, the narrator is visiting the cultural capital of Japan, and thus the fact that we are privy to this particular comportment, and the parenthetical comment on it (“quel homme d’action”) and not a more cultured or authentic cultural experience comes off as crude and out of place—saugrenu. This is not what one would expect to witness, and it is the brashness and audacity of the comment that create a humorous contrast between the Kyoto we thought we would see and the one in which the narrator currently resides. He has not done anything.

5. Semantic Fields as Ludic Contrast

Even when he does finally venture out, he admits that he does not know where he is going [“Je ne savais pas où j’allais” (*FA* 155)]:

Je marchais au hasard, sans but, je me perdais dans des embouteillages de piétons au grand carrefour de Kawaramachi, je flânais dans des galeries marchandes, je passais le seuil de boutiques de calligraphie et m’attardais un instant devant les encres en bâtonnets solides, noirs avec quelque inscription verticale dorée, regardais les pinceaux précieux, en poils de je ne sais quoi, qui coûtaient la peau du cul. (*FA* 155-6)

In this passage, the narrator wanders aimlessly through the city, casually describing what he sees. Upon describing the delicateness of the calligraphy tools, once again he offers a harsh contrast to the “pinceaux précieux” when he uses the familiar expression from the French

lexicon coûter la peau du cul to turn it into something more vulgar. When the narrator says that the precious calligraphy pens were “en poils de je ne sais quoi” and then directly follows this up with “qui coûtaient la peau du cul,” the playful relation between these two clauses must not be ignored. One could venture to guess that he wants us to infer that these “pinceaux précieux” are in fact perhaps “en poils du cul!” Not only is Toussaint playing with language in this scene, he also plays with contrast in the context, juxtaposing precious tools of an ancient art with the ignoble word choice of cul.¹³³

I have specifically cited the importance of the role semantic choices play for our author in section B of this chapter and have already mentioned other plays on words in this section as well, as we have just seen in the above paragraphs with plays on miction and cul, for example. Language, that is to say his way with words, is one of this author’s greatest talents, and examples of his ludic sensibility as it relates to language surface throughout this text. With cul, aspects of the saugrenu are obvious, while miction is a medical term not employed in everyday situations. The sudden insertion of such vulgar or very particular language into contexts of the everyday working world, as was the case with the young French attachée, and the very ancient and respected cultural world, as was the case with the calligraphy tools, attests to the dénivellation that recurs in Toussaint’s texts. Another example of this is seen in all the instances in which the narrator suddenly swears in the text. Some examples include:

Le taxi était surchauffé et Marie avait trop chaud maintenant, elle se sentait mal, elle finit par enlever son grand manteau de cuir noir, difficilement, en se contorsionnant à côté de moi sur la banquette arrière du taxi, grimaçant et paraissant m’en vouloir, alors que je n’y étais manifestement pour rien, **merde**, s’il faisait aussi chaud dans ce taxi, elle n’avait qu’à se plaindre au chauffeur . . . (FA 13) [my emphasis]

J’étais revenu vers elle [Marie] en pataugeant dans mes sandales en mousse qui prenaient l’eau de toutes parts, l’épaisseur des chaussettes était telle que je ne parvenais

¹³³ The cul seems to play a large role in Toussaint’s playfulness here and in the novel on the whole. In non-literary terms, the novel *Faire l’amour* is une histoire de cul, as in pornography.

pas à entrer entièrement le pied dans la pantoufle, de sorte que mon talon restait en rade à l'extérieur et s'enfonçait à chaque pas davantage dans la neige, **et merde**. (FA 80) [my emphasis]

Dans la détresse qui l'avait jetée dans mes bras, c'était la chaleur de mon corps qu'elle était venue chercher, pas la souplesse de ma dialectique, **elle n'en avait rien à foutre de mes mots et de mes raisonnements** . . . (FA 89) [my emphasis]

J'avais ouvert le *Japan Times* du jour et le feuilletais en silence, les pages déployées à côté de moi sur le tatami (en dernière page, se trouvait une photo du sumotori Musashimaru en super-mauvaise posture, **putain**). (FA 146-7) [my emphasis]

The insertion of merde in the first two quotes depicts the frustration of the narrator, as he seems to be losing all patience in his relationship with Marie. In the second quotation in particular, not only does the sudden presence of this swear word perhaps takes the reader by surprise, but it is also how he ends that particular sentence. The sentence begins with an attempt to describe the gradual decline of this couple's patience, which is exacerbated by the fact that it has begun to snow, is quite cold outside, and neither are appropriately dressed for the weather. Subsequently, the steady description is halted abruptly as if the narrator just gives up in ending his thought with merde. Anytime a vulgar expression suddenly surfaces in this narration, it may surprise and/or delight the readers for not only its concrete content, but also for its unexpected placement within the context. However, what comes off as especially humorous in the third passage above is the juxtaposition of the phrase "la souplesse de ma dialectique" with the declaration that "elle n'en avait rien à foutre de mes mots." It is quite precisely the supple quality of Toussaint's language that renders his narrative style so captivating, and so it is quite amusing to see these words quoted, only to be followed by a sentence that says that Marie "did not give a shit about [his] words or [his] reasonings." [my translation] The dénivellations, then, are not only a matter of linguistic level or aesthetic shock. They often seem to curb lyricism and put a brutal and sarcastic end to beautiful

stylistic effusions. It seems that the author plays with the beauty of language, only to then suggest that it is out of touch with today's world. Swearing or inserting something out of place in order to interrupt an otherwise poetic passage or profound thought certainly snaps one back into reality, and even possibly out of the fiction of the narrative for a moment.

