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**The Heuristics of Narrativity in the Works of Jean-Philippe Toussaint**

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in French Studies

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Languages and Cultures**

**March 2016**

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to the Wolfson Foundation for funding my research through a Wolfson Foundation Postgraduate Scholarship. The generous support I received from the Wolfson Foundation was essential to the completion of my thesis and I am proud to have benefited from the Foundation's continued support for, and belief in, the protection and promotion of the Humanities in a time of institutional crisis.

My thanks to the University of Warwick and particularly to the staff and postgraduates in the French Department for their friendship, advice and support. My special thanks to my principal supervisor, Dr. Douglas Morrey, whose discussions, debates, precisions and patience have been extremely invaluable throughout, and for taking my early decision to excise Michel Houellebecq from my thesis, in order to concentrate fully on the works of Jean-Philippe Toussaint, in his stride. My great thanks to my secondary supervisor, Dr. Oliver Davis, for giving me many key insights about the approach of my thesis, especially with regard to the third chapter. My thanks also to Professor Andy Leak for introducing me to Toussaint's work.

My thanks to my parents, for their amazing love and support, and to my two brothers who both live in far off places, but were there when I needed them. Finally, my thanks to Chloe, for everything.

## **Declaration and Inclusion of Material from a Prior Thesis**

Brief sections of Chapter 1 contain passages from my thesis submitted for the degree of MA in French and Francophone Studies: Language, Culture and History at University College London in 2011. These are referenced within the text.

## Abstract

This thesis analyses nine novels and two films by Jean-Philippe Toussaint, spanning the period from *La Salle de bain* (1985) to *Nue* (2013). Drawing on the hermeneutic phenomenology of Paul Ricœur, it argues that Toussaint's texts can be fruitfully understood as representing fictionalised forms of reflexive narrativity.

Through the close readings of the texts developed in this thesis, it is argued that Toussaint's anonymous fictional narrators are presented as both the readers and writers of their own lives, engaged in reimagining their own past experiences in ways which are heuristically motivated towards future possibilities for action, and that these reimaginings are represented both *as* and *through* the formal variations of the texts themselves. Also emphasised, however, is the way in which such refigurative narrative engagements are frequently depicted as deceptive or problematic.

The first chapter, *Self in the World*, analyses *La Salle de bain* (1985), *L'Appareil-photo* (1988) and *La Réticence* (1991), focusing on the ways in which Toussaint's novels engage with thematic issues of subjectivity, identity, agency and the human capacity for reflexive narrativity.

The second chapter, *The Other in the Self*, analyses two novels, *Monsieur* (1986) and *La Télévision* (1997), and two films, *La Sévillane* (1992) and *La Patinoire* (1999), focusing on the ways in which Toussaint's texts deploy various forms of ironic discourse in the critical mediation of the relationship between individual subjectivity and the exigencies of society, the workplace, and problems related to creative agency.

The final chapter, *Selfhood in the Other*, analyses the novels of Toussaint's *Marie* tetralogy, *Faire l'amour* (2002), *Fuir* (2005), *La Vérité sur Marie* (2009), and *Nue* (2013), focusing on how this series interrogates philosophical questions of intersubjectivity by drawing on a number of historical conceptualisations of the aesthetic concept of the sublime.



## Introduction, Literature Review, Aims

This thesis will analyse all of Jean-Philippe Toussaint's published fictional novels to date, as well as two films which he wrote and directed, *La Sévillane* (1992) and *La Patinoire* (1999). The methodological approach will draw heavily on the 'hermeneutic phenomenology' of Paul Ricœur, particularly in the areas of narrativity, temporality, personal identity, agency and intersubjectivity, and the close readings of Toussaint's texts contained herein will be informed by Ricœur's analyses of the ways in which narrative practices are intrinsic features of human experience, both allowing and compelling us to dynamically graft structures of intelligibility and meaning onto our disjointed, heterogeneous experience of a world of objects, events and other agents.

September 2013 saw the publication of Jean-Philippe Toussaint's ninth novel, *Nue* (2013).<sup>1</sup> The fourth instalment of Toussaint's *Marie* series, *Nue* represents the culmination of a cycle which began eleven years earlier with *Faire l'amour* (2002),<sup>2</sup> presenting an anonymous first-person narrator elliptically reflecting upon several periods in his fractious romantic relationship with a globally acclaimed fashion designer, Marie de Montalte. The series has received both commercial and critical acclaim in France, Jordan Stump writing that the second novel of the series, '*Fuir*, [...] Houellebecq notwithstanding, was unmistakably the major event of the 2005 literary season.'<sup>3</sup> The curator of graphic arts at the Louvre, Pascal Torres, was so impressed by one of this novel's scenes, set in France's most famous art gallery, that

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *Nue* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2013). Hereafter cited in the format '(N, x)'.  
<sup>2</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *Faire L'amour* (Paris: Minuit, 2002). Hereafter cited in the format '(FA, x)'.  
<sup>3</sup> Jordan Stump, 'Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Unfinished', *SubStance*, 35.111 (2006), 95–111, p. 95.

he took the highly unusual step of inviting Toussaint to stage an original exhibition there, 2012's *Livre/Louvre*, a rare opportunity for a contemporary novelist.

Comprising photography, film and sculpture, Toussaint has described the connecting theme of this exhibition as 'un hommage visuel au livre'.<sup>4</sup> Both *Nue* and the series' third instalment, *La Vérité sur Marie* (2009) appeared on shortlists for the Goncourt Prize, France's most prestigious literary award, for the years in which they were released, and *Fuir* (2005)<sup>5</sup> and *La Vérité sur Marie* received the *prix Medicis* and the *prix Décembre*, in 2005 and 2009 respectively.<sup>6</sup> Since the publication of his first novel, *La Salle de bain* (1985),<sup>7</sup> Toussaint's readership has grown internationally as well as domestically, with reviews of translations of *Fuir* and *La Vérité sur Marie* appearing in *The Independent*, the *New York Times*, *Der Spiegel* and *The Guardian*, and with Nicolas Lezard writing that 'Toussaint is carving out one of the most fascinating literary *oeuvres* of our times.'<sup>8</sup>

Despite a growing level of critical and commercial attention at home and abroad and although, as Sarah Glasco notes, Toussaint's novels now form 'part of French literature curricula at universities worldwide',<sup>9</sup> this does not yet appear to have translated into very much published research, particularly in English. As of the time of writing, Glasco's *Parody and Palimpsest: Intertextuality, Language and the Ludic in the Novels of Jean-Philippe Toussaint* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015) p. 1.

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<sup>4</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *La Main et le regard: Livre/Louvre* (Paris: Musée du Louvre Éditions, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *Fuir* (Paris: Minuit, 2005). Hereafter cited in the format '(F, x)'.

<sup>6</sup> In 2009, *La Vérité sur Marie* was beaten by another Minuit novel, Marie NDiaye's *Trois Femmes Puissantes*.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *La Salle de bain* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1985). Hereafter cited in the format '(SB, x)'.

<sup>8</sup> 'The Truth About Marie, By Jean-Philippe Toussaint', *The Independent*; 'Die besten Romane des Herbstes: Hier wachsen Ihnen Hörner beim Lesen!', *Spiegel Online*, 1 January 2010; Christopher Byrd, 'Book Review | "Running Away," By Jean-Philippe Toussaint; Translated by Matthew B. Smith', *The New York Times*, 24 December 2009; Nicholas Lezard, 'The Truth About Marie by Jean-Philippe Toussaint – Review', *The Guardian*, 6 September 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah L. Glasco, *Parody and Palimpsest: Intertextuality, Language and the Ludic in the Novels of Jean-Philippe Toussaint* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015) p. 1.

length monograph on Toussaint's work, accompanied by around a dozen journal articles, as well as chapters and book sections by Roy Caldwell and Jean-Louis Hippolyte.<sup>10</sup> In French, there has been more research published on Toussaint's novels, including several dozen journal articles, although so far only been one collected volume, edited by Laurent Demoulin and Pierre Piret,<sup>11</sup> along with short book sections by Alexander Hertich and Cécile Yapaudijian-Labat,<sup>12</sup> and longer chapters by Maryse Fauvel and Fieke Schoots.<sup>13</sup> The earliest monograph to appear on Toussaint's work was Mirko Schmidt's *Jean-Philippe Toussaint: Erzählen und Verschweigen*, published in 2001.<sup>14</sup> While there is some degree of critical engagement with German-language secondary literature on Toussaint's work in this thesis, including Schmidt's monograph and an article by Ulrika Schneider,<sup>15</sup> this engagement is necessarily limited, both on account of difficulties encountered accessing some German-language resources, and due to its author having only been learning German for little over a year, making the task of reading academic writing in German an extremely laborious task.

In *Fuzzy Fiction*,<sup>16</sup> Jean-Louis Hippolyte describes the aesthetic which predominates in Toussaint's novels as one of 'fuzzyness', arguing that his texts, in common with those of a number of other contemporary French-language writers

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<sup>10</sup> Roy Caldwell, 'Jean-Philippe Toussaint', in *The contemporary novel in France*, ed. by William J. Thompson (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), pp. 369-420. Jean-Louis Hippolyte, *Fuzzy Fiction*, Stages, 21 (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), pp. 24-61.

<sup>11</sup> *Textyles*, 38 (2010).

<sup>12</sup> Cécile Yapaudijian-Labat, 'Éric Chevillard et Jean-Philippe Toussaint à l'ombre de Beckett', in *Existe-t-il un style Minuit?*, pp. 135-44. Alexander Hertich, 'Jean-Philippe Toussaint et Alain Robbe-Grillet sur le double circuit', in *Existe-t-il un style Minuit?*, pp. 125-134.

<sup>13</sup> Maryse Fauvel, *Scènes d'intérieur: Six romanciers des années 1980-1990* (Paris: Summa, 2007) pp. 13-42. Fieke Schoots, 'Passer en douce à la douane'. *L'écriture minimaliste de Minuit: Deville, Échenoz, Redonnet et Toussaint* (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997) (currently out of print).

<sup>14</sup> Mirko F. Schmidt, *Jean-Philippe Toussaint: Erzählen und Verschweigen* (Paderborn: Books on Demand GmbH, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Ulrike Schneider, 'Fluchtpunkte des Erzählens. Medialität und Narration in Jean-Philippe Toussaints Roman *Fuir*', *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur*, 118 (2008), 141-61.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Louis Hippolyte, *Fuzzy Fiction*, Stages, 21 (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

(Eric Chevillard, Marie Redonnet, Antoine Volodine and François Bon), can be characterised by the manner in which they offer only limited, curtailed or fragmentary views onto the diegetic worlds they present as well as in terms of the highly limited amount of information they provide about the concrete identities of their protagonists. Hippolyte suggests that by destabilising the reader's passive ability to apprehend a coherent chain of events which might constitute the novel's plot, or easily establish a stable understanding of protagonists' identities, Toussaint's novels prompt the reader to actively (re)interpret them,<sup>17</sup> in a way which is reminiscent of what Frank Kermode once described as a defining character of the writing of the *nouveau roman* generation, in that '[t]he reader is not offered easy satisfactions, but [rather] a challenge to creative cooperation.'<sup>18</sup> Hippolyte, along with a number of other commentators, explicitly links features of Toussaint's writing practice with the period of counter-conventional formal and stylistic experimentation associated with writers of the New Novel, situating Toussaint within a context of literary inheritance of those to whom Robbe-Grillet once referred as 'ceux qui n'écrivent pas "comme il faut"'.<sup>19</sup> Features such as the non-linear chronological structure of Toussaint's novels, their resistance to traditional notions of plot and character, as well as the relative absence of explicit psychological detail, are frequently cited in support of such readings, and Hippolyte suggests that what they 'may have in common [...] is that both refute the "final plenitude of meaning" that characterized most prewar literature.'<sup>20</sup>

Much of the published work on Toussaint's writing looks to interrogate this

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<sup>17</sup> Hippolyte, *Fuzzy Fiction*, p.54.

<sup>18</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending; Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Cécile Narjoux, 'Minuit, "la fabrique orchestrale" de "ceux qui n'écrivent pas comme il faut"', in *Existe-t-il un style Minuit?* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2014), p. 11

<sup>20</sup> Hippolyte, *Fuzzy Fiction*, p.54.

relationship between his own writing practices and those of his ‘predecessors’ at Minuit. For Warren Motte, what serves to unite the older generation with the ‘jeunes auteurs de Minuit’, including Toussaint, relates to the ways in which they rely extensively on what Barthes called the ‘hermeneutic code’, that is, ‘any aspect of the text which is intended to elicit and nourish the reader’s curiosity’.<sup>21</sup> Fieke Schoots makes a similar argument in favour of identifying a current of ‘*post-nouveau romanciers*’, placing the work of Toussaint alongside Minuit authors, Jean Échenoz, Marie Redonnet and Patrick Deville, drawing on literary theory by Gérard Genette, Russian narratological formalists and Gilles Deleuze.<sup>22</sup>

Several commentators have associated this heritage with the way in which, in each of Toussaint’s novels, highly significant pieces of information are frequently gestured towards without actually being presented, their significance signalled to the reader while their content remains withheld, as Jean-Benoît Gabriel does when he suggests the crucial place of a kind of implicit ‘*non-dit*’ or ‘*hors-champ*’ in Toussaint’s work, pointing to an interview with *Les Inrockuptibles* in which the author stated, ‘Je partage la théorie de Robbe-Grillet selon laquelle ce qu’il y a de plus fort, dans un roman, c’est ce qui manque.’<sup>23</sup> In the collected volume, *Existe-t-il un style Minuit?*, Hertich argues that Toussaint’s work can be understood in terms of the formal innovations of Robbe-Grillet in particular: ‘On peut relire *Pour un nouveau roman* et quasiment cocher les cases – contre personnages épais, contre les grandes histoires, contre une littérature engagée, contre un psychologie déterminante – en pensant à l’œuvre de Toussaint.’<sup>24</sup> For Yapaudijan-Labat, Toussaint’s *La Salle de bain* is reminiscent of the works of Samuel Beckett, in that it is driven by ‘une

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<sup>21</sup> Warren Motte, *Fiction Now* (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008), p. 179.

<sup>22</sup> Schoots, *Passer en douce à la douane*.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Benoît Gabriel, ‘Fuir l’image avec désinvolture’, *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 47-56 (p. 55).

<sup>24</sup> Hertich, ‘Jean-Philippe Toussaint et Alain Robbe-Grillet sur le double circuit’, p. 133.

voix, à la première personne, celle d'un marginal qui est exclu ou s'exclut de la société et de son jeu, et qui semble mû par la nécessité de raconter' and, more generally, argues that his work can be associated with that of other contemporary writers at the Minuit who share this heritage, particularly in terms of the ironic qualities of their novels, '[d]istance, distanciation qui est peut-être l'un des traits caractéristiques majeurs des romans Minuit d'aujourd'hui'.<sup>25</sup> The personal connection between Toussaint and Beckett is anecdotally recounted in Toussaint's non-fiction work, *L'Urgence et la Patience*,<sup>26</sup> which reveals details of his relationship with Beckett shortly prior to the latter's death, including how Beckett played an instrumental role in bringing Toussaint's work to the attention of *Minuit* editor Jérôme Lindon.

In terms of these distancing effects, Hippolyte has argued, through an incongruous profusion of signifiers and extratextual signs, 'locations, [...] artists, writers, historical figures, [...] commercial brands', Toussaint's texts erode the boundaries between reality and representation and destabilise meaning.<sup>27</sup> Due to this high degree of inter- and extra-textual referentiality in Toussaint's novels, another significant angle of approach has been to interrogate the relationship between his own thematic concerns and writing practices with the artistic practices of the many authors, painters, filmmakers, and artworks referenced throughout his novels. Perhaps the most sustained example of this approach is Sarah Glasco's 2015 work, *Parody and Palimpsest: Intertextuality, Language and the Ludic in the Novels of Jean-Philippe Toussaint*, a central methodological direction of which is drawing

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<sup>25</sup> Yapaudijian-Labat, 'Éric Chevillard et Jean-Philippe Toussaint à l'ombre de Beckett', p. 141.

<sup>26</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *L'Urgence et La Patience* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2012). Hereafter cited in the format '(U&P, x)'.  
<sup>27</sup> Hippolyte, *Fuzzy Fiction*, p. 55.

attention to literary allusions in all of Toussaint's published novels.<sup>28</sup> Many of the intertexts identified by Glasco, such as the final words of *Monsieur*, ('Ce fut tout') echoing those of Flaubert's Frédéric in *L'Éducation sentimentale*, or the protagonist of the same novel, the character 'Monsieur', having echoes of Beckett's Molloy in terms of his general passivity, are highly plausible and illuminating, whereas others are perhaps less so, for example, when she identifies similarities between how Gide's Edouard of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* and Toussaint's narrator of *La Télévision* conceive of the writing process, going so far as to suggest that *La Télévision* becomes 'a parody of Gide's novel', which does not seem to be borne out by the text itself.<sup>29</sup> The strength of Glasco's monograph is in its expository approach, and it provides a solid introduction to several aspects of Toussaint's body of work, particularly with regard to the identification of intertextuality. Essays such as Pascale McGarry's 'La Dame Blanche et le Coeur à la crème'<sup>30</sup> or Ernstpeter Ruhe's 'D'une poignée de vent : La vie de Marie selon Toussaint',<sup>31</sup> which take a narrower focus, the first interrogating the conceptual relationship between Pascal's *Pensées* and philosophical ideas expressed in *La Salle de bain*, the second looking at the relationship between the intertextual allusions to José Luis Borges in *La Vérité sur Marie* and the different ways in which Toussaint and Borges conceptualise literature, provide the opportunity for more in-depth analytical readings of the thematic and philosophical significance of the ways in which the novels deploy their intertextual allusions, rather than just identifying them.

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<sup>28</sup> Glasco, *Parody and Palimpsest*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>30</sup> Pascale McGarry, 'La Dame Blanche et le Coeur à la crème', *Estudios de Lengua y Literatura Francesa*, 8 (1994-1995), 101-114.

<sup>31</sup> Ernstpeter Ruhe, 'D'une poignée de vent: la vie de Marie selon Toussaint', *French Forum*, 36.1 (2011), 95-114.

A key strength of Hippolyte's analysis in *Fuzzy Fiction* is in treating Toussaint's novels as not only 'partial' in the sense of displaying an aesthetic of 'incompleteness' or an epistemological fragmentation, but also in terms of another fundamental kind of partiality that they exhibit, in that each novel is presented as the highly subjective, self-reflexive product of a profoundly singular narrating consciousness, and he crucially identifies the way in which Toussaint's novels 'fundamentally differ from the New Novel, since they also articulate a resurgence of the subject, but a polymorphous one.'<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Piret and Demoulin, in the introduction to their edited journal issue on Toussaint's work, *Jean-Philippe Toussaint*,<sup>33</sup> the first of its kind published in French, highlight, 'l'omniprésence, voire l'omnipotence, du narrateur et la position d'énonciation singulière qu'il adopte',<sup>34</sup> and Mirko Schmidt, the author of *Erzählen und Verschweigen*, also refers to Toussaint's narrators as typically having 'solipsistic tendencies.'<sup>35</sup> A central argument of this thesis is that the relationship between the two kinds of partiality described by Hippolyte are intrinsically bound up with the most significant thematic and philosophical implications of Toussaint's texts. What has perhaps not yet been sufficiently addressed in the analyses of critics who identify a highly perspectival or phenomenological focus in Toussaint's work, is a proper sustained engagement with *how* these texts go about constructing their narrating/narrated subjects, and what functions the textual material of the novels are presented as performing *for* these fictional subjects. There are exceptions to this, with Frank Wagner arguing that Toussaint's novels should be understood not only in terms of the fundamentally subjective perspective they express, what he calls a 'profession de foi perspectiviste',

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<sup>32</sup> Hippolyte, *Fuzzy Fiction*, p. 51.

<sup>33</sup> *Textyles*, 38, (2010).

<sup>34</sup> Laurent Demoulin and Pierre Piret, 'Introduction', *Textyles*, 38, (2010) 7-11 (p. 8).

<sup>35</sup> Schmidt, *Jean-Philippe Toussaint: Erzählen und Verschweigen*, p. 71. My translation.



but also that we should understand the novels themselves as engaged in a form of ‘transfiguration comme mimesis créatrice’.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Ulrike Schneider perceptively notes the way in which the disruptions of narrative convention found in Toussaint’s later novels, when Toussaint employs techniques such as the transgression of narrative mode in *Fuir* and *La Vérité sur Marie*, where at several points the first-person narrating voice appears to be supplanted by an omniscient third-person perspective centred on the series’ deuteragonist, Marie, this is not simply a gratuitous textual effect of disorienting polyphony, but rather serves to signal its own status *as* transgression, one which is imaginatively motivated by the first-person narrator in a way which does ‘not only thematise the absence of the narrator-protagonist *as a character of the story*, but also insists upon his own role as *narrator of the story*, even within this ‘abnormal’ configuration’.<sup>37</sup> Schneider perceptively points out that such effects ‘call the reader’s attention [...] to reflect not only on established narrative conventions or reader expectations, but also, more generally, on the possibilities of fictional literary narrative.’<sup>38</sup>

In Piret and Demoulin’s edited volume, which takes as one of its primary aims the identification of persistent traits in Toussaint’s work, the importance of the relationship between the primacy of first-person experience, on one hand, and, on the other, the thematisation of how fictional resources can be mobilised towards heuristic ends, is engaged with to various extents in articles by Isabelle Ost, Olivier Mignon, and Frank Wagner.<sup>39</sup> Ost points out that Toussaint does not simply document ‘l’écèlement du sujet contemporain’ but also the manner in which the

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<sup>36</sup> Wagner, ‘Monsieur Jean Philippe Toussaint et la notion de vérité’, p. 26

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 149. My translation.

<sup>38</sup> Schneider, ‘Fluchtpunkte des Erzählens. Medialität und Narration in Jean-Philippe Toussaints Roman *Fuir*’, p. 158. My translation.

<sup>39</sup> Frank Wagner, ‘Monsieur Jean Philippe Toussaint et la notion de vérité (pour une poétique perspectiviste)’, *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 25-34.

narrating subject can respond to this, ‘en expérimentant les processus conjoints de structuration *et* de déstructuration.’<sup>40</sup> What these contributions share with the analyses in this thesis is the emphasis they place on the *active* character of the creative work of Toussaint’s fictional narrating personae as being of particular thematic importance. This runs contrary to the views expressed in articles such as Maria Luisa Guerrero Alonso’s ‘Discontinuidad y engaño: en torno a “La Télévision” de Jean-Philippe Toussaint’, which argues that the superficiality associated with watching television, as described by the narrator of *La Télévision*, is ultimately reflected by the ‘anecdotal’ form of the novel as a whole, which she characterises in terms of a certain meaninglessness, ‘seeing for seeing’s sake, walking for walking’s sake, narrating for narration’s sake’.<sup>41</sup> Mignon, conversely, identifies the importance of the different treatments of different categories of image in Toussaint’s work, making reference to the author’s short non-fiction piece, *Le Jour où j’ai fait ma première photo*, which emphasises Toussaint’s stated conviction that ‘le sens réside davantage dans la réalisation des œuvres que dans les œuvres elles-mêmes.’<sup>42</sup> Mignon argues that this concern with the active character of artistic creation is one which is shared by Toussaint’s fictional narrators, particularly those of *L’Appareil-photo* and *La Télévision*, the former becoming increasingly disillusioned with the inability of photographs to capture the dynamism of lived reality, and the latter describing the televisual image as essentially soporific in its sensational immediacy, overwhelming and inhibiting the normal functioning of

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<sup>40</sup> Isabelle Ost, ‘Dispositifs techniques et place du sujet dans quelques romans de Jean-Philippe Toussaint’, *Textyles*, ed. by Laurent Demoulin and Pierre Piret, 38 (2010), 77–87 (p. 87).

<sup>41</sup> María Luisa Guerrero Alonso, ‘Discontinuidad y engaño: en torno a “La Télévision” de Jean-Philippe Toussaint’, in *El texto como encrucijada: estudios franceses y francófonos*, 1 (2004), 607–706 (p. 706) My translation.

<sup>42</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, ‘Le jour où j’ai fait ma première photo’, 2 (2001) <<http://www.bon-a-tirer.com/volume2/jpt.html>> [accessed 10/05/2014], unpaginated.

thought, ‘ses tentatives [...] impitoyablement submergées par de nouvelles vagues, de nouvelles sollicitations.’<sup>43</sup>

A central argument of this thesis will be that Toussaint’s texts can be fruitfully analysed in terms of the ways in which they both thematise and practise what Ricœur calls ‘le pouvoir heuristique déployé par la fiction’.<sup>44</sup> Ricœur writes of the ‘propriété remarquable qu’a le récit de pouvoir se dédoubler en *énonciation* et *énoncé*,’<sup>45</sup> that is to say, the way in which narratives can be critically examined only by examining their narrated events, but also on the level of contemplating the ‘réalité circonstancielle qui entoure l’instance de discours.’<sup>46</sup> Central to the analyses in this thesis will be the argument that Toussaint’s novels, vague and laconic as they often are, and as anonymous as his narrators may appear, can be better understood by taking account of the ways in which they typically suggest a heuristic character to his narrators’ acts of narrative enunciation, understood as acts of (re)interpreting or ‘refiguring’, to use Ricœur’s term, their own lived experience through formal variations of the texts themselves. By examining the ways in which Toussaint’s novels consistently prompt the reader to consider the conditions which surround and inform fictional narrators’ narrating contexts, this thesis also argues that these novels encourage readers to identify factors responsible for motivating the acts of refiguration in which his fictional narrators are engaged, while also thematising the possibilities of narrative form to reshape human experience more generally, in non-fictional contexts. As Marjorie Worthington writes, making the case for restoring the primacy of the flesh-and-blood author in interpretative practices, a text ‘that

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<sup>43</sup> Olivier Mignon, ‘Presque sans lumière’, *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 67–76 (p. 70).

<sup>44</sup> Paul Ricœur, *La Métaphore Vive* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975), p. 315.

<sup>45</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit II: La configuration dans le récit de fiction*, 3 vols (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984), II, p. 115.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Du texte à l’action: Essais d’herméneutique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986), p. 157.

thematizes self-conscious awareness of the process of its own construction unavoidably thematizes the importance of its own constructor'.<sup>47</sup> This is not the intention of this thesis, which rather aims to analyse Toussaint's texts in terms of what Richard Saint-Gelais, in a recent conference presentation called 'the fictionalisation of reflexivity', which he defines as what happens when 'metafiction belongs in the fullest sense to the fictional context in which it appears'.<sup>48</sup>

A clear example of this characteristic tendency can be seen in the first novel analysed in Chapter 1, *La Salle de bain*, in which the use of an unconventional chronological structure, and particularly the way in which this only reveals itself as such to the reader at the very end of the novel, serves to prompt a reconsideration of the causal as well as temporal connections between the events it has presented. While most commentators are in agreement that the novel's structure is thematically important, it has been suggested that the novel represents an impossibility of narrative form to transfigure human life, as in Glasco's suggestion that this indicates that the narrator 'perhaps [...] has learned nothing when we see the similar patterns of his life resurface at the end of the novel'.<sup>49</sup> While this is a valid reading of the novel, the first chapter of this thesis will argue that the particularity and power of Toussaint's novel lies in the way it shows his narrator covertly recasting a 'real', lived episode from its fictional narrator's past as something like a 'counterfactual' or simulated *potential future consequence* of the 'patterns of life' he experiences in the first part of the novel. Throughout the thesis, Toussaint's texts will be repeatedly linked to a particularly Ricœurian understanding of narrative configuration, 'dans

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<sup>47</sup> Marjorie Worthington, 'Done with Mirrors: Restoring the Authority Lost in John Barth's Funhouse', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 47.1 (2001), 114–36.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Saint-Gelais, 'The Fictionalization of Reflexivity', 2015, University of Hamburg. <<https://lecture2go.uni-hamburg.de/veranstaltungen/-/v/18328>> [accessed 27 October 2015].

<sup>49</sup> Glasco, *Parody and Palimpsest*, p. 46.

lequel la fonction heuristique procède de la structure narrative et où la redescription a pour référent l'action elle-même.'<sup>50</sup> The crucial issue will be to show that the way in which Toussaint uses such formally unconventional effects in his novels are not gratuitous, arbitrary or unconventional 'for their own sake', but rather are intrinsic to the thematic and philosophical *enjeux* of his novels.

As mentioned above, Yapaudijan-Labat suggests that the works of Toussaint share with the fiction of his *post-nouveau romancier* peers the manner in which they employ various forms of '[d]istance, distanciation'.<sup>51</sup> Mirko F. Schmidt has suggested that the role of rhetorical distance is of central importance in Toussaint's work, while at the same time cautioning that this does not simply equate to a lack of emotional investment or the gratuitous reproduction of styles and forms, in ways which, as Frederic Jameson describes, are characteristic of 'postmodern' aesthetics.<sup>52</sup> Rather, Schmidt sees this as a body of 'writing which takes aim at tradition, sometimes repeating it, at others treating it ironically, writing which takes its distance, in which seriousness and humour confront each other, where theoretical models are turned into a playground, conscious of its status as writing, without taking its own rulebook too seriously.'<sup>53</sup> This chimes with the argument advanced by Hanna Meretoja who sees a number of the *jeunes auteurs de Minuit*, such as Toussaint, Jean Echenoz and Marie Ndiaye, as not straightforwardly classifiable under the rubric of postmodern heirs engaged in repeating the innovations of the experimentalist *nouveaux romanciers* such as Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute.<sup>54</sup> For Meretoja, an important current in contemporary fiction has emerged

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<sup>50</sup> Ricœur, *Du texte à l'action*, p. 248.

<sup>51</sup> Yapaudijan-Labat, *Éric Chevillard et Jean-Philippe Toussaint à l'ombre de Beckett*, p. 141.

<sup>52</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

<sup>53</sup> Schmidt, *Jean-Philippe Toussaint: Erzählen und Verschweigen*, p. 23. My translation.

<sup>54</sup> Hanna Meretoja, *The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory: The Crisis and Return of Storytelling*

as a response to the postmodern ‘crisis of storytelling’, which embraces the disruptions of generic convention, innovations in narrative form and enunciative experimentation exemplified by this ‘crisis’ and also, like the work of the *nouveaux romanciers*, ‘foregrounds the active nature of both storytelling and reading’, while at the same time rejecting a wholesale embrace of detachment. Meretoja associates this with a ‘metamodern’ perspective, characterised by the impression that ‘storytelling can simultaneously invite readers’ immersion and emotional engagement, draw attention to its own fictionality and reflect on the cognitive, affective and existential significance of the narrative practices in which we are embedded.’<sup>55</sup> In this vein, Jordan Stump, despite focusing on the formal features of *Faire l’amour* and *Fuir* argues that the fact that Toussaint’s novels invite abstract and theoretical levels of interpretation does not in any way preclude the reader from enjoying them “‘just” as ‘beautiful, complicated love stories, [which are] genuinely moving and convincing in their mapping out of the tortured terrain of human affection and disaffection’.<sup>56</sup> Tom McCarthy has similarly noted that in Toussaint’s work we find ‘mediation, time-lapse, speed and death [...] but also straight-up, almost sentimental pathos.’<sup>57</sup>

Hippolyte suggests that Toussaint, in common with the other Minit writers, shares a ‘concern with the construction of identity, with the literary investigating of the self, with probing its questionable homogeneity and exposing the mechanics of its construction’.<sup>58</sup> This, however, could be said of the nouveau roman writers – indeed, Meretoja argues that the novels of what she calls the ‘literary narrative turn’ share with ‘antinarrative fiction and thought the conviction that all processes of

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from *Robbe-Grillet to Tournier* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 220.

<sup>55</sup> Meretoja, *The narrative turn in fiction and theory*, p. 47.

<sup>56</sup> Stump, ‘Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Unfinished’, p. 110.

<sup>57</sup> Tom McCarthy, ‘Stabbing the Olive’, *London Review of Books*, 32.3 (2010), 26–28 (p. 27).

<sup>58</sup> Hippolyte, *Fuzzy Fiction*, p.23.

understanding are fundamentally uncertain and partial,' but at the same time put a greater emphasis on the notion that 'that the fragility and uncertainty of our processes of narrative construction in no way diminish our need for narratives or their power to produce and reshape reality.'<sup>59</sup> These characteristics would appear to accurately describe Toussaint's writing practice; the typical ambiguity of his novels' conclusions should certainly temper any reading which trumpets too loudly the ameliorative potential of narrativity in Toussaint's fiction, however, at the same time, it seems mistaken to say, with Concepción Hermosilla Álvarez, that Toussaint's novels can be characterised as motivated by 'un présent qui n'est plus porté par un passé, qui n'est plus nourri par un vécu',<sup>60</sup> or to see *only* aimlessness in Toussaint's fiction, to suggest, as María Luisa Guerrero Alonso does, that 'the protagonists of Toussaint's literary microcosms *never get anywhere*'.<sup>61</sup>

While it would be perfectly valid to treat the metafictional elements of Toussaint's texts in such a way as to give primacy to their *autofictional* elements,<sup>62</sup> this thesis will argue that readings of these texts can be profoundly enriched by suspending our disbelief just enough to consider the texts as 'fiction that deliberately reflects upon itself',<sup>63</sup> but which is also simultaneously grounded in a fictional, diegetic reality, in which it is (presented as) having been composed, imagined or thought by the narrator of a given text. Let us make it clear what this does not mean. First, there is no suggestion that this is the only appropriate way to read Toussaint's texts. It should also be emphasised that not every fictional text would benefit from

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<sup>59</sup> Meretoja, *The narrative turn in fiction and theory*, p. 214.

<sup>60</sup> Concepción Hermosilla Álvarez, 'L'appareil-photo est-il un roman postmoderne?', *Cuadernos de Filología Francesa*, 6 (1992), 61–81 (p. 81).

<sup>61</sup> Guerrero Alonso, *Discontinuidad y engaño*, p. 698. My translation.

<sup>62</sup> An approach tentatively undertaken by Wagner, 'Monsieur Jean Philippe Toussaint et la notion de vérité', and Emmanuel Boujou, 'Énergie romanesque et reprise d'autorité (Emmanuel Carrère, Noémi Lefebvre, Jean-Philippe Toussaint)', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 54 (2014), 92-105.

<sup>63</sup> Engler, Burnd, 'Metafiction', *The Literary Encyclopaedia* (17 December 2004) <<http://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=715>> [accessed 12 August 2015].

this critical approach; to do so would be to commit the error of artificially ‘naturalising’ texts which do not merit such treatment.