In the fourth passage quoted above, it is easier to laugh at the sheer slapstick nature of the comment that contains the swear word. The immediate context has nothing to do with Marie. Therefore, the reader may be more relaxed: one may be more willing to laugh at something concretely funny and not just something that coaxes a laugh or smile out of discomfort, tension, or shock. This sort of reaction is the one that readers likely experience when they encounter a passage ending with “Le jour se levait sur Tokyo et je lui enfonçais un doigt dans le trou du cul” (*FA* 91), as I have already discussed. In the fourth quotation, the narrator picks up a newspaper, and so perhaps we expect to get a snapshot of some new story from Kyoto. However, the narrator mentions nothing about any stories and skips directly to the last page where he sees a picture of a famous sumo wrestler. The banality of the comment and the image it conjures up—a fat Japanese man, practically nude, in a bad and perhaps painful looking posture—are comical in themselves, but the final addition of putain to the passage seems definitively to invite laughter, and maybe even a little squeamishness on the part of some readers for the image described. There is certainly a discrepancy present between the referent and the expression, and this last passage in particular constitutes once again a comical concession to the cultural reputation of Kyoto.

The author also likes to insert quasi-subliminal messages for his characters through his choice of words. We have already discussed the idea of “EXIT EXIT EXIT” in all capitals as a possible reference to Beckett, but we also mentioned it in terms of its actual meaning at the

moment for our narrator, a subliminally playful message perhaps urging him to exit his relationship with Marie. When the narrator and Marie are out in the snowy night in Tokyo, traffic is bustling, and pictures of the urban landscape are presented to the reader, as the narrator constantly evokes images of neon lights in particular. He describes a sea of Japanese symbols, an acknowledgement of the unfamiliar environment in which he and Marie find themselves at that moment:

Partout, sur la grisaille des façades encore napées d'obscurité, brillaient des enseignes de néons imbriquées et superposées, un enchevêtrement de panneaux où couraient des inscriptions en katakanas, d'indéchiffrables colonnes d'idéogrammes qui se mêlaient parfois à quelques caractères familiers, tels ceux d'une enseigne publicitaire géante, fixée au flanc d'une passerelle métallique qui surplombait l'avenue et attirait l'oeil par sa saisissante injonction : VIVRE. (*FA 77*)

Like the words "EXIT EXIT EXIT" in all capital letters, the familiarity of "VIVRE," also in all capital letters, seems to be another playful injunction. It is precisely during this outing that Marie and the narrator oscillate incessantly in their disgust for each other. Their relationship is disintegrating gradually, and yet they will not break up. It is as if the narrator needs a slap in the face, an enormous message flashing at him in neon lights, imploring him to wake up and live his life. Indeed, the fact that it is the word vivre that shines through all the unfamiliar symbols rings quite telling and playful.

6. Slapstick and black humor

Perhaps one of the most comical scenes in the book in terms of contrast, however, occurs on a bullet train to Tokyo after the narrator has spoken to Marie on the phone from Kyoto. He becomes physically ill. Overcome with anxiety, he wants to vomit. We are confronted with the graphic details of his vomiting attempts, utterly vile in their brutally realistic descriptions:

J'essayais de vomir, mais rien ne venait, et je finis par glisser un doigt au fond de ma

gorge pour m’y forcer. Alors, lentement, péniblement, difficilement, je vomis quelques gouttes de bile. C’était extrêmement douloureux, et je me sentais mourir, je sentais la proximité physique et concrète de la mort au contact du métal froid de la cuvette, je sentais mes forces m’abandonner, mais, si mon corps flanchait et était prêt à s’écrouler par terre le long de la cuvette, mon esprit bravait ma déchéance, et, comme un orchestre qui continue de jouer imperturbablement pendant un naufrage, je m’étais mis à fredonner mentalement, très doucement, de façon lente et saccadée, répétitive et absurde, une vieille chanson des Beatles dont je déroulais la mélodie dans un murmure mental déchiré et poignant: «*All you need is love – love – love is all you need*», et, sans pouvoir aller plus avant dans la chanson, ma poitrine se soulevait dans un nouveau spasme et quelques gouttes de vomi très aigre giclaient [sic] dans la cuvette. (FA 170-1)

This embodies maybe one of the most absurd moments in the entire novel, and the narrator himself describes it as such as well in the above passage. Let us not forget that he is in the confines of a train lavatory, and thus it is not difficult to conjure up images of the cold of the metal toilet and the horrid smell that must certainly accompany it. However, when the vomit starts to come, the narrator, in even more absurd fashion “trionphant mentalement [...] continuai[t] à chanter opiniâtrement, [s]es lèvres s’entrouvaient, affaiblies et pâtesuses” . . . (FA 171). Singing «*All you need is love – love – love is all you need*» “d’une voix plaintive et victorieuse” while hovering over a train lavatory toilet, the train rushing to its destination at three hundred kilometers per hour, is nothing short of ridiculous in its contrasting elements, and therefore this scene is extremely funny. Under normal circumstances, one might be horrified at the thought of someone feeling so ill on a train. We might be sympathetic toward someone stuck in a tiny lavatory vomiting. However, in Toussaint’s typical fashion and again affirming Breton’s idea of black humor as the “ennemi mortel de la sentimentalité,” we are left with a completely different feeling at the end of this scene, a mix of disgust at the actual event and revelry in the narrator’s absurd reaction to it.

I have spoken of several instances in *L’autoportrait à l’étranger*, and then especially in *Faire l’amour*, in which the author shocks the readers with the incongruous elements of the

content, many of which may be saugrenus, and even simply vulgar. Indeed, the evolution of Toussaint's writing seems to take a sharper turn with *L'autoportrait*; but as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, no one could have expected the abrupt change that was to occur with the publication of his seventh text in the form of unabashedly erotic and graphic sex scenes. Toussaint, apparently himself having the ability to shock in the deadpan manner for which he is so well known in his writing, combines language and contrast to create a beautifully written story with a very serious theme. Nevertheless, through all the gravity, this clever manipulation of language and contrast is precisely what contributes clear-cut comical elements in the form of caricatures, for example, to this otherwise somber story.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHAT'S NEXT? *FUIR* AND BEYOND

My goal throughout this dissertation has been to establish Jean-Philippe Toussaint as an author with a prolific ludic spirit that dominates all aspects of his texts. At the beginning of his career, many critics characterized his works as minimalist. Although most recognized the novels for their humorous elements, none really treated these aspects with much detail, and this is precisely what I have done.

Whereas the plots of his novels may be minimalist, the writing style and narrative technique are not as minimalist as some critics have believed in the end: it is playful. What may have been a more appropriate characterization of his first three novels no longer seems to be a perfect fit, and ultimately when we discuss his more recent novels, the term minimalism seems passé. Indeed, Toussaint's sentences can be simple and concise, and the style can be banal or fragmented to reflect the action on the one hand. The texts may also, for example, employ a certain lexical field to mirror the content, as I demonstrated by quoting the author's texts in conjunction with Michael Riffaterre's theory of context and effect. On the other hand, grammatical and syntactical structures may also be quite complex despite the inherent simplicity and/or banality of the story being told. This is often where we find humor: in the writing itself, in the sentence structure, and in particular semantic choices.

As early as the author's third novel, *L'appareil-photo*, but especially notable from his fourth novel, *La réticence*, to the present, Toussaint no longer follows a prescribed formula

for style with short, simple sentences. He mixes these with sentences that span an entire page, for example. Additionally, as I have pointed out, this author does not lack a talent for poetic phrasing within his prose texts despite his penchant for slapstick and the saugrenu. Examples of his stylistic bravado can be found throughout all of his texts where readers are privy to luxurious expansions of even the most banal ideas or events. These moments, however, showcase the author's mastery of both literary expression and use of contrast within that expression. It is precisely this use of contrast through style in the writing and the saugrenu, for instance, in the content that contributes so richly to the multiplicity of ludic subtexts. In sum, Jean-Philippe Toussaint is able to turn something seemingly quite ordinary on the level of content into something rather extraordinary in the end through his very creative use of narratology and style.

However, one of the most playful devices of Toussaint's works to my mind is his prolific use of intertextuality. If the reader can pick up on the smallest of winks at other texts, from obscure allusions mentioned so nonchalantly to the most intricate thematic interweaving of other works into his own, a whole other world opens up. The reader may then both appreciate the texts themselves as rich literary works as well as the author and his techniques: the reader can appreciate the amazing combination of not only skill and imagination, but also the educated and culturally informed spirit behind these works.