To take an example from contemporary French literature, imagine if we were to treat the character Bruno, of Houellebecq’s *Les Particules élémentaires*,<sup>64</sup> as being responsible for ‘composing’ the novel in which he appears as a character – strictly speaking, there would be nothing logically inconsistent about this conjecture; Bruno is highly educated, deeply embittered about the state of the society he lives in, and feels hopeless and desperate to the point that one could conceivably imagine him as the agent responsible for producing the work in which he appears (whether as a work of writing, or simply of his imagination) as a cathartic act, and in which *his* craving for radical post-human renewal textually manifests itself. However, just what would actually be gained from such an analysis? Not a great deal since, it could be argued, what is thematically at stake in the novel does not hinge on the presence or absence of a particular configuring agent, whether real or fictional. However, the same could not be said of readings which account for characters’ acts of narrative refiguration when applied to a novel like Houellebecq’s *La Possibilité d’une île*,<sup>65</sup> in spite of its polyphonic narrative mode. Large parts of the novel take place in a distant future, in which post-human clones, with a radically different physiology to that of contemporary humans, spend their monastic lives reflecting upon the written testimonies of their many predecessors while also composing their own works, destined in turn for their successors. As Meretoja points out, in the novel this is ‘presented as a process of interpretation that is far from mechanical.’<sup>66</sup> Douglas Morrey notes that, despite the dystopic qualities of the post-human society, from a

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<sup>64</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998).

<sup>65</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d’une île* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).

<sup>66</sup> Meretoja, *The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory*, p. 175.



human perspective, ‘the departure of Daniel<sup>25</sup> in the epilogue testifies to a restlessness within this apparently desireless species and to the ineradicable pull of certain humanist ideals’.<sup>67</sup> Although it might not make sense or be logically consistent to treat the text as a whole as the recorded invention of any particular diegetic character, it can be argued that Houellebecq’s novel nevertheless contains key elements of fictionalised reflexivity, due to its thematisation of the perspective-taking power of literature which appears to be partly responsible for triggering the post-human character’s vestigial desires.

Now consider the novels of Annie Ernaux. Ernaux is perhaps the most successful French-language practitioner of contemporary ‘autofiction’, her texts recurrently thematising the intersections between the lived past, the imperfect processes of remembering and the artifice of narrative in its quasi-fictional and personal as well as institutional, social, and cultural guises, revisiting real events from her own life through highly reflexive, refigurative narrative fictions. To understand Ernaux’s novels only as a form of fictionalised ‘testimony’ would to neglect some of the most potent features of her work; as Simon Kemp suggests, in ‘all of Ernaux’s work [...] the period of narrating is not only the perspective from which the narrated time is viewed, but a focus of attention in its own right.’<sup>68</sup> Just as neglecting the consideration of the narrating context out of which Ernaux’s texts are presented as being composed would risk impoverishing our understanding of them, it would seem a mistake to treat Toussaint’s texts as simple testimony for much the same reason, despite their extra layer of fictionality. As will be argued throughout this thesis, in each of his novels, a pronounced concordance of textual elements

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<sup>67</sup> Douglas Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq: Humanity and Its Aftermath*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 150–151.

<sup>68</sup> Simon Kemp, *French Fiction and the Twenty-First Century: The Return to the Story* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), p. 25

typically supports an understanding of his narrators, in spite of their fictional status, as actively engaged in self-conscious, reflexive processes of narrative configuration and refiguration, with many of the formal and stylistic features of the text mobilised *by them* as unmistakably purposeful configurational acts.

Although this thesis supports the view that Toussaint's texts benefit from as wide a variety of critical approaches as possible, to strip the (fictional) imaginative agency from his narrator characters seems to miss something crucial of the way in which Toussaint presents us with narrators who (appear to) practise something not dissimilar to Ernaux's active works of remembering and reinterpretation. Toussaint's texts are consistently presented as the products of reflexively conscious narrators, always keeping their living present context, their lived past experiences and their future aspirations in mind, even if the reader is offered only fragmented access to them, attempting to understand how that lived experience has shaped who they are now, and how coming to new understandings about those experiences might allow them to modify their understanding of themselves or prepare the ground for different possible action in the future.

## **Thesis Structure**

Chapter 1, *Self in the World*, explores the relationships between subjective agency, personal identity and narrativity in *La Salle de bain*, *L'Appareil-photo* and *La Réticence*. This chapter focuses particularly on tensions between the desire of Toussaint's anonymous first-person narrators to externalise a sense of their acting subjectivity, the threats posed to this subjectivity by the objectifying forces of a destructive temporal reality, and their attempts to reassert their agency through

heuristic acts of narrative reinterpretation. This chapter sets out a number of areas of the methodological approach of the thesis as a whole, arguing that there is a pronounced thematic proximity between these novels and several key aspects of Paul Ricœur's philosophical work, particularly the tension between the subjectively mediated experience of time, or 'phenomenological time', and the processes of universal causality, 'cosmic time'.<sup>69</sup> Drawing particularly on Ricœur's three volumes of *Temps et récit*, it will be argued that many of the aesthetic characteristics of Toussaint's early novels are grounded in the tension between these two conceptions of time, with their narrators simultaneously deploying and self-consciously interrogating the possibilities of narration to mediate between the physical temporality of the external world and the internal experience of temporality for the individual (narrating) subject.

This chapter will argue that Toussaint's novels can be best understood as representing *active* attempts by his (fictional) narrators to rethink their own horizons of actantial possibility, that is, as attempts at narrative mediation, with the narrators 're-reading' and 're-writing' their own lived pasts in order to generate new possibilities for future action. However, the focus will be shifted somewhat in discussing *La Réticence*, arguing that Toussaint's fiction does not simply or unambiguously endorse narrating activity as propitious to thinking around aporetic questions of temporal experience, human agency or identity, but also that his texts reflect the limitations, and even the dangers, of such forms of activity. This is something which Meretoja identifies as a shortcoming in the work of Ricœur and other hermeneutists who, she suggests, are overly optimistic about the transformative

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<sup>69</sup> Paul Ricœur, 'Intellectual Autobiography', in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur*, ed. by Edwin Lewis Hahn (Peru, Illinois: The Library of Living Philosophers, 1995), pp. 3-53.

power and possibilities associated with our narrative capacities, while paying ‘curiously little attention to the way in which we predominantly narrate our lives according to the stereotypical narrative schemes that perpetuate the dominant power structures of contemporary order’.<sup>70</sup> Although the focus will be predominantly placed on personal rather than cultural narrative schemes, it will be argued that a similarly ambivalent reticent attitude towards the possibilities of narrativity to reshape human life is expressed and centrally thematised in *La Réticence*, an ambivalence towards the heuristic ‘power’ of narrativity which will also inform the analyses in the following chapters.

Chapter 2, *The Other in the Self*, analyses Toussaint’s novels, *Monsieur* and *La Télévision*, alongside two films he wrote directed, *La Sévillane* and *La Patinoire*, investigating the role of various forms of ironic discourse in Toussaint’s work, and how these relate to his protagonists’ self-conceptions, particularly in terms of how they relate to other people. It will be argued that *Monsieur*, Toussaint’s only published novel to be written entirely in the third person, represents a radical kind of rhetorical irony, whereby an anonymous narrator mobilises the hollowness and insincerity of the social and commercial world in which its protagonist, the titular ‘Monsieur’, is imbricated, but that this itself constitutes an indirect means of self-examination, allowing him to critically confront the stultifying realities of his life. It will then be argued that the first person *La Télévision* engages in ironic self-examination in a different way, which will be described in terms of ‘affective irony’, treating his past self as an object of humour and light-hearted derision, in a way which is somewhat at odds with his implied ‘réalité circonstancielle’, facing a major bout of writer’s block and the anticipated birth of his second child. Here, it will be

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<sup>70</sup> Meretoja, *The narrative turn in fiction and theory*, pp. 208–209.

argued that the ironic strategies of this narrator ultimately allow the narrator to make metatextual insights about the nature of creative writing itself. One of the two cinematic texts examined in this chapter, *La Sévillane*, is Toussaint's own adaptation of his highly ironic novel, *L'Appareil-photo*, and this provides the opportunity to consider the strategies Toussaint uses to express the 'same' story translated to a different medium. Key to this section will also be the work of Vivien Sobchack and Daniel Frampton, film theorists who articulate the ways in which films construct their own kind of agency or intentionality, in ways which are not directly translatable to and from literature. In the analysis of *La Patinoire*, again written and directed by Toussaint, in this case from his original screenplay, it will be argued that the film centrally thematises this problem of creative intentionality, in the conflict between individual aspiration and the necessity of creative collaboration which cinematic form requires. Also drawing on the work of Bruce Kawin and David Bordwell, this chapter will argue that, just as Toussaint's novels communicate a highly ambivalent attitude with regard to the possibilities of literary narrative form, so the films contain auto-critical and ironically mediated elements, which we could consider as expressing doubts as to the possibility of cinematic form to express the kinds of highly subjective and, crucially, heuristic practices of literature which are characteristic of Toussaint's novels.

Finally, Chapter 3, *Selfhood in the Other*, will focus on the thematic engagement with questions of intersubjectivity in Toussaint's work, analysing the *Marie* tetralogy (*Faire l'amour*, *Fuir*, *La Vérité sur Marie* and *Nue*). Drawing upon a multiply defined concept from aesthetic philosophy, the 'sublime', this chapter will show how Toussaint formally represents the imaginative variations which mobilise developments in the narrator's thought across the four novels of the series. If the

second chapter considers how Toussaint represents intersubjectivity in a social sense, particularly in terms of the workplace, Chapter 3 looks at how this series of novels meditates on more philosophical problems of intersubjectivity, with the narrator textually negotiating something like what Merleau-Ponty described as the universally human condition of a ‘solipsisme vécu qui n’est pas dépassable’,<sup>71</sup> appearing to ‘use’ the formal and stylistic resources of narrative figuration in such a way as to perform successive attempts to work through the reductive judgements he makes about Marie at the outset of the series, passing through successive judgements which will be associated with a number of historical conceptualisations of the ‘sublime’. From his initial frustration, resentment and barely repressed violent urges towards Marie, through his refiguration of the recent past in *Fuir*, to his elaborate attempts to inhabit Marie’s perspective by poetically simulating her subjective experience in *La Vérité sur Marie*, and ultimately to the highly uncertain conclusion of *Nue*, it will be argued that this series thematises the possibilities of narrative in relation to perspective-taking, while at the same time questioning its limits.

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<sup>71</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p.415.

## Chapter 1: The Self in the World

This chapter will examine the relationship between identity, agency and narrativity in Toussaint's work, analysing three of his early novels and drawing on the hermeneutic phenomenology of Paul Ricœur, particularly his theoretical work in the areas of personal identity, narrative production, and reading. The first part of this chapter will introduce key concepts in these areas in order to shed light on the relationship between narrative-production and agency which takes centre-stage in Ricœurian theory, before demonstrating how this kind of hermeneutic focus can offer a valuable framework through which to read Toussaint's *La Salle de bain* (1985),<sup>72</sup> *L'Appareil-photo* (1988)<sup>73</sup> and *La Réticence* (1991).<sup>74</sup>

### Ubiquitous Narrativity and the Threefold Mimesis

Ricœur's thought is epistemologically grounded in the understanding that all human experience is mediated through narrative systems which operate within time. 'Mon hypothèse de base est [...] la suivante: le caractère commun de l'expérience humaine, qui est marqué, articulé, clarifié par l'acte de raconter sous toutes ses formes, c'est son *caractère temporel*.'<sup>75</sup> Following Heidegger, Ricœur argues that it is our fundamentally temporal condition which allows for the very possibility of human experience, but also for the possibilities of self-consciousness and reflexivity: 'j'adopte l'idée directrice d'*Être et Temps* selon laquelle la temporalité constitue non

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<sup>72</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *La Salle de bain*, (Paris: Minuit, 1985)

<sup>73</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *L'Appareil-photo*, (Paris: Minuit, 2007).

<sup>74</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *La Réticence* (Paris: Minuit, 1991)

<sup>75</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Du texte à l'action: Essais d'herméneutique* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), p.14. Ricœur's emphasis.

seulement une caractéristique majeure de l'être que nous sommes, mais celle qui, plus que tout autre, signale le rapport de cet être à l'être en tant qu'être.<sup>76</sup> From the innateness of our 'historical condition' follows the structuring necessity of narrative logic: 'Nous faisons l'histoire et nous faisons de l'histoire parce que nous sommes historiques. Ce "parce que" est celui de la conditionnalité existentielle.'<sup>77</sup> Roland Barthes wrote that 'le récit est présent dans tous les temps, dans tous les lieux, dans toutes les sociétés; le récit commence avec l'histoire même de l'humanité',<sup>78</sup> and it is this sort of ubiquitous narrativity which figures as central to Ricœur's conception of human action, constituting perhaps the most fundamental resource for temporal beings faced with an incomplete understanding about their belonging to an only partially intelligible external reality in which they find themselves.

Bearing this in mind, Ricœur argues that a (pre-)narrative understanding of the world is intrinsic to how we are able to structure our encounter with temporal reality in a logically coherent way. If we understand a plot as the synthesis of heterogeneous events into an imitation of action, serving to render such action intelligible, then 'une compétence préalable est requise: la capacité d'identifier l'action *en général* par ses traits structurels'.<sup>79</sup> This underlying narrative understanding of action corresponds to what Ricœur refers to as 'mimesis1', or *prefiguration*. This is the first stage of what he terms the 'triple mimesis',<sup>80</sup> the way in which he understands how we represent or imitate action. Broadly, this is constituted by *mimesis1*, connoting this kind of universal pre-narrative

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<sup>76</sup> Paul Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), p. 452.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 374.

<sup>78</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits', *Communications*, 8 (1966), 1-27 (p. 1).

<sup>79</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit I: l'intrigue et le récit historique*, 3 Vols (Paris: Seuil, 1983), I, pp. 87-88. Ricœur's emphasis.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.



understanding, *mimesis*<sup>2</sup>, which relates to the *configuration* of these prior events into a narrative text, through authorial processes of ‘emplotment’, and *mimesis*<sup>3</sup>, the point of *refiguration*, in which narrative and practical reality are reintegrated through critical interpretation.

Even at this primary stage of *prefiguration*, causality, for Ricœur, can only be rendered intelligible through a doubly interpretative/narrative act which attributes meaning to events. This principle is maintained and developed when Ricœur moves from looking at how we intuitively understand the narrative logic of action in the real world to analysing the compositional act inherent in the production of narrative texts, *mimesis*<sup>2</sup> or *configuration*. This is paradigmatically the place of fiction, and here Ricœur traces a conceptual heritage to an understanding of the Aristotelian *muthos* set out in the *Poetics* and its notions of the synthesis of heterogeneous elements via ‘la composition réglée d’une fable.’<sup>81</sup> Crucial at this stage is the distinction Ricœur makes between merely seeing a fictional text as a closed object for interpretation and seeing the text in such a way as to take account of how the creative act of its composition is itself the product of interpretative processes, noting that the *muthos* ‘entend plus qu’une structure, au sens statique du mot: une opération [...], à savoir la structuration qui exige que l’on parle de *mise-en-intrigue* plutôt que d’intrigue.’<sup>82</sup>

Towards the end of *La Métaphore vive* (1975),<sup>83</sup> Ricœur foreshadows his later work by suggesting that the place of narrative configuration is, in one sense, strongly analogous to the semantic innovations produced by metaphor. For Ricœur, the key defining power of metaphor is that of communicating meaning, and this makes it part of poetic discourse. As he would later write in *Du texte à l’action*

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<sup>81</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit II: la configuration dans le récit de fiction*, 3 Vols (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984), II, p. 287.

<sup>82</sup> Ricœur, *Du texte à l’action*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>83</sup> Paul Ricœur, *La Métaphore Vive* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975).

(1986), ‘le discours poétique porte au langage des aspects, des qualités, des valeurs de la réalité, qui n’ont pas d’accès au langage directement descriptif.’<sup>84</sup> Metaphor is both produced and understood through a confrontation between multiple meanings of words and an interpretative capacity, or sensitivity, to the contextual uses of this polysemic quality. Correspondingly, with narrative, ‘[a]u-delà de la polysémie de mots dans la conversation, se découvre une polysémie de texte qui invite une lecture plurielle.’<sup>85</sup> Secondly, metaphor is characterised by a semantic tension between its literal ‘is-not’ value and a figurative ‘is like’ value, which allows for the bringing into language of new meaning from ‘cette émergence d’une nouvelle parenté générique entre des idées hétérogènes.’<sup>86</sup> It is this tension, writes Ricœur, ‘qui assure le transfert même de sens et qui donne au langage poétique son caractère de “plus-value” sémantique’.<sup>87</sup> Once again, a similar operation is at work in narrative, with its structured duality of connection/disconnection to and from a literally real referent fulfilling a crucial function in its ability to manipulate reality and produce new modes of understanding and meaning. Narrative, like metaphor, corresponds to ‘une stratégie de discours qui, en préservant et développant la puissance créatrice du langage, préserve et développe le pouvoir *heuristique* déployé par la *fiction*.’<sup>88</sup>

As Ricœur puts it, ‘[l]a littérature est un vaste laboratoire où sont essayés des estimations, des évaluations, des jugements d’approbation et de condamnation’.<sup>89</sup> Both metaphor and narrative are characterised as forms of poetic discourse, but while metaphor operates paradigmatically on the level of the metaphorical phrase, the exemplary narrative unit is the text. Ricœur draws on the terminology of

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<sup>84</sup> Ricœur, *Du texte à l’action*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>87</sup> Ricœur, *La Métaphore vive*, p. 315.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10. Ricœur’s emphasis.

<sup>89</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), p. 139.

structural linguistics in order to consider the limitations of a number of different structuralist and narratological models which sought to reduce narrative discourse to a codified and absolute ‘langue’ of logic, without consideration of the meaning of (or for) the implied subjectivities or discourses present within a given text, belonging to the domain of ‘parole’. At the same time he cautions against the notion of an unmediated, direct empathetic connection between the reader and the author of a text, which he sees as a something of a naive extension of philosophical idealism, for in the narrative text we find various forms of *distanciation* which confer upon it various kinds of autonomy; from the intention of its author, its modes of production and from its initial or ‘intended’ audience.<sup>90</sup> Meaning, writes Ricœur, is ‘*la présupposition la plus générale de toute herméneutique*’<sup>91</sup> and in his threefold mimesis, novel meaning is produced not only in our prefigurative encounters with the world, or in the configurative stage of composition, but also in the subsequent *refigurative* stage, where we find ‘ce pouvoir de "refaire" la réalité et plus précisément, dans le cadre de la fiction narrative, *la réalité praxique*, dans la mesure où le texte vise intentionnellement un horizon de réalité nouvelle.’<sup>92</sup>

It is this return to the horizons of ‘practical reality’ which marks the place of *mimesis*<sup>3</sup> and *refiguration*. This stage is concerned with the way that we find meaning in a text by decontextualizing the configured reality that it represents in order to apply it to our own practical field: ‘Se comprendre, c’est se comprendre *devant le texte* et recevoir de lui les conditions d’un soi autre que le moi qui vient à la lecture.’<sup>93</sup> It is this final stage which renders intelligible the characters of a text as volitional agents similar to flesh and blood readers, allowing real readers to make

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<sup>90</sup> Ricœur, *Du texte à l’action*, p. 35.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62. Ricœur’s emphasis.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27. Ricœur’s emphasis.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36. Ricœur’s emphasis.

sense of the intentional behaviour of fictional characters, the causal networks surrounding their actions, and the projection of their goals and desires. In this refigurative stage the reader must confront the ‘matter of the text’ as a novel expression of their own, existing practical reality: ‘le texte doit pouvoir [...] se décontextualiser de manière à se laisser recontextualiser dans une nouvelle situation: ce que fait précisément l’acte de lire.’<sup>94</sup>

Crucially, it is not only the external, ‘real’ reader who engages in this act of interpretation. This is reflected in Ricœur’s suggestion that the most important questions of his kind of philosophy ‘concernent la possibilité de la *compréhension de soi* comme le sujet des opérations de connaissance, de volition, d’estimation, etc.’<sup>95</sup> Ricœur’s understanding of the ubiquitous narrative *prefiguration* of action allows him to suggest that fictional characters must generally, to some extent, also be considered as narrating agents; readers of their own lives and their own pasts, from which they construct meaning and purpose, and which, in turn, propels them to create the conditions for new possibilities of action in the future. For fictional characters to have meaning for a reader, they must be understood as intentional agents with their *own* sense of meaning and purpose, derived from the interplay of their *own* configurations and refigurations. Whether fictional or flesh and blood, ‘le personnage est lui-même mis en intrigue.’<sup>96</sup>

This concern with the heuristic quality of fiction may explain why Ricœur is attracted to a system of thought such as psychoanalysis, because he sees the psychoanalytic method as premised on the decodifications and recodifications offered by narrativity. For Ricœur, psychoanalysis is interesting in so far as it aims to

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 29. Ricœur’s emphasis.

<sup>96</sup> Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, p. 170.

encourage the analysand to recognise their own sense of agency, through the re-interpretation of existing narrative understanding of the self and in the construction of new, alternative self-narratives. In psychoanalysis, ‘la cure [est] de substituer à ses bribes d’histoires à la fois inintelligibles et insupportables une histoire cohérente et acceptable, dans laquelle l’analysant puisse reconnaître son ipséité.’<sup>97</sup> It is through this refigurative process of ‘working through’ one’s life-narrative in search of personal meaning or purpose that psychoanalysis emphasises the link between personal narrativity and agency. This connection is also at the heart of Ricœur’s philosophy which shares with psychoanalysis the practice of supplanting Cartesian notions of a sovereign *Cogito* by a divided, inquisitive subject who seeks personal meaning. As Ricœur says, his is a reflexive philosophy which aims to explain the mechanisms by which meaning is produced in the mind of a subject: ‘si l’on peut appeler la psychanalyse une *archéologie du sujet*, la tâche d’une philosophie réflexive, après Freud, sera de relier dialectiquement une téléologie à cette archéologie.’<sup>98</sup>

The sense of ‘working-through’, in more a general sense, also provides the basis for Ricœur’s theory of reading, arising from the refigurative stage in his concept of a threefold mimesis. Ricœur argues that when fiction is interpreted without consideration of the role of reading, ‘son statut ontologique reste en suspens’<sup>99</sup> and it is ‘seulement *dans* la lecture que le dynamisme de configuration achève son parcours.’<sup>100</sup> This emphasis on the role of interpretation could also be seen as playing an essential role in Toussaint’s novels. In terms of the ‘real’ reader, as Olivier Mignon has pointed out, these novels are formulated in such a way as to

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<sup>97</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit III: le temps raconté*, 3 Vols (Paris: Seuil, 1985), III, p. 444.

<sup>98</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Le Conflit des interprétations; essais d’herméneutique* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 331.

<sup>99</sup> Ricœur, *Temps et récit III*, p. 286.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p.287.

privilege the reader's interpretative work. In both *L'Appareil-photo* and *La Salle de bain*, the reader is frequently presented with chronological ellipses and epistemological *paralipses*, often suggested by an unfulfilled sort of textual *amorce*, which Genette defined as those 'simples pierres d'attente sans anticipation, même allusive, qui ne trouveront leur signification que plus tard.'<sup>101</sup> The fact that these anticipatory clues frequently go unsubstantiated within the texts suggests a concealment of aspects of the novels' implied continuity, serving to push the reader to 'refigure' the fragmentary events that have taken place within the narrative, in order to make logical connections and to establish meaning. Importantly, such interpretative work belongs not only to the 'real' reader, but also to the first-person narrators of Toussaint's fiction. This echoes Ricœur's understanding of the goal of the psychoanalytic 'working-through' of one's past in order to create the conditions for new understanding, and therefore new possibilities for action. Ricœur sees this exemplified by the Freudian *perlaboration* or *Durcharbeitung*, which allows the subject to perceive themselves as 'constitué à la fois comme lecteur et comme scripteur de sa propre vie.'<sup>102</sup> It will be argued that the most central thematic concern of Toussaint's novels, representing the productive impetus of his narrator-characters, stems from the tension between the struggle for this *compréhension de soi*, that is to say, the recognition of an acting subjectivity through the heuristic tools of narrative configuration and refiguration, and the insurmountable aporias of an indifferent external reality.

Frank Wagner's reading of Toussaint's work echoes, without directly referring to, these Ricœurian concepts, emphasising the profound links between a

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<sup>101</sup> Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972), p.112.

<sup>102</sup> Ricœur, *Temps et récit III*, p. 443.

high degree of auto-hermeneutical engagement on the part of the first-person narrators and the implicitly heuristic quality of the narratives which are meta-textually attributable to the narrators' own compositional acts of narrative configuration. Wagner writes that when the narrator of *La Vérité sur Marie* articulates his desire to express a profoundly novelistic kind of truth ('une vérité proche de l'invention, ou jumelle de mensonge, la vérité idéale') (VM, 166), this can be read almost as the *mode d'emploi* of Toussaint's practice of literature, 'une manière de profession de foi perspectiviste',<sup>103</sup> in which a particular acting phenomenology attempts to establish agency, to take possession of its place in a surrounding reality by remaking that reality through the practices of narration. Wagner sees the narrator-characters as engaged in a form of 'mimesis comme transfiguration créatrice',<sup>104</sup> recalling Ricœur's three mimetic stages: the movement from a *prefigured* imitation of action, through a *configurational* or compositional act, to an interpretative *refiguration* of the possibilities for action. Although Wagner is right to state that this practice of poetically transfiguring the world of action through narrative configuration assumes its fullest expression in Toussaint's later novels, his assertion is perhaps too strong when he suggests that in the earlier works, 's'il advenait que soient dialectisés les rapports de la pensée et de l'expression, c'était presque toujours sur un mode déceptif, concluant à l'irréductibilité du flux mental à la formulation langagière'.<sup>105</sup> While there is, indeed, a strong focus on the aporetics of linguistically articulating phenomenological experience in both *L'Appareil-photo* and *La Salle de bain*, we will argue that both novels are also profoundly engaged in remaking the *practical* horizons of their narrators, that is, in recognising and

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<sup>103</sup> Frank Wagner, 'Monsieur Jean Philippe Toussaint et la notion de vérité (pour une poétique perspectiviste)', *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 25-34 (p. 31).

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

remaking the self through an experience of the creative agency of narration.

### **Mêmeté and ipséité**

To explore the functioning of these fictional acts of auto-hermeneutics, we must first say something about Paul Ricœur's theoretical work on personal identity, once more constructed according to an *identity-difference* pair, comprised of the *idem* and the *ipse*, which he also refers to variously as the Same and Self-Constancy, and as sameness (*mêmeté*) and selfhood (*ipséité*).<sup>106</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the terms 'sameness' and 'selfhood' (*mêmeté* and *ipséité*) will be used, since these seem the most appropriate for the purposes of exploring the link between personal identity and agency.

Central to Ricœur's argument is a critique of the traditional opposition within analytic philosophy between the substance metaphysics of 'numerical identity' ('qui fait que connaître est reconnaître: la même chose, *n* fois')<sup>107</sup> and 'qualitative identity' ('autrement dit la ressemblance extrême').<sup>108</sup> This dialectic pair may be all very well as far as discussing the persistence of properties or aspects in a given object.

However, Ricœur considers that in naively applying these twin notions to the problem of diachronic *personal* identity we are essentially committing a category error,<sup>109</sup> and that to describe the functioning of identity in conscious, acting subjects using these terms of substance identity is seriously lacking, at least until something

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<sup>106</sup> Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, p. 140.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>109</sup> Perhaps pertinent then, in terms of the everyday understanding of a diachronic self, that Ricœur expresses admiration for Turbayne's notion that the semantic innovation of metaphor can take the form of a 'planned category error' which seeks to 'présenter les faits d'une catégorie dans les idiomes appropriés à une autre.' Ricœur, *La Métaphore vive*, p. 250.



further is added to the picture. Ricœur believes that in order to understand personal identity, we must first make the unusual philosophical move of grouping together these two notions, that of the absolutely identical (an individual's unchanging genetic makeup, for example) and the manifestly identical (extreme resemblance over time, even without absolute substance identity, as in Plutarch's 'Ship of Theseus'<sup>110</sup> thought experiment), under the category of *mêmeté*, or sameness.

Ricœur establishes this link by suggesting that sameness corresponds to the recognisability of something, whether essentially identical or analogous, which has been *characterised* by its permanence in time. The presence (but crucially *not* the emergence, as we will see) of an acquired narrative, an image of the same traits or appearances which recognisably persist and constitute some kind of unbroken continuity, can incorporate both numerical identity and qualitative identity within a constellation of identifiable 'habits', which taken together reveal a sense of 'character'. This sense of character is strongly reminiscent of Daniel Dennett's description of the self as an abstract concept, a narrative fiction which is analogous to a centre of gravity,<sup>111</sup> in that it has no concrete existence in and of itself, but would allow an external observer to make reliable predictions about its behaviour.

Similarly, Ricœur argues that within the individual, the character of sameness is associated with the aspect of personal identity rooted in the externally recognisable, as a kind of presented image or repeating story which he describes as 'l'ensemble des marques distinctives qui permettent de réidentifier un individu humain comme étant le même.'<sup>112</sup> Just as with the interpretative act of *refiguration*,

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<sup>110</sup> For a discussion of Plutarch's 'Ship of Theseus' see David Sedley, 'The Stoic Criterion of Identity', *Phronesis*, 27 (1982), 255-275.

<sup>111</sup> Daniel Dennett, 'The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity', in *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*, ed. by P. Cole F. Kessel, D. Johnson (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1992).

<sup>112</sup> Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, p. 144.

this does not only take place on the external level, that of the recognition of ‘character’ by other, secondary agents, but also on an auto-hermeneutic level: that of an internally constructed notion of the self-as-continuity; the self as presented to itself. The English word ‘character’ conceals the duality of this process; in sameness identity, we find the more or less coherent narrative in which a given conscious being recognises certain traits of character (*caractère*), which then give way to the formation of another kind of character (*personnage*) - (‘le personnage est lui-même mis en intrigue’).<sup>113</sup> As we will see, this is the passage from a relatively objective referent, as the sum of predictable dispositions, to a phenomenological subject capable of action. To treat this latter notion of character, *personnage*, we must consider how these narrative constellations of sameness identity arise in the first place. This is the crux of the distinction which Ricœur draws between *mêmeté* and *ipséité*, both of which are discernible in the notion of character and in its constitutive habits. This character-of-habits is described as ‘le soi sous les apparences de la mêmeté’,<sup>114</sup> but if we wish to bring to light where this sameness originated, Ricœur tells us that we must consider the ‘double valence d’habitude en train d’être, comme on dit, et d’habitude déjà acquise.’<sup>115</sup> If character is a kind of narrative comprised of habits then, by extension, this narrative of the idemic self, the acquired *caractère* of *mêmeté*, must be the product of a preceding, *acquiring* process performed by a *personnage*, which Ricœur calls *ipséité*, or selfhood.

Sameness identity presents itself as a configured image of the past, as a plot of sorts. Selfhood identity is involved in the preceding, configurational process of that emplotment, which is also a *refigurative* act because it operates by remaking

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

prior conceptions of sameness identity. Whereas sameness is rooted in the recognition of a progressively converging idea of a self-as-object, selfhood can be characterised by a different kind of recognition; that of a possibility for a kind of creative, narrative action which creates the impression of a self-as-subject. Joan McCarthy questions Ricœur's shifting terminology here since in *Temps et récit* he seems to imply that *ipse* identity and 'narrative identity' are equivalent values, while in *Soi-même comme un autre* he suggests that the place of narrative identity is to act as a mediator between the *idem* and *ipse* components of personal identity.<sup>116</sup>

Although McCarthy opts to follow the earlier *ipse*-narrative equivalence, it could be more fruitful to go along with Ricœur's terminological redefinition, to see both sameness and selfhood as poles of narrative identity; the former as *narrated-identity*, the later as *narrating-identity*. In making narrativity the locus of personal identity, Ricœur presents the *idem* of sameness as evoking the externally identifiable 'What' traits of identity, the accumulated traits of a predictable character (Ricœur also uses the term 'sedimentation' here), whereas the *ipse* of selfhood suggests the result of narrative processes through which an individual consciousness posits and realises an acting 'Who',<sup>117</sup> a being imbued with agency. Selfhood is oriented towards the future, towards the horizon of anticipation and a sense of becoming which Ricœur associates with an uncovering of meaning, purpose, or direction, corresponding to the (ontologically perspectival) impression of being capable of voluntary action, of free will.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Joan McCarthy, *Dennett and Ricœur on the Narrative Self* (Virginia: Humanity Books, 2007), p. 143.

<sup>117</sup> Ricœur also extends this idea to the field of ethics by linking selfhood to 'keeping promises', in the mode of externalising the self as a volitional agent. He writes that selfhood 'est pour la personne la manière telle de se comporter qu'autrui peut compter sur elle. Parce que quelqu'un compte sur moi, je suis comptable de mes actions devant un autre.' Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, p. 195.

<sup>118</sup> This is the territory of what Joseph Levine termed the 'explanatory gap', that is, the difficulty of resolving the 'hard problem' of conscious experience. Joseph Levine, 'Materialism and qualia: The explanatory gap', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 64 (1983). Like Levine, Ricœur rejects the

Whereas sameness is conceived as the apparently static image of emplotted dispositions, selfhood is an actantial, creative process which rests ‘sur une structure temporelle conforme au modèle d’identité dynamique issue de la composition poétique d’un texte narratif.’<sup>119</sup> Much in the way of a critical reader who reinterprets a narrative text to find new meaning, the agency of selfhood is derived from an ability to refigure the networks of significance in past experiences in order to reach different possible conclusions, which then serve to guide future action. In the process of ‘reading’ the narrativised past, the reflective, critical reader of the self can explore different possibilities for action through a teleological reconfiguration which supplants the ‘recognisable continuity’ arising from sameness with a sense of narrative agency borne out of selfhood. It is through this Ricœurian lens that this reading of Toussaint’s *L’Appareil-photo* will focus on its narrator’s attempts to capture an image of his *ipseitic* identity, capable of expressing the sense of himself an acting subject. With *La Salle de bain* the focus will be particularly on the structural organisation of the novel which, it will be suggested, reflects the same thematic concern: that of the narrator’s desire to realise himself as an agent, to remake reality into one he can meaningfully inhabit.

### **Fictive experiences of time in *La Salle de bain* and *L’Appareil-photo***

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ontology of Cartesian dualism, but he insists he is a ‘semantic dualist’, privileging the subjective experience of meaning in his understanding of human action. Jean-Pierre Changeux and Paul Ricœur, *Ce qui nous fait penser : la nature et la règle* (Paris: Editions Odile Jacob, 1998). He argues that such subjective experience is not the place of a transparent, sovereign subject, but rather one of simultaneous belonging to the intentional and physical orders, premised on ‘attestation’, or ‘l’assurance d’être soi-même agissant et souffrant.’ Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, p. 35. As I have argued elsewhere, several (but not all) aspects of Ricœur’s philosophy of mind are broadly compatible with contemporary neuroscience. Will Crichton, ‘The philosopher’s generosity and its limits: Paul Ricœur and Neurophilosophy’, *Concilium*, 362, ‘Theology, Anthropology and Neuroscience’ (2015), 27-38.