Within the author's intertextual references, a complex web of thematic recycling also occurs. Two interrelated themes that Toussaint privileges in all of his novels, for example, are immobility vs. movement and the notion of time. Although the Pascalian intertext is present in *L'appareil-photo*, the humor seems much less subverted by the angst of the characters in this work when compared to *La Salle de bain*. Despite the humorous reputation

that the author's first three novels enjoy, there is still an underlying anxiety present in all three texts that completely infuses the fourth novel *La réticence* and thus eclipses any thoughts of playfulness in this text. Critics did not know what to make of this text; nevertheless, ludic devices abound as I established in my discussion in chapter three, and we realize that all this text does, on some levels, is play. Toussaint offers the reader a parodic detective novel with a paranoid narrator leading the way, leading the reader in and out of hypotheses that never pan out to be real. What seems real, however, through the absurdity of some his conspiracy theories, is his anxiety. We can relate all this anxiety to Pascal's thought: "Our nature is in movement; complete repose is death." This notion most definitely characterizes the author's first three novels, and none more than *L'appareil-photo*, where the narrator and his new companion, affectionately and hardly coincidentally named Pascale, can be seen in cars, taxis, boats, and planes, constantly in motion, but not really accomplishing anything. Toussaint's perpetual evocation of Pascal in his first three texts is abundantly playful, and while it does seep into his subsequent texts, the movement seems to embody more of a mental wandering in *La réticence* and *La Télévision. Autoportrait (à l'étranger)* embodies both mental and physical wandering as the narrator offers up musings and anecdotes from his various travels around the world. Still, we see the narrator immobilized at the end of the text in Kyoto, plagued with nostalgia and a sudden hyperawareness of the passage of time. This is quite a contrast to the relative lightness of the text on the whole.

The constant reference to immobility and its underlying juxtaposition with movement along with the flow of time continues to come to the forefront in *Faire l'amour* through the story of a passionate and seemingly unhappy couple unable to break up. They just cannot seem to end their tumultuous relationship and so they just keep going. This inability to

embrace the complete repose that Pascal invokes speaks to our fear of self-examination and ultimately our desire to evade the truth, to avoid reality, that is to say, contemplation of one's mortality and finitude. The theme of immobility and our inability to stop time is reinforced in this novel through intertextual allusions to Apollinaire's *Pont Mirabeau* and is playfully parodied through a mingling with Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*, as we learn that the narrator of that novel does, in fact, find complete repose precisely in his own death. Toussaint parodies this idea at the end of his novel: in his version, a flower is killed, not a person, as one may have suspected. Thus, this anticlimactic end reaffirms the notion at the start of the dissertation that Toussaint incarnates a magister ludi.

Despite the dark ambiance that pervades *Faire l'amour*, I have been able to pinpoint and discuss in detail the concrete comical elements that do indeed exist in this text. This task would prove even more difficult, however, in the author's most recent publication *Fuir*. If we thought that *Faire l'amour* marked a definitive point of evolution in Toussaint's narrative technique, his novel *Fuir*, which was published in September 2005, marks an even further departure from surface humor and more concrete comic elements. Daniel Martin exclaimed enthusiastically in his review that *Fuir* is a "double tour de force : en même temps qu'il donne un premier grand roman au téléphone mobile, il invente un genre nouveau, celui du thriller intime où le suspense naît de l'ordinaire des émotions contrariées." Furthermore, Nelly Kapriélian asserted in the opening statement of her article that "Jean-Philippe Toussaint has published the second part of a highly cinematic Asian diptych - and has taken his work in a new direction."

I have made several mentions in the dissertation of Toussaint's more filmic perspectives on writing, his visual sensibilities, and the fact that he is also a filmmaker. This time

however, the cinematic aspect clearly dominates the landscape, and an homage to Chinese action films would seem to be a rich point of discussion. Indeed, the idea of Toussaint writing action sequences is completely different, but this is not to say that *Fuir* does not contain a multiplicity of ludic dimensions as well.¹³⁴ As I have insisted throughout this dissertation, intertextuality as a game constitutes the utmost ludic device, and Toussaint has proven his sharp eye for contrast, be it in story or style. He perpetually plays with allusions to other texts, and this novel seems to be no exception as we will explore in a moment. So what does one make of this critically acclaimed bestseller?¹³⁵

What is interesting about *Fuir* is that for the first time, Toussaint uses the same

¹³⁴ Many critics agree that Toussaint plays off of Chinese action films, but not all agree on the mastery of the author's cinematic vision. Let us cite Sylvain Bonnafoux's scathing article:

Il s'inscrit dans la continuité d'une oeuvre inaugurée il y a plus de vingt ans par *La salle de bains*, lorsqu'à peine âgé de 25 ans, l'auteur nous étonnait par sa maîtrise et son sens de l'humour. Ensuite, il n'a fait que creuser le même sillon, mais c'est seulement depuis *Faire l'amour* que l'on se préoccupe de lui : devenu sérieux, il a gagné ses galons de grand écrivain. Les critiques sont unanimes, l'auteur s'est mis en danger, il s'est renouvelé et ne cesse d'expérimenter, cassant le moule d'un bel outil pour en concevoir de nouveaux. Toussaint lui-même est très fier d'écrire des phrases plus difficiles à lire, c'est-à-dire plus longues. Autrement dit, il est devenu chiant et s'en félicite... sauf que son écriture ne s'est pas vraiment renouvelée. Utilisant les mêmes techniques narratives, il n'a fait que changer de registre.

[...]Ce mélange de trivialité et de poésie, ce romantisme urbain et fiévreux, ces personnages mutiques, on sait où on les a vus : dans les films d'auteurs chinois, japonais, coréens...

Mais ce que ces réalisateurs, même très sophistiqués - comme Hou Hsiao-Hsien ou Wong Kar-Wai, pour ne citer qu'eux -, font avec un naturel et un sens du premier degré dont les européens sont depuis longtemps dépourvus, devient chez Jean-Philippe Toussaint du maniérisme. Même lorsque le récit se poursuit sur l'île d'Elbe, ce qui domine à la lecture de *Fuir*, c'est l'impression de déjà-vu. En établissant un pont entre la littérature et le cinéma, Toussaint n'a pas renouvelé le genre romanesque, il en a marqué la capitulation et l'extrême sénilité.

¹³⁵ It should be noted that although *Fuir* has been hailed by most critics as a masterpiece, not everyone agrees as evidenced in the previous note as well. Toussaint always disconcerts, but some just do not know what to make of him. For example, Marc Riglet wrote the following of *Fuir* in *Lire* [octobre 2005]:

Qu'aime-t-on chez Jean-Philippe Toussaint, quand on l'aime ? Des histoires insolites, ancrées dans notre réalité contemporaine et rapportées avec une économie de moyens que rehausse un de ces humeurs que l'on dit froids... De ses pérégrinations exotiques, il croit pouvoir faire la matière de ces récits. Que ses personnages ou lui-même (*Autoportrait*, 2000) en sortent désolés et poisseux et qu'ils vivent invariablement une histoire d'amour en phase terminale ne suffit plus à créer des types romanesques, ni à nous surprendre...

narrator and female protagonist (Marie) from *Faire l'amour*, and so the two texts are directly related. In fact, though published three years after *Faire l'amour*, *Fuir* is actually the first installment of what has come to be called this “diptique asiatique.” John Taylor summarizes the novel, explaining that “the ever-obliging narrator gets hooked into a half-ludicrous, half-perilous imbroglio with Zhang Xiangzhi, an unfathomable Chinese business associate of Marie’s.” Then, “[w]ild chase scenes involve a motorcycle and the alluring Li Qi, who is Zhang Xiangzhi’s business partner, paramour or secretary: Her identity is mysterious as well.”¹³⁶ Ultimately, as Taylor asserts, this novel [*Fuir*] moves “beyond the farce of this *casse-tête chinois* (as the French term brain-teasers),” and “the particular subtlety of both novels [*Fuir* and *Faire l'amour*] is Toussaint’s focus on the narrator and Marie as their love begins to crumble.”

Fuir tells the story of the narrator’s trip to China, in part in order to deliver an envelope containing twenty-five thousand dollars cash from Marie to Zhang Xiangzhi, “relation d’affaires de Marie” (F 11). He is in Shanghai for this purpose, but also for pleasure as well. However, strange things seem to happen from the beginning, and both narrator and reader are plunged into an unfamiliar, seemingly exotic universe rife with mystery. The text is divided into three parts: the first takes place in Shanghai, the second in Beijing, and the third on the island of Elba. In the first part, Zhang Xiangzhi introduces him to Li Qi, and the

¹³⁶ Although we cannot know for sure, Toussaint may well be playing with both of these characters’ names. It is suspect and thus intriguing to note that Zhang Xiangzhi is the name of a real person, the Deputy Director of the Accounting Regulatory Department for the Ministry of Finance in Beijing. We know from Toussaint’s novel that his character Zhang Xiangzhi is involved in the finances for the Chinese branch of Marie’s company *Allons-y, Allons-o*. Knowing this fact about the real person, it is then amusing to see the fictional character negotiate the prices of things like hotel rooms several times in the novel. By the same token, the reader well acquainted with Toussaint’s texts knows that he has an appreciation for art and often inserts references to visual artists into his works. Li Qi was also a real person, an artist whose paintings include a 1960 portrait of Mao Zedong, for example. Knowing our author, then, it does not seem so surprising that the narrator meets Li Qi at an art exposition.

intrigue accelerates from there. From Shanghai, these three go to Beijing on an overnight train. The narrator and Li Qi begin a seductively detailed interlude in the train lavatory, which, in typical Toussaintian style, is interrupted by the menace of his cell phone ringing out in the corridor, a used phone given to him by Zhang Xiangzhi for use in China. The narrator is paralyzed with fear, wondering if perhaps Zhang Xiangzhi is on the other side of the door. Finally he answers. It is Marie, calling to tell him that there has been an accident and that her father has died. The sexual encounter with Li Qi is abruptly halted. The narrator simultaneously feels profoundly sad and guilty. He will go to Elba for the funeral service, but not just yet.