<sup>119</sup> Ricœur, *Temps et récit III*, p. 443.

Given that these novels explore questions of agency in relation to the human experience of time, it is important to note that the presentation of temporality in each novel is rather different. Although both novels do explore the relationship between temporality, narrativity and agency, Ricœur's suggestion that each fictional work provides its own '*expérience fictive du temps* [qui est] projetée par la conjonction/disjonction entre temps mis à raconter et temps raconté'<sup>120</sup> and J. Hillis Miller's cautionary words that 'each literary work has a different time sense – even those by the same author'<sup>121</sup> could not be more apposite here. While *La Salle de bain* deals with an individual's desperate attempt to escape from a damaging, threatening experience of temporality in which he, like all of us, is inescapably implicated, *L'Appareil-photo* portrays an individual who seems relatively at peace with the coursing of time, savouring his immersion in the ephemeral pleasures of the present moment. In *La Salle de bain*, we find an obsession with fixity and the desire to impose order on the world, the difficulty of doing so ultimately serving to compound an increasingly serious crisis of anxiety for the powerless narrator, whereas in *L'Appareil-photo* we see the narrator's determined passivity, choosing to go with the flow (of time), dispensing with any need to rigidly order his reality, while reporting his lightly farcical interactions with secondary characters. Although these are perhaps the most salient features of the novels' different time senses, to reduce *L'Appareil-photo* to a tale of immersion in time, or *La Salle de bain* to a tale of resisting time, would be an oversimplification.

In both novels, it is clear that the desire of submitting oneself to the present

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<sup>120</sup> Ricœur, *Temps et récit II*, p. 143.

<sup>121</sup> J. Hillis Miller, 'Time in Literature', *Daedalus*, 132 (2003), 86-97 (p. 87).

instant remains in constant tension with that of resisting the flow of what Ricœur has called ‘physical, cosmological’<sup>122</sup> time. This first conception of time is the time of the world: a universally unfolding *chronology-as-causality* which is unaffected by subjective mediation, a force of entropic movement which only becomes perceptible to the subject through its second-order effects. The subject’s existence takes place both ‘inside’ this time (the degeneration of cells, the physical laws seen to be operating within, or *as*, time acting upon the subject), and ‘outside’ it (the necessarily partial perception of these forces, the mediated temporal experience of a (differently) temporal existence). The inaccessible ‘outside’ of time understood in the physical sense could also be seen as the essential ‘inside’ of a second kind of time: this is the place of the individual’s interior temporal experience, originating in the junctures of memory, perception and anticipation and expressed in poetic or discursive representations of this experience. Ricœur calls this latter conception of time ‘the psychological, phenomenological approach’<sup>123</sup> which, although inextricably connected to the passage of physical time, operates on a different level: the level of the phenomenological subject ordering heterogeneous temporal experience via the agency of narrative configuration.

As Jean-François Lyotard puts it, ‘[l]e temps de l’atome, le temps du dieu, ne sont pas ce que nous (l’esprit qui synthétise, mais pas tout) expérimentons comme temporalité.’<sup>124</sup> The two approaches (on the one hand, subordinating lived experience to physical time, and on the other, subordinating physical time to phenomenological ordering) are well reflected in a key passage of *La Salle de bain*, as the narrator tells us of ‘deux manières de regarder tomber la pluie, chez soi,

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<sup>122</sup> Paul Ricœur, ‘Intellectual Autobiography’, in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur*, ed. by Edwin Lewis Hahn (Peru, Illinois: The Library of Living Philosophers, 1995), pp. 3-53 (p. 41).

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *L’Inhumain: Causeries sur le temps* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1988), p. 172.

derrière une vitre' (SB, 35). From the observational space of apparent atemporal safety, one can watch either the downward motion of raindrops past a fixed space in the sky, or alternatively choose to let one's gaze follow the individual droplets as they fall to hit the ground. The former, which is 'reposante pour l'esprit', may represent the movement of objects in time but it provides 'aucune idée de la finalité du mouvement' (SB, 36), whereas the latter brings home to the narrator the fact that 'le mouvement, aussi fulgurant soit-il en apparence, tend essentiellement vers l'immobilité, et qu'en conséquence, aussi lent peut-il parfois sembler, entraîne continûment les corps vers la mort, qui est immobilité.' (SB, 36)

In framing a fixed piece of sky the observer's attention is directed towards the present instant, artificially dispensing with the raindrops' origin point or their final destination. This suggests a certain degree of subordination of physical time to the directed, attentive focus on the impression of a present instant within phenomenological time. Conversely, following the trajectory of an individual raindrop, the subject's gaze and, correspondingly, their attentive resources, are subordinated to an event in physical time.

As Christophe Meurée has suggested, the conflicted nature of this relationship with time is thematically present throughout all of Toussaint's work: 'Depuis les premières oeuvres [...] les personnages toussanctiens n'ont eu de cesse de maintenir un rapport paradoxal au temps : d'une part, ils le fuient comme la peste et d'autre part, ils prennent plaisir à faire corps avec son cours.'<sup>125</sup> While it will be suggested that the presentation of the problematics of agency in these novels confronts the aporias of temporality from different sides and that, furthermore, these

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<sup>125</sup> Christophe Meurée, 'Temps de la résistance: résistance au temps', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 50 (2010), 83-98 (p. 84).

approaches roughly parallel the two images of rain observation, we must not forget, with *Meurée*, that instances of each approach occur in each novel.

In *La Salle de bain*, the desire to escape the entropic damage of physical time will lead to an awareness of the impossibility of doing so, at least according to the ways we see the narrator attempting within the text (hiding, flight, deferral). Correspondingly, this leads to a moment of configurational praxis by the narrator attempting to re-establish agency: the metatextual manipulation of the past in order to create a *refiguration* of the horizons of possibility, allowing new action to be undertaken. With *L'Appareil-photo*, it will be argued that while the narrator's passive submission to the present moment, which Pierre Piret has compared to the self-effacing imperative within Zen Buddhism ('Il s'agit pour le sujet de lâcher prise, de se déprendre de soi, de ses intentions, de ses illusions')<sup>126</sup>, can be considered significant for both aesthetic and thematic considerations in the novel, it will also be suggested that the novel's fictive experience of time results from the tension between this effacement of self and the gradual resurfacing of a desire for phenomenological ordering, in the context of the narrator's search to express personal identity.

### ***La Salle de bain***

In *La Salle de bain*, the protagonist isolates himself in enclosed spaces (the titular bathroom, a hotel room, a hospital ward), as he immediately informs us: 'Lorsque j'ai commencé à passer mes après-midi dans la salle de bain, je ne comptais pas m'y installer' (SB, 11). From these spaces, which are periodically abandoned, the narrator elaborates an aesthetic which is heavily informed by the physical effects of a harmful

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<sup>126</sup> Pierre Piret, 'Portrait de l'artiste en Oriental', *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 35-56 (p. 39).



temporality, with an unrelenting focus on images of entropic movement; flowing water, melting ice cream, cracking walls, daydreams about the infinitesimally slow sinking of the city of Venice. The use of the imagery of both static and flowing water to evoke the spatial, physical effects of a threatening temporality is repeated throughout *La Salle de bain*. During the passage on rain observation, the narrator plays upon the double meaning of the French *temps* to convey the effect this has upon him: '[j']avais eu soudain peur du mauvais temps, alors que c'était l'écoulement même du temps, une fois de plus, qui m'avait horrifié' (SB, 31). Peering out from behind the apparent safety of his window, the narrator imagines the people in the street as if in an aquarium slowly filled up by the rain. Given that it has been explicitly associated with the flow of time, the image of the slowly-filling aquarium takes on a double metaphorical value.

On the one hand, it is suggestive of the narrator contemplating the universal ephemerality and inevitable finitude of human life. On the other, it seems somehow suspect, backwards even, since it is the narrator who inhabits a confined, enclosed space, looking out from behind his glass wall at people living their lives, which ends up ironically reinforcing the fact that his attempts to retreat from reality may be actively contributing to his feelings of powerlessness. Although, hiding in his bathroom, the narrator seems determined to see his own body as protected, impervious to the ravages of time ('mon visage ne laissait rien paraître. Jamais.') (SB, 12) or may appear to have established some benevolent relationship with temporality, as the master of his surroundings ('je coulais là des heures agréables, méditant dans la baignoire') (SB, 11), its entropic power can still be acutely perceived within such spaces which are frequently contaminated by the imagery of decay, such as the cracking bathroom wall where 'des cratères çà et là trouaient la

peinture terne. Une fissure semblait gagner du terrain' (SB, 12).

Despite the narrator's various attempts to attenuate painful temporal experience, to escape or retreat from it by mediating his contact with the external reality bearing the signs of its forces, he remains inescapably the object of these forces. Given the recurrent spatialisation of time as water, the ironic significance of his chosen 'hiding places' (a bathtub, a hotel room in Venice) only serves to highlight this inescapability, an unavoidable immersion in time, although as Warren Motte rightly points out, 'unlike Heraclitus's river, those bodies of water are static (or apparently so), and that is what attracts the narrator to them'.<sup>127</sup> The image of the filling aquarium is brought to mind later in the narration (although, is revealed at the novel's end, it occurs chronologically beforehand) when, in a hotel bathroom in Venice, the narrator looks in the mirror at his stubble-darkened chin as tap-water runs onto his scarf, implicating his own body in this coursing of time which he seeks to elude at any cost. This narrator who has sought to resist time's effects becomes, in doing so, ever more aware of the ephemeral quality of his own existence, as if a raindrop hurtling towards climactic nothingness, the ever-present awareness of a terrifying future (death, or the end of the text?).

The desire to impose the fixity of meaning onto reality, and the difficulty of doing so, appears to occupy a central place in the narrator's concerns, as he attempts to shut out the threatening change wrought by temporal experience, to resist the heterogeneous flux of time. This is reflected in a number of geometrical references, including a seemingly arbitrary numbering of the novel's paragraphs, its wry dedication to Pythagoras' theorem and the titling of a middle, analeptic section

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<sup>127</sup> Warren Motte, *Small Worlds: Minimalism in Contemporary French Literature* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 76.

taking place in Venice, as ‘hypoténuse’. The sense of incongruity between such geometrical fixity and the flux of physical time encourages us to see the narrator’s feeble attempts to impose order on the chaos of existence as fated ultimately to fall apart. Reinforced by the fact that, at several points, the narrator makes explicit reference to his unease about the destructive effects of time, we may also be inclined to see the pervasive imagery of threatening temporality as the poetic externalisation of these anxieties. Sylvie Loignon suggests that there is a somewhat circular, double function of the imagery of decay and desolation in Toussaint’s novels, representing both cause and effect. Perceiving such images draws the first-person narrators’ focus to the entropic force which ‘vient affleurer le délabrement de toute chose par l’effet du temps’<sup>128</sup>, often serving to compound a melancholic state, but within the text these images also seem to figure as the products of a preceding, narrating melancholy, indicating their status as diegetic metaphors (‘diégétiques en ce sens que leur “véhicule” est emprunté de la diégèse’)<sup>129</sup> which ‘matérialisent la souffrance qui envahit le narrateur tout au long du récit.’<sup>130</sup>

Walking the streets of Venice, the narrator tears a poster from the wall which ‘annonçait sobrement la mort d’un jeune homme de vingt-trois ans’ (SB, 79), its horrific representational value serving as a reminder that younger men than he have already succumbed to mortal time. So acute is his desire to elude these processes, the narrator states his age more than once as ‘vingt-sept ans, bientôt vingt-neuf’ (SB, 15), an almost petulant refusal to allow the incorporation of his lived experience into a fixed historical narrative grounded in physical time, which Ricœur has called ‘calendar time’. ‘Telle est la position médiane du temps calendaire: il cosmologise le

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<sup>128</sup> Sylvie Loignon, ‘Comment finir? La Mélancolie de Jean-Philippe Toussaint’, *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 88-98 (p. 92).

<sup>129</sup> Genette, *Figures III*, p. 48.

<sup>130</sup> Loignon, ‘Comment finir? La Mélancolie de Jean-Philippe Toussaint’, p. 92.

temps vécu, il humanise le temps cosmique.’<sup>131</sup> It is almost as if the narrator’s phenomenological experience of time is ‘running faster’ than the physical passage of time and this unwillingness to reconcile lived time and physical time may also explain the general absence of specific markers of the passage of time in the novel.<sup>132</sup> Conversely, one of the more stabilising forces in the narrator’s life seems to be the figure of his girlfriend, Edmondsson. Although this relationship becomes (or has perhaps always been) extremely conflicted, she represents one of the poles of stability which constitutes his being-in-the-world, a cornerstone of his narrative identity written in the affective link to the Other. Instances in which the narrator is separated from this affective ‘anchor’ for an extended period of time are characterised by impressions of destabilisation, of a kind of ontological floundering. In the lobby of the Venetian hotel room, the narrator spends longer and longer each day on the phone with Edmondsson, until she finally visits him (although the reader is kept in the dark with regards to the content of these calls). The return to Paris signalled by the title of the novel’s final section is not that of the narrator, but that of Edmondsson, and this separation from the loved-being seems to play a major role in the increased difficulty with which the narrator struggles to integrate his past life into his present, prompting him to ask the question, ‘Que faisais-je ici?’ (SB, 116).<sup>133</sup>

When the (apparently Belgian, as indicated by his green passport and the singular ‘bain’ in his references to the bathroom) narrator does return, a brittle encounter with the lady at the checkout desk in Orly, who tells him, ‘n’oubliez pas

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<sup>131</sup> Ricœur, *Du texte à l’action*, p. 297.

<sup>132</sup> Alternatively, the narrator’s uncannily ‘doubled’ age could be interpreted as a marker of the temporal doubling on account of a revisiting of the past, whereby the ‘narrating’ narrator can be almost 29 and the ‘narrated’ narrator just 27, simultaneously. Chapter 3 will include an in depth investigation of how Toussaint uses this doubling effect in *Fuir*, however, as we will see below, it is also highly relevant to the readings in of the three texts under consideration here.

<sup>133</sup> This paragraph contains elements from my MA thesis.

que vous êtes à l'étranger, ici' (SB, 120), highlights this impression of floundering: 'Je traînai dans les couloirs de l'aéroport, m'assis dans une salle d'attente, ne savais pas quoi faire.' (SB, 121) Only a phone call to Edmondsson will allow him to return to his previous life, to restore to him a degree of agency during his crisis of instability. The narrator also finds comfort in images such as his newly painted kitchen or in a new pair of socks; these appear to have an opposite, soothing effect upon him, representing unworn surfaces which have yet to suffer at the hands of an aggressive temporality. We see this when the narrator, emerging from the haven of his Venetian hotel room to buy new clothes, lingers over the fresh and folded fabrics which have not yet been polluted by the emanations of the human body, not yet implicated in the human experience of time (unworn, in both senses): 'je m'attardais devant les vêtements, choisissais des chemises, touchais la laine des pull-overs.' (SB, 59) He describes the pleasure of putting on new items of clothing: 'La laine était douce, sentait bon. Je mis les chaussettes propres, le caleçon neuf. Je me sentais bien.' (SB, 54)

As with the cracking walls of the narrator's bathroom, however, the entropic effects of time can only be temporarily attenuated: a few pages later he is reluctantly forced back out into the world when his 'caleçon neuf devenait sale', the fabrics in which he wraps himself once again contaminated by a human body subjected to physical time. Jean-Louis Hippolyte has suggested that such representations of bodily contamination, particularly in terms of chronic pain, are an important feature of Toussaint's novels, serving to connect corporeality to the damaging effects of temporality. He notes that 'it is not insignificant that [...] being (as in "existing") and being sick (as in "beginning to die") should always coexist here'<sup>134</sup> – sinus problems

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<sup>134</sup> Jean-Louis Hippolyte, *Fuzzy fiction* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), p. 36.

in *La Salle de bain*, back problems in *L'Appareil-photo* and the 'small bouts of tachycardia'<sup>135</sup> experienced by the narrator of *La Réticence*. These all seem to represent a kind of sensory duration which has taken on a threatening (finite) edge, as a reminder of the mortal effects of time acting upon the bodies of these narrators, simultaneously reifying their existence and drawing them towards death. As the narrator of *La Salle de bain* remarks at one point, 'mes yeux brûlaient, ébouillantés. Il faisait noir, j'avais mal. La souffrance était l'ultime assurance de mon existence, la seule' (SB, 95).<sup>136</sup>

The narrator's almost physical revulsion at the idea of ontological or temporal mutability is shown in the language of mutilation that he employs to evoke the discourse of the Polish painter in his kitchen discussing the octopuses he has purchased at a meat market, making reference to the Polish artist, Soutine, whose paintings seem to radiate a sense of ontological fluidity and dissolution: 'Avec un fin sourire, citant Soutine, il parlait de viande crue, de sang, de mouches, cervelles, tripes, boyaux, abats entassés regroupés dans des caisses.' (SB, 24) Rejecting such troubling fluidity, the narrator instead seeks 'un aperçu de la perfection. Un Mondrian' (SB, 15) in the image of a Dame Blanche (hot chocolate sauce on vanilla ice-cream), longing for the pure and impossibly atemporal immobility of Mondrian's intersecting lines. 'Déséquilibre et rigueur, exactitude.' (SB, 15) This impossibility is testified to later when, in Venice, he despairingly watches a real Dame Blanche melt before his eyes:

Je regardais le mouvement, immobile [...] Je ne bougeais pas. Les mains

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> This characterisation of physical pain resembles that of Levinas, who described 'une impossibilité de se détacher de l'instant de l'existence [, ...] l'irrémissibilité même de l'être.' Emmanuel Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983), p. 55.

figées sur la table, j’essayais de toutes mes forces de garder l’immobilité, de la retenir, mais je sais bien que, sur mon corps aussi, le mouvement s’écoulait. (SB, 80)

In what is perhaps a punning reference to what the Belgian critic, Georges Poulet, called the ‘création humaine, *trop humaine*’ of a phenomenological experience of time, the narrator, while contemplating the immanence of his imagined (immobile) Dame Blanche, tells us that, ‘Le poulet, malgré toute la tendresse qui je lui voue, ne soutient pas la comparaison.’ (SB, 80) If we recall how Ricœur suggests that to experience temporality is to engage in a compositional ‘synthèse de l’hétérogène’,<sup>137</sup> we should see the compatibility with Poulet’s statement that, ‘l’acte humain par lequel l’esprit se fait présent à quelque groupe d’images à la fois locales et temporelles, a bien souvent le caractère d’une création incomplète, incongrue comme de choses qui, dit Supervielle, “ne sont pas faites pour aller ensemble”’.<sup>138</sup> Immediately after this reflection on the Dame Blanche comes a moment in which the narrator becomes aware that such an attempt to actually *live* this kind of frozen, dynamic atemporality, is impossible. He understands that he must take action, to allow himself to be implicated in world-time, when he expresses, in the form of an unfinished sentence, that he knows that he must do *something*:

Je devais prendre un risque, disais-je les yeux baissées, en caressant l’émail de la baignoire, le risque de compromettre la quiétude de ma vie abstraite pour.

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<sup>137</sup> Ricœur, *Temps et récit I*, p. 202.

<sup>138</sup> Georges Poulet, *Études sur le temps humain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1949): p. 47.

Je ne terminai pas ma phrase. (SB, 15)

The refusal to articulate the nature of this ‘risk’ may imply that the idea of integrating any projected future action into his present may just be too terrifying a prospect for the narrator, but it also draws our attention to the fact that the narration is not being entirely candid. Driven by a growing awareness of the impossibility of actually *living* the kind of immobility he seeks in a Dame-Blanche or a Mondrian painting, the following paragraph reads simply, ‘Le lendemain, je sortis de la salle de bain.’ (SB, 16) Crucially, this passage will be repeated almost *verbatim* at the end of the novel, with the addition of a single letter ‘a’ to transform the past-historic into the past-imperfect; *je sortis* becomes *je sortais*.

However, following this first iteration of the passage, it soon becomes clear that the narrator has abandoned one hermetic space in order to occupy another: the only time he actually leaves the apartment within the diegesis will eventually turn out to have taken place in an analepsis, of which the *portée* reaches beyond the beginning of the narrative. Irritated by an intrusion into his kitchen, ‘troublé dans mes déambulations par la présence des deux Polonais qui ne quittaient pas la cuisine’ (SB, 16), he lets his mind wander into a kind of imagined prolepsis of an evening at the Austrian embassy (the invitation which he has received to this event goes unanswered within the narrative and he suggests that he may have been contacted in error), ‘Ne connaissant ni Autrichiens ni diplomates, je dis qu’il s’agissait d’une erreur, probablement.’ (SB, 15) In the imagined course of events the evening is dull and uneventful, and the narrator goes as far as to imagine himself having to lie to his girlfriend about how well it went – ‘l’ambassadeur d’Autriche, homme austère,



mesuré, érudit, m'avait avoué être très impressionné par la finesse de mes raisonnements, frappé par l'implacabilité de ma logique et enfin, très sincèrement, ébloui par ma beauté.' (SB, 29) As with the lack of candour implied by the abruptly unfinished sentence, this tall tale cannot help but draw our attention to the degree of compositional artifice, the unreliability, even a mendaciousness, inherent in the way that our narrator is willing to (re)configure the narrative past (in this case in the form of an imagined future-anterior). Jean-Louis Hippolyte has suggested that the various evocations of artifice are a key feature in the construction of Toussaint's aesthetic, pointing out that these effects are achieved through a number of what he calls 'strategies of fuzzification.'<sup>139</sup> Central among these is the predominance of the *non-lieu* in Toussaint's texts, those spaces empty of human signification, described by Augé: 'un espace qui ne peut se définir ni comme identitaire, ni comme relationnel, ni comme historique définira un non-lieu.'<sup>140</sup> In *La Salle de bain*, it is significant that several of the spaces chosen by the narrator in which to hide from the effects of time and constitute some kind of stable, immutable self are themselves examples of such *non-lieux*, for example, in the form of a hotel room or that of hospital ward, the transitory aspect of human relations to these spaces seeming to further emphasise the impossibility of any attempt to exist atemporally within them.

When the narrator first ventures outside the relative safety of his bathroom filled with books, he finds his kitchen thrown into disorder by Kabrowinski, the Polish painter who is searching for a recipient for a dismembered octopus bought at a fish market: 'Il lui a fallu ouvrir tous les placards, déplacer les casseroles, sortir les brocs et les bassines, les égouttoirs et les fait-tout, avant de trouver au fond de

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<sup>139</sup> Hippolyte, *Fuzzy fiction*, p. 37.

<sup>140</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-lieux : introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 100.

quelque armoire ce compotier verdâtre en méchant plastique transparent.’ (SB, 34)

This sense of displeasure, evoked in scenes in which the order the narrator has attempted to impose on his surroundings comes under threat, finds itself repeated, for example, in a recollection of a house-warming evening spent with a couple of Edmondsson’s friends. Struggling to make small talk, he seems prickly and irritated by their invasion of his personal space, the introduction of disorder into the structural rigidity to which he is drawn: ‘ils s’attardèrent devant la bibliothèque, retiraient des livres des rayons, les remettaient en place.’ (SB, 43) Once more, this degree of artifice is emphasised in the narrator’s attempts to construct controlled and impenetrable spaces in which he can live outside of the ravages of the time, reflected in the description of the game of Monopoly the two couples play as an unsatisfying simulation of life: ‘Nous nous passions les dés, construisions des maisons, bâtissions des hôtels. La partie languissait.’ (SB, 44)

Games recur frequently throughout Toussaint’s oeuvre. Recalling Ricœur’s description of literature as a laboratory of experimentation, games have a simulative effect which allows their players to experiment with different possibilities for action while safely removed from any devastating real-world consequences. We see that when *La Salle de bain*’s narrator plays games, he treats everything in fixed terms of winning or losing. The combination of liminal opportunity with artifice characterises games in Toussaint’s work, and this can also be linked to the treatment of agency, as it is in moments which offer multiple and distinct possibilities that we recognise our capacity for action and the artifice of narrativity. While *La Salle de bain*’s competitive approach may seem mildly silly when playing an (imagined) world darts championship alone in a Venetian hotel room, it takes on a double absurdity when it comes to living in the real world. This absurdity of taking the triviality of such little

simulations seriously is also reflected humorously in *L'Appareil-photo*'s game of mikado, with the man in the service station emphatically uttering, '(je t'ai eue, hein, salope, disait-il en posant [la baguette] délicatement à côté de lui)' (AP, 61). In *La Salle de bain*, whether playing Monopoly with acquaintances, 'j'allai me coucher après les avoir écrasés (il n'y a pas de secret, au Monopoly)' (SB, 44), or engaging in a 'conversation' with a barman in Venice (which merely consists of each participant naming cyclists from their respective countries, 'Roger de Vlaeminck et son frère, Eric. Que pouvait-on répondre à cela?') (SB, 62), the narrator's powerful imposition of his own will on such trivial matters ironically underlines his inability for meaningful action in the more serious matters of his life and relationships – in a climactic moment of anxiety, the powerless narrator will lash out by throwing a dart into the face of his girlfriend, Edmondsson.

When first encountering the Polish man's octopus, the narrator is uneasy, suggestive of something akin to Sartrean existential nausea, where an external, corporeal reality threateningly implicates the body of the narrator, and he tells us 'Depuis quelques instants déjà, je savais que j'allais quitter la cuisine.' (SB, 35) The narrator parenthetically, and not entirely convincingly, attributes this to the fact that '(j'avais un peu froid)' (SB, 35), but we are perhaps more likely to see this as a metaphorical shiver of fear or unease down his spine rather than a drop in temperature, to read this, too, as 'l'écoulement même du temps, une fois de plus, qui m'avait horrifié.' (SB, 31) Looking for a sweater, he rummages through an old suitcase which he tells us must have belonged to the previous inhabitants of the apartment and in doing so finds exactly the disorder he is seeking to elude; the assorted detritus of the lives of others, 'je m'étonnais de trouver tout ce merdier à l'intérieur.' (SB, 37) A mess of objects, including ornaments relating to foreign

travel, ('tabatières en ivoire, santons, netsukes') are incongruously thrown together but there is no immediately available narrative through which to mediate the narrator's encounter with such objects. Like the narrator of *L'Appareil-photo* looking over the photographs of the couple whose camera he has stolen, *La Salle de bain*'s narrator finds himself 'confronté là à une intimité à laquelle je n'aurais jamais du avoir accès' (AP, 119) and appears to perceive something similar to the 'sorte d'indécence involontaire qui se dégageait de ces photos.' (AP, 119)

The thrown-together nature of these fragmented symbols, in turn, draws the narrator to evoke the night he met the apartment's previous inhabitants before moving in, when he presumably saw these objects in a different context, arranged and ordered according to the will of another. In this analeptic recollection the narrator and Edmondsson are perched on camping chairs; foreigners in this accumulated space of signifying alterity that they will go on to remake in their own image. As if this weight of otherness were not unbearable enough, the unease felt by the narrator is heightened when the former tenant tells him he intends to write a novel, 'Et vous aurez un jardin? demandai-je pour éviter qu'il nous racontât le sujet de son roman, les péripéties, les rebondissements.' (SB, 39) This encounter with another 'writer', as a producer of a kind of unbearable 'othered' intimacy, ironically provokes a feeling of unease in the narrator who is reminded of the difficulties he faces in terms of the narrative mastery of his own temporal experience. When the narrator finally finds a sweater after rummaging among the detritus of his former neighbours' possessions, it is so short that it barely reaches his wrists, and has 'l'allure d'un sac de pommes de terre à l'abandon.' (SB, 44) He deduces that it must have belonged to Edmondsson when she was a young girl and then immediately, despite its obvious flaws, decides that this is good enough for him: 'à peu de choses

près (?), cela pouvait convenir.’ (SB, 45) The *temps* which has affected him is confirmed to be temporal unease, awareness of ontological flux, rather than drop in temperature, since he first removes his jacket before donning it.<sup>141</sup>

Soon after, following the mounting tension which accompanies the narrator’s interaction with the importunate painters and the fleshy mass of their octopus, the second section of the novel, ‘Hypoténuse’, begins. The numbering of the paragraphs is reset to 1) and the section opens with the narrator suddenly on a train from Paris to Venice, telling us, ‘Je partis brusquement, et sans prévenir personne.’ (SB, 49) Roy Caldwell has suggested that this is ‘to achieve the conditions necessary for serene immobility, paradoxically, [he] must travel.’<sup>142</sup> Initially, in this new space of temporal refuge, the narrator’s physical surroundings seem less menacing than the brouhaha of the first section. As he lies on his duvet with the radio blaring rock music, his spatial surroundings seem to melt away (‘les meubles s’estompaient, s’amenuisaient dans la pénombre.’) and time itself appears distended: ‘L’après-midi n’en finissait pas, comme toujours à l’étranger, où les heures, le premier jour paraissent appesanties, semblent plus longues, plus lentes, interminables.’ (SB, 55) It soon becomes clear that the narrator has, once again, merely replaced one hermetic space with another. Each descent to a lower floor is portrayed as an agonising tribulation, and he is unwilling to travel too far from the building which contains his new hideaway: ‘Lorsque je sortais de l’hôtel, je m’éloignais rarement. Je restais dans les rues avoisinantes.’ (SB, 59) He spends his days lying down, playing darts and doing little else. When Edmondsson comes to meet the narrator in Venice, having failed to persuade him to return to Paris, she actively pursues tourist activities while

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<sup>141</sup> This paragraph contains elements from my MA dissertation.

<sup>142</sup> Roy Caldwell, ‘Jean-Philippe Toussaint’, in *The contemporary novel in France*, ed. by William J. Thompson (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), pp. 369-420 (p. 372).

he stays in his room and shies from contact with the outside world. The hotel room quickly succumbs to the narrator's perception of the temporal threats of the external world, and he is consumed by recurrent nightmares which seem to reflect how terrified he is by the prospect of being unable to submit that world to an ordering act, to his configurational agency, describing one such nightmare as 'un tourbillon qui m'englobe et m'emporte en son centre [...] où des lignes droites placées devant mes yeux dont je tâche infiniment de modifier la structure, remplaçant un segment par un autre, procédant à des corrections sans fin pour les épurer.' (SB, 89)

Arising from the fundamental nature of human comprehension in the *prefiguration* of action, the anxiety experienced by the narrator and his prior admission of his need to act, to take a risk, implicitly presents the first section as the logical precedent which has led to this new state of affairs. However, as we will come to see by the end of the novel, this is not the case. The episode in the Venetian hotel culminates in the narrator lashing out, inexplicably throwing a dart at Edmondsson's face after she has repeatedly tried to get him to leave the room. In this momentary physical expression of all the accumulated anxiety, Edmondsson is injured, precipitating her return to Paris at the start of the final section, 'Paris', leaving the narrator alone in Venice. He soon finds himself in a hospital ward where he is to undergo an operation on his sinuses. Befriending his doctor and playing tennis with him and his wife, he constructs a little routine (complete with a barman who knows how he likes his coffee), another kind of life-in-miniature, as if dawdling in this *non-lieu* in order to 'buy time' before having to engage his own agency in the decision of whether or not to return to Paris. Standing in the paradigmatic *non-lieu* of the hospital toilets, the narrator looks at his face in the mirror, half in shadow, and expresses the problematically unincorporable nature of the chain of events which has

led him to his current position: ‘Je regardais mon visage ainsi divisé par la lumière, je le regardais fixement et me posais une question simple. Que faisais-je ici?’ (SB, 116) In this way, the ontological status of the present is problematised by an inadequate epistemology of the past, that is to say, by the inability to recognise one’s own sense of narrative agency in the past.<sup>143</sup>

Warren Motte has also recognised these blurred and repeated descriptions of space, suggesting that the commonality of their character constitutes an important effect of repetition in *La Salle de bain*, ‘the narrator’s world being so diminutive, its constitutive elements are few and they recur in the narrative with regularity.’<sup>144</sup>

Maryse Fauvel suggests that this is exemplified in the way that Toussaint’s narratives repeatedly present the same kinds of spaces: those which are hyper-familiar and yet definitionally transitory. Fauvel writes that ‘toutes les villes et tous les villages finissent par se ressembler puisque les mêmes lieux y sont évoqués : des cabines téléphoniques, des gares ferroviaires ou maritimes, des hôtels ; des boutiques, ou des kiosques à journaux’<sup>145</sup> and she sees the effect of this as bringing about an ‘anémissation du réel, un simulacre du réel, un réalisme de surface. Images, objets, lieux et personnages s’amoncellent, mais sont tous voués à disparaître, à être vidés de leur substance.’<sup>146</sup> Motte similarly suggests that the effect of this kind of repetition is to ‘draw the reader’s interest away from the narrated and towards the narrating and constitutes a tactic of deliberate deflection.’<sup>147</sup>

Hippolyte also links the recurrent images of bodily degeneration in

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<sup>143</sup> This paragraph contains elements from my MA thesis.

<sup>144</sup> Motte, *Small Worlds*, p. 74.

<sup>145</sup> Maryse Fauvel, *Scènes d'intérieur: Six romanciers des années 1980-1990* (Paris: Summa, 2007), p. 18.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>147</sup> Motte, *Small Worlds*, p. 78.

Toussaint's work to a tendency to represent the 'decay of the text itself'<sup>148</sup>, serving to draw the attention of both that of the self-conscious narrator and that of the reader to the very act of narration, as well as the shortcomings and failures of that narrative action. In *La Salle de bain*'s sweater hunt, if we are to understand 'à peu de choses près (?)' as evoking the disruption of whatever conceptual (narrativising) tools operate in the constitution of stability or order available to the narrator, we may note a certain similarity to Heideggerian notion of Care. When the taken-for-granted, or ready-to-hand, equipment malfunctions (in this case, the conceptual equipment of narration), the subject experiences a necessary shift in attention and cognitive resources from the results that this equipment normally produces, as the malfunctioning equipment itself becomes present-to-hand. The thematisation of this kind of narratorial malfunction will be particularly relevant to the analysis of *La Réticence*.

Towards the end of the third section of *La Salle de bain*, after returning to Paris to join Edmondsson, the narrator begins to spend his time in the bathroom again. It suddenly becomes clear that the chronological structure of the text does not, in fact, proceed from 'Paris'(1), to 'Hypoténuse' and then to 'Paris'(2), but rather from 'Hypoténuse' to 'Paris'(2) to 'Paris'(1). The novel ends with an almost verbatim repetition of the phrase encountered in the first section, about the need to take a risk, but this time, instead we read the imperfect instead of the past historic: 'Le lendemain je *sortais* de la salle de bain.' In *La Salle de bain*, if efforts to live entirely 'outside' the flow of physical time prove catastrophic for the narrator, the adoption of the imperfect tense reflects a certain change in the text as a whole. Motte suggests that 'that change of tense of the verb *sortir* is indicative of the fact that *La*

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<sup>148</sup> Hippolyte, *Fuzzy fiction*, p. 37.



*Salle de bain* moves not towards closure but rather away from it',<sup>149</sup> but if we are to read *La Salle de bain* as an expression of the narrator's process of 'working-through', configuring the past to create the possibilities of action through interpretative refiguration, the Venetian analepsis (a traumatic event in the past) paradoxically takes the form of a future to be avoided. This is reinforced by the fact that the analeptic nature of the Venetian episode is not revealed until after it has passed, and is instead *presented* in the text as if were the result of the narrator's state of mind in the first part of the novel. The expression of this troubling potential future (which has actually taken place in the narrator's past, presumably following a similarly troubled state of mind) can be reproduced as narration, perhaps as a means to avoid having to experience anything similar again *in reality*, and this recalls Ricœur's description of literature as a laboratory of experimentation. In the course of reading about the narrator's experiences in Venice, the reader may be tempted to look back on the unfinished sentence, 'je devais compromettre la quiétude de ma vie abstraite pour', and infer a likely ending: *pour fuir*.<sup>150</sup>

However, on recognising the episode as chronologically *anterior* to the end of the first section, in this new iteration of the unfinished sentence, the word which proposes itself may be different. We may choose to see that what the narrator was unwilling to articulate was a realisation that he must 'compromettre la quiétude de [s]a vie abstraite pour *narrer*.' Motte is correct to say that this ending moves away from closure, but the new aperture is implicitly that which grants access to a different possible future, as the product of a reappraisal of experience and the reintroduction of agency via the narrator's synchronic act of composition.

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<sup>149</sup> Motte, *Small Worlds*, p. 75.

<sup>150</sup> This paragraph contains elements from my MA thesis.

Interpreting this moment of repetition, as Sarah Glasco does, as the sign that this narrator has ‘perhaps [...] learned nothing when we see the similar patterns of his life resurface at the end of the novel’<sup>151</sup> seems not to fully take account of the novel’s chronological structure or of the nature of the narrator’s trip to Venice, that is, *as a narrated, remembered consequence of similar conditions faced by the narrator in the past*. As Ricœur tells us, ‘Se comprendre, c’est se comprendre *devant le texte et recevoir de lui les conditions d’un soi autre que le moi qui vient à la lecture.*’<sup>152</sup> Motte, and also Mirko F. Schmidt are perhaps right to highlight the fact that the ending is deeply ambiguous, that in an absolute sense, ‘the problem remains, as it always does with Toussaint, finally unresolved’,<sup>153</sup> however, it is also important to note that the text only ends once the narrator has created the conditions for the *possibility* of catharsis, engendered through revised self-understanding and the semantic innovations made possible by the poetics of narrative: the past-historic becomes the past-imperfect as the historical past becomes an imperfect past not to be repeated.

### ***L’Appareil-photo***

If the static bodies of water we find in *La Salle de bain* reflect a desire to resist time, the aesthetic of temporality in *L’Appareil-photo* is perhaps best exemplified by a scene of the narrator standing on a cross-channel ferry, perceiving the movement of the vessel, and of his own body, ‘fendant la mer sans insister et sans forcer, comme si

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<sup>151</sup> Sarah L. Glasco, *Parody and Palimpsest: Intertextuality, Language and the Ludic in the Novels of Jean-Philippe Toussaint* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), p. 46.

<sup>152</sup> Ricœur, *Du texte à l’action*, p. 36.

<sup>153</sup> Mirko F. Schmidt, *Jean-Philippe Toussaint: Erzählen und Verschweigen* (Paderborn: Books on Demand GmbH, 2001), p. 46. My translation.

je mourais progressivement, comme si je vivais peut-être, je ne savais pas, c'était simple et je n'y pouvais rien, je me laissais entraîner par le mouvement du bateau...’ (AP, 95), submitting his own physical existence to movement in time. If *La Salle de bain*'s narrator attempts to escape time, and in doing so is condemned to focus obsessively on the postulated future-points of ontological dissolution (as if the raindrop hitting the ground), the narrator of *L'Appareil-photo* consents, as if he were a raindrop in motion, to the movement through a perpetual present in which ‘[sa] vie allait de l'avant, oui, dans un renouvellement constant d'écumes identiques.’ (AP, 96)

This stands in stark contrast to the breakdown of the lonely narrator's hermetic existence in a Venetian hotel in *La Salle de bain*, his attempted flight from temporal unease only resulting in a magnification of its intensity. If the narrator of the earlier novel seeks to prevent time from affecting him by clinging to order and fixity, the heterogeneous, contingent events of *L'Appareil-photo* seem to imply a reticence to impose very much degree of ordering upon temporal experience at all. This is emphatically not a plot driven by action and, seemingly, little of consequence actually *happens*: the narrator decides to learn to drive, has lunch and gets a foot massage in Milan, develops a relationship with a girl from the driving school, thinks about his previous attempt at learning to drive, gets driven around for a while in search of a gas canister, goes on holiday to England, comes home. Jordan Stump has suggested that this focus on the apparently trivial is a characteristic trait of much of Toussaint's earlier work. ‘Nothing particularly decisive happens to these characters; they might travel, they might exert their autonomy in various ways, but in the end their stories are aimless and amorphous ones,’<sup>154</sup> a point which Warren Motte has

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<sup>154</sup> Jordan Stump, ‘Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Unfinished’, *SubStance*, 35 (2006), 95-111 (p. 97).

also made in relation to *La Salle de bain*, noting how ‘the furniture of the quotidian will eventually support a story that plays out an epic of the trivial.’<sup>155</sup>

*L’Appareil-photo*’s opening affirms this meandering approach to time and refusal to impart direction: ‘C’est à peu près à la même époque de ma vie, vie calme où d’ordinaire rien n’advenait, que dans mon horizon immédiat coïncidèrent deux événements qui, pris séparément, ne présentaient guère d’intérêt, et qui, considérés ensemble, n’avaient malheureusement aucun rapport entre eux.’ (AP, 7) In an interview with Laurent Demoulin, Toussaint has suggested that he is particularly proud of this opening: ‘C’est très radical, comme incipit, c’est vraiment se foutre du monde. Je suis un écrivain de trente ans qui dit “Ce que je vais vous raconter n’a aucun intérêt”’.<sup>156</sup> We could almost read these opening words as an attempt to frustrate the Barthesian concept of *notabilité* (‘le noté apparaissant toujours comme du notable’)<sup>157</sup> and, indeed, what the narrator will later describe as his *modus vivendi* suggests this sort of reluctance to impose the teleological structure of narrative onto the discordance of physical time.

For much of the novel, the narrator seems determinedly unwilling to actively impose himself on the world, preferring instead to passively allow the flow of time and events to carry him along, luxuriating in moments at which he feels intensely aware of his immersion in the present instant. In *La Salle de bain* we find a relatively terse style throughout and this is used to great effect in moments at which the narrator recounts an unexpected or unusual action, without giving any explanation for his behaviour: ‘11) Le lendemain, je sortis de la salle de bain.’, ‘71) je ne descendis pas déjeuner.’ (SB, 16, 53) In *L’Appareil-photo*, the interplay of motion

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<sup>155</sup> Motte, *Small Worlds*, p. 72.

<sup>156</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, interview with Laurent Demoulin, ‘Pour un roman infinitésimaliste’, postface to *L’Appareil-photo* (Paris : Éditions de Minuit, 2007), pp. 130-141 (p. 135).

<sup>157</sup> Barthes, ‘Introduction à l’analyse structurale des récits’, p. 3.

and stillness is stylistically reflected in the alternation between this sparser, laconic style, used to relate comical exchanges and (mis)communications with other characters, and the poetic run-on sentences in which the narrator contemplates his submission to passive movement ('sur la banquette arrière de la voiture [...] je jubilais *in petto* en laissant les choses suivre leur cours' (AP, 56)) or the pleasures of simple physical sensation ('[je me] lovai délicieusement mon talon entre ses cuisses, dans le petit nid douillet et malléable d'une serviette-éponge des plus moelleuses' (AP, 20)). This is particularly true of moments of undisturbed reflection within dark, enclosed spaces, where the narrator's flux of thought is echoed in the dynamic blossoming into a more poetic, meditative style:

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 décevante... (AP, 32).

For much of *L'Appareil-photo*, the narrator is content to relish the unconnected sensuality of such moments, and the fact that he is ostensibly learning to drive seems to take on something of an ironic metaphorical value, given that his role is closer to that of passenger in the course of events, rather than the agent responsible for driving them forward. Early in the novel, Pascale, the woman from the driving school with whom the narrator will pursue a romantic relationship, cannot understand his inaction in providing identity photographs for his file. As Isabelle Ost has pointed out, the idea of an identity photograph must represent a particular kind of anxiety for

an individual attempting to live purely in the living present, since its function is to ‘figer l’individu dans un éternel présent, cataloguer sa présence dans le système.’<sup>158</sup>

In response to Pascale’s incomprehension, the narrator revealingly ruminates that ‘mon jeu d’approche, assez obscur en apparence, avait en quelque sorte pour effet de fatiguer la réalité à laquelle je me heurtais’, the desired result being that, ‘ma propension à ne jamais brusquer [...] me préparait en vérité un terrain favorable où, quand les choses me paraîtraient mûres, je pourrais cartonner.’ (AP, 14) Unlike the viscerally competitive approach to games in *La Salle de bain*, here we find an impression of ‘playing the long game’, the narrator deferring the moment of configurative action. This impression is evoked once more in the confines of the service station toilet stall, as he lets his mind wander languorously over a famously difficult chess problem in which all the pieces are *en prise*. ‘Ce problème (je ne voyais pas le problème, personnellement),’ he tells us, ‘représentait à mes yeux un modus vivendi des plus raffinés.’ (AP, 49) This kind of contemplative activity is similarly at play when the narrator watches a game of mikado played out in a mirror reflection, studying the movements of the participants, without participating himself.

This non-participation is illustrated in the way that the representation of enclosed spaces differs between the two novels. Like in *La Salle de bain*, these *non-lieux* (a photo-booth, a toilet, a phone cabin) function as places for the narrator to temporarily withdraw from physical time, but he does so in order to let his thought process meander over different possibilities rather than attempting to impose a fixed geometry of meaning upon them:

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<sup>158</sup> Isabelle Ost, ‘Dispositifs techniques et place du sujet dans quelques romans de Jean-Philippe Toussaint’, *Textyles*, ed. by Laurent Demoulin and Pierre Piret, 38 (2010), 77–87 (p. 80).

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)

And yet, in *L'Appareil-photo*, the desire to maintain some kind of pure potentiality for unlimited human action by immersing oneself in the present moment seems to run in to just as many problems as the desire for a phenomenologically omnipotent atemporality that we find in *La Salle de bain*. The pleasures of a passive submission to time gradually give way to something quite different: the alternation between melancholy and urgency, and a foregrounding of the narrator's seemingly impossible desire to produce an image, a physical representation, of his fugacious subjectivity. This could be seen as ironically foreshadowed in the first part by the frequently humorous description of trivial events as if they were of a profound importance ('je proposai à Pascale de nous y arrêter pour boire un café, ou même un thé si elle voulait, j'étais prêt à tout. A tout.') (AP, 88) Frank Wagner has suggested that the change from the humour of the first part, presented almost as 'une bascule dans une forme très maîtrisée de burlesque', to the narrator's troubled search to establish personal meaning at the end ensures that the profound tonal shift is driven home 'avec d'autant plus d'acuité',<sup>159</sup> as the narrator moves 'progressivement de la difficulté de vivre au désespoir d'être' (AP, 94). This epiphanic moment takes place in a photo booth with the narrator reflecting on a scene he has just witnessed,

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<sup>159</sup> Frank Wagner, 'La Vérité sur Jean-Philippe' (2011) <<http://www.vox-poetica.org/t/articles/wagner2011.html>> [accessed 01/07/2013], unpaginated.

strikingly similar to the image of rain-observation described in *La Salle de bain*: ‘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 que le tremblé ouvert d’un contour de Rothko.’ (AP, 93) The narrator is struck by the sight of the illuminated raindrops’ transient passage, and relates it to the inaccessible, evanescent character of the coursing of thought, telling us ‘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, 94) Like the raindrop falling past the fixed space, without the intentionality of narrative configuration to provide the teleological weight of some ‘idée de la finalité du mouvement’ (SB, 36), the narrator’s immersion in his thought processes leads him to consider the hollow nature of existence without agency.

From this point forward, he begins to focus his energy on the question of how to bring into external reality something which belongs intrinsically to the domain of internal experience; an intense phenomenological awareness of his acting subjectivity, something akin to the Ricœurian notion of selfhood. What he claims to be seeking is ‘quelque chose comme un portrait, un autoportrait peut-être, mais sans moi et sans personne [...] douloureuse et simple, sans arrière-plan et presque sans lumière’. We see his attempts to grasp at this impression of an innermost, and yet frustratingly immaterial, conception of his sense of *personnage* in a series of photographic images, both real and imagined. We also see his frustration and melancholy when, instead of this desired encounter, for the most part the photographs he examines offer only the banal and unedifying reflections of that stuff of pre-established *caractère*, aspects of the recognisable ‘marques distinctives’ constitutive of sameness identity.



It is significant that this realisation (of the need to establish personal meaning) follows shortly after he gets some passport-style identity photographs taken in a photo booth, since these bring home to him their scant power to bring to light any aspect of his longed-for ideal of a physically present and yet intimately internal, phenomenological motion. All they display is ‘une sorte de lassitude dans la manière d’être là [...] et je souriais à l’objectif, enfin je souriais, c’est comme ça que je souris’ (AP, 97). The pun on the word for lens encapsulates how such images represent only the externally recognisable traits of pre-established sameness, rather than deploying any impression of the intrinsically temporal process of willed-for action which characterises selfhood. As Isabelle Ost has noted, the way in which the photographs taken in the photo-booth are described ‘montre bien que ces clichés annihilent l’individualité du personnage, la singularité du sujet.’<sup>160</sup> We can compare the effect this has upon the narrator to an earlier moment, when at the driving school, instead of bringing along any such up-to-date images, he shows Pascale family photographs from his childhood, much to her bewilderment, telling her, ‘je pense que vous conviendrez que cela ne nous est pas d’une grande utilité (pour le dossier, dis-je).’ (AP, 11) As the implicitly qualifying nature of this parenthesis suggests, the photos may be quite irrelevant as far as concerns the inscription file, but they have a rather deeper significance to our narrator. Unlike those taken in the photo booth, these photographs seem to better approximate a sense of the *kind* of identity that the narrator is pursuing, since, in addition to reflecting the familiarity and recognition inherent in sameness identity, they also open onto a wider network of personal stories and affective links which are associated with the memories of prior acts of

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<sup>160</sup> Ost, ‘Dispositifs techniques et place du sujet dans quelques romans de Jean-Philippe Toussaint’, p. 80.

*configurational* agency, of selfhood-past. This temporal distancing emphasises the narrative recollection of the processes responsible for the narrator *then* becoming the narrator *now*. Such instances reflect Ricœur's acknowledgement that sameness and selfhood intersect in a circular 'dialectique de l'innovation et de la sédimentation, sous-jacente au processus d'identification, [qui] est là pour rappeler que le caractère a une histoire, contractée dirait-on, au double sens du mot « contraction » : abréviation et affection.'<sup>161</sup>

This also brings to mind Roland Barthes's term, *punctum*, coined to describe the seemingly expansive, metonymic effects which strike us when looking at photographs which profoundly affect us. Barthes describes this impression as rooted in 'ce que j'ajoute à la photo et *qui cependant y est déjà*.'<sup>162</sup> For Barthes, this is associated with a power specific to the photographic image, a power to impart a particular sense of striking authenticity, a sense of having been in reality, as incontestable artefacts of a 'ça a été'.<sup>163</sup> As we will explore in our discussion of *La Television* and *La Réticence*, and as Olivier Mignon has convincingly argued, the treatment of different categories of image in Toussaint's work seems to correspond in large part to their apparent degree of interpretative openness for their receiver.<sup>164</sup> If we follow Ricœur's ideas about the refigurative stage, the liminality or openness to different possible interpretations also determines the degrees of different possible action for the receiver. Barthes would have us see the expansive openness of photography as a special category of image, unlike the guided and busy flux of the cinematic image which 'ne s'accroche pas à moi: ce n'est pas un spectre'.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, pp. 148-149.

<sup>162</sup> Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), p. 89. Barthes's emphasis.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>164</sup> Olivier Mignon, 'Presque sans lumière', *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 67-76.

<sup>165</sup> Barthes, *La chambre claire*, p. 140.

Although, of course, with Victor Burgin, we must be mindful not to overemphasise this artificial distinction, since it is specifically employed in service to a certain discourse, in a meditation on the link between mourning and the photographic image.<sup>166</sup>

Surrounded by the apparently affective reference points of his family members, the narrator's infant self may seem to better represent some aspect of what we called above the 'narrating-identity' of *ipséité* (or at least appears to, from the perspective of a present in which one is aware of a personal narrative link to the past). In the 'Winter Garden Photograph', in which Barthes saw the essential 'air' of his deceased mother, it was in an image of the woman as a child which nonetheless poignantly evoked for her son what he saw as the defining qualities of her selfhood. Similarly, Toussaint's narrator, perceiving himself as the child-referent of these pictures, seems to achieve a level of recognition which goes beyond a mere atemporal snapshot of some familiar aspect. Showing the last of a series of photographs he tells Pascale, 'Là, c'est encore nous, ma sœur et moi, dans la piscine' (AP, 11) presenting the past through an affective, narrative link.

Georges Poulet, whose phenomenological criticism could be seen as a precursor to certain aspects of Ricœur's more developed thesis on narrativity and identity, argued that this link to the Other is central to the formation of what he called 'une durée basée sur la mémoire affective'.<sup>167</sup> Poulet's approach to diachronic identity was centred on his concept of duration,<sup>168</sup> an emplotted construction of lived

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<sup>166</sup> Reading from *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, Burgin also shows that 'the abrasion of the image against the real, which Barthes finds and values in photography, is at least structurally similar to his readiness, when in the cinema 'to be fascinated two times: by the image and by what surrounds it.' Victor Burgin, *The remembered film* (London: Reaktion, 2004), p. 37.

<sup>167</sup> Poulet, *Études sur le temps humain*, p. 33.

<sup>168</sup> Poulet also associated *duration* with the linking together of moments of sensation over time, 'L'intensité de la sensation fonde l'instant; la multiplicité des sensations fonde la durée.' *Ibid.*, p. 28.

experience where identity is produced through an internal narrative charting the relational anchoring of the self to the Other through affect and across the passage of time, evocative of Ricœur's *ipséité/mêmeté* pair. This kind of affective duration is involved in the process of establishing selfhood through its connection to the desire of imposing a degree of ordering, of narrative coherence, onto a temporally distributed network of (inter)personal experience. It seems implicit that for Toussaint's narrator, as for Barthes, this emotive, expansive narrativity is expressed particularly upon the encounter with photographs which bring to mind such affective connections. However, despite this anchoring in relational existence, permitting a limited 'redeployment' of an ipseitic, narrating identity, we can imagine that these childhood photos still predominantly belong to the domain of pre-established personal narratives. Although they represent aspects of both sameness and selfhood, they remain insufficient in terms of expressing the sense of a continuous process of 'becoming oneself', the *élan furieux* of consciousness that the narrator perceives within his adult self, and the selfhood he wants to externalise.

After finding a forgotten camera on a ferry, the narrator gets the photographs developed (after taking a few himself), and he is surprised to find himself powerfully affected by one taken by the camera's original owners, a scene of the harbour station in Newhaven, in which he recognises the incidental presence of Pascale's silhouette within the frame. Here, the narrator's affective link to the referent hits with the force of a brutal authenticity, of a more contemporaneous nature than the childhood photographs could offer him. The role of the Other in this metonymic, expansive site for the Barthesian punctum, within this 'ça a été', allows the narrator to perceive the relational effects of his existence, to identify his being-in-the-world; to recognise himself as a 'j'y ai été' of sorts. This proves more elucidating in terms of the

construction of a narrative identity than the more distant, foundational kind of identity offered by the childhood photographs, and certainly more so than the deadening objectivity of what Barthes calls ‘la nappe mortifère de la Pose’<sup>169</sup> which the narrator assumed in the solitude of a photo-booth. The effect of the childhood photographs and that of the incidental image of Pascale can be contrasted with the narrator’s own photographs taken on the ferry when, ‘pris de panique’, he starts running through its corridors and passageways, taking ‘des photos au hasard, des marches et de mes pieds, tout en courant dans les escaliers l’appareil à la main.’ (AP, 103) Upon his return home, he wonders whether such photos will finally provide the desired representation of an experience of acting selfhood, divorced from sameness, the ‘upper limit’ of personal identity, as Ricœur calls it, ‘où l’ipse pose la question de son identité sans le secours et l’appui de l’idem.’<sup>170</sup> The apparent impossibility of such a representation is reflected in the photos being overexposed, leaving only ‘ça et là quelques ombres informes comme d’imperceptibles traces de mon absence.’ (AP, 116) Just as the narrator describes the futility of ‘la tâche d’arrêter la pensée pour en exprimer le contenu au grand jour’ (AP, 94), attempting to expose (bring to light) an essential and static (idem) expression of the fluidity of acting subjectivity, the actual experience of lived time, leaves only ‘de l’eau entre les doigts, quelque gouttes vidées de grâce brûlées dans la lumière.’ (AP, 94)

Toussaint’s short text, *Le jour où j’ai fait ma première photo* (2001), draws attention to the author’s interest in subordinating the narrated to the narrating, the cultural object to the process of its configurative production, as he recounts the experience of taking a photograph of his shadow projected onto a wall in Kyoto: ‘je

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<sup>169</sup> Barthes, *La chambre claire*, p. 32.

<sup>170</sup> Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, p. 150.

savais déjà intuitivement, que la photo – et l’art – était une expérience de vie, une expérience intime dont le sens résidait davantage dans sa réalisation que dans les œuvres elles-mêmes.’<sup>171</sup> We can see how this resonates with Ricœur’s description of the functioning of the narrating, *ipse* identity, analogous to the psychoanalytic process of a subject’s ‘working-through’ their personal narrative, where ‘l’histoire d’une vie ne cesse d’être refigurée par toutes les histoires véridiques ou fictives qu’un sujet raconte sur lui-même. Cette refiguration fait de la vie elle-même un tissu d’histoires racontées.’<sup>172</sup>

In ironically deferring the moment of confronting the aporetic questions of his essential identity, the paradoxical desire to capture a dynamic process as a static image, the narrator allows events to take their course, and only later attempts to ‘recognise’ his selfhood in the accumulated past of experience, which itself would seem to provide the expression of that experience of selfhood. Our punning narrator elucidates the ontological dialectic of identity in a densely allusive passage, as he watches a hot-air balloon land and ponders which petrol company it is owned by: ‘aux armes jaunes de Shell, par exemple. Où de la Total, je connais pas son logo. Moi, l’essence. Quant à la quiddité, peut-on se fier au logos?’ (AP, 93). There is a somewhat trivial literal reading of this passage (‘the logo of Shell’s yellow arms, for example. Or that of Total. I don’t know its logo. What do I know about petrol anyway? If we’re splitting hairs, can we trust logos?’) However, the polysemic multiplicity of each of these terms suggests a more metaphorical rumination on questions of identity. Is the narrator a fixed Totality, a being with a reducible and essential identity which can be captured and displayed, or merely a Shell (a body) in

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<sup>171</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, ‘Le jour où j’ai fait ma première photo’, 2 (2001) <<http://www.bon-a-tirer.com/volume2/jpt.html>> [accessed 10/05/2014], unpaginated.

<sup>172</sup> Ricœur, *Temps et récit III*, p. 443.

which a plural, fragmented and constantly evolving kind of identity takes form? Etymologically, ‘logo’ passing through ‘logogram’ on its way to ‘logos’, connects this dialectic of essence and flux to the act of writing (the telling, the word). It is this literary endeavour itself, this telling, which allows *L’Appareil-photo* to, if not conquer or pin down an ipse identity, then at least to approximate it and to express the process of that approach through narration.

In the same vein as *La Salle de bain*’s bracketed question mark and unfinished sentence, it is perhaps an inevitable consequence of the frequent use of anachrony that both novels are replete with ellipses which deny the reader a complete chronological understanding of the continuity and progression of the events of the narrative. However, these texts are also implicitly *paraliphtical*, leaving holes in the totality of information presented within the text which indicate epistemological rather than chronological omissions. Although their ‘presence’ (or rather their implied representational absence) is sometimes incongruously indicated by an unfulfilled kind of textual *amorce*, those ‘simples pierres d’attente sans anticipation, même allusive, qui ne trouveront leur signification que plus tard’,<sup>173</sup> these are often non-sequiturs for which no definitive clarification appears to be forthcoming. In each of the texts these *paralipses* appear to offer a glimpse of some aspect within the implied continuity of the narrative with which the narrator seems unwilling to provide the reader, to explicitly address within the discourse, but the secondary effects resulting from these pockets of unstated information can nevertheless sometimes permeate the surface of the text.<sup>174</sup> Jean-Benoît Gabriel has suggested that this is a key unifying principle across Toussaint’s work in both

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<sup>173</sup> Genette, *Figures III*, p. 112.

<sup>174</sup> This passage contains elements from my MA thesis.

literature and cinema: the focus on an implied continuity of the text to which the reader-viewer is denied direct access, the bringing into perception a richly inaccessible *hors-champ*, leading to ‘une grande attention portée à tout ce qui n’est pas écrit, et qui fait [...] les grands livres, ceux qui laissent de la place au lecteur.’<sup>175</sup>

When the narrator of *L’Appareil-photo* tells us of ‘des blessures qui menacent – et j’en savais des infimes’(AP, 94) are we to link this to the failed attempt at learning to drive ten years anterior to the beginning of the novel, during which he also fails to romance a girl (who could even conceivably be Pascale), or perhaps to the loss of a family member which we may read in the ‘*c’est encore nous*’ of the childhood photographs? This is illustrated in an analepsis which occurs during an early stage of the narrator’s relationship with Pascale. Sitting in the motorway service-station toilet to have a think, what he chooses to think about (and to synchronically present in the narrative) is a period ten years before when he attempted to learn to drive. The present imposes itself on the past, as the narrator considers various failures (to furnish the necessary identity photographs, to woo a girl in the driving school, to get his driver’s license). The girl is never named, but her representational value (and even, conceivably, her identity) is hinted at through a combination of wordplay and the narrator’s caustic tone, describing the advances of their driving-theory teacher as the ‘spectacle répugnant de sa courte main poilue dont un des doigts enculait une chevalière malaxant négligemment son adorable épaule.’ (AP, 38) This is followed by the proliferation of a number of alliterative *Ps*, beginning three consecutive sentences ‘Pendant...’ ‘Parfois...’ ‘Pour...’, and with the (excessive?) ‘Parfois, pour pimenter ses explications, il se permettait la fantaisie d’une petite plaisanterie.’ (AP, 38) This alliterative plosive excess connotes both a

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<sup>175</sup> Jean-Benoît Gabriel, ‘Fuir l’image avec désinvolture’, *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 47-56 (p. 55).



sound-image of expectoration (a certain disgust felt by the narrator for his theory-teacher), but also (perhaps unavoidably) refers back to both Pascale Poulaigaievski and her son, Petit-Pierre. There is certainly nothing in the text to dissuade the reading that the girl is Pascale herself. Could it also be that another *P* (the theory teacher, Puffin, in paternal relation to Petit-Pierre) is the source of the mildly antagonistic manner in which the narrator relates to his girlfriend's son?

*L'Appareil-photo* ends with the narrator slumped in a phone booth miles from anywhere, watching the sun rise: 'c'était encore la nuit, mais une nuit déjà atténuée d'aube claire et bleutée' (AP, 126). Marie-Pascale Huglo has described this ending as one of 'l'incomplétude du récit: les attentes romanesques suscitées (rencontre et voyage amoureux) sont déçues, et loin de se clore sur une fin annoncée, l'histoire se suspend en cours de route.'<sup>176</sup> However, as Ricœur notes, in an ending which omits such forms of resolution, 'il faut que la dissolution de l'intrigue soit comprise comme un signal adressé au lecteur de coopérer à l'œuvre, de faire lui-même l'intrigue.'<sup>177</sup> The liminality of this ending expresses the way that narration brings into being the possibility for representing human agency in the face of physical time, without ever being able to transcend that tension between lived experience and physical time. Narration can nevertheless bring a different interpretation and a different temporal experience to that tension, a different fictive experience of time, by imbuing it with a weight of potentiality, ready to fracture into definite futures of human action – perhaps not the geometric fixity of a Mondrian, but something more like 'le tremble ouvert d'un contour de Rothko' (AP, 93), as expressed by the final words of the text.

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<sup>176</sup> Marie-Pascale Huglo, 'Le secret du raconteur', *Intermédialités : histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques*, 2 (2003), 45-62 (p. 58).

<sup>177</sup> Ricœur, *Temps et récit II*, p. 50.

[Je] 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)

As Arcana Albright puts it, this final image suggests ‘qu’une des forces de la littérature réside dans sa capacité à montrer la réalité – la vie et la mort dans le cas du papillon – et en même temps à s’en échapper.’<sup>178</sup> The final gerund is suggestive of the manner in which *L’Appareil-photo* articulates the tension between lived experience and the experience of action. Significant here, and also in terms of the perspectival shift engendered when *sortis* becomes *sortais*, is Ricœur’s suggestion that the abstract manipulation of temporal ordering of narrative owes much to its use of the tense system, which plays a key part both in configuration and in the interpretative act of refigurative praxis: ‘le système des temps offre une réserve de distinctions, de relations et de combinaisons dans laquelle la fiction puise les ressources de sa propre autonomie par rapport à l’expérience vive.’<sup>179</sup> While no photograph seems capable of redeploying the impression of acting selfhood, in the course of recounting, the text itself seems to take on the role of both the apparatus (narration, *l’appareil*) with which to capture the dynamic ‘air’ or ‘character’ of an *ipse* identity, and the expression of that identity itself (the narrative, *la photo*).

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<sup>178</sup> Arcana Albright, ‘Jean-Philippe Toussaint : écrivain de la photographie et photographe du livre’, *Textyles*, 40 (2011), 65-74 (p. 69).

<sup>179</sup> Ricœur, *Temps et récit II*, p. 117.

## *La Réticence*

*La Salle de bain* and *L'Appareil-photo*, in their different approaches to questions of agency and personal identity, could be said to exemplify a number of characteristic elements which recur to varying degrees throughout all of Toussaint's novels; the anonymity of his narrators, the rather functional (or 'fuzzy', to use Hippolyte's term) nature of the secondary characters and locations which they present, and, with the partial exception of the *Marie* series, discussed in Chapter 3, a general absence of explicit psychological detail – as Arcana Albright puts it, 'ses narrateurs protagonistes racontent ce qu'ils ont vu et fait, et non ce qu'ils ont ressenti. Leurs actions étant souvent inhabituelles [...] c'est au lecteur de combler le vide.'<sup>180</sup>

Perhaps most crucially, given the approach of this thesis, is the characteristic way in which this interpretive work of the reader of Toussaint's novels corresponds to analogous forms of hermeneutic labour on the part of his narrators. Toussaint's fictional narrators repeatedly appear as the readers of their own lives, engaged in the interpretation of their own pasts as quasi-texts, from new epistemological standpoints, whereby 'des significations [...] peuvent être actualisées ou remplies dans des situations autres que celle dans laquelle l'action s'est produit'.<sup>181</sup> These acts of interpretation are generally implied to be motivated by pertinent factors in what Ricœur calls the 'réalité circonstancielle'<sup>182</sup> of the narrating moment, even if the precise nature of such motivations is typically withheld. Each of Toussaint's texts is imprinted with the traces of this active processuality via its formal narrative variations, be they structural, rhetorical, stylistic, or modal in nature, which vehicle

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<sup>180</sup> Albright, 'Jean-Philippe Toussaint : écrivain de la photographie et photographe du livre', p. 65.

<sup>181</sup> Ricœur, *Du texte à l'action*, p. 219.

<sup>182</sup> Ricœur, *Du texte à l'action*, p. 157.

the kinds of *imaginative* variations which David M. Kaplan describes in terms of being able to ‘impute my own power to act by depicting to myself imaginative variations of what I can do, what I could do, and what I could have done.’<sup>183</sup> His narrators represent the relationships between their past, present and future and between critical reflection and action in ways which echo Meretoja’s characterisation of the strategies of hermeneutists such as Ricœur, Gadamer or Heidegger: ‘Instead of seeing repetition as simple reiteration, they understand it as a process of reinterpreting the past in a way that opens up new possibilities in the present.’<sup>184</sup>

If Toussaint’s fiction expresses the philosophical possibilities by which critical reflection through quasi-fictional imaginative mediations might provide the basis for new and different action, his narrators deploying their imaginative variations as propaedeutics to reasoning, and labouring in Ricœur’s ‘laboratoire pour des expériences de pensée en nombre illimité’,<sup>185</sup> this is a laboratory in which, to torture the metaphor, hazardous substances are handled, at times resulting in disaster. Meretoja suggests that Ricœur, along with other major hermeneutists, often failed to pay enough attention to the flipside of the ‘emancipatory potential’ of narrativity, highlighting the lack of consideration towards the dangers of engaging with certain narrative practices, received cultural narratives in particular. She suggests that, due to an enthusiasm for expounding the heuristic or ameliorative possibilities of fiction’s imaginative variations, their ‘destructive potential [...] has often been downplayed in the hermeneutic tradition.’<sup>186</sup> This corrective seems highly relevant to Toussaint’s own writing practice, for even if his novels do seem to express some

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<sup>183</sup> David M. Kaplan, *Ricoeur’s Critical Theory* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003) p. 81.

<sup>184</sup> Meretoja, *The narrative turn in fiction and theory: the crisis and return of storytelling from Robbe-Grillet to Tournier* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 156

<sup>185</sup> Ricœur, *Temps et Récit III*, p. 484.

<sup>186</sup> Meretoja, *The narrative turn in fiction and theory*, p. 204.

sense of the transformative powers of narrative refiguration with regard to future-oriented actantial possibilities, they express no such unbridled confidence that its outcomes will necessarily be positive ones.

In the two novels analysed above, we have already seen examples of Toussaint's highly uncertain or liminal endings; even novels do appear to suggest the possible acquisition of some new understanding on the part of his narrators, the nature of what new and different action this revised understanding might be translated into is almost never concretely specified, and certainly not concretely realised within the texts themselves.<sup>187</sup> The powerful sense of anxiety-tinged indeterminacy which characterises each of Toussaint's endings expresses the sense in which, however much our critical reflection upon the stories we tell ourselves may serve to open up new spaces for potential action, however much modifying one's prior understandings may engender the possibility of *living* differently, the forms that such future action will take can never be definitively settled, their realisation only hypothetical, as fragile and highly uncertain potentialities which remain 'beyond the text'.