The second part of the novel takes place in Beijing. Upon arrival, Zhang Xiangzhi goes to obtain a vehicle and chooses a motorcycle. Conversations occur of which the narrator understands nothing and pretty soon, he, Zhang Xiangzhi, and Li Qi find themselves on the run (after a brief and seemingly surreal interlude in a bowling alley where they bowl a game), all three on the back of this motorcycle, zig-zagging through the crowded streets of Beijing by night. Indeed, as the title suggests, they seem to be fleeing, but fleeing what and/or whom? Toussaint's vivid language and fluid style bring these scenes to life, and the reader is easily transported to the fictive universe of the novel. We suddenly feel as if we are watching a film, as if we are speeding through crowded streets with these characters. Magdalena Hrozinkova notes to this effect in her meeting with the author for Radio Prague: "Considéré comme chef de fil du roman minimaliste, Jean-Philippe Toussaint est aussi apprécié pour son écriture visuelle. Comme quelqu'un qui sait écrire le mouvement, la couleur, la lumière." Nelly Kapriélian affirms this sentiment as well, positing that Toussaint's texts have become "more visual and cinematic." She wonders: "Might this be because he has himself made

films...? Today, his novel *Fuir* is a fine literary response to the work of the most interesting contemporary film makers, such as David Lynch or Wong Kar-wai.”

The author undeniably knows how to write movement, color, and light, as we see the protagonist constantly on the move by train, plane, motorcycle, and taxicab. We also see the neon lights that animate the night of Beijing, as well as the monuments and other tourist sites that whiz by the narrator as Zhang Xiangzhi drives him through the city on the back of the motorcycle earlier that day. Toussaint playfully implies here through Zhang Xiangzhi’s pointing out all the sites to the narrator that this is in fact his visit to Beijing, sped up in fast motion so that nothing is recognizable. However, amidst the speed and constant movement, amidst all this action, amidst a fragmented plot so fluidly narrated, Toussaint also infuses a plethora of emotions into the text. Another renowned Chinese director known for his action films is John Woo, who directed the Hollywood blockbuster, *Mission: Impossible 2*. While this film was not well received by American critics in general, one critic’s commentary rings quite compelling next to the idea of *Fuir*, and he claims that it is really American audiences that did not “get” this film: they have a set idea of what an action film should be, and that is non-stop action and an escape from reality that does not force them to reflect. Just as in Toussaint’s novels, there are also slow and deliberate scenes of mundane daily life in this action film. In “John Woo’s Accomplished Mission,” Jeffrey M. Anderson insists that “Woo is not concerned with telling a *Mission: Impossible* story,” and that “[h]e has found a way to make his characters Ethan Hunt (Cruise) and Nyah Nordoff-Hall (Thandie Newton) into distinctive Woo-ian figures.” Anderson asserts that Woo’s film “is more concerned with powerhouse emotions than plot twists,” and that what distinguishes him from other filmmakers “is not only his beautifully choreographed and completely clear action scenes,

but also his strong emotional grandiosity.” This is precisely what comes into play in Toussaint’s novel, and these emotions penetrate the novel from the beginning and can be seen in the narrator’s attraction to Li Qi, his profound sorrow and guilt at the news of the death of Marie’s father, his genuine fear and sense of panic that pervades the text as he, Zhang Xiangzhi, and Li Qi flee, and his resignation when he reunites with Marie.

The narrator expresses a sense of fear several times and wonders himself what they are running from: “je sentais mon coeur battre très fort dans ma poitrine, avec ce sentiment de peur pure et d’effroi, de panique d’autant plus effrayante et irrationnelle que je n’avais aucune idée de ce que nous étions en train de fuir ainsi éperdument” (*F* 112). Then, “Nos corps, dans la peur, ne faisaient qu’un, soudés sur la moto dans le même élan de fuite, rassemblés dans la même direction, sursautant pour un rien et se retournant à contretemps pour guetter nos invisibles poursuivants” (*F* 118), and “Nous débouchâmes là sans transition, encore en mouvement, encore agités, encore en état de choc, dans la fuite, dans le tremblement du corps, dans l’urgence d’échapper ...” (*F* 121). This frenetic ambiance only accelerates and does not let up until the end of the second part of the novel when suddenly, Zhang Xiangzhi drops the narrator off and tells him to get a taxi and go back to the hotel. The scene ends there, and there is no resolution or explanation whatsoever. Throughout, the narrator asks rhetorical questions and alludes to suspect activities and his own confusion in order to establish an atmosphere where neither he nor the reader seems to understand what is going on.¹³⁷ Ultimately, the confusion remains. The reader certainly feels disoriented as there

¹³⁷ Here are some examples of this from the first part of the novel:

Je n’ignorais pas que Zhang Xiangzhi menait depuis quelques années des opérations immobilières en Chine pour le compte de Marie, peut-être douteuses et illicites ... le tout vraisemblablement entaché de corruption et de commissions occultes [...] Mais, jusqu’à présent, je n’avais jamais entendu dire que Zhang Xiangzhi était lié au crime organisé. (*F* 13-14)

exists a real sense of urgency and the feeling that these characters are being chased because they are involved with something serious and dangerous. But, we never know what it is. In like manner to his other novels, Toussaint leaves the reader wondering and any questions regarding the mystery that dominates the plot are left completely unresolved at the end. *Fuir* is not funny. It is a sort of roman policier as was the idea behind *La réticence*; however, this time, the events are real, not a figment of the narrator's imagination, or at least not that we know. What is different about this novel, what marks a clear evolution in narrative technique, is that Toussaint creates a world that scarcely contains the comic relief of the previous fictive universes he has offered up. If we thought comic relief was scarce in *Faire l'amour*, it makes itself even more so in *Fuir* where the death of Marie's father dominates the narrator's spirit for the bulk of the novel. This novel may pay homage to or even parody Asian action films or action films in general, but the prescriptive formula for most action films revolves solely around action sequences and contain a logical resolution at the end, i.e. the good guys win, the bad guys lose, the mystery is solved, and the audience is appeased and led out of the dark. We do not often see any psychological motivation on the part of the characters in this genre. Again, this is where the comparisons to Wong Kar-wai become even more intriguing as the following excerpt from Acquarello's article on the film *As Tears Go By* shows:

Je ne comprenais rien à ce qui se passait, et je me sentis soudain envahi par une vague d'inquiétude, de déplaisir et de doute. Après avoir salué nos retrouvailles d'un sourire qui me parut ironique, voire légèrement goguenard, comme s'il voulait souligner le mauvais tour qu'il venait de me jouer—ou que j'aurais essayé moi-même de lui jouer, et dont il n'aurait pas été dupe—Zhang Xiangzhi s'éloigna de quelques pas pour passer un coup de téléphone sur son portable. Que faisait-il là? Avait-il simplement accompagné Li Qi à la gare? Certes, il n'y avait rien d'étonnant à ce que Li Qi et Zhang Xiangzhi se connaissent (c'était même par lui que j'avais fait sa connaissance), mais je ne comprenais pas comment il avait été mis au courant de notre voyage—et je fus encore plus désorienté quand Li Qi m'apprit qu'il venait avec nous à Pékin. (F 25-6)

[Zhang Xiangzhi] dit quelques mots en chinois, calmement, comme s'il faisait un rapport succinct de la situation (et, même si c'était peu probable, je ne pus m'empêcher de penser qu'il parlait de moi, tant j'avais le sentiment d'être surveillé en permanence depuis que j'étais en Chine). (F 36)

Marking Wong Kar-wai's first foray into feature film, *As Tears Go By* subverts the familiar images of frenetic violence and non-stop action endemic in contemporary Hong Kong films with a more somber, atmospheric, and contemplative portrait of failed connection and unrequited longing. Wong incorporates evocative, highly stylized elements that would become the filmmaker's indelible aesthetic signature: chaotic chase sequences reflected through fragmented, stroboscopic ... the sentiment of adrift melancholy articulated through dispassionate voice-over narration ... and transitional (and allusively transcendent) images of travel (most notably in the interstitial shot of passing buses as Wah reads Ah-Ngor's letter); the permutability of time through accelerated and slow motion sequences and narrative ellipses (the final image of Wah that momentarily triggers a flashback).

In terms of the thematic recycling, Toussaint does evoke the sense of immobility versus movement in this novel as well, and in fact, while the narrator is on the move non-stop for a while in the second part of the text, his relationship with Marie seems to have come to a halt. Even more disorienting, then, than perhaps the frenzied chase scene is the entrance into the third and final part of the novel. After page after page of this blurry chase and the chaos of the unknown, the reader is extracted suddenly from the neon lights and nocturnal night life of Beijing to a flight to Paris from where the narrator then travels to Elba to meet Marie for her father's funeral. This is a classic example of Toussaint's masterful use of contrast and also reflects the description of Wong Kar-wai's film that I just cited above. Furthermore, we can see the same "failed connection" and "unrequited longing" in both the narrator's interrupted affair with Li Qi as well as in his doomed relationship with Marie. The juxtaposition of chaos and speed with the subdued and melancholic ambiance of Elba could not be more stark. They are two vastly different universes, the former seeming like a dream sequence, the latter the return to reality. This part could well be a completely different novel altogether. Suddenly the readers find themselves in more familiar territory as we experience the narrator's solitary wanderings and musings as well as a detailed sexual encounter between him and Marie. Interestingly enough, the description above of Wong Kar-wai's film as possessing "the

sentiment of adrift melancholy articulated through dispassionate voice-over narration” seems uncannily to characterize the end of Toussaint’s novel. In a strange narrative sequence, the narrator disappears at the end of the novel for a spell, and yet he continues to narrate the story. His words then suddenly become precisely this sort of “voice-over narration” that occurs in *As Tears Go By*. He ponders Marie’s reaction to his absence during her father’s funeral service:

Je ne sais pas quand Marie s’aperçut de mon absence de l’église – car je n’étais plus dans l’église – , si ce fut pendant le déroulement même de l’office, se retournant un instant pour me chercher des yeux et ne trouvant soudain plus que le vide entre les colonnes de marbre à l’endroit où je me trouvais quelques instants plus tôt – un vide immédiatement saisissant, anormal, un vide froid, silencieux, inquiétant – ou si c’est seulement plus tard qu’elle s’était rendu compte de mon absence, quand les portes de l’église s’étaient ouvertes à la fin de l’office et avaient laissé la lumière pénétrer à l’intérieur, une grande vague de lumière solaire qui s’était avancée dans la pénombre et avait inondé le pavement veiné de marbre de l’église. (*F* 151-52)