The notion of narrativity as constituting a potentially dangerous or self-destructive impulse in Toussaint's work is perhaps most vividly displayed by the extremes of anxiety and paranoia which suffuse both *La Réticence* (1991), Toussaint's fourth published novel, and *Faire l'amour* (2002), his sixth. In both of these novels, it appears as if the compulsion of the narrating personae to engage in narrative activity, the desire to synthesise the heterogeneous elements of experience

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<sup>187</sup> The *Marie* series, again, constitutes a partial exception, since it is comprised of four novels with a persistent narrator, in which 'new understanding' does appear to play a part in motivating new perspectives and future actions in each subsequent texts, although the endings of each instalment taken individually, and also the series taken as a whole, have similarly inconclusive endings.

into meaningful relation with one another, and their inability to adequately do so, itself becomes partly responsible for engendering severe psychological consequences. In *Faire l'amour*, discussed in Chapter 3, the narrator is faced with an increasingly unbearable awareness of an incompatibility between his nostalgically-inflected memories of an earlier period in his romantic relationship and their radical discontinuity with the present situation in which he finds himself, bringing him to the verge of committing extreme violence. Laurent Demoulin has convincingly argued that the connection between the two novels is more than simply thematic or tonal, suggesting that *Faire l'amour* mobilises a number of 'procédés narratifs qui avaient été expérimentés pour la première fois dans *La Réticence*.'<sup>188</sup> In *La Réticence* a thematic relationship between identity, narrativity and agency remains central, both in terms of the significance attributed to the degree of artifice involved in the refiguration of personal narratives, and in terms of the subject-driven, *active* nature of the processes involved in the weaving together of disparate events and objects in the articulation of selfhood and in the mediated contemplation of hypothetical future actions. However, what strikingly differentiates *La Réticence* from Toussaint's preceding novels is the way in which it foregrounds the inadequacy and failure of such activity, even the danger it might represent, to the near-total exclusion of any ameliorative or heuristic potential.

The novel centres around another anonymous first-person narrator, this time visiting the fictional seaside town of Sasuelo with his baby son. The town's Corsican situation is indicated only by the brief mention of a telephone area code, and it seems significant that Sasuelo is the *only* properly fictional geographical setting to be found

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<sup>188</sup> Laurent Demoulin, 'Faire l'amour à la croisée des chemins', postface to *Faire L'amour* (Paris: Minuit, 2009), pp. 149-159 (p. 153).

throughout any of Toussaint's published novels, which perhaps tells us something about the novel's singularly pronounced disconnection from its narrator's lived reality. In contradistinction to the selection of anachronous episodes found in the other two novels, which encourage the reader to 'comblent le vide', as Albright puts it, inviting meaningful interpretations as to the pertinence of their juxtaposition with particular scenes in the narrated present, the chronology of *La Réticence* is fragmented to the point that such a reconstruction becomes, if not totally impossible, then at least highly problematic. From the opening words, 'Ce matin, il y avait un chat mort dans le port' (*LR*, 11), the text multiplies its temporal markers, which frequently appear at the start of its paragraphs ('Le lendemain matin', 'C'est ce matin-là', 'Ce soir-là', 'La nuit suivante', 'Cette nuit') (*LR*, 19, 36, 40, 46, 62) but without these serving to provide any meaningful elucidation as to the chronological sequence of the events they frame. As Schoots puts it, '[d]énuées de point de repère, ces précisions n'ont aucun sens.'<sup>189</sup> The text proceeds through ellipsis and iteration, as the narrator moves between a limited series of spaces; his hotel room, the streets and harbour of Sasuelo, and a villa on the outskirts of the town owned by a couple, the Biaggis, whom he claims, early in the novel, to have travelled there 'en quelque sorte' (*LR*, 16) to visit. The narrator has sent the couple a letter announcing his arrival before he departed Paris, but for unspecified reasons he has become profoundly anxious about actually going to visit them, 'retenu par une espèce d'appréhension mystérieuse' (*LR*, 16), and when he finally does pluck up the courage to do so, he finds the unopened letter in their post-box, which he steals. Perhaps the clearest marker of the narrator's disturbed relationship with temporality

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<sup>189</sup> Fieke Schoots, 'Passer en douce à la douane'. *L'écriture minimaliste de Minuit : Deville, Échenoz, Redonnet et Toussaint* (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997), p. 113.

is the recurring image of ‘le même clair de lune toutes les nuits identique, toujours le même exactement’ (LR, 76), repeatedly evoked via variations of this same phrase: ‘toutes ces nuits dernières il y avait un clair de lune sur la jetée, toujours le même exactement’ (LR, 94). As with the conflicting temporal markers found in the text, this unchanging full moon suggests the breakdown of cosmological time, which in turn foregrounds to the reader the narrator’s subjective mediation of his reality, simultaneously indicating a kind of attentive inertia on his part and destabilising his mimetic relationship to the external world by marking the literal impossibility of all the events he describes having taken place the same night which, as Motte suggests, ‘serves to draw the reader’s interest away from the narrated and towards the narrating and constitutes a tactic of deliberate deflection’.<sup>190</sup>

If Hertich’s contention that chronological confusion is not a habitual feature of Toussaint’s novels is not quite accurate, he is right to draw attention to the way in which *La Réticence* aggravates this confusion and destabilises its reference points and, consequently, its possibilities for sense-making, to a far greater extent than in any of Toussaint’s other novels, the result of which is, as he argues, to ‘souligne[r] le paranoïa du narrateur’.<sup>191</sup> Motte notes that such iterative effects were already present in germinal form in *La Salle de bain*, ‘the narrator’s world being so diminutive, its constitutive elements [...] recur in the narrative with regularity’,<sup>192</sup> however, this is taken to new extremes in *La Réticence* which seems to use its repeated elements in such a way as to signify the pathologically fixated thought processes of its narrator. His apprehension is largely concentrated on the absent figure of Paul Biaggi, and as

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<sup>190</sup> Motte, *Small Worlds*, p. 75.

<sup>191</sup> Alexander Hertich, ‘Jean-Philippe Toussaint et Alain Robbe-Grillet sur le double circuit’, in *Existe-t-il un style Minuit?*, pp. 125-134 (p. 129).

<sup>192</sup> Motte, *Small Worlds*, p. 74



the text progresses the narrator becomes increasingly convinced that Biaggi is observing him from a mysterious grey Mercedes that he sees parked around town and later in the Biaggis' driveway, coming to believe that Paul Biaggi is tracking his movements, plotting against him, and perhaps even constituting a threat to his life. What begins as a diffuse anxiety, seemingly triggered by the opening image of the dead cat, gradually builds towards the narrator's exaggerated certitude, as reflected by repeated phrases such as 'en réalité' (LR, 63), 'j'étais certain', (LR, 62) and 'j'en étais sur' (LR, 72), 'il avait du' (LR, 132).

In spite of his complete physical absence, Paul Biaggi looms over the narrative and constitutes the principal site for the narrator's increasingly paranoid chains of speculation. Departing from the relative laconicism of the previous novels, the narrator's anxiety is stylistically reflected by the proliferation of long, run-on sentences which appear throughout *La Réticence* and which, with each of their subsequent clauses, seem to textually materialise his rising dread and the increasing gravity of his paranoid conclusions, as if such passages were borne along by the giddy process of interpreting reality itself, but in a way which the narrator does not seem to be able to control or direct. In one such instance, the narrator poses himself a series of questions about the strange presence of a fishing hook in the jaws of the dead cat, before a frenetic energy appears to take hold of him:

Pourquoi, surtout, l'extrémité du fil était-elle coupée aussi proprement [...] 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 [...] et se convulsant de toutes ses forces au bout de la ligne morte, il avait tranché net le fil [...] le chat retombant [...], quelques dernières vaguelettes venant mourir doucement contre ses flancs ? (LR, 37-38)

There is an absurd incongruity to the final interrogative marker which frames this long, single-sentence phrase, characterised by its diegetically unsubstantiated leaps of logic and a visceral fixation on the violent images of the writhing, dying cat, and containing within it several shorter, declarative phrases describing Biaggi's actions in precise detail, actions which the text will later confirm that the narrator could not have witnessed. If such inconsistencies clue the reader in to the narrator's interpretive difficulties, the veracity of the unstable, embedded conclusions within this 'question' are themselves thrown into even greater doubt by the passage which follows it, the narrator mentioning his initially innocent interpretation of the events surrounding the cat's death ('le chat était tombé à l'eau accidentellement') (LR, 39), when he first witnessed it floating 'ce matin' (LR, 38), before segueing into a description of a scene taking place 'la veille, au soir' (LR, 39) in which he was sitting on the jetty of the harbour, attempting to cut open the carapace of a crab, when suddenly,

...un bruit de pas furtifs [...] m'avait fait lever la tête, le petit couteau serré dans la main droite. Le chat se tenait là, [...] les yeux verts luminescents qui brillait dans la nuit et me regardaient fixement. (LR, 40)

The effect of this foreboding scene is to destabilise the preceding attribution of responsibility for the cat's murder, displacing it from Biaggi onto the narrator, who now appears to be inculcating himself; suggesting that what he is doing is recalling the first time he saw the dead cat, he instead describes encountering it alive, while he is armed with both a knife and a piece of 'bait'. For the reader, presented with only this fragmentary selection of information, the narrator emerges as a more likely culprit, particularly when, in the next paragraph (beginning 'Ce soir-là') (*LR*, 40), he drops the subject, shifting to a tonally very different scene taking place in the hotel, in the presence of his infant son, suggesting dissimulation or obfuscation on his part and feeding the reader's suspicion as to his unreliability. As Schoots highlights, the effect of these inconsistencies is to prompt the reader to disalign their own interpretative activity from that of the narrator and away from the questions to which the latter is ostensibly seeking to respond (Who killed the cat? Is Biaggi really plotting against him?), and instead towards uncovering the reasons behind 'l'angoisse du narrateur: quelle est l'origine de sa paralysie?'<sup>193</sup>

For Mirko Schmidt, *La Réticence* can be understood in terms of a deliberate return to practices of the 'Nouveau Roman' generation, writing that Toussaint, 'reanimates an old form, in this case that of crime and detective fiction, defamiliarizing its content, while maintaining its conventional narrative models and structures.'<sup>194</sup> Other commentators have identified more specific intertextual associations, with Tom McCarthy and Alexander Hertrich both noting that *La Réticence* has a great deal in common with the Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur* in particular, McCarthy describing *La Réticence* as 'like an apprentice's studied emulation' of Robbe-Grillet's novel,<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Schoots, *Passer en douce à la douane*, p. 113.

<sup>194</sup> Schmidt, *Erzählen und Verschweigen*, p. 29 My translation.

<sup>195</sup> Tom McCarthy, 'Stabbing the Olive', *London Review of Books*, 32.3 (2010), 26–28 (p. 26).

while Hertrich identifies a tendency shared by both novels to use temporal dislocation and an iterative ‘structure’ in such a way as to reflect or reveal the psychological disturbance of its narratorial voice, and through which ‘on [...] aperçoit les manies du protagoniste’.<sup>196</sup> *La Réticence* seems to be driven forward largely by its narrator’s compulsion to *over-* and *mis-* interpret the world around him, expressed in the form of a frequently hysterical attentive energy to insignificant details and, as Tom MacCarthy writes, an ‘obsessive attention to surfaces and objects’,<sup>197</sup> overcharging the significance of his encounters with these surfaces and objects via the attribution of mutually contradictory meanings to them. This malfunctioning of the narrator’s ability to make interpretive judgements about the world around him is symbolically expressed in bathetic form in one scene which sees him travelling in a taxi, glimpsing a mushroom from the window as the vehicle passes by:

...le profil familier de quelque champignon qui avait poussé en bordure d’un talus dans un nid putride de feuilles mortes, une jeune coulemelle peut-être, ou quelque amanite, qui disparaissait aussitôt de mon champ de vision et dont je gardais une image fugitive à l’esprit alors que le taxi s’était déjà éloigné de plus d’une centaine de mètres du champignon qui m’avait ainsi intrigué un instant. (LR, 33)

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<sup>196</sup> Alexander Hertich, ‘Jean-Philippe Toussaint et Alain Robbe-Grillet sur le double circuit’, in *Existe-t-il un style Minuit?*, ed. by Michel Bertrand, Karine Germoni, and Annick Jauer (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2014), pp. 135–44 (p. 129).

<sup>197</sup> McCarthy, ‘Stabbing the Olive’, p. 26.

Unable to decide whether the mushroom is a benign ‘coulemelle’ or a poisonous ‘amanite’, his fixation on this kind of snatched, momentarily encountered image, and the way in which he describes the trivial encounter nagging at him, reflects on a miniature scale his more general inability to distinguish, throughout the novel, between danger and harmlessness, and between those facts which are pertinent and those which are insignificant, as will ultimately be confirmed by revelations such as of the banal realities of the circumstances the cat’s death (it did indeed fall into the water accidentally), the identity of the driver of the lurking grey Mercedes (it belongs not to the Biaggis, but rather to the gardener tending the house for the absent couple while they are away), or the question of whether he has murdered Paul Biaggi (the Biaggis are away on a trip). Given the comparisons by commentators between *La Réticence* and the textual practices of Robbe-Grillet, it is worth noting Meretoja’s suggestion that Robbe-Grillet himself ‘follows the legacy of Kafka and Beckett in that instead of engaging in action that manifests their narrative self-understanding, the characters’ agency is limited to waiting – for something to happen *to* them.’<sup>198</sup> The narrator’s obsessive attentive return to events witnessed in his immediate past reflects the etymology of novel’s title, connecting a reluctance to act to an attentive ‘striking back’, but also perhaps, homophonically, to his incessant acts of ‘re-tissance’, whereby his uncontrolled compulsion to weave together dubious semantic connections between unrelated events and objects corresponds to an inability to translate meaningful interpretations into meaningful action.

As Ricœur says, ‘par delà sa fonction mimétique [...] l’imagination a une fonction projective qui appartient au dynamisme même de l’agir’,<sup>199</sup> and the

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<sup>198</sup> Meretoja, *The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory*, p. 101. Meretoja’s emphasis.

<sup>199</sup> Ricœur, *Du texte à l’action*, p. 249.

narrator's titular 'reticence' seems precisely rooted in an inability to decide, to make interpretive judgements, which is intrinsic to the imaginative possibilities involved in turning narrative self-understanding into action. After stealing the letter from the Biaggis, he later returns to their villa to return it, describing 'ce léger frisson d'angoisse passagère que j'éprouvais toujours au moment de devoir lâcher du courrier dans une boîte' (LR, 89). In recounting this moment, his reticence to act is explicitly linked to an anxious interrogation of his own 'compositional' abilities, stylistically reflected by a long, meandering sentence comprised of 33 lines (which is also the narrator's age, 'je venais d'avoir trente-trois ans oui, c'est l'âge où finit l'adolescence') (LR, 101), before he ultimately drops the letter into the letterbox:

...pendant cette seconde durant laquelle je relisais toujours mentalement le courrier que je venais d'écrire, me remémorant toutes les tournures de phrases que j'avais employées [...], quand ce n'était pas le contenu même des lettres qui devenait l'objet de ce doute soudain [...] et que toutes ces sensations diffuses se confondaient en moi, c'est à ce moment-là que je lâchais les lettres – et ma main poursuivit son mouvement (LR, 88-89)

The narrator's compositional difficulties are reflected by other features on the level of sentence structure. We find this in phrases which semi-parenthesise conjunctions and qualifiers, destabilising their habitual function of coherently bringing heterogeneous information together in explanatory relationships of conjuncture or disjuncture, to instead induce brief moments of semantic fragmentation, as in, 'J'étais monté attendre le patron en haut des marches du perron, *et*, au bout d'un

moment...’ (LR, 66) or ‘Les eaux du port étaient très sombres à l’endroit où je me trouvais, *mais*, de temps en temps, je devinais la présence d’un cortège de poissons’.<sup>200</sup> Similar effects in other formulations, such as, ‘Mon fils respirait doucement dans son lit, qui s’était rendormi’ (LR, 97), ‘...en haut des marches, où Biaggi se tenait sans bouger peut-être, qui était là au premier étage en train de m’observer’ (LR, 60), or, ‘La villa des Biaggi était silencieuse et fermée maintenant, qui s’étendait dans la brume derrière les grilles de la propriété’ (LR, 88). These kinds of strangely placed relative pronouns, which are reiterated dozens of times throughout the novel, introduce semantic disruptions between their referent and the action they describe, stylistically reflecting the narrator’s own inability to ‘keep it together’, to meaningfully connect perception, mediated interpretation and action. These do not tend to provide an obstacle to understanding, but in some cases, as in the latter two examples cited above, they can serve to produce bizarre effects, making it momentarily appear almost as if ‘now’ or ‘perhaps’ are themselves the subjects of these sentences, perhaps appropriate given the way in which the novel seems informed by a perpetual present and an aesthetic of constant undecidability. Alternatively, it is almost as if the pronouns become interrogative rather than relative in nature, reflecting the narrator’s inability to distinguish concrete reality from his fevered speculations. It does not seem fortuitous that the narrator describes the Biaggis’ letterbox as *bancale*, playing on its polysemic definition, as not only suggesting unsteadiness or instability, but also the idea of a bank or threshold. If the kinds of threshold which appear in *L’Appareil-photo* are sometimes conveyed as being agreeably liberating for its narrator, moments which connote liminality in *La*

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<sup>200</sup> My emphasis.

*Réticence* tend to be associated with an anxiety as to the bifurcating effects of taking decisive action or deciding on a determinate interpretation.

After hearing the sound of a typewriter from the room above him and noticing a new suitcase in the lobby of the hotel, he becomes utterly convinced that Biaggi must have rented a room, simply in order to observe him. When he finally plucks up the courage to investigate, after stealing a key from the reception, the narrator's hesitation is once again stylistically reflected, 'Je me tenais immobile devant la porte [...] et je ne bougeais pas, persuadé que c'était la chambre de Biaggi, que c'était dans cette chambre qu'il s'était installé [...] et que c'était dans cette chambre qu'il travaillait' (*LR*, 77), as he describes in precise detail what expects to find behind the door; Biaggi's typewriter, his ashtray, sheets of paper, that is, items which form part of a clichéd iconography of a writer. As we saw with the unease of the narrator of *La Salle de bain* when confronted with the presence of an aspiring novelist, Biaggi's transformation from acquaintance into antagonist seems significant in that his status as an absent writer has ironic implications for the more general way in which the text thematises the threat of narrative-building to itself; Biaggi, the original *destinataire* of the narrator's letter becomes, at least in the mind of the novel's narrator, the absent *destinateur* of the events of the text, responsible for orchestrating events over which the narrator appears to have lost control.<sup>201</sup>

Throughout the novel, each time the narrator uncovers a benign explanation for the presence of the incongruous objects or unexplained events that he has speculatively invested with threatening significations, the disconfirmation of the appropriateness of the disturbing circumstances or associations he has attached to

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<sup>201</sup> I made a point similar to this in my MA dissertation.



them does not seem to lead him to doubt his own abilities to discern the truth, but rather simply engenders a further shift of his paranoid focus onto some new object of suspicion. When he is confronted with a reality contrary to his expected encounter with the traces of Biaggi ('Il n'y avait rien de tout cela, c'était une chambre occupée par une dame apparemment' (*LR*, 78), the text quickly introduces another source for his paranoid extrapolations, undermining the credibility of his ability to interpret his surrounding reality. After leaving the room, the narrator encounters the hotel's owner, who tells him that somebody left the downstairs bay windows open the previous night (we already know that this was the narrator, making a trip to the harbour) and that he found a black cat which had entered the hotel.

The narrator had previously stated his belief that it was Biaggi who had maliciously locked him out of the hotel, but while this provides yet another perfectly rational explanation for one of the 'unknowns' that had provoked his anxiety ('c'était donc le patron [...] qui avait refermé la baie vitrée derrière moi la nuit dernière') (*LR*, 78-79), the narrator instead begins to believe that the hotel owner is colluding with Biaggi, initially leaving the windows open because 'il savait très bien que Biaggi se trouvait encore dehors à ce moment-là' (*LR*, 80), before reasserting his conviction that Biaggi was indeed responsible, 'm'ayant précédé à l'hôtel en revenant du port' (*LR*, 80). The appearance of the living cat also disturbs the coherence of the text because, until this point, the only cat we have seen was the dead one in the harbour. This evokes Schrödinger's famous thought-experiment; in a sealed container (the text) both cat and the possibly murdered Biaggi appear as simultaneously alive and dead until the box is opened (the text ends). Any expectations of sensational resolution, however, will also be disappointed, for it will

turn out that the Biaggis are away on a trip, and that there are two identical cats in the village of Sasuelo.<sup>202</sup>

As Schoots puts it, it becomes increasingly clear that ‘ce n’est pas la réalité mais les interprétations du narrateur qui sont la source de l’angoisse.’<sup>203</sup> It is perhaps this which most strongly associates the novel with the textual practices of Robbe-Grillet, ‘privile[ing] disorientation, hesitation and non-comprehension rather than understanding, knowledge and resolution.’<sup>204</sup> This is never clearer than when the narrator alternates between conflicting interpretations, the reality of which are, to the reader, obviously mutually exclusive, but without being able to settle on one, as occurs when he graphically evokes the strangling of Paul Biaggi in a long, breathless passage, appearing to inculcate himself in the act of murder, but then shortly afterwards resumes his fevered anxiety that Biaggi is following him:

...quelqu’un [...] l’avait rejoint sur la jetée pendant la nuit, quelqu’un qui s’était approché de lui par-derrière sous le même clair de lune toutes les nuits identique [...] et qui lui avait passé sa cravate autour du cou, [...] les mains de Biaggi s’accrochaient à ses poignets pour le faire lâcher prise [...] et [...] Biaggi avait lâché prise, tombant sur le quai avec autour du cou ce qui restait de ma cravate – un coup de pied suffisait pour faire basculer le corps dans le port. (*LR*, 98-99)

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<sup>202</sup> This paragraph contains elements from my MA dissertation.

<sup>203</sup> Fieke Schoots, ‘*Passer en douce à la douane*’, p. 126.

<sup>204</sup> Meretoja, *The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory*, p. 118.

As Jean-Benoît Gabriel notes, ‘le regard de l’autre – Biaggi – est lié à l’enfermement du narrateur. C’est, du moins, ce que sa paranoïa lui fait croire’.<sup>205</sup> The images of the perpetual full moon with its ‘longues nuages noirs qui glissaient lentement dans le halo’ which appear with increasing frequency throughout the novel not only serve to mark disruptions in cosmological time, but evoke the bisected eye of Buñuel’s *Un Chien Andalou*, where the opening image of an ocular membrane being split open serves to call forth an oneiric, associative logic which is at odds with narrative coherence. Schmidt is right to note that, in general, the ‘humour and ironic interjections of the previous novels yield to an ominous atmosphere which for the most part conditions *La Réticence*’,<sup>206</sup> but it is also notable that, in the scattered scenes of the narrator with his son, this ominous atmosphere is periodically attenuated by moments of tender affection, and it is only in such scenes that the novel’s three parenthesised interjections appear. The first of these is rather humorous, when the narrator points out an elderly lady to his son, ‘tu ne veux pas lui faire un bisou? Regarde, moi je fais un bisou à Marie-Ange, dis-je (et je fis un bisou à la dame, qui parut un peu étonnée).’ (*LR*, 22) In the second parenthesised comment, this seems to simply express the narrator’s affection for his son, separated (or bracketed) from the predominating anxiety of the text, ‘(il dormait dans mes bras, et je sentais la chaleur de son petit corps endormi contre ma poitrine)’ (*LR*, 67), whereas the third could almost be interpreted as ironically mocking the novel’s iterative structure, ‘La route montait légèrement et les roues de la poussette grinçaient (c’était nouveau, ça).’ (*LR*, 83)

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<sup>205</sup> Jean-Benoît Gabriel, ‘Fuir l’image avec désinvolture’, p. 53.

<sup>206</sup> Schmidt, *Erzählen und Verschweigen*, p. 30. My translation.

The son seems to be ‘narratively competent’ in a way that the father is not, watching a leaf blowing in the wind ‘dont il suivait les pérégrinations d’un œil soucieux depuis le macadam de la chaussée où elle avait commencé à s’envoler jusqu’à son point d’arrivée sur le bord de la route’ (LR, 83). At one point, the narrator points his son’s attention to donkey out the window of his hotel room, a scene which he evoked earlier in the novel, evoking a sense of desolation or decay’, before realising that ‘c’était mon doigt qu’il regardait plutôt, en réalité, qu’il finit par attraper d’ailleurs et serrer doucement dans sa petite main’ (LR, 96). Unlike the other uses of ‘en réalité’, which Schoots points out are used ironically and constitute a strategy by which ‘le narrateur met le lecteur en garde contre sa fabulation’,<sup>207</sup> this time, buttressed between the gaze and the grasp of the infant allows for the (momentary) impression of some kind of ontological ‘safety’ based in both affect and physical sensation. The son, ‘solidement maintenu dans sa poussette par un petit harnais’ (LR, 14), untroubled by the obsessive attempts to construct narrative coherence and content to simply experience a succession of moments linked by pure sensation.

Schoots notes, if ‘les événements témoignent d’une progression, la structure récursive suggère, d’autre part, qu’on piétine sur place, dans un éternel présent.’<sup>208</sup> It is perhaps the continual thematisation of the narrator being threatened by an observing, absent author, typing from the room upstairs which, in keeping with the fictional setting of Sasuelo, most strongly differentiates *La Réticence* from Toussaint’s other fiction and problematises the possibilities of understanding this text purely on the level of the narrator’s interpretive capabilities. With the

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<sup>207</sup> Schoots, ‘*Passer en douce à la douane*’, p. 126.

<sup>208</sup> Schoots, ‘*Passer en douce à la douane*’, p. 126.

breakdown of the narrator's interpretive coherence, we also find a certain degree of breakdown in the illusion of the narrator as its composing agent, or at least as an agent with the power to heuristically mobilise his acts of interpretation. A possible derivation of the name Biaggi itself is from the Latin *blaesus*, meaning to 'stammer', which may encourage us to see the text on a different level, in terms of the Toussaint's description in *L'Urgence et la Patience*, '[l]'expérience douloureuse de l'écriture de *La Réticence*, livre que je n'arrivais pas à écrire, que j'ai failli abandonner plusieurs fois.' (*U&P*, 22) This interpretation of the novel as partly metaphor for the tribulations of the writing process may be seen in the narrator's attitude to images of harmonious ornamentation, as when he eats in a local restaurant *Chez Georges*, and mockingly remarks upon the clichéd red and white checkered tableclothes,

...avec, pour parfaire encore l'harmonie sourcilleuse de la décoration, dans une sorte de recherche délicate de raffinement dans les moindres détails, des petits ronds de serviette en bois qui servaient également d'anneaux pour les tringles à rideaux. (*LR*, 26)

As Schmidt notes, 'the increasingly threatening atmosphere [...] ultimately reveals itself as deceptive'.<sup>209</sup> The text ends after the narrator, having uncovered reasonable explanations for all the signs of Biaggi's presence that he thought he had perceived, meets a fisherman in the harbour who explains to him how the cat drowned accidentally, which leads him to make the link between his mistaken connection

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<sup>209</sup> Schmidt, *Erzählen und Verschweigen*, p. 30. My translation.

between two incongruous experiences which triggered the whole series of anxious interpretations which constituted the novel: ‘ce n’est que plus tard que j’étais rendu moi-même sur la jetée en réalité, et que j’avais découvert le chat mort dans le port, et, sur la place du village, la vieille Mercedes grise’ (*LR*, 157). The return of narrative simplicity allows the narrator to reinsert himself into the material reality of the world, rather than to frantically attempting to reinterpret it, and he seems to take a leaf out of his son’s book, by allowing himself to be absorbed in the simple pleasures of physical sensation:

Je sentais le contact froid du sable sous la plante de mes pieds, [...] et j’enfonçais mes pieds à chaque pas davantage dans le sol pour m’imprégner toujours plus de la sensation de bien-être que me procurait le contact du sable mouillé. (*LR*, 158)

## **Conclusion**

We began this chapter by introducing several key concepts of Ricœur’s work on the link between narrativity and agency. We showed how Ricœur regards the work of narrativity as central to any understanding of human action, since narrative logic underpins how we make action intelligible through the attribution of networks of meaning and causality. We showed how from this starting point Ricœur develops a concept of the creative work of poetic discourse and its semantic innovations, emphasising the fact that experimentation with the logic of narrativity is intrinsic to how new meaning is produced in general. We saw how this can permit the linguistic

approximation of some of the more aporetic aspects of phenomenological experience, but also how the configurational act itself is the paradigmatic moment of agency, since it is predicated on the narrating subject identifying and communicating meaning.

Ricœur tells us that without the confrontation between the configured text and the interpretative act of reading that ‘la chose du texte’, its *meaning*, as regards the reader’s recontextualisation of the experience it conveys into their own practical field, cannot be discerned. ‘Son statut ontologique reste en suspens [...] en attente de lecture. C’est seulement *dans* la lecture que le dynamisme de configuration achève son parcours.’<sup>210</sup> ‘La signifiante de l’œuvre de fiction procède de cette intersection.’<sup>211</sup> We saw in the introduction to this chapter how Ricœur’s focus on the intentional basis for human action allows us to see these narrating characters as themselves the readers and writers of their own lives engaged in a search for meaning and outlined Ricœur’s double conception of personal identity in terms of the *idem/ipse* pair and considered the implications this has for an understanding of agency.

We then began to show how *La Salle de bain* explores these questions from the perspective of an individual attempting to resist his implication within the external forces of his Being-in-the-world through non-narrative means (hiding, flight, deferral). We saw how these attempts to domesticate an experience of temporality by forcing upon it an atemporal geometry of phenomenological desire in the absence of meaningful action ultimately serve to reinforce the narrator’s sense of powerlessness. We also saw how such failures can be contrasted with the productive,

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<sup>210</sup> Ricœur, *Temps et récit III*, pp. 286-287.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287.

narrating work by which the narrator appears to eventually create the possibilities for reshaping his lived reality through the narrating artifice of anachrony. We concluded that the effects of simulating a problematic *past experience* in Venice as a hypothetical *future consequence* of the narrator's inaction in the first section represents a configurational act of 'working-through' and the creation of what we called a 'space of evitability', allowing revised self-understanding for the narrator and the creation of new possibilities for action beyond the text.

We then showed how Toussaint explores the problem of agency from a different perspective in *L'Appareil-photo*. Rather than resisting the flow of time, we find a narrator who immerses himself in the living present. Instead of attempting to force temporal reality to conform to his will, he lets events take their course and seems content to observe their little absurdities rather than imposing upon them any strong intentions. We suggested that while this allows the narrator to focus on moments of affective or sensory intensity, this ultimately gives way to something different, as the narrator becomes aware of a problematic deficit of personal meaning, and we concluded that this is responsible for the tonal shift which takes place towards the end of the novel. We analysed the narrator's various attempts to express an image of what he calls his *élan furieux* with reference to Ricœur's *mêmeté/ipséité* pair and suggested that what the narrator appears to be seeking to express is the moment of initiative, the configuring act which characterises *ipse* identity. We concluded that it is the text of the novel itself which may ultimately provide something of this sought-after expression.

The readings of Toussaint's first two novels may encourage us view his work as expressing a cautiously optimistic vision of the possibilities of reflexive narrative refiguration in terms of its how it serves his narrators in rethinking their own lives,



identities and sense of agency, in this sense supporting Jean Duffy's view that narrative in contemporary fiction can be conceptualised in terms of a flawed, but nevertheless 'approximative mode of self-constitution'.<sup>212</sup> In our discussion of *La Réticence*, however, we focused on these flaws, showing the way in which Toussaint's fiction does not unambiguously endorse narrating activity as propitious to thinking around aporetic questions of temporal experience, human agency or identity, but also the ways it reflects upon the limitations and even dangers of narrative interpretation to obscure or damage our ability to understand reality.

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<sup>212</sup> Jean Duffy, *Thresholds of Meaning* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), p. 301.

## Chapter 2: The Other in the Self

This chapter will examine the role of irony in Toussaint's work, with a particular focus on how it is employed in representations of the relationship between self and society. In a sense, this could be understood as a movement 'outwards' from the thematic focus of the first chapter, which analysed the ways in which three of Toussaint's first-person narrators articulate and critically interrogate their sense of agency and personal identity, in each case melancholically backgrounded by their keen awareness of an entropic temporality which delimits human life and all its projects.

The first chapter stressed the connection between narrators' reflective and reflexive engagements with their own established or 'sedimented' narrative understandings about events in their lived past and attempts to generate novel possibilities for action in the future. It was suggested that, despite these (fictional) narrators often appearing rather unengaged or aimless, *La Salle de bain* and *L'Appareil-photo* can be fruitfully understood as acts of narrative refiguration, as their self-conscious attempts to textually renegotiate aspects of their lived past experience, in ways implied to be motivated by (often only minimally presented) problems or difficulties they face in their (narrating) present, arguing that Toussaint's narrators are something like reticent hermeneutists, critical 'readers' of their own lives, before finally discussing the ways in which *La Réticence* constitutes something of a corrective to an understanding of practices of reflexive narrativity in Toussaint's fiction as unambiguously ameliorative or straightforwardly capable of

imaginatively transfiguring its narrators' lived realities in ways which are exclusively oriented towards positive outcomes.

Up until this point we have looked exclusively at Toussaint's first-person novels, each of which constitutes a highly partial account by a single narrating individual encountering the world around him. This chapter will shift the focus somewhat away from that relationship between self and the material world, concentrating instead on the manifestations of the relationship between self and society in Toussaint's work, particularly in terms of how various forms of ironic discourse are deployed in order to negotiate this relationship. Of the four texts under consideration here, only two are novels, and only one is written in the first-person. The first half of the chapter will examine Toussaint's third-person novel, *Monsieur* (1986),<sup>213</sup> and his first-person novel, *La Télévision* (1997),<sup>214</sup> discussing different 'ironic strategies' used in each novel, and arguing that these serve a crucial function in Toussaint's literary oeuvre, both in the way that his narrators engage in critical self-reflection about their own lives and their place within society, and also in how the texts present metatextual, 'quasi-theoretical' reflections about the possibilities of narrative form itself.

The second half of the chapter will turn to two non-literary texts, analysing two films that Toussaint wrote and directed. First, *La Sévillane* (1992),<sup>215</sup> an adaptation of *L'Appareil Photo*, and then *La Patinoire* (1999),<sup>216</sup> from his original screenplay, arguing that these films use ironic strategies of their own and that, here too, this is strongly involved in both the representation of the relationship between

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<sup>213</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *Monsieur* (Paris: Minuit, 1986).

<sup>214</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *La Télévision* (Paris: Minuit, 1997).

<sup>215</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *La Sévillane* (Les Films des Tournelles, 1992).

<sup>216</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *La Patinoire* (Les Films des Tournelles, 1999).

self and society and in the generation of quasi-theoretical reflections which interrogate the particularities of the cinematic medium. As Demoulin and Piret have suggested, ‘ [q]u’il use de la plume ou de la caméra, Toussaint interroge [...] toujours sa propre énonciation à travers le construction narrative.’<sup>217</sup> Of particular interest here will be the ways in which both films, to differing extents, appear to pose the question of whether the necessarily collaborative nature of filmmaking is a barrier to the ‘perspectivist’ possibilities of literature, and also how this relates to the fracturing of the novels’ illusion of coincidence between implied author and narrator. Throughout this chapter it will be argued that, in spite of the seemingly radical departure from first-person enunciation via the ‘modal irony’ of *Monsieur*, and in spite of the self-conscious signalling of enunciative difficulties associated with working in cinema, this does little to displace what Frank Wagner calls the ‘rôle fondateur du perspectivisme’<sup>218</sup> in Toussaint’s work, in which a thematic concern with individual subjectivity remains central.

## **Irony**

Before analysing the ‘ironic strategies’ of the novels, it is necessary to clarify just which kinds of irony we are talking about. Wayne C. Booth compares the conceptual nebulosity of the word to that of the aesthetic notion of the ‘sublime’, (a nebulosity which will, in fact, provide the critical locus for our analyses in the following chapter), suggesting that both terms ‘can stand for a quality or gift in the speaker or

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<sup>217</sup> Laurent Demoulin and Pierre Piret, ‘Introduction’, *Textyles*, 38, (2010), 7-11 (p. 9).

<sup>218</sup> Frank Wagner, ‘Monsieur Jean Philippe Toussaint et la notion de vérité (pour une poétique perspectiviste)’, *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 25-34 (p.32).

writer, for something in the work, and for something that happens to the reader or auditor.’<sup>219</sup> Ernst Behler notes that, in its ‘pre-Romantic’ form, irony was first and foremost understood as a rhetorical technique, where ‘the intention of the speaker is contrary to what he actually says’ but where, at the same time, certain ‘rules insure that we actually understand the intended meaning.’<sup>220</sup> In spoken verbal irony, such rules allow us to code discourse *as* ironic for our interlocutors, ‘distinguish[ing] irony from mere lying’, through our ‘intonation, emphasis, and gesture [...] to help reveal the real or intended meaning.’<sup>221</sup>

Jonathan Tittler considers that there is a necessary connection between this sort of verbal, rhetorical or intentional irony and that other large category of ironies, denoted variously as ‘situational’, ‘accidental’ or ‘cosmic’. He defines rhetorical irony as the intended production of meanings by a speaker via words which appear antithetical to their standard or literal interpretation, through ‘the coincidence of divergent signifieds in a singular signifier’,<sup>222</sup> attaching to this the adjective ‘ironical’. To situational irony he ascribes the adjective ‘ironic’, defined as ‘paradoxical [...] circumstance, [...] contrary to expectations or to reason itself’.<sup>223</sup> For Tittler, appreciating irony, whether of the ironic or the ironical variety, is fundamentally tied up with affective distance. It is this, he says, which allows us ‘to reflect on a situation as being ironic (rather than merely experience it as catastrophic) and [...] to indulge in the circuitous [...] mode of interplay called ironical,’ and a

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<sup>219</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. xiv.

<sup>220</sup> Ernst Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity* (London: University of Washington Press, 1990), p. 81.

<sup>221</sup> Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*, p. 76.

<sup>222</sup> Jonathan Tittler, ‘Approximately Irony’, *Modern Language Studies*, 15 (1985), 32-46 (p. 34).

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

key criterion for the articulation of this kind of ‘ironical’ discourse, as Tittler frames it, is that ‘the speaker is detached, reticent’.<sup>224</sup>

When we speak of intentional or rhetorical irony in this chapter, this will refer to the ‘ironical’ dissimulation of a speaker behind a discursive and/or affective mask. Booth argues that whether or not we recognise these forms of dissimulation in a literary context is determined principally by the reader’s ability to differentiate between the obvious or surface meaning of a phrase, a passage, or a text and ‘the intentions that constitute[d] the creative act.’<sup>225</sup> For Booth, this process takes the form of four stages, deployed rapidly in sequence – first, a rejection of literal meaning, then experimentation with alternative interpretations, followed by ‘a decision made about the author’s knowledge or beliefs’, and finally a decision made about new meaning, which will rely upon ‘the unspoken beliefs that the reader has decided to attribute to [the author].’<sup>226</sup> If intentional irony is always a matter of making interpretative judgements, Booth argues that ‘stable ironies’ can nevertheless exist because, in many instances, readers or listeners can be relied upon to make similar judgements about the nature of the contradictions between what an author, narrator or speaker is saying and what we think they really mean.

If this is in keeping with the ‘Pre-Romantic’ conceptualisation of irony as Behler puts it, he suggests that, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, a rather different kind of irony began to gain ground, promoted by aestheticians such as Friedrich Schlegel. This ‘new’ ironic discourse could be defined in opposition to the ‘stable’ ironies

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p. 33, p. 34.

<sup>225</sup> Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, p. 91.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., p. 11, p. 12. When Booth uses ‘author’ here, it is not clear whether he means the literal author of a text, an ‘implied author’ as interpreted and reconstructed by the reader, or simply the ‘author’ of a particular discourse, that is, its speaker. For our purposes, it is this third kind of ‘author’ which interests us, that is, the narrators of Toussaint’s novels as the simulated ‘authors’ of the texts, presented as responsible for producing their ironies.

described by Booth, of the kind which Behler describes as being ‘based on complete agreement, [...] understanding between speaker and listener’.<sup>227</sup> By contrast, while ‘Romantic’ irony still involves the coding of discourse *as* ironic, it differentiates itself by imposing progressively greater obstacles to our ability to determine what it is that the speaker ‘really means’.<sup>228</sup> For Booth, an instance of ironic discourse becomes ‘unstable’ in this way when its speaker ‘refuses to declare himself, however subtly, *for* any stable proposition, even the opposite of whatever proposition his irony fervently denies.’<sup>229</sup> If the ‘resolution’ of intentional irony is premised on making judgements about a speaker’s true intentions, this becomes increasingly difficult when the speaker refuses to advance, even implicitly, any grounds for us to make those judgements. Behler sees this element of instability as central to the interrogative power of irony, arguing that ‘the most crucial issues of irony reside in the area of self-conscious saying and writing and concern the problems of linguistic articulation, communication and understanding in regard to truth.’<sup>230</sup> For Fredric Jameson, it is these ‘unstable’ ironies, which provide ‘the supreme theoretical concept and value of traditional modernism and the very locus of the notion of self-consciousness and the reflexive’.<sup>231</sup>

At the more extreme end of this ironical instability, we could place the form of irony advocated by Richard Rorty, who praises the liberating potential of the

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<sup>227</sup> Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*, p. 81.

<sup>228</sup> Oergel suggests that Schlegel saw his Romantic irony as ‘capable of completely representing, and communicating, human reality, because through irony dichotomous elements can be co-represented, integrated, if not synthesised.’ Maïke Oergel, ‘The Aesthetics of Historicity: Dialectical Dynamics in Schiller’s and Friedrich Schlegel’s Concepts of the Art of Modernity’, in *Aesthetics and Modernity from Schiller to the Frankfurt School*, ed. by Jerome Carroll, Steve Giles, and Maïke Oergel (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 45–68 (p. 60).

<sup>229</sup> Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, p. 240.

<sup>230</sup> Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*, p. 111.

<sup>231</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 258-259.

ironic free exchange of discourse positions in philosophy and cultural criticism, suggesting that this practice may help us to guard against becoming trapped within any given ‘final vocabulary’.<sup>232</sup> This would encourage us to relativise the positions we hold and assess them more dispassionately, alongside competing accounts, so that, as Clare Colebrook puts it, we would ‘not [be] troubled by, nor would we violently react to, other narratives or language games.’<sup>233</sup> Rortyan irony is like a strong form of the detachment or reticence which Tittler describes as necessary for ironical discourse, and its emphasis on renewed self-understanding is also rather reminiscent of Ricœurian *distanciation*, where ‘le texte est la médiation par laquelle nous nous comprenons nous-même.’<sup>234</sup> If Jameson sees irony as central to modernism, he nevertheless expresses concern that the frenetic adoption of disposable ironical identities and discourses has gathered pace in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, in opposition to Rorty’s enthusiasm for the relativistic tension produced by a relatively uncommitted engagement with competing discourse positions, Jameson sees the progressively expanding domain of irony as troublingly well-suited to the forces of late capitalism. It is perhaps this question of ‘commitment’ which best demarcates the blurry boundary between the comparatively engaged experimentalism and affectively distanced self-consciousness of modernism (and latterly ‘meta-modernism’)<sup>235</sup> and the more pronounced experimental extremes, the eclipse of the self, and the privileging of an aesthetic of discursive polyphony in postmodernism. Whether we see Schlegel’s ‘indissoluble

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<sup>232</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 73.

<sup>233</sup> Claire Colebrook, *Irony* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 155.

<sup>234</sup> Ricœur, *Du texte à l’action: Essais d’herméneutique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986), p. 129.

<sup>235</sup> ‘The metamodern is constituted by a tension, no, the double-bind, of a modern desire for *sens* and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all’. Timotheus & Acker Vermeulen, Rabin van der, ‘Notes on Metamodernism’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, 2 (2010), 1-14 (p. 6).



antagonism' and Rorty's 'pure irony' as multitudinous and robust challenges to discursive cultural hegemonies, or as leading to an unedifyingly disengaged discursive free-for-all probably depends in large part on the context in which they are deployed, but it is also worth echoing Booth's point that such matters will remain largely ones of taste: 'we all tend to mistrust both those who have less of a stomach for underminings and unspoken negations than ourselves and those who can happily accommodate more.'<sup>236</sup>

### *Monsieur*

The highly elliptical narrative of *Monsieur* details events which took place up to three years prior to the point from which its narration begins: 'Le jour où, voici trois ans, Monsieur entra dans ses nouvelles fonctions, on lui attribua un bureau personnel, jusqu'à présent c'était parfait, au seizième étage, tour Léonard-de-Vinci.' (*M*, 7) This character, identified only as the eponymous 'Monsieur' by the austere declarative voice of the text, spends unproductive days at work, separates from his fiancée, has a brief holiday with a friend in Cannes, experiments with various new living arrangements, tries to avoid a series of people making demands on his time, and finally meets a woman, Anna Bruckhardt, soon after which the novel comes to an end. Throughout, the detached third-person narrative voice which recounts the travails of this 'Monsieur' plays on the facelessness and anonymity of his place within his world of work. Mirko Schmidt suggests that the protagonist 'is already

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<sup>236</sup> Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, p. 276.

represented as a blank space par excellence by his “name”<sup>237</sup> and the appellation ‘Monsieur’ is also significant in the way it is often used in France as a formal second-person address to male strangers, particularly in the context of client-customer relationships. As Jonathan Lear says, irony only ‘becomes possible when one encounters animals who pretend’,<sup>238</sup> and professional work environments, with their particular linguistic conventions and regulated codes of behaviour, tend to provide fertile ground for pretence-laden ironical activity. The contextually inappropriate use of ‘business-speak’ by both the character, Monsieur, and the narrator, this register of corporate formality, will also find its echo in *La Télévision*, in the form of the narrator’s often amusingly context-inappropriate academic pomposity. Both can be seen as culturally localised ‘final vocabularies’, rigid artefacts of a linguistic *mêmeté* which are characterised by the sorts of cultural ‘automaticity’ described by Henri Bergson as providing reliable sources of humour, centred on revealing the ‘réglementation[s] automatique[s] de la société.’<sup>239</sup>

Bergson argues that, in order to operate effectively within modern societies, individuals must be capable of incorporating a certain ‘elasticity’ into their behaviour, adapting to the dynamism and particularity of social life and a community of others, rather than cleaving rigidly to a fixed idea of who or what they are, as expressed in his statement that ‘ce qui est comique par-dessus tout [...] c’est de se solidifier en caractère.’<sup>240</sup> Bergson suggests that character humour is generally premised on this kind of ‘accumulated automaticity’ or ‘solidification’, with which he describes the development of an individual’s outwardly recognisable

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<sup>237</sup> Mirko F. Schmidt, *Jean-Philippe Toussaint: Erzählen und Verschweigen* (Paderborn: Books on Demand GmbH, 2001), p. 134. My translation.

<sup>238</sup> Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 10.

<sup>239</sup> Henri Bergson, *Le Rire: Essai sur la signification du comique* (Paris: Quadrige, 2012), p. 36.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

characteristics (resulting in ‘ce qu’il y a de *tout fait* dans notre personne’),<sup>241</sup> traits which can be mimetically reproduced for comic effect. This ‘solidification’ of externally recognisable traits, which turns a living human being into a recognisable ‘thing’ to be laughed at, is conceptually similar to the processes of ‘sedimentation’<sup>242</sup> which Ricœur describes as constituting the development of the ‘sameness’ aspect of an individual’s personal identity. Bergson’s notion that what is truly funny is when ‘une personne nous donne l’impression d’une chose’<sup>243</sup> finds an echo in Ricœur’s linking of a particular focus on externally recognisable traits to an objectifying perspective on human life, as expressed when he writes that ‘le caractère, c’est véritablement le “quoi” du “qui”’.<sup>244</sup>

Without entering into the more troubling aspects of Bergson’s theory of humour,<sup>245</sup> or endorsing the dualistic philosophy of ‘vitalism’ that he would later come to advocate, we can identify strong connections between Ricœur’s *mêmeté* and what Bergson calls *le mécanique*, humorous rigidity or automaticity, and also between Ricœur’s notion of acting selfhood (*ipséité*) and Bergson’s *vivant*. Humour is a notoriously problematic concept to analyse, and it is not our intention to attempt such a task here, although Patricia French’s perceptive dissertation on Toussaintien humour offers a number of insights on the subject.<sup>246</sup> What is of interest for our purposes is the way in which Bergson’s notion of character humour is premised on the act of bringing out ‘la part d’automatisme qu’[une personne] a laissée

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>242</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), p. 196.

<sup>243</sup> Bergson, *Le Rire*, p. 44. Bergson’s emphasis.

<sup>244</sup> Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, p. 147.

<sup>245</sup> That Bergson was writing in a context very different to our own is perhaps best illustrated by the disturbingly casual way that he sets out to determine which physical disabilities and deformities constitute the greatest sources of humour, or to answer nagging questions which, one infers, he thinks is on the mind of his readership, such as ‘pourquoi rit-on d’un nègre?’ Bergson, *Le Rire*, p. 31.

<sup>246</sup> Patricia French, ‘L’humour dans l’oeuvre de Jean-Philippe Toussaint’ (unpublished master’s thesis, Université de Bourgogne, 2002).

s'introduire dans sa personne',<sup>247</sup> in a way which is highly consonant with the kind of dissimulating, imitative ironical activity described above, and which illustrates a disjuncture between self-as-subject and self-as-object, a thematically central concern in both *Monsieur* and *La Télévision*.

A deadpan, emotionally detached account of events persistently centred on a single protagonist, in which direct psychological exposition is largely withheld, could be regarded as a characteristic feature of any of Toussaint's early novels. As a number of commentators have noted, *Monsieur* shares with Toussaint's first-person texts the fragmentary and elusive manner in which its narration reveals the protagonist's world, where '[its] gaze does not allow the onlooker to seize the totality of the real',<sup>248</sup> presenting discontinuous episodes from Monsieur's life without any immediately obvious narrative thread connecting them. Such resemblances with Toussaint's other novels are not only present at the level of the narrative gaze; the reclusive, evasive behaviour we see from the main character, Monsieur, is recognisably of a kind with that of Toussaint's first-person narrators, exhibiting a familiar reticence when it comes to interacting with others, an unease about taking decisive action or making future plans, and predilections for retreating to quiet spaces to contemplate and for losing himself in rule-based abstractions while failing to take action in real life (quantum physics, table-tennis and chess in this case).

With *Monsieur*, it is Tittler's kind of 'ironical' activity which is of central importance, that which involves the dissimulation of the speaker behind a discursive mask. What we could call the novel's central 'ironic strategy' is incarnated by the

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<sup>247</sup> Bergson, *Le Rire*, p. 25.

<sup>248</sup> Jean-Louis Hippolyte, *Fuzzy fiction* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), p. 45.

fact that *Monsieur*, unique among Toussaint's novels, is narrated entirely in the third-person, troubling the reader's ability to clearly and directly attribute the narrative voice of the text to its protagonist. Hanna Meretoja argues that a key technique of the writers of the *nouveau roman* was to disorientingly undermine the reader's ability to 'naturalise' the discourse of a text, to take the sense-making position of establishing an 'unequivocal narrative perspective [...] often considered to be a crucial condition of narrativity.'<sup>249</sup> In contrast to a novel such as Robbe-Grillet's *Dans le Labyrinthe*, which Meretoja takes as a prime example of this sort of decentred narrativity, Toussaint's *Monsieur* presents no logical barriers to readings which seek to reconcile the perspectives of its narrator and its protagonist, taking them as instances of a single individual, as Hippolyte does when he writes that the novel's 'at least bifocal' narrative gaze alternates between 'two narrators (one homodiegetic, the other heterodiegetic) who in reality are two shades of the same narrating persona.'<sup>250</sup> Although he does not choose to pursue the matter, there is significant textual support for Hippolyte's assertion, as will be discussed below. Nevertheless, we should remain wary of overstating how obviously the narrator and the protagonist can be collapsed into a singular entity, as dogmatically 'naturalising' the novel's narrating voice could result in the failure to take account of the crucial distancing effects of the novel's heterodiegetic narration and the powerful sense of anonymity, banality, and absurdity which it confers upon the elliptically presented series of events in the life of Monsieur.

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<sup>249</sup> Meretoja, *The narrative turn in fiction and theory: the crisis and return of storytelling from Robbe-Grillet to Tournier* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 34.

<sup>250</sup> Hippolyte, *Fuzzy fiction*, p. 47.

As Glasco has noted, *Monsieur* ‘revolves around a general theme of evasion’.<sup>251</sup> Despite his ostensibly elevated position, as ‘un des trois ou quatre plus important responsables commerciaux de Fiat-France’ (*M*, 21), Monsieur actively seeks to avoid drawing attention to himself at work, and this is taken to farcical excess when, during a board meeting, we see him physically sheltering behind a female colleague and some-time confidante, Dubois-Lacour, so as not to fall into the eye-line of his superiors, moving ‘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*, 12) At the outset of the novel, this behaviour appears to be anchored in Monsieur’s displeasure at the productivity imperative at work, personified by nagging colleagues who turn up at his office ‘pour obtenir de lui, *cette fois-ci*, des faits précis, des chiffres, du concret’ (*M*, 14),<sup>252</sup> suggesting that he may be facing difficulty in the performance of his duties, or that he has failed to ‘deliver’ on previous occasions.

Throughout the novel, such encounters are never accompanied by any direct psychological exposition, but something of their effect upon Monsieur is, nevertheless, often indirectly discernible through his reported (evasive) behaviour, or through details about his physical responses which we could associate with stress or anxiety. Sitting in his office, we see him making vague reassurances to his colleagues, ‘en regardant ses doigts [...] les tempes légèrement moites, [...] il promettait des tableaux, que sais-je moi, des graphiques.’ (*M*, 13-14) When questioned directly by one of his superiors in the board meeting, Monsieur is in the habit of responding immediately, ‘d’une manière sèche, précise, technique,

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<sup>251</sup> Sarah L. Glasco, *Parody and Palimpsest: Intertextuality, Language and the Ludic in the Novels of Jean-Philippe Toussaint* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), p. 51.

<sup>252</sup> My emphasis.

professionnelle. Hip, hop. Après quoi, les doigts tremblant légèrement, il se replaçait dans l'ombre de sa voisine.' (*M*, 12) Although Monsieur's evasive use of 'business-speak' formality is only described by the narrator here, multiple examples of this register kind of language appear as free-indirect discourse throughout the novel, generally when Monsieur is faced with high-stakes interpersonal encounters, for example, when he abruptly decides to travel to Cannes without his fiancée, and breaks the news to her via the sort of insincere, pseudo-participatory language normally used to draw business meetings to a close: 'D'autres questions? Non. Parfait.' (*M*, 25) This linguistic coincidence of Monsieur and the narrator hints at their shared identity, although if this is the case, the narrator seems to want to throw the reader of the scent with his apparent admission of ignorance in regards to Monsieur's professional obligations ('que sais-je moi'). The playful expression, 'Hip, hop', will also be repeated on the very last page of the novel, after Monsieur meets 'Anna Bruckhardt'. The fact that, in the scene of the board meeting, this expression implies a simplicity or facility for Monsieur which is ironically at odds with the reported signs of his agitation, it seems reasonable to wonder whether there is a corresponding inauthenticity at play when the narrator recounts his meeting with Anna at the end of the novel, perhaps casting doubt on its superficially hopeful conclusion: 'Anna Bruckhardt [...] l'embrassa dans la nuit. Hip, hop. Et voilà, ce ne fut pas plus difficile que ça.' (*M*, 111)

For the moment, we can say that a general confusion between categories of work and leisure grounds much of the novel's ironic humour, for example, when Dubois-Lacour remarks to Monsieur that she never sees him doing any work, before qualifying this by suggesting that this is, paradoxically, the mark of 'les vrais grands travailleurs' (*M*, 13). The reader may be disinclined to agree with her assessment,

given that it comes immediately after the scene of the board meeting and that, just a few pages earlier, we witness Monsieur repeatedly descending to the cafeteria, during times of day one would normally expect him to be working ('Au cours de la matinée...', 'Au milieu de l'après-midi...') (*M*, 9, 10). This disjuncture between Dubois-Lacour's suggestion that Monsieur is a 'grand travailleur' and the presented reality of his procrastinating behaviour in the workplace mirrors the novel's central ironic strategy, playing on the multiple contradictions between the way the Monsieur is characterised by the novel's narrative voice, and Monsieur's reported behaviour, that is to say, between the declarative and descriptive levels of the narration. We repeatedly encounter descriptive details which directly contradict statements made by the narrator, often in very close proximity to each other, which is likely to encourage the reader to surmise that, in such instances, the '[s]urface meaning is nonsense',<sup>253</sup> strengthening the impression that the narrative voice is being articulated in an intentionally ironical manner.

For Booth, much of the power of irony comes from the reader's perception of strong negation, 'the sudden plain irreducible "no" of the first step in ironic reconstruction' which, he argues, is responsible for many of 'our most precious literary moments.'<sup>254</sup> When, for example, the narrator states that Monsieur is integrating well into the workforce at Fiat-France, '[t]rès vite, Monsieur se fit assez bien accepter au sein de la société' (*M*, 8), the validity of this assertion is immediately thrown into doubt by the remainder of the very paragraph in which it appears, illustrating not Monsieur's sociability, but rather its opposite, in the form of his faltering attempts to involve himself in conversation with his colleagues, 'les

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<sup>253</sup> Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, p. 6.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 128-129.



yeux baissés, il les écoutait débattre de telle ou telle question. Puis, s'excusant de devoir prendre congé, il [...] regagnait nonchalamment son bureau' (*M*, 9). It is not just in the workplace that we find such moments of implicit, conspicuous negation. After Monsieur's separation from his fiancée, what is described by the narrator as her parents' generous-spirited tolerance of Monsieur's continued presence in their home ('ils ne ménageaient aucun effort pour l'encourager de trouver un nouvel appartement'), is similarly undermined, almost immediately, when we are told that Mme Parrain, 'vraiment très gentiment, [...] finit par lui trouver un trois-pièces dans le quartier.' (*M*, 31, 32) Or, when Monsieur returns home after a violent incident with a stranger who inexplicably shoves him into a bus stop, and we are told that '[l]a fiancée de Monsieur, ce soir-là, fit preuve de beaucoup de compréhension à son égard' (*M*, 16), where expectations prompted by the word 'fiancée' and what this would typically imply about the relationship between the two characters, along with the reference to her sympathetic reaction, conflicts with the slightness of what this compassionate behaviour actually involves, amounting only to her 'installant un lit de camp dans sa chambre' (*M*, 16). It is notable that this is the first point at which we are introduced to Monsieur's fiancée, and allowing (or encouraging) the narrator's declaration to be thrown into ironical relief at this moment encourages the reader to concentrate on the detail that they are not sharing a room and, as suggested by the temporal marker, 'ce-soir là', the fact that even this small degree of compassionate interaction between the characters may be rather inhabitual.

Sure enough, within fifteen pages, this temporally compressed relationship has ended and Monsieur needs to find somewhere else to live. As Schmidt notes, the abrupt nature of the Monsieur's separation from his fiancée is emphasised by the fact that it 'goes unnarrated, until it is first mentioned at the point she introduces her new

boyfriend, Jean-Marc, to her parents'.<sup>255</sup> Just as the inauthenticity of the discursive conventions of his workplace appear to contaminate Monsieur's social interactions, so to do the kinds of pressures associated with the workplace, with individuals making demands and infringing on his time; his new neighbour, Kaltz, ropes him into taking dictation of a dry academic tract on mineralogy, a landlord stipulates that a condition of letting out a room to Monsieur is that he teaches his apathetic son, Ludovic, about quantum physics, and Monsieur's brother has him supervise his young twin nieces while he goes out to socialise with friends and colleagues. The gently scathing, parenthetical description of Monsieur's brother when the latter goes out for an evening with two female colleagues, fellow philosophy lecturers, '(professeur de philosophie lui aussi, mais Monsieur n'avait pas à juger la conduite de son frère)' (*M*, 69), appears to humorously dismiss productive activity of certain kinds as if it were something like a character flaw. There is a humorous irony of this faux-magnanimity, in not condemning his brother's life choices, as, despite Monsieur's apparently prestigious position in the automobile business, his own life looks to be increasingly in disarray and his behaviour increasingly erratic, bouncing from apartment to apartment in the aftermath of the separation from his fiancée, while his brother seems, at least superficially, to have a functioning work, social and family life.

Philosophy may constitute a source of unease (and consequently an object of derision) for both Monsieur and the third-person narrator due to its association with interrogating the aporetic questions of human life. In marked contrast to his implied distaste for this 'humanising' field, Monsieur seems taken with the hard sciences; as with the narrators of *La Salle de bain* or *Fuir* who sensuously lose themselves in the

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<sup>255</sup> Schmidt, *Erzählen und Verschweigen*, p. 122. My translation.

comforting immobility and abstractions associated with the registers of geometry, Monsieur gravitates towards those domains which are involved in reifying, rather than humanising, the world around him. After moving out of the apartment with his ex-fiancée and her parents, Les Parrain, Monsieur encounters his new neighbour, Kaltz, whose opening conversational gambit is to propose that Monsieur aids him in composing a text on mineralogy. While this odd invitation is initially presented as if it were an offer of genuine collaboration, Kaltz encouraging this individual who he has just met to ‘travailler avec lui’ (*M*, 34), it soon emerges that he is really only asking Monsieur to provide his transcribing services *gratis*, taking down dictation of a book Kaltz has already planned out.

This uncreative, time-consuming activity is ironically distinguished from the everyday grind of Monsieur’s work, taking place ‘tous les week-ends (pendant la semaine, Monsieur travaillait)’ (*M*, 37). He soon comes to resent the obligation and, significantly, the way in which this growing resentment is communicated by the text suggests that it relates not only to a frustration at being cynically exploited by Kaltz, but also to the re-emergence of the social world in the content of the dictated tract itself, short fragments of which periodically erupt into the text of the novel. While the first of the fragments begins by considering particular minerals in a general and material way, in terms of their internal crystalline structure, explicitly designated by the narrator as abstracted from direct human experience (‘toutes les roches [...] sont en réalité constituées de cristaux, rarement visibles à l’oeil nu’) (*M*, 36) the emphasis soon shifts towards describing the practical applications of particular minerals, such as their fabrication in jewellery (*M*, 38), then to reflections on their cultural or symbolic values (native gold, ‘symbole [...] du feu purificateur et de l’illumination’)

(*M*, 39) and, finally, to a focus on their external features ('la reconnaissance des formes extérieures des cristaux') (*M*, 74).

The initial agreement to 'collaborate' on the mineralogy text is immediately followed by a single-line paragraph in which the narrator implies that Monsieur has acquiesced to Kaltz's request due simply to an inability to assert himself: 'Monsieur ne savait rien refuser.' (*M*, 36) While Monsieur does indeed seem a profoundly reticent individual, the narrator's curt conclusion underplays the character's persistent attraction to various forms of distraction and withdrawal, which may be a more pertinent factor in his agreement to participate in the project. As the social re-emerges, however, the impulse for distracting reification becomes untenable for Monsieur/the narrator, and, as if in response to the shift away from an initial focus on internal physical structure towards questions which are both more socially expansive and more 'external', the extracts are serially counterpointed by further declarative, single-line paragraphs which imply Monsieur's growing desire to extricate himself from the arrangement: 'Monsieur finit par en référer à Mme Dubois-Lacour.' ; 'Le plus sage apparut à Monsieur de déménager.' ; 'Monsieur, paix aux hommes de bonne volonté, le lendemain soir, emménagea chez les Leguen.' (*M*, 38, 40, 74) As Glasco has noted, the isolation of these phrases in their own paragraphs 'helps the sentence[s] to speak volumes [...] instead of actually verbalizing Monsieur's annoyance at the situation in which he finds himself.'<sup>256</sup>

This direction of travel comes to a head towards the end of the novel, after Monsieur has left his new apartment and returned to the building he previously shared with Kaltz, when the latter confesses that he does not intend for his text to

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<sup>256</sup> Glasco, *Parody and Palimpsest*, p. 54.

constitute an exhaustive scientific view of the subject, but rather that he wants to create a highly digressive work not limited to dry discussions of crystallographic structure, but determined ‘au gré de nos goûts propres, [...] d’une manière que nous revendiquons: subjective.’ (*M*, 87) Once again, the narrator offers no direct access to Monsieur’s thoughts on the matter, but another single-line paragraph dispassionately tells us that, after this exchange, Monsieur takes to avoiding Kaltz ‘[p]endant quelques jours’ (*M*, 87). In spite of the use of the third-person plural, it is Kaltz who appears to be uniquely in charge of the mineralogy tract’s content, which may offer an explanation for Monsieur’s behaviour. Alternatively, the fact that shortly after this exchange, Kaltz more or less disappears from the text entirely, not to be mentioned again, may encourage us to see not only Monsieur, but also the narrator engaging in a more radically evasive behaviour, textually eliminating an individual who, in opposition to Monsieur, is happy to externalise his subjective vision of the world.

As Sylvie Loignon has suggested, the integration of Kaltz’s mineralogical fragments into the narrative of Monsieur encourages us to see how ‘[l]e texte lui-même donne à voir sa propre propension à réifier [les personnages] et le monde’.<sup>257</sup> In the absence of psychological exposition, the reader’s perception of Monsieur’s character will predominantly be as a product of his actions. The narrator may describe Monsieur as a ‘puits d’anecdotes’, but, as Ricœur argues, whenever we see an agent performing actions in a sequence over time, this inevitably entails the development of a certain notion of character (for the reader), even in texts which radically attempt to eliminate the ‘sameness’ aspect of personal identity, such as Robert Musil’s unnaturally anonymous *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. ‘La phrase :

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<sup>257</sup> Sylvie Loignon, ‘Comment finir? La Mélancolie de Jean-Philippe Toussaint’, *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 88-98 (p. 93)

« Je ne suis rien », writes Ricœur, ‘doit garder sa forme paradoxale : « rien » ne signifierait plus rien, si « rien » n’était en effet attribué à « je ».’<sup>258</sup>

Early in the novel, just after we first see Monsieur being hassled by colleagues in his office. After they leave, a single-line paragraph reads simply ‘Les gens, tout de même.’ (*M*, 14) The placement of this piece of free-indirect discourse in this context seems to propose a convergence of the narrator’s and Monsieur’s perspectives, but it also looks to be rather unambiguously a sigh of discontent prompted by these importunate individuals, that is to say, it looks to be the result of a judgement made by Monsieur or the narrator (or both) about secondary characters. As the text progresses this phrase becomes something of a refrain, but with each reappearance, however, it becomes progressively more ambiguous as to whom this phrase actually refers. A good example of this is when Monsieur exits his apartment building during a physics lesson with his landlord’s son, Ludovic, in order to observe him from the street outside. As Patricia French observes, it is partly due to the fact that the narration is not unequivocally the voice of the diegetic protagonist, Monsieur, that this referential confusion can be emphasised, as ‘cette remarque dédaigneuse pourrait soit provenir du narrateur qui chercherait alors à se distancer de Monsieur [...] soit de Monsieur qui se moquerait de Ludovic’.<sup>259</sup>

As mentioned above, ‘naturalising’ the novel’s discourse by unambivalently identifying the protagonist with the narrator could risk undermining this crucial, ironical disconnection between the two; as Tittler says ‘one must experience irony in order to comprehend it.’<sup>260</sup> If, in the first instance, the phrase is associated with

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<sup>258</sup> Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, p. 196.

<sup>259</sup> French, ‘L’humour dans l’œuvre de Jean-Philippe Toussaint’, p. 89.

<sup>260</sup> Tittler, ‘Approximately Irony’, p. 37.

Monsieur's colleagues, appearing as the objects of judgements *by* him, towards the end of the novel, the narrator seems to have Monsieur himself firmly in his sights, as when he mistakenly addresses a group of colleagues as *messieurs*, despite there being a woman present, which seems to prompt a sudden lapse into a momentary boorishness, 'Et Madame? ajoutait-il en inclinant la tête avec respect à l'adresse de la seule femme présente, pas mal du reste, enfin faut voir. Les gens, tout de même.' (*M*, 92) A similar judgement of Monsieur by the narrator seems to occur during his first conversation with Anna Bruckhardt, as they discuss Egypt, describing to each other the sights they witnessed, 'des paysages grandioses, parfois irréels (les gens, tout de même).' (*M*, 96)

Just as the narrator of *L'Appareil-photo* punned on the indeterminacy of a fuel-company logo on a hot air balloon (Total or Shell), decontextualizing a piece of advertising to hint at his increasingly metaphysical concerns about personal identity, the banal reality of the narrator working for 'Fiat-France' could also be read onomastically. The word 'fiat' appears in the novel not only in reference to the car manufacturer, but also in the phrase '*fiat lux*' (*M*, 91) towards the end, the Latin translation of the Biblical phrase 'let there be light', explicitly in the context of the narrator closing his eyes and contemplating. 'Fiat', in Latin, is the third-person passive subjunctive form of *facere* (to do), but also the third person active subjunctive form of *fieri* (to become). This relationship between doing and becoming, between action and aspiration, can be thought of in terms of the organisation of *Monsieur* as a whole, by a narrator observing this Monsieur, across a chain of superficially unconnected events, a man described by the narrator as 'un puits d'anecdotes' (*M*, 101), in the course of his conversations with Anna Bruckhardt.

When Mme Parrain finds out about her prospective son-in-law's high-status career, seemingly impressed, she asks him, 'Et vous avez des prix? Je ne sais pas, dit Monsieur en tapotant sur la table' (*M*, 22), again making bodily movements associated with agitation. While we could see this exchange as reflecting Monsieur's unwillingness to find out which perks he is entitled to, a consequence of his generally reticent behaviour at work, there is also a possible wordplay here, relating to the verb *déprendre*. More commonly used in its reflexive form, *se déprendre* means to give up a habit, or an attachment to something or someone. Given what we have said about indirect self-examination, it is not such a stretch to read Mme Parrain's question homonymically as asking, 'Et vous avez *dépris*?' The normally reflexive, intransitive verb, rendered as a transitive, reflects the indirect way in which Monsieur reflects on, and objectifies, his own past behaviour, via the ironic position of the disengaged heterodiegetic narrator. The fact that this paragraph quickly ends with another lapse into 'business-speak' formality ('Bien, bien. D'autres questions?') (*M*, 22), suggests a desire to abruptly shut down the conversation, which would be in keeping with the narrator's general unwillingness to reveal himself. As Jonathan Lear cautions, we should not see ironical discourse as *merely* rhetorical and nothing more, as simply 'saying the opposite of what [one] means, [or of] remaining detached by undercutting any manifestation of seriousness.'<sup>261</sup> If the narrator of *Monsieur* and Monsieur are the same individual at different points in time, then there is a sense in which the heterodiegetic narrator constitutes more than just a humorous avoidance strategy by Monsieur, dissimulating himself behind the disengaged discourse of his narrator.

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<sup>261</sup> Lear, *A Case for Irony*, p. 9.



Jonathan Lear and Frederic Jameson's problems with the relatively 'pure' irony defended by Rorty seems related to its disconnection from what Lear has described as irony's 'would-be directedness', associated with meaningful aspiration. Lear argues that there is an intrinsic duality to irony which Rorty's account overlooks, 'misleading himself about his freedom via the plethora of social meanings at his disposal and his lack of commitment to any of them'.<sup>262</sup> Irony, for Lear, does not merely entail the adoption of a variety of interchangeable masks, but also a simultaneous 'pretense-transcending activity'<sup>263</sup> which, he contends, brings together self-consciousness with the commitment to a certain ideal of 'human excellence' and a recognition of the gulf between our ideals and the realities of our lives. Learning how to live as a human is difficult, he says, because it involves learning how to employ irony's 'uncanny disruptions of would-be directedness'.

Could we regard the use of third-person narration as an example of this kind of disruptive activity? When Monsieur travels to Cannes with his friend, Louis, they discuss the Copenhagen Interpretation of particle physics and the famous thought-experiment, Schrodinger's cat:

[...] le simple fait de le regarder [...] le faisant passer de l'état de limbes à un nouvel état, où il était soit positivement en vie, soit positivement mort, c'était selon.

Tout était selon. (*M*, 27)

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<sup>262</sup> Lear, *A Case for Irony*, p. 38.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

This passage seems to evoke a connection between certitude, the confirmative nature of observation in particle physics and how it appears to ‘fix’ a reality which previously appeared more malleable, more replete with differential possibilities, into a single, determined state. This conversation takes place shortly after Monsieur has abandoned his fiancée in Paris, which may encourage us to read this as the expression of a more general anxiety related to *self*-examination. Walter Ong writes that, ‘[a]bout any work of literature, it is legitimate to ask who is saying what to whom’, while emphasising that this ‘question can call for responses at any number of levels’.<sup>264</sup> As Hippolyte suggests, Toussaint’s protagonists are ‘Pascalian figures who observe and meditate upon the fate of things from the margins while the world is held at bay’,<sup>265</sup> but while they are quite willing to make judgements about others, the prospect of holding themselves up to that same standard of examination is a profoundly intimidating one.

Just before his departure for Cannes, the dangers of examining people too closely is illustrated in the incident at the bus stop, as Monsieur returns from his weekly football match. ‘Monsieur n’aimait pas [...] tout ce qui, de près ou de loin, lui ressemblait.’ (*M*, 15) When a stranger, rendered as a lower-case ‘monsieur’, asks Monsieur a question, rather than responding, Monsieur merely stares at him, ‘le considéra de haut en bas.’ (*M*, 15) The stranger reacts with unanticipated fury, shoving him into the metal bus stop and injuring his wrist. Monsieur’s unwillingness to have his injured wrist X-rayed seems almost like a literalisation of his anxieties about self-examination and, later in the novel, in one of Kaltz’s mineralogical fragments, we find a description of X-rays being used to identify ‘les dislocations ou

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<sup>264</sup> Walter J. Ong, ‘From Mimesis to Irony: The Distancing of Voice’, *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 9 (1976), 1-24 (pp. 2-3).

<sup>265</sup> Hippolyte, *Fuzzy Fiction*, p. 40.

les fautes d'empilement' (*M*, 45), inside crystalline structures. The ironic textual strategy of the third-person narrator allows 'Monsieur, qui ne voulait pas d'histoires' (*M*, 17), to serve as a generator of a kind of Bergsonian character humour, but it also seems to provide the indirect means for him to submit his own life and his behavioural tendencies to critical observation, while also reflecting his unwillingness to confront his own 'fautes d'empilement' in more direct fashion.

### *La Télévision*

If the key 'unstable' irony of *Monsieur* is produced by the formal conceit of its ambiguous narrative mode, the first-person novel, *La Télévision*, though it employs less radical means, is perhaps more typical of the ironic strategies found throughout Toussaint's fiction. Here, the primary driver of ironic effects is discernible not through formal disruptions of narrative convention, but rather via forms of tonal and affective distance similar to those already present in *Monsieur*. *La Télévision* once again presents a narrator textually revisiting a period of his recent past, this time an unnamed, French-speaking academic on sabbatical in Berlin while his pregnant partner holidays in Italy with their young son. Whereas the protagonist of *Monsieur* goes to elaborate lengths to avoid engaging in critical self-reflection, the narrator of *La Télévision* appears, from the very outset of the novel, to be rather more upfront about an issue he wishes to confront, namely his unproductive behaviour. Having planned to use the summer to complete a monograph on the renaissance artist, Titian, the narrator finds himself perpetually distracted, particularly by the analgesic pleasures of procrastinating in front of the eponymous television:

Depuis quelques mois [...] j'avais constaté une très légère dérive dans mon comportement. Je restais presque tous les après-midi à la maison, [...] et je regardais la télévision pendant trois ou quatre heures d'affilée [...], les pieds nus, la main sous les parties. Moi, quoi. (T, 9)

As Séan Burke has suggested, in relation to the highly self-conscious *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, the most effective autobiographical writing tends to be that which takes account of the necessity of 'breaking the timehonoured autobiographical contract – that the self of writing and the self written should be one and the same self.'<sup>266</sup> The colloquial usage of 'quoi' in this passage, which serves a similar rhetorical, assent-seeking function to 'right?' or 'you know?' in English, could be read as a piece of wordplay implying that this slouching, mildly onanistic image of the narrator is somehow typical or indicative of his general character or demeanour, constituting a piece of wordplay which establishes a certain equivalence between narrator (Moi) and object (quoi). Although, again unlike *Monsieur*, the narrative voice of *La Télévision* is unambiguously attributable to the narrated-narrator 'observing himself', the central principle which connects the ironic strategies of the two novels is markedly similar, in that both involve imposing, and drawing attention to, various forms of distance between the 'self of writing' and the 'self written'. The primary locus for this is a kind of affective detachment, providing another point of intersection between ironical discourse and Bergson's theory of humour. For Bergson, to find an observed, derided individual laughable requires not only that

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<sup>266</sup> Séan Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 53, p. 51.

their characteristic or ‘automatic’ behaviour be amenable to imitation; it is also necessary for the deriding observer to temporarily inhibit his or her empathetic tendencies to a certain degree or, as Bergson puts it, that ‘on s’arrange pour que nous n’en soyons pas émus.’<sup>267</sup>

Ricœur writes that ‘c’est [...] en comparant une chose avec elle-même dans des temps différents que nous formons les idées d’identité et de diversité’.<sup>268</sup>

Throughout Toussaint’s work, we often find a correlation between the dominant tonality of a given novel and the diegetic length of time between its narrated and narrating aspects. We have already insisted on the importance of deictic phrases, on account of how they connect the time of events depicted, the *énoncé*, to the time of their configuration into narrative, the *énonciation*, in ways which point towards meaningful relationships between Toussaint’s narrators’ lived pasts and their present, narrating contexts, often providing fragmentary clues as to what their motivations might be for choosing to textually revisit particular events. A key example of this can be seen in the very different ways that *La Télévision* and *La Réticence* can be read as thematising experiences of writer’s block. It seems emblematic that *La Réticence* begins with the words, ‘Ce matin...’ (R, 11) throwing us into an immediate present, or, perhaps more accurately, a frantic succession of immediate pasts, in which the narrating and the narrated are disturbingly confounded, while the opening of *La Télévision* explicitly marks out how much time has elapsed between the two points, opening with the narrator’s declaration of his decision to stop watching television, ‘il y a un peu plus de six mois, fin juillet’ (T, 7). In spite of the thematic overlap, the relentless temporal immediacy of *La Réticence* plays a key part

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<sup>267</sup> Bergson, *Le Rire*, p. 111.

<sup>268</sup> Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, p. 151.

in its simulation of the psychological instability of its paranoid, attentively frantic narrator, whereas the narrative voice of *La Télévision* is not only more temporally distanced from the events it recounts, but also significantly more emotionally detached, with humour largely displacing anxiety.

In this way, Toussaint's novels often seem self-consciously informed by a notion of the passage of time tempering the affective immediacy of one's past experiences, and being propitious to more emotionally subdued, measured appraisals of one's past self, considered from a contextually different vantage point. On its own, however, this is not sufficient to account for the pronounced degree of affective detachment deployed by many of his narrators, who attach layers of rhetorical artifice to their own lived pasts, exemplifying Ricœur's conviction that '[l]e passé de narration n'est que le quasi-passé de la voix narrative.'<sup>269</sup> This 'quasi-past' is reflexively presented as comprised not just of the events that Toussaint's narrators have 'really' experienced, but also of their subsequent interpretative-configurative process which employs the rhetorical resources of fiction in order to retrospectively modify the interpreted meaning of these experiences, in this case through a pronounced use of affective irony. This particular form of ironic detachment is conceptually similar to the empathy-inhibiting '*insensibilité* du spectateur'<sup>270</sup> which Bergson sees as an essential condition of humour, an insensitivity which, in *La Télévision*, characterises the way in which the narrator chooses to present his past, that is, as if he were an amusingly foolish or ridiculous character given to all manner of pretensions, as an object of derisive humour as much as a subject of experience. In one sense Glasco is right to suggest that 'Toussaint is clearly poking fun at this

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>270</sup> Bergson, *Le Rire*, p. 111.

protagonist's project',<sup>271</sup> but it also seems important to take account of the way in which the narrator of *La Télévision* is implicitly portrayed as engaged in poking fun at himself.

As Simon Critchley puts it, self-deprecating '[h]umour has the same formal structure as depression, but it is an anti-depressant that works by the ego finding itself ridiculous.'<sup>272</sup> For Critchley, affective distance is central to the humour of self-deprecation, relating this, in psychoanalytic terms, to the regulatory possibilities of the super-ego, whereby 'the melancholic talks about himself [...] as though he were talking about some loathsome thing.'<sup>273</sup> To find oneself 'loathsome' suggests that we see flaws in our selves that cannot be easily repaired, as with Monsieur's cristalised 'fautes d'empilement'. For Bergson, character humour is associated with treating aspects of the human object of humour *as* object, in order to provide a kind of corrective by highlighting 'ce qui est automatiquement accompli'<sup>274</sup> in characters who fail to adapt to dynamic realities of the world and the similarly dynamic demands of other people. If our self-esteem is related to our power to act autonomously, if, as Ricœur says, there is a strong correlation between 'la diminution du pouvoir d'agir' and 'le regne proprement dite de la souffrance',<sup>275</sup> what is more loathsome than the manifestations of this sort of constraining automaticity within ourselves?

### **Moi, quoi.**

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<sup>271</sup> Glasco, *Parody and Palimpsest*, p. 124

<sup>272</sup> Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 99.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>274</sup> Bergson, *Le Rire*, p. 111.

<sup>275</sup> Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, p. 371.

While the narrator's trouble with watching television is partly down to the amount of time he fritters away watching the screen when he ought to be working on his Titian monograph, it is also explicitly described in terms of a similar relationship between distance and the possibilities of critical reflection. An early passage in the novel provides a stylistic reflection of the narrator's experience of excessive stimulation while watching television, the relentless immediacy of the televisual playing a crucial role in both his compulsion to keep watching and his urge to stop himself from doing so. This extended description of the images presented to the narrator, as he switches between channels at a frenetic pace, relays the discontinuous chain of snatched visuals that confront him: 'c'était des séries américaines stéréotypées, c'était des clips, [...] c'était des jeux télévisés, [...] c'était le bonheur, [...] c'était des cadavres étendues dans les rues, [...] c'était le neuf, c'était le neuf' (*T*, 19-20). Over two and a half pages, in the form of a single, unbroken sentence, we find more than fifty of these descriptive phrases, producing a disorienting effect which is rather reminiscent of the meandering, progressively rising panic of the multiple-clause sentences found in both *La Réticence* and parts of *Faire l'amour*. The narrator's attention momentarily fixates on a particular image, before being swiftly seized by another, and then another, in seemingly endless succession, until he eventually switches off the set. It is only at this point, sitting in silence, with the television turned off, that he can begin to articulate just what he finds so disturbing about the influence of television upon his life, explicitly linking his concerns to the notion that vicariously abandoning oneself to the depicted realities of the screen inhibits his own reflective capacities:



...non seulement la télévision est fluide, qui ne laisse pas le temps à la réflexion de s'épanouir du fait de sa permanent fuite en avant, mais elle est également étanche, en cela qu'elle interdit tout échange de richesse entre notre esprit et ses matières. (*T*, 23)

Olivier Mignon suggests that different categories of image are granted different statuses in Toussaint's fiction. Photographs, as the visually static records of isolated instants, are associated with expansive reflection and imaginative contextual reconstruction on the part of the viewer, whereas similar attempts, when watching television, 'sont impitoyablement submergées par de nouvelles vagues, de nouvelles sollicitations.'<sup>276</sup> The sensational immediacy of the television is disturbing for the narrator, not just because it represents a drain on his precious time, but also due to the fact that his work is tightly bound up with the kind of concentrated, individual intellectual effort to which television is portrayed as inimical. Rather than allowing him to make his own imaginative associations, in service to the 'vaste essai sur les relations entre les arts et le pouvoir politique' (*T*, 14) that he has been planning, the televisual image is considered by the narrator to be something like an agency unto itself, a hermetic simulation of thinking which Mignon describes as '[u]n monologue inépuisable et condescendant, un égotisme déguisé en prodigalité'.<sup>277</sup>

After watching a televised tennis match which lasts most of a day, the narrator experiences something resembling a hangover, leaving him 'nauséux et fourbu, l'esprit vide, les jambes molles, les yeux mousses' (*T*, 10), which he humorously attributes to the fact that he is getting older, that he is no longer

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<sup>276</sup> Olivier Mignon, 'Presque sans lumière', *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 67–76 (p. 70).

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

‘physically capable’ of enduring five sets of tennis, as if he had been an active participant, rather than simple observer, immobile on his sofa. The following paragraph opens with what looks like an admission, that ‘Je ne faisais rien, par ailleurs’ (*T*, 10), but the narrator then goes on to make it clear that he is not referring to watching television, but rather to quite another kind of ‘doing nothing’: ‘Par rien faire, j’entends ne faire que l’essentiel, penser, lire, écouter de la musique, faire l’amour, me promener, aller à la piscine, cueillir des champignons.’ (*T*, 10) Unlike the more extreme kind of inactivity associated with passively watching television, these other, physically active forms of procrastination do not seem to inhibit the narrator’s abilities to think and reflect freely in the same way, even though they still constitute ‘doing nothing’ by virtue of the fact that they are not what narrator really *should* be doing, namely writing about Titian.

These various forms of notionally productive activity, which seem to bring him no closer to completing his research, are repeatedly the subject of ironical skewering by the narrator himself. Experiencing a sudden urge to watch the news one evening, he congratulates himself on not succumbing to the temptation, ‘(mais je n’en fis rien, c’est ça que j’admire chez moi)’ (*T*, 104), but in the context of his general passivity and the growing evidence of his chronic procrastination, this apparent self-commendation for doing nothing is stable irony, especially when it is juxtaposed with the sight of him using this ‘saved’ time to calculate just how many other people across Europe also happen not to be watching television at that precise moment, pursuing this highly trivial question to the extent of making calculations and citing ‘quelques études que j’avais pu parcourir sur la question’ (*T*, 105), that is, engaging in just the kind of investigative work which he is being paid to carry out. Despite an inability to sit down and actually produce the text of his monograph, his

work life permeates the other spheres of his life in various small ways, such as when he describes acting out the apocryphal scene which first drew him to the study of Titian, when the artist dropped his paintbrush in the presence of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, with his son ('Je faisais l'empereur et mon fils faisait Titien') (T, 82), whom he begins to call by the name of a prominent art historian whose work he has been reading, '(depuis deux ou trois semaines, j'appelais mon fils Babelon, je ne sais pas pourquoi).' (T, 90)

The narrator seems aware of these tendencies, frequently deploying a kind of exaggerated pedagogical attitude which seems to belong to the academic milieu in which he operates, and which has echoes of the evasive and contextually inappropriate 'business-speak' of Monsieur/the narrator of *Monsieur*. Just as with that specific register of language, which looked especially absurd when removed from its normal workplace context and applied to purely social interactions, here the narrator's pompously superfluous, didactic specifications to the reader can only be read ironically, as when he parenthetically qualifies what he is saying about the problem of television, '(...je ne sais pas si vous avez déjà regardé la télévision)' (T, 12), when he provides an absurd French translation of his neighbours' German names, 'Uwe et Inge Drescher (que l'on pourrait traduire approximativement par Guy et Luce Perreire)' (T, 23), or when he explains that he is expecting his second child to be female after seeing Delon's ultrasound, 'car le gynécologue n'avait pas vu de verge à l'échographie (et, souvent, quand il n'y a pas de verge, c'est une petite fille, avais-je expliqué).' (T, 8) Whereas Monsieur's misapplication of such localised forms of discourse seems premised on how their depersonalised formality can serve to dissimulate raw affect, in *La Télévision* there also seems to be an implicit mockery of the narrator's lofty academic or writerly aspirations. These localised discursive

conventions may oil the societal machine, allowing us to ‘play our parts’ effectively in interactions with others in particular contexts, in the corporate world for Monsieur, or the academic world for the narrator of *La Télévision*, but both narrators deploy them ironically, drawing attention to the fundamental insincerity which structures them. Waiting for a taxi while returning home drunk one night, the narrator stares longingly at a prostitute on the other side of the road, describing how it is only by imagining in a way which diverges from her visible reality that he can be aroused by her (‘Eût-elle été un rien plus grassouillette [...] et vêtue d’un simple chemise de nuit transparente...’) (T, 119). He is attracted to her in so far as she represents somebody else entirely, as an imagined, unreal individual, but rather than pursue this thought, he punctures it with deflationary comic effect, via the use of an incongruously dated expression and the ironical adoption of an exaggerated earnestness in questioning the nature of his own sexual urges, drawing him to particular parts of her body: ‘[...] les hanches et la chatte, sapristi! Je me demandais pourquoi les hanches, d’ailleurs (la chatte, j’y voyais plus clair).’ (T, 120) It is revealing that the reason the narrator gives for finding the prostitute initially unappealing is that she appears ‘sans visage et sans identité, *tout entière enfermée dans l’image la plus stéréotypée de sa fonction*’ (T, 119).<sup>278</sup> We could perhaps read this comment as also applying to the narrator himself, suggesting an awareness of how he too is trapped by the unappealing exigencies of his own ‘function’, his writerly and academic ambitions covering over other aspects of his life and influencing how others see him.

*La Télévision* also ironically divides the narrator between the position of observer and observed in other ways, often centred on his physical body. Critchley

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<sup>278</sup> My emphasis.

suggests that the body is fundamental to humour because it is the site of confusions between ‘having’ and ‘being’, in that we both ‘are’ our body, which not only houses us but constitutes the very possibility of our experiencing the world, and ‘have’ our body, something inextricably foreign and uncontrollable about it persisting, to the extent that is affected by physical degeneration, unintended shudders, sexual arousal and all manner of other phenomena which are not the products of our conscious intention. In a way which is reminiscent of Ricœur’s conviction that to be human is to exist simultaneously in the order of the physical and the order of intentions,<sup>279</sup> and also of Bergson’s division of human experience into *le vivant* and *le mécanique*, Critchley argues that it is this unintended ‘having’ which is privileged in humour, where the body is ‘estranged, alien, weakening, failing.’<sup>280</sup> We see this difficulty in uniting ‘having’ and ‘being’ when the narrator practices some nudism in Berlin’s Halensee park, describing his feelings of awkwardness as he walks naked towards the park’s lake to swim, traversing an area of the park populated by mostly clothed people :

...assez mal à l’aise, ne sachant quelle manière adopter, oscillant entre un style dégagé, avec des grands balancements de bras dont le manque de naturel ne faisait que souligner la maladresse de ma démarche, et une manière plus digne de me mouvoir, la tête haute, [...] qui devait favoriser [...] une ride d’expression dure et renfrognée (alors que je me régalais, en réalité, à enfoncer mes pieds nus dans l’herbe tiède). (*T*, 57)

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<sup>279</sup> Jean-Pierre Changeux and Paul Ricœur, *Ce qui nous fait penser : la nature et la règle* (Paris: Editions Odile Jacob, 1998) p. 23.

<sup>280</sup> Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 51.

He seems keenly aware of, and discomfited by, the thought that his gestures will appear ridiculous to others, not only in and of themselves but also because of the incongruity between his internal experience and outward manner. The first posture he adopts, appearing to externalise the pleasure he is deriving from the feeling of the grass between his toes, is marked out as the unnatural one, whereas the more ‘dignified’ physical aspect appears to be an awkward attempt to imitate the ‘messieurs élégants’ walking towards him, who appear, unlike him, to be able to achieve that elusive congruence between their thoughts and their physical behaviour, ‘en échangeant des propos calmes et mesurés [...] dont ils soulignaient la portée d’un geste souple et arrondi de la main.’ (*T*, 58) The narrator’s efforts at physical dissimulation in this scene are similar, but they also represent something almost like the inverse of movement made by the ironical discourse of the novel as a whole, in which negative experiences are rarely evoked directly in affective terms, and more often serve as sources of self-deprecating humour by the retrospective gaze of the narrator. Here, the narrator claims to feel momentarily carefree, enjoying the grass between his toes, but he feigns a seriousness and intensity, as if to telegraph to those around him that he is engaged in deep and purposive thought. Moments later, still entirely naked, he realises that one of the men approaching him is Hans Heinrich Mechelius, the president of the foundation responsible for granting his research funding. When Mechelius inquires about how the narrator’s project is progressing, while leaning in to pluck a blade of grass from his shoulder, ‘Et comment avance votre travail, cher ami? me dit-il en avançant vers moi’ (*T*, 59), the repeated use of ‘avancer’ suggests a link between the work itself (the narrator having written nothing at all by this point) and the way in which this character incarnates the menacing

possibility of financial and reputational consequences if the narrator fails to bring it to term. In this encounter the narrator being physically exposed to a superior literalises the sense in which he is the object of scrutiny in other ways, particularly when he then excuses himself: ‘Je dis que c’était gentil, mais que j’avais du travail’ (*T*, 61).

Half asleep and listening to the radio as he eats his breakfast, he describes his thoughts flowing in the form of ‘quelques arabesques très libres et très agréables à suivre sur les différents développements possibles que pourrait prendre mon étude’ (*T*, 39). However, when he sits down at his computer to write, this freedom is rapidly curtailed by the need to make practical decisions about the text; despite being three weeks into his sabbatical, he is still occupied by the question of what name to give his subject, paralysed in indecision in the face of the various names used by other commentators: ‘Titien, le Titien, Vecilli, Vecellio, Tiziano Vecellio, Titien Vecelli, Titien Vecellio?’ (*T*, 41) The frustration he feels at the inconsistency of Musset, causing him to ‘boil with rage’, belies his own inability to make a decision about even such minor details, which could be seen as echoing the attentive excess/deficit, the kind of cognitive ‘incontinence’ which he ascribes to television, as he is frequently shown engaged in drawing his own, playful, imaginative associations, such as in personifying the plants of his neighbours, imagining a rubber plant as ‘un vieux Chinois, [...] il préférerait être légèrement brumisé que copieusement arrosé (ce qui peut se comprendre, évidemment, de la part d’un vieux Chinois)’ (*T*, 26), or, when he suddenly remembers his obligation to water the plants, testing the soil around the base of their prized fern with his fingers, ‘Ce n’était pas sec, sec, non ; mais disons que j’avais déjà connu plus enthousiasmant (je ne citerai pas de noms, rassurez-vous).’ (*T*, 124) However, as if from the narrator’s inability to decide also

emerges a realisation that, ‘il n’était peut-être pas complètement indifférent d’attacher quelque importance à la manière de nommer si l’on voulait écrire.’ (T, 41)

### **Le travail, quoi.**

Jonathan Lear argues that, in the context of any aspiration, in this case to be a successful academic writer, it is ‘constitutive of human excellence that one develop a capacity for appropriately disrupting one’s understanding of what such excellence consists in.’<sup>281</sup> In Lear’s view, rhetorical irony can only take you so far. While *La Télévision* and *Monsieur* share similar concerns about critical self-examination and the fraught negotiation of work and social spaces, *La Télévision* also differentiates itself by employing ironical distance in such a way as to bring about a relatively explicit investigation of metatextual concerns around the necessary conditions for narrative configuration itself. The etymology of the novel’s title could be seen as revealing here, bringing together a concern with the visual and with distance (from the Greek stem *tele-*) which is even more apparent in the component words of the German *fernsehen*. This distance is not just one between the narrating and the narrated, but also between the realities of the narrator’s past and his future-oriented aspirations; *tele-* is itself derived from *teleos* (final goal, purpose), and as Ricœur says, in fiction, ‘les faits racontés à un temps du passé prennent place des projets, des attentes, des anticipations, par quoi les protagonistes du récit sont orientés vers leur avenir’.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> Lear, *A Case for Irony*, p. 37.

<sup>282</sup> Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, p. 192.



The ironical stance of the narrator of *La Télévision* not only constitutes a means by which he can engage in critical self-reflection, but it also mirrors the other forms of distance that the narrator takes from his own writing practice, via the various forms of ‘doing nothing’. By approaching his own writerly failures in an ironically distanced way, the narrator is prompted to reflect not only on the negative influence of his procrastinating tendencies (Moi, quoi?), but also to ask more fundamental questions about the nature of the writing process itself and the nature of his employment (Le travail, quoi?). Christine Korsgaard characterises this kind of irony as ‘Socratic’, operating on the principle ‘that a form of practical identity in a sense comes up for review as measured against *itself*: that is, as measured against the standards that are inherent in that very form of identification.’<sup>283</sup> The rhetorical irony of the narrator of *La Télévision*, which transforms distressing experience into comedic burlesque, serves as a grounds for self-examination, but this self-examination is still goal-oriented, even if the ostensible ‘goal’ is not the originally intended one of completing his monograph. The narrator is a writer, but his predicament leads him to ironically ask the question, ‘what is a writer who doesn’t write?’ Sitting at his desk, where he should be writing about Titien, the narrator thinks about how television has helped to influence modern society, and particularly ‘le fait que l’homme maintenant [...] semblait consacrer davantage de temps et d’énergie au commentaire de ses actions qu’à ses actions elles-mêmes.’ (*T*, 46) As a producer of secondary literature, the creative work which serves as the basis for his employment is based on just this kind of ‘commentary’, but the text of *La Télévision* simultaneously presents itself as an example of this kind of distanced commentary as

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<sup>283</sup> Christine Korsgaard, ‘Self-Constitution and Irony’, in *A Case for Irony*, ed. by Jonathan Lear (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 75-83 (p.76).

an alternative to direct action. *Television*, understood as ‘distance vision’, is a pervasive condition of the narrator’s world; it seems apt that the novel ends shortly after the narrator has bought a VHS recorder/player – just as narrative form provides the narrator the distance he needs in order to take an (amusingly) critical, reflective view of his past actions and past self, a VHS recorder provides him with the opportunity to order and manage how he watches television.

For Vlastos, Socratic irony excels at ‘acknowledging the burden of freedom which is inherent in all significant communication.’<sup>284</sup> We find a range of quasi-theoretical reflections and aphorisms on the act of writing throughout *La Télévision*, several of which appear in Toussaint’s non-fiction text about his own writing process, *L’Urgence et la Patience*, some verbatim, such as the statement that ‘ne pas écrire est au moins aussi important qu’écrire,’ (*T*, 75) (*U&P*, 23). While this could support Warren Motte’s contention that ‘Toussaint deploys his narrator as a stalking-horse, using that man’s struggles to suggest his own conception of writing and its vicissitudes,’<sup>285</sup> *La Télévision* attributes these insights by the narrator not as pre-established conclusions, but rather as the *consequence* of his heuristic engagements with his own inability to produce text. Without necessarily contesting Motte’s reading, it is worth noting Lear’s persuasive argument that all ‘social pretense already contains a pretense-laden understanding of its aspiration, but irony facilitates a process by which the aspiration seems to break free of these bounds.’<sup>286</sup> If to play a part is always to take on, to a greater or lesser degree, some level of automaticity or pretence, in which our own freedom is partly curtailed by the norms associated with

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<sup>284</sup> Gregory Vlastos, ‘Socratic irony’, *The Classical Quarterly*, 37 (1987), 79-96 (p. 95).

<sup>285</sup> Warren Motte, *Fables of the Novel: French Fiction Since 1990* (Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), p. 186.

<sup>286</sup> Lear, *A Case for Irony*, p. 23.

the part we are playing, Lear sees the ‘would-be-directedness’ of Socratic or aspirational irony as offering the ironist the opportunity to indirectly question the very foundations of what playing such a part means, simultaneously rejecting the ways in which the part in question it is conventionally understood while maintaining a certain commitment to a renewed understanding of it. Vlastos articulates this through what he refers as ‘complex irony’, distinct from the implicit pact of mutual understanding which undergirds stable or ‘simple’ ironies: ‘In ‘simple’ irony what is said is simply not what is meant. In ‘complex’ irony what is said both is and isn’t what is meant.’<sup>287</sup>

In a sense, one of the key ideas about writing expressed in *L’Urgence et la Patience* is already present in *La Télévision*, the idea there are ‘deux processus distincts à l’oeuvre dans le travail littéraire’, the first a period of opening the mind and letting oneself reflect freely on the many possible directions that a future text will take, the latter an applied process of concentration and decision, requiring ‘méthode et discipline, austérité et rigueur, au moment de la mise en forme définitive.’ (*T*, 138) When the narrator avoids sitting down at his computer to work, choosing instead to swim or sunbathe, the repeated descriptions of these kinds of activities as ‘working’ might initially appear amusingly disingenuous, but in another sense he is telling the truth; he is engaged in the first of these two processes, constantly thinking about the broad strokes of his project as he swims, dozes or sunbathes, falling short only when it comes to committing his ideas to the page. Referring to one such instance of the narrator describing the imaginative, preparatory part of the writing process, Glasco points out that the narrator’s claim to ‘rêvasser [...] aristotéliennement à mon étude’ (*T*, 75) is amusingly oxymoronic, since the

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<sup>287</sup> Vlastos, ‘Socratic irony’, p. 86.

verb ‘implies a very unstructured way of thinking about things’, whereas ‘an adverb based on Aristotle implies meticulous structure’.<sup>288</sup> She is right to identify this as exemplifying the central dichotomy in the creative process as articulated by the narrator, but we should be wary of the conclusion that ‘[t]he key issue in the book is a narrator who attempts to give readers the illusion that he is accomplishing something.’<sup>289</sup> While it is true that there are some indications towards the end of the novel that the narrator may have failed to bring his work on Titian to term (although this is not confirmed), the double process of ironical engagement, with his own lived experience and with the nature of writing and literary aspiration, can nevertheless be considered to give rise to at two different forms of ‘accomplishment’, in terms of new understanding, the first via the narrator’s adoption of a quasi-external perspective on his own behaviour (‘Moi, quoi’), creating the conditions for a gradual process of self-recognition which may lead to the possibility of subsequently altering that behaviour, while simultaneously allowing him to articulate his metatextual, quasi-theoretical insights into the writing process (‘Le travail, quoi’), which are themselves the products of his ironically mediated, critical reflection on his ‘failure’ to write.

### **Toussaint’s cinematic ironies**

We will now turn to look at two films written and directed by Toussaint, *La Sévillane* (1992), a cinematic adaptation of his own novel, *L’Appareil-photo*,

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<sup>288</sup> Glasco, *Parody and Palimpsest*, p. 125.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, and *La Patinoire* (1997), from his original screenplay. The primary task here will be to interrogate to what extent these films can be seen as incorporating ‘ironic strategies’ of their own, with particular regard to the relationship between individual subjectivity and other people. First, we will set out our approach to an analysis of Toussaint’s films which, for reasons which will become apparent, will have to take account of the ways in which cinematic texts and literary texts fundamentally differ.

As we have argued, *Monsieur* and *La Télévision* embody the ways in which, as Lear puts it, irony allows us to transform ‘an expression of detachment and lack of commitment’ into ‘an expression of earnestness and commitment’.<sup>290</sup> With regard to the possibility of films to enact analogous ‘aspirational’ ironic procedures, *La Sévillane*, as an adaptation, is of particular interest to us since both the film and its source text appear to aspire to this sort of activity, juxtaposing comical banality with the ‘would-be-directedness’ of a narrating subjectivity intent on achieving self-recognition, partly through such indirect means. One of the key problems the film comes up against, however, is that of reproducing novel’s tension between the detached, ironical discourse of a particular speaker and the presentation of that speaker’s highly subjective and intimate ‘earnestness and commitment’, when adapted to a medium which seems to privilege externality and surface over interiority and self-reflexivity. Every fictional text can be said to imply one or more subject positions, and this plays a key part in the ironic multiplication of perspectives; with regard to literature, this is broadly in line with what Seymour Benjamin Chatman argues is Wayne C. Booth’s most valuable definition of his multiply, and not always consistently, defined concept of the ‘implied author’, as

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<sup>290</sup> Lear, *A Case for Irony*, p. 38.

*'the recorded invention of the text'*<sup>291</sup> which is based on the 'codes and conventions' perceived to inform that text's intentional activity. Such positions are not equivalent to the text's narrative voice(s) nor to its point(s) of view, nor to its flesh-and-blood author, but function rather as virtual, synthesised products of the reader's interpretations of that text's markers of discursive, ideological or cultural situatedness; it is on account of this that Chatman suggests that it would be more accurate to speak of texts having 'inferred authors'.

In order for the reader of a literary text to give form to this implied or inferred author, Booth insists on the importance of identifying the 'large ironies' which are responsible for demarcating the 'kinds of distance between the fallible or unreliable narrator and the implied author who carries the reader with him in judging the narrator'.<sup>292</sup> Although Chatman takes issue with some of Booth's specifications about the concept, he argues that this is the crucial point, to recognise that 'the implied author is the inventor, and the narrator is the "utterer"' and that '[a]s inventor, the implied author is by definition distinguishable from the narrators, who are invented.'<sup>293</sup> Although this chapter has examined instances of ironic distance in Toussaint's novels, we have generally been less concerned with these kinds of evaluating distance described by Booth, that is, those distances which are perceptible between the narrator of a given text and an 'implied author' or inferred 'metalinguage' of that text, which is other than the narrator.

Since, in Toussaint's novels, judgements made about the narrators within the texts are invariably presented as reflexive judgements, made *by* the narrators *about*

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<sup>291</sup> Seymour Benjamin Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 82, p. 83. Chatman's emphasis.

<sup>292</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 158.

<sup>293</sup> Chatman, *Coming to Terms*, p. 85.

*themselves* at different points in time, a key angle of approach in this thesis has been to consider the texts largely on their own terms. That is to say, to treat the narrators not only as the ‘utterers’, but also *as if* they were the ‘inventors’ of their own texts, *as if* they were the agents responsible for the texts’ configuration, aiming to demonstrate how the fruitfulness of this approach in illuminating the ways in which Toussaint’s novels’ interrogate the connections between self-reflection and the heuristic possibilities presented by narrativity. As Borges’s fictional author Pierre Menard says of his famously recontextualised ‘Quijote’, ‘philosophers publish in pleasing volumes the intermediary stages of their work, whereas I have resolved to lose them’.<sup>294</sup> This thesis is primarily interested in the philosophical implications of Toussaint’s novels; what they express about subjectivity, intersubjectivity, critical reflection and narrative form, and this approach, it will be argued, has a number of major similarities to Daniel Frampton’s programme of reading filmic texts in ‘Filmosophy’.<sup>295</sup>

The possibilities of collapsing ‘utterer’ and ‘inventor’ into one is not such a simple task when it comes to Toussaint’s films. David Bordwell strongly argues against this approach, and against a tradition of drawing ‘analogies to phenomenal perception [which] tend to “naturalize” the operations of film style’, a critical activity of which he questions the value.<sup>296</sup> Bordwell suggests that too often film-writing is informed by such enunciative concerns in a naïve way, premised on literary or linguistic understandings, in the tradition of Plato’s division of storytelling into deictically straightforward ‘diegetic’ works,<sup>297</sup> characterised by a voice which is

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<sup>294</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote’, in *Ficciones* (Barcelona: Debolsillo, 2014), pp. 40-53 (p. 46).

<sup>295</sup> Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy* (London: Columbia University Press, 2006).

<sup>296</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 11. My translation.

<sup>297</sup> Plato’s use of ‘diegetic’ in this context, referring to the rhetorical or discursive character of a work, differs from the contemporary, paleonymic use of *diegesis* as ‘the accepted term for the fictional

unambiguously attributable to the poet themselves, and ‘mimetic’ works, where ‘the poet [...] makes his own speech like that of another’.<sup>298</sup> In cinematic terms, this is a distinction analogous to the one between ‘utterer’ and ‘inventor’ in literature, perhaps most clearly expressed in the context of film-writing by André Gauderault, through his distinction between a film’s ‘monstrator’ (who shows) and ‘narrator’ (who narrates). Bordwell argues that a ‘[f]ilm’s lack of deictic (person, tense, mode, etc.) makes it difficult to account systematically for the speaker, situation and means of enunciation’<sup>299</sup> and therefore concludes that such enunciative models are not propitious to the effective analysis of cinematic texts. Instead, he urges a focus on the technical and formal procedures by which films provide various ‘narrative cues’ which prompt intelligibility-making narrative activity on the part of the spectator, in ways which are both supported by and rely upon subversions of their expectations.

Although she employs different terminology, the attribution of an ‘implied author’ to a literary text could also be related to Vivian Sobchack’s powerful argument in favour of applying phenomenological critique to films, particularly when she says that we ought to consider cinematic texts not just as viewed objects, but also as viewing subjects engaged in making intentional choices, which we interpretively engage with in an ‘intersubjectively dialogical’ way.<sup>300</sup> Sobchack suggests that the nature of the medium is such that it always incorporates a greater degree of mimetic fidelity than literature, by virtue of the doubled ‘visible’ (representational) and ‘visual’ (intentional) quality of film, expressing itself *as*

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world of the story.’ Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>300</sup> ‘Intentionality’ here is used not in the sense of ‘deliberate choice’, but rather in its phenomenological sense, as the act of making external objects salient in consciousness by perceptually attending to them. Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 15, p. 24.



perception of a material world, rather than just as words on a page, while at the same time appearing as if it were an ‘extension of the incarnate intentionality of the person’,<sup>301</sup> focusing its gaze in particular ways on its own objects. Sobchack explicitly dissociates the literary notion of an implied author from what she calls the ‘filmmaker’, a term she uses atypically, referring neither to an inferred and virtual singularity (as with the implied or inferred author), nor to a *virtual* subject position *tout court*, but rather to the ‘concrete, situated, and synoptic presence of the many persons who realized the film’.<sup>302</sup> This is a key point, to which we will return below; Sobchack acknowledges a fundamental difference between the subjective singularity attached to the idea of an implied author and the subjective *multiplicity* of the ‘filmmaker’, as the agglomeration of all the individuals involved in the creation of the film and whose various intentions, as with the ‘real’ author of a work of literature, are never directly accessible to the reader – ‘such a relation is never completely transparent’.<sup>303</sup> Bruce Kawin makes a similar point in noting that we must take account that ‘[i]t is rare for a film to be made and truly controlled by a single person or even to appeal back to a consistent perspective’, whereas, ‘[t]he converse is common in literature’.<sup>304</sup>

Despite this early and important acknowledgement by Sobchack in *The Address of the Eye*, she at times seems to forget about this disunity on the part of the ‘filmmaker’, for example, when she states that ‘the *film* [...] is itself the agency which two intending perceptions (and persons) can be said to share and communicate

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<sup>301</sup> ‘Intentionality’ here is used not in the sense of ‘deliberate choice’, but rather in its phenomenological sense, as the act of making external objects salient to consciousness by perceptually attending to them. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>304</sup> Bruce Kawin, ‘An Outline of Film Voices’, *Film Quarterly*, 38 (1984-1985), 38-46 (p. 44).

conscious experience.<sup>305</sup> In differentiating her ‘filmmaker’ from the ‘implied author’, she insightfully highlights the crucial importance of recognising a much greater degree of intersubjective collaboration involved in the creation of most films than in that of most literary texts, even if at times she risks undermining the necessary virtuality of a given film’s inferred subject position(s) through repeated assertions about the film not *as if* it were a viewing subject, but *as* a viewing subject. This may appear a somewhat pedantic point of contention, especially given the approach of this thesis, considering Toussaint’s novels as if they were the ‘recorded inventions’ of their narrators, but it is one which is highly significant in the context of the two films under discussion here. As will be argued, both *La Sévillane* and *La Patinoire*, to different degrees, thematise this very problem of articulating a subjective, perspectival vision of the kind perceptible to the reader of Toussaint’s novels, and communicating an ‘*off-screen subject*, who enacts sight, revises vision, and perspectivally frames its work as a visible image.’<sup>306</sup>

Daniel Frampton is highly critical of what he calls Bordwell’s ‘technicist’ approach, which he calls ‘boring’, but, although he acknowledges the value of Sobchack’s work in reframing filmic texts themselves *as* forms of intentional activity, he takes issue with her chosen terminology, arguing that we ought to see films as providing new forms of ‘thinking’ which are not just ‘second-hand phenomenological’ ones, but rather properly ‘transsubjective’, in that a film ‘does not merely present objects, but reveals a way of seeing them’ and presents its own contents through the filter of ‘perspectives that we could never hold.’<sup>307</sup> Tomás Domingo Moratalla, arguing in a recent article that Ricœurian hermeneutics are well-

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<sup>305</sup> Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, p. 190. Sobchack’s emphasis.

<sup>306</sup> Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, p. 292.

<sup>307</sup> Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy*, p. 52, p. 49, p. 50.

suited to analysing cinematic works, appears to share Frampton's focus on the importance of the philosophical implications of how we can artistically (re)present counterfactual realities, suggesting that it is this which links cinema and literature, in that both 'submit us to imaginative variations that can take us out of our egotism, our [...] relations with others or our impoverished comprehension of the world.'<sup>308</sup>

Moratalla focuses on the power of filmic texts in the specific context of interrogating historically and societally constructed memory, but he insists, more generally, that the hermeneutic power of cinema is to be found in the way that films 'hypothesise a training in the formation of judgement.'<sup>309</sup>

James MacDowell has suggested that the concept of irony in cinema has historically been under-theorised, but that it is worth identifying rhetorical irony in filmic texts when there is 'something analogous to the linguistic situation [...] a distinction precisely between something presented as "explicit" and something remaining "implicit" – between the ostensibly "clear" and the nominally "hidden".'<sup>310</sup> Whether we speak in terms of Sobchack's plural 'filmmaker' or Frampton's 'transsubjective', 'thinking' films, if we can agree with Moratalla that films make judgements about the objects they present, while at the same time provoking judgements by their spectators (that is, about both the films and their objects), then the problem of rhetorical irony in cinema, or at least the reluctance of theorists to refer to cleavages between explicit and implicit meaning in a given film *as* instances of irony, may be related to the difficulty of determining the place of *intentionality* in cinematic works.

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<sup>308</sup> Tomás Domingo Moratalla, 'Visitando Level Five (Chris Marker). Ricœur, el cine y la hermenéutica', *Logoi*, 2 (2015), 286-304 (p. 292). My translation.

<sup>309</sup> Moratalla, 'Visitando Level Five', p. 302. My translation.

<sup>310</sup> James MacDowell, 'Surface Meanings, Irony and Film Interpretation' (presented at the Film-Philosophy Conference 2015: The Evaluation of Form, University of Oxford, 2015), p. 3.

## *La Sévillane*

*L'Appareil-photo*, the source novel of *La Sévillane*, is a highly ironic text in which the narrator's growing anxieties about articulating a sense of his own personal identity are initially covered over by a humorously inflected nonchalance, both towards others and to the world around him, with a heavy focus on the banal and the trivial, accompanied by a reluctance to engage in direct self-reflection. *La Sévillane* is presented as an 'adaptation libre' of the novel and while, of course, a cinematic adaptation is under no obligation to tow the thematic lines of its source text, a number of elements indicate that the film seeks to cover thematically similar ground to *L'Appareil-photo*, both in recreating its aesthetic of comical banality and in gesturing towards the more existential anxieties around identity which are foregrounded in the second half of the source novel. The film, albeit with some highly significant omissions and alterations, tracks closely to the narrative thread of the novel, taking us from the initial meeting between the protagonist (Jean-Claude Adelin, credited as 'le narrateur') and Pascale (Mireille Perrier) in a driving school, through their meandering search for a replacement gas canister in the company of Pascale's father, M. Polougaievski, (Jean Yanne) to the couple's visit to London, and the narrator's spontaneous theft of a camera on a cross-channel ferry.

Perhaps the most striking deviation, to readers of the novel, is, with a single exception, the linearity of the film. It opens with a shot of the 'narrator' dejectedly hugging his knees on the floor of a phone box situated in a port, which we later discover is Dieppe, where the ferry from London arrives, as his voice intones the opening words of *L'Appareil-photo* verbatim: 'C'est à peu près à la même époque de

ma vie [...] que dans mon horizon immédiat coïncidèrent deux événements...’ (*AP*, 7). Kawin has contended that voice-over narration, when attributed to a single, diegetically present character, is a quasi-literary device which has often been ‘used to anchor an adaptation in its literary source’, but also used as a shorthand for indicating to the spectator ‘that the film is limited to this character’s point of view’.<sup>311</sup> He links this to a ‘natural association between first-person discourse and first-person experience’, which he sees as accounting for our much greater familiarity with perspectivalism in literature, as opposed to ‘film [which] has no discrete pronouns’.<sup>312</sup> *La Sévillane*, the adaptation of a first-person novel in which internal reflection plays a determining role, uses voiceover narration at several points, and is bookended by the same words which open and close *L’Appareil-photo*, suggesting that the film is be intended to be viewed, at least to some degree, through the lens of the narrator’s perspective. Kawin points out that cinema is by no means incapable of ‘personalising discourse’, but rather that techniques, including first-person voiceover narration and consistent subjective focalisation, analogous to techniques which are highly effective at expressing subjectivity in literature, may not necessarily translate successfully to filmic texts, citing the example of the 1947 film adaptation of Raymond Chandler’s *Lady in the Lake*, where ‘an ever-present subjective camera becomes an oppressive reminder, as the ever-present first-person pronoun in the novel of the same name does not’.<sup>313</sup>

In the novel it is not deictically clear whence the narrator is physically narrating, whereas the film’s opening and closing shots of the character miserably

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<sup>311</sup> Bruce F. Kawin, *Mindscreen: Bergman, Godard, and the first-person film* (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2006), p. 6.

<sup>312</sup> Kawin, ‘An Outline of Film Voices’, p. 39.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

slumped in the phone box, both accompanied by voiceover narration, imply a causal relationship between the film's selective presentation of its events, characters and objects and a determining narratorial consciousness on the part of the narrator, connected to this moment in time. Kawin argues that, in order to effectively communicate human subjectivity in films, filmmakers must 'creatively redefine' the means of giving 'the impression that someone or some category of voice is telling, presenting, falsifying or arranging, in short, narrating',<sup>314</sup> but while it is implied that the narrator of this film, in some form, might be presented as occupying that role, it is not clear what his 'narration' actually *does*. Apart from the circular 'syuzhet' of the film (responsible for the 'task of presenting the story'<sup>315</sup> in a particular sequence, which Bordwell argues is not equivalent to a discursive act of *énonciation*), the kinds of highly directed, non-arbitrary use of anachrony described in the first chapter's discussion of the novel, whereby 'la fonction heuristique procède de la structure narrative',<sup>316</sup> and which, it was argued, were crucial to the thematisation of the narrator's active refiguration of his obscurely presented past, and his growing desire for self-recognition in the present, seem to be entirely absent from *La Sévillane*. While this final scene implies that the film's narrative origin might be plausibly identified with what Kawin calls 'visualised mentation',<sup>317</sup> on the part of narrator, and the passage of time from night to dawn may suggest that he has been engaged in reflecting on the events of the film, the structural and formal material of the film does little to reflect any *active* engagement on his part, or to support the notion of heuristic possibilities associated with a textually mediated 'mentation'. Frampton agrees with Kawin's identification of a possibility for a different kind of 'mentation'

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>315</sup> Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 52.

<sup>316</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Du texte à l'action*, p. 248.

<sup>317</sup> Kawin, *Mindscreen*, p. 12.

in filmic texts which is not attached to particular diegetic characters (what Frampton calls 'transubjective' being), but he suggests that Kawin's analysis is somewhat limited by his attribution of this quality to only a particular type of self-referential, 'reflexive' film, rather than consistently seeing it as a condition for film being itself, to, as Frampton puts it, 'allow[ing] 'thinking' into the plainest of films.'<sup>318</sup>

Another departure from the novel is the significantly more prominent role occupied by Pascale's father, M. Polougaievski, played by Jean Yanne. Throughout the film, he wears the same colour of bright yellow anorak as Pascale, counterpointed with the narrator's uniformly dark, sombre clothing, casting the narrator as an interloper into their pre-existing and more fundamental familial relationship and, compared with the anxious directionless narrator, this character is very self-assured and 'knows his onions', or rather his gherkins. Serving as a recurrently importunate annoyance, he insists on educating the narrator, Pascale, his grandson, Petit Pierre, and anyone else who will listen about his specific domain of expertise, namely, how to preserve gherkins and how to make marmalade. The choice of casting seems illuminating. Jean Yanne has appeared in a wide range of popular comedies in which he has frequently played, or played on, quasi-stereotyped images of the French national character and, until 1990, he was a principal contributor to *Les Grosses Têtes*, a daily comedy show on the radio station, *RTL*. A number of his roles have also been characterised as 'beaufs', characters described by Polack and Michelson as recognisable types originating from the 'reactionary breeding ground' of an often provincial petit-bourgeoisie, 'cynical, detestable characters' with antisocial tendencies, as in his roles in the films of Claude

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<sup>318</sup> Frampton, *Filmosophy*, p. 32.

Chabrol.<sup>319</sup> *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonist and journalist, Cabu, credited as a populariser of the term, derived from ‘beau-frère’, characterised the ‘beauf’ as ‘ce type qui assène des vérités, ses vérités, il ne réfléchit absolument pas, il est porté [...] par des certitudes dont il ne démordra jamais.’<sup>320</sup> The film’s presentation of the kind of ‘automaticity’ described by Bergson, and which we associated with the postures of ironic dissimulation above, is incarnated by this figure who cannot seem to stop himself from taking charge, doling out contextually irrelevant advice and narcissistically bringing the conversation around to his cooking or, perhaps more appropriately, *preserving* abilities, which, by the end of the film, are firmly in doubt, when he contaminates his signature marmalade with garlic.

As Patricia White notes, ‘[c]asting and performance are already a reading of type’, and the audience’s expectations will be informed by ‘spectatorial experience of the star in other roles’.<sup>321</sup> There is perhaps an ambiguity to Yanne’s casting, in that his previous roles appear broadly divided between affable ‘français de souche’ banality and the lurking possibility of menace associated with ‘beaufitude’, which corresponds to the way in which the film codes his behaviour as almost pathological in its automaticity. In the first scene in which he appears, the narrator and Pascale are sitting opposite each other in awkward silence in the driving school when Polougaievski Senior arrives outside. As his car screeches to a halt, he almost knocks over a passer-by and her small child, but he seems utterly oblivious to the danger he has placed them in when she remonstrates with him, shouting at him that he should learn to drive, which he finds highly amusing, (the incident plays out outside a

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<sup>319</sup> Jean-Claude Polack and Annette Michelson, ‘Chabrol and the Execution of the Deed’, *October*, 98 (2001), 77-92 (p. 79).

<sup>320</sup> Jean Cabu and Gérard Holtz, *Le Beauf, Selon Cabu - Archive INA de 1979*, online video recording, YouTube, 10 January 1979, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTK\\_56pIS3I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTK_56pIS3I)>, [accessed 15 July 2015]. It could be argued that an element of metropolitan condescension underlies this concept.

<sup>321</sup> Cited in Pamela Roberston Wojcik, ‘Typecasting’, *Criticism*, 45 (2003), 223-249 (p. 224).



driving school) laughing and repeating, “‘Apprenez à conduire”, c’est rigolo, bonne journée!’ (S, 15: 50). As he sets down a package on the countertop, his first words to the narrator and Pascale are, ‘Bon, j’amène les cornichons’ (S, 16:05), even before any introductions have even been made, which here suggests an ironic double meaning, since ‘cornichon’ is a slang term for an idiot or imbecile; as he then tells the narrator, ‘J’adore faire les cornichons, c’est vrai, franchement c’est ma spécialité.’ (S, 16:20) The grounds for M. Polougaievski’s apparent self-possession, as he ferries the characters around, instructing them to follow his lead at several points to a refrain of, ‘Allez, en route les enfants!’ (S, 32:40), and generally behaving like an insufferable know-it-all, are repeatedly undermined by his inability to substantiate his ‘directedness’, the characters getting lost following his lead. Bergson suggests that character humour is largely dependent on unreflective ‘inattention’ to oneself and others, and that ‘l’inattention se confond précisément ici avec [...] l’insociabilité.’<sup>322</sup> There is a sense in which this character, in thrall to his sedimented, *idemic* (or preserved) dispositions, could potentially provide the counterpoint to the narrator’s Socratic, *ipseitic* uncertainty with regard to expressions of his own elusive personal identity, however, there is an asymmetry here which covers over the thematic treatment of the latter aspect, instead foregrounding Yanne’s (hilarious) performance.

M. Polougaievski is an ‘over-sharer’; after only the most cursory of introductions, he mentions to the narrator (a complete stranger at this point) his supposedly ‘secret’ gherkin recipe, before immediately following this with, ‘mais un jour, je suis pas éternel, il va bien falloir que je transmette la recette aux jeunes.’ (S, 16:30) Asking the narrator if he is interested in learning the recipe, he does not wait

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<sup>322</sup> Bergson, *Le Rire*, p. 112.

for a response before launching into a painstakingly detailed description of its every stage, the camera remaining attentively fixed on him throughout, as if earnestly concentrated on the transmission of this highly important information. In this instance, at least, the film's formal treatment of the moment seems to reproduce, or translate, something similar to the ironic engagement of the novel's narrator with experiences of banal *quotidianité*, at odds with the willed uncertainty of his own identitary horizons. As Macdowell writes, drawing on Booth, 'irony by its very nature assumes that it is only *through* intention that a statement becomes properly describable as ironic at all'.<sup>323</sup> However, as Sarah Kazloff points out in her discussion of ironic voice-over narration, the complexity of identifying ironic discourse in film derives from the fact that it does not share with literature the characteristic that 'both story and discourse are transmitted through a single sign system – language.'<sup>324</sup> If the film's attentive gaze can be understood as producing an ironic effect here, it does not seem to be an effect which can be straightforwardly attributable to the intentionality of the narrator, but rather more to its own, as Frampton would put it, 'transsubjective' being, simultaneously intending judgements about the world it is presenting.

In the first chapter, it was suggested that a scene in *L'Appareil-photo*, in which the narrator watches M. Polougaievski and a service station attendant play mikado as he shaves in the mirror contributes to a general impression of the narrator's preference for engaging only vicariously and indirectly with the world around him. Revealingly, in *La Sévillane*, this non-engagement is taken a step

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<sup>323</sup> James MacDowell, 'Film Interpretation and the Rhetoric of Irony' (presented at the SCMS 2015, Fairmont Queen Elizabeth, Montreal, 2015), p. 4

<sup>324</sup> Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-over Narration in American Fiction Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 102.

further, the scene playing out as the narrator waits outside, while his physical position in the novel, shaving topless at the mirror, is *replaced* by Polougaievski, who doles out unwelcome advice to Tom Novembre's station attendant about how to proceed in the solitary game of mikado the latter is playing. Mikado is a game of careful moves, where disturbances are unwelcome, and the topless Polougaievski, constantly interjecting with unwelcome advice, his face wet and foamy from shaving as he encroaches on the attendant's personal space with his paunchy form, prompts several glances of mute outrage from Novembre's character. The antisocial behaviour of the novel's narrator is substituted here for that of Polougaievski, invading not only the attendant's physical space, but also criticising his abilities at the game: 'Il y a pas longtemps que vous jouez au mikado, hein? Ça se voit.' (S, 30:00) Although Tom Novembre's character appears only briefly, in only this scene, he shares certain characteristics with the narrator of the film and novel; too timid to properly contest the words of M. Polougaievski, but also clearly aghast at his presence.

In *La Patinoire*, Novembre will assume a much more central role, and one cannot help but wonder if his presence in *La Sévillane* is, in a certain fashion, almost unfortunate, as his skilled reactive performance, when confronted with Polougaievski, compares very favourably with that of Jean-Claude Adelin's narrator, who struggles to physically articulate the sense of internal disturbance which might motivate his desire in the latter part of the film to, as he tells Pascale on the ferry, 'faire [...] un portrait, un autoportrait peut-être, mais sans moi et sans personne' (S, 1:22:05). Kawin argues that, in discussing self-reflexivity in cinematic works, one should attempt to identify a kind of subjective consistency which 'must reach from an articulate base; it must on some level, say "I", which is one mark of systemic

integrity’, although he emphasises that ‘there are no rules about the kind of self that is.’<sup>325</sup> In *La Sévillane*, part of the problem is perhaps that Adelin’s narrator is simply not believably conflicted in the way which appears to motivate the narrator of *L’Appareil-photo* to emerge from behind his posture of ironic detachment and attempt to externalise a sense of his personal identity, despite there being multiple indications that the film itself attempts to proceed in this way.

Let us consider the scene in which the narrator retreats to the service-station toilets to urinate and contemplate. Sarah Glasco suggests that, in the novel, this setting ‘completely undermines the act of thinking and deep reflection’ and ‘serve[s] to distract the reader from the purported profundity that the act of thinking might otherwise be able to conjure.’<sup>326</sup> This does seem true to a certain extent and it is not only the incongruous setting, but also the narrator himself who ironically ‘punctures’ his own meditations, ‘(je serais plutôt un gros penseur, oui)’ (*AP*, 50) (‘je m’étais [...] rétranché dans mes pensées, pour parvenir à m’en extraire, bonjour)’ (*AP*, 31) but at the same time, we cannot ignore that this scene in the novel prompts a pertinent analeptic memory of his previous attempt to drive ten years earlier. The same episode in the film makes no corresponding departure from its linear structure, showing only the narrator sitting impassively on the toilet eating crisps, his voiceover narration speaking an abridged version of the novel’s words: ‘j’étais assis là depuis un moment déjà, et je suivais tranquillement le cours de mes pensées.[...] [J]e ne doutais plus maintenant que mes assauts répétés [...] finiraient par épuiser la réalité à laquelle je me heurtais.’ (*S*, 12:45) If we accept that, in the novel, it is partly the refigurative power of the narrator’s analeptic disruptions of the narrative

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<sup>325</sup> Kawin, *Mindscreen*, p. 193, p. 194.

<sup>326</sup> Glasco, *Parody and Palimpsest*, p. 69.

structure which, themselves, constitute key instances of these ‘assauts répétés’, the film fails to articulate its own impression of what is at stake for the narrator, and the scene fails to communicate the sense of ‘the significance and bias of [...] perception as it engages a substantial world that has meaning – makes sense’.<sup>327</sup>

Perhaps what we can recognise most clearly from *L’Appareil-photo* in *La Sévillane*, is the persistent, mocking unease associated with the presence of other people (‘les gens, tout de même’) which, strikingly is not only that of the narrator, but also appears to be doubled by that of the filmic text commenting on its own procedures. It seems significant that its title derives from an element which is entirely absent from the novel, in the form of the *sevillana* dances practised by Pascale, dances which are, historically, tightly bound up with social and communal life of Southern Spain. Lynn Matluck Brooks notes that many similar dance forms were highly integrated into societal and liturgical traditions in historical Seville, playing a key role in fostering ‘the identification of the city as a community of people’, particularly the case with the ‘quintessential’ *seguidillas* from which *sevillanas* would later develop, ‘which crossed social boundaries and appeared in the streets, at Court, and on the stage.’<sup>328</sup>

At one point, seizing on the opportunity to escape Mr. Poulagaievski’s endless sermons on how to make marmalade, the narrator tells Pascale that he will accompany her to one of her dance classes. The film cuts to a shot of Pascale and a group of other women in flamenco dresses, synchronically dancing together in a studio to encouragement from their male teacher, before cutting to a shot of the

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<sup>327</sup> Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, p. 205.

<sup>328</sup> Lynn Matluck Brooks, *The Dances of the Processions of Seville in Spain's Golden Age* (Kassel: Edition Reichenberger, 1988), p. 34, p. 399.

narrator pacing outside, alone, as he waits for the class to end. We then cut back and forth between the dance studio, the women forming a circle and taking turns dancing in its centre, and the narrator standing outside, alone, first as he watches a panicked late arrival rushing into the building, and then as he appears to reach the end of the novel he is reading. When it is Pascale's turn to move into the centre, she seductively advances and retreats towards the male teacher, before she turns her head, surprised, a reverse shot showing us the narrator standing there, before we see her rapidly flicking her head back and forth between the dance teacher and narrator as the music ends. This is followed by a scene of the characters sitting together in a changing room, with the narrator looking despondent, telling Pascale that when she is not there, 'j' imagine que je vous parle, et je raconte des histoires, je raconte des blagues, et quand vous êtes là, je ne dis plus rien.' (S, 41:45) Pascale responds by suggesting that if he is too shy to express himself properly, then perhaps he could just pretend like she is not there, which prompts the narrator to say, with a heavy sigh, 'Je ne peux pas faire comme si vous n'étiez pas là.' (S, 42:30) In the first chapter it was suggested that jealousy with regard to the possible paternity of Pascale's son, 'Petit Pierre', may have been a motivating factor for the narrator in the novel, and here, we could perhaps infer some kind of sexual rivalry with the dance teacher, but there is also a sense that the narrator's importunate presence in the dance class highlights the difficulties he faces in participating in quintessentially *social* practices, as incarnated by the *sevillana* dances themselves.

Throughout both the novel and the film, the use of the formal second-person address, *vous*, between the characters serves to attach an incongruous formality to their budding relationship, but the film may also invite us to read the 'vous' on another level, generating a tension 'between [the film's] surface meanings and

implicit meanings.’<sup>329</sup> MacDowell suggests, however, that if one is to argue for the significance of such ironic tensions in cinematic works, this requires ‘moving beyond [identifying] irony’s mere presence, and onto questions of its particular uses and significances in individual cases’.<sup>330</sup> In this instance, we could understand the problematic ‘vous’ precisely in terms of its plurality, rather than simply its formality, to read it as an ironic judgement by the transsubjective film about its own problems of articulation or enunciation, in terms of the obstacles presented to subjective expression in the form of the concrete presence of other individuals, and perhaps not only that of the fictional characters, but also that of the film’s concrete collaborators. Despite the relative laconicism of *L’Appareil-photo*’s narrator, the novel abounds with written but unspoken reflections upon his own internal experience – the possibility of replicating this rich sense of interiority in filmic form seems heavily curtailed, and it may be possible to interpret the apparent melancholy of the film-narrator’s statements here not only in terms of his own diffidence towards Pascale, but also as an emanation of a metafilmic position or judgement which expresses reservations about the possibilities of cinematic form (which necessarily entails a plurality of individuals) to signify first-person subjectivity *in the same way* as in literature, ironically placed in the mouth of the ‘narrator’.

We could also read the film’s ironic treatment of this conflict between the subjective enunciation of a diegetic character and its transsubjective being as expressed in the form of a visual gag where, during a supermarket visit to purchase jam-making ingredients, what initially looks like a fixed subjective camera or point-of-view shot onto the supermarket floor is revealed to actually be a shot through an

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<sup>329</sup> MacDowell, *Surface Meanings, Irony and Film Interpretation*, p. 9.

<sup>330</sup> MacDowell, *Film Interpretation and the Rhetoric of Irony*, p. 10.

elevator shaft as the three characters slowly emerge from below to occupy the full space of the screen. (S, 21:45) Something similar appears to take place in scene in which the narrator is sitting in the back of M. Polougaievski's convertible as he drives them down a busy street. Pascale, from the passenger seat, suddenly turns to ask the narrator why he appears to be crying, but his voice is barely audible over the sounds of traffic and wind, as he appears to mouth the words, 'C'est un truc à l'intérieur de l'oeil' (S, 20:00). Pascale repeatedly tells him that she can't hear what he is saying, forcing him to repeat himself, up until the point at which he cups his hands and shouts, 'Je suis très sensible!', causing M. Polougaievski to burst out laughing and remark, 'C'est ce qu'il faut pas entendre...' (S, 20:05).

In the first chapter, it was argued that, in *L'Appareil-photo*, it is the presence of others, and particularly the incidental presence of Pascale in a photo taken by the camera's original owners, which ultimately serves to 'allow the narrator to perceive the relational effects of his existence'. In the film, conversely, without the support of a sufficiently encoded, pragmatic subjectivity, the presence of others in the film seems to act as a *barrier* to the ipseitic activity motivated towards self-recognition, the narrator character becoming just another object of the film's gaze. As in the novel, the desired photograph which the narrator describes as 'sans moi et sans personne sans arrière plan et presque sans lumière' is believed by the narrator to be one of those he takes while running panicked on the ferry. Rather than this being a mostly private realisation, articulated as internal contemplation relayed by the text, in *La Sévillane* the narrator both explicitly *tells* Pascale that he has managed to capture this image and tells her 'tenez, elle est pour vous' as he hands her the film from the stolen camera, whereas in the novel the narrator keeps possession of them to get them developed himself.



In the novel, the photographic film ultimately turns out to be ‘uniformément sous-exposée’ (AP, 116), but the symbolic value these photos convey for the narrator, in terms of what they express about the dynamism of his living selfhood and the impossibility of definitively capturing personal identity in a static configuration, is a key moment and one which is notably absent here. In *La Sévillane*, Pascale’s reacts with an expression of incomprehension and a slight unease, looking into the distance, as if unsure how to react to this sudden bizarre confidence. The scene is ironically framed by the film in a twofold way. First, whereas in the novel developing these photos appears to have profound personal meaning for the narrator, attached to his own reflexive contemplations, they would presumably mean very little to Pascale, so the narrator’s ‘gift’, the idea that the photo is ‘for her’, seems rather absurd. Second, as Frampton says, ‘framing is a position of thinking’<sup>331</sup> or filmic judgement, and it seems revealing that, when the narrator of *La Sévillane* tells Pascale, ‘ce n’est que maintenant que je suis arrivé à faire cette photo’ (S, 1:22:10), these words are spoken in the context of a close-up of the two characters, almost as if to suggest that his words might refer not to the photos he has captured while running through the ferry, but rather, via the voice of the film itself, to the quasi-photographic image of the two characters as it frames them.

Just as the narrator’s shouted declaration, ‘Je suis très sensible!’, in the car prompted mocking laughter from M. Polougaievski, the film articulates the way in which the narrator’s attempts to engage more candidly with those around him, to (over)expose an image of his intimate being is troubled by the tangible presence of an interlocutor other than just himself. While we could understand such scenes as thematising the narrator’s inability to ‘make himself heard’ in the presence of other

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<sup>331</sup> Frampton, *Filmosophy*, p. 125.

individuals, they also take on a secondary value, in terms of a metafilmic or transsubjective position which expresses of the difficulty of translating the determining subjectivity of the novel from page to screen, that is to say, not simply as a problem of individual enunciation, but rather as one relating to the problems of materially incarnating the narrator's voice in cinematic form, the narrator's failure doubled by the failure that the film identifies within itself.

After the ferry pulls into port, the narrator and Pascale take a walk on the beach, where he tells her that he loves her. The two characters look at each other, expressionless, Pascale opening her mouth to speak before closing it again without saying anything. We then cut to a shot of the narrator curled up in the phone box, almost identical to the shot which opened the film, but rather than the black sky of night in the first shot, day is now beginning to dawn: 'le jour se levait maintenant, [...] et je pensais. Je pensais, oui, et lorsque je pensais je simulais une autre vie sans agression et sans douleur possible.' (*S*, 1:24:50) Whereas, in the novel, the final status of the central relationship remains undetermined, here it is much more strongly implied that Pascale has rejected the narrator's declaration of love, since the cabin has been relocated