The narrator remains absent from his own text for fifteen pages, and thus the reader is led around the island as Marie goes to the cemetery and then begins to search for her missing lover. Suddenly the focus shifts completely and the story is all about Marie and her anxiety. The obvious anxiety and tension already present because of the death of her father only mount as she desperately looks for the narrator. She does finally arrive at the right hotel and the right room, but the narrator is still missing. In playful yet seemingly menacing style still, he relays her discovery yet again of his absence:

Elle frappa à la porte du pavillon. Personne ne répondit. C’est moi, dit-elle. C’est moi, ouvre-moi. Rien, personne ne répondait.. Elle frappa encore, plus fort. Pourquoi ne répondais-je pas, pourquoi ne voulais-je pas lui ouvrir? Étais-je là? Marie paniquait, secouait la poignée de la porte. M’était-il arrivé quelque chose? Étais-je là mort, sur le lit, derrière la porte? (*F* 164)

If we know Toussaint, this scene, this voice-over and the rhetorical questions might make us smile. However, this bizarre and sudden disappearance could be quite disconcerting to those

unfamiliar with his style or simply those who expect him to interject a glint of humor here. Alas, he does not, and his whereabouts during his absence are never revealed. The reader may find him/herself craving some comic relief, expecting it at some point, but this time, it never really occurs. On the other hand, such an abrupt change is playful, as is asking if you might be dead when you are the narrator of the story, so contrary to what we might think, the publication of this novel does indeed extend the author's esprit ludique. While the novel itself does not come off as playful on the surface, ludic dimensions still abound. Possible intertextual allusions to Chinese film makers cannot be ignored, and the author's will and desire to do something that seems so different is also very playful. Jean-Louis Ezine wrote in *Le Nouvel observateur* (15 Septembre 2005) on that note that "Avec son nouveau roman, 'Fuir', l'auteur de 'La Salle de bain', le roman culte de l'école minimaliste, surprend et déconcerte une fois de plus." Indeed, Toussaint never ceases to surprise readers, and this is exactly what I have strove to exemplify.

In summary, I have examined how the style and structure are linked to the content of the novels, and thus how the ridiculousness of some of the events and slapstick comments may also be inextricably linked to the writing style and the way that the events are arranged. I have also confirmed how his derisive humor and use of incongruity and the saugrenu seem to be more indicative of black humor, or as O'Neill prefers, the comedy of entropy, in Toussaint's publications up to *Fuir*. All in all, throughout this dissertation I have verified the author's masterful use of narratology and style through detailed semantic, structural, and textual examinations while simultaneously showing his ludic agenda underneath it all. The author likes to play and does so through both story and style. Ultimately, however, it is style that Toussaint privileges, as I have insisted throughout, and it is style that truly comes to the

forefront of his most recent novel in the form of stunning visual scenes that accelerate and decelerate with the same graceful fluidity, a trait emblematic of more cinematic sequences that use slow motion as an effect. Whereas films may be described as visually stunning, Toussaint's writing style is equally vivid and beautiful. Certainly, I have shown how the writing itself sort of becomes the protagonist of each novel, especially in *La Télévision*. Yann Granjon has expressed from this perspective that "L'œuvre de Jean-Philippe Toussaint se nourrit toujours plus d'esthétique que d'analyse." He sums up this sentiment so astutely in describing *Fuir* in particular:

À travers l'observation et la description des lieux, personnes, événements, on éprouve ici concrètement l'épaisseur du monde. On a donc retrouvé une voix, un ton, qui signalent qu'on est de retour dans cet univers unique et singulier, une oeuvre. Et quand on tourne la dernière page, on s'aperçoit qu'on a été tenu en haleine par un suspense dont les mots sont les principaux personnages.

Indeed, Toussaint's fictive universes seek to bring his writing to the forefront, and with no humorous distractions in the content of *Fuir*, the poetic quality and mastery of style that seemed only subtly displayed in his first novels emerge as main characters themselves. Although this has perhaps always been the case on some level, it is ironically through his lack of surface humor that this author has finally been recognized as a true artist, a gifted writer, a master stylist. The inevitable question would be, then: how will Jean-Philippe Toussaint surprise us next? As it turns out, he will surprise readers once more with a minuscule publication of eleven small pages of text that was released by Minuit on November 9, 2006. The author's latest publication is not a novel. Toussaint was inspired to write this musing prose poem entitled *La Mélancolie de Zidane* after having been in attendance at the World Cup Soccer Championship in Berlin during the summer of 2006. Melancholy, indeed, for there is not a trace of humor in this downhearted chronicle of Zidane's disgraceful action.

It seems that the author is almost sympathetic to him and attempts to understand what went wrong, what really happened on that fateful day, all the while creating another fluidly beautiful work.

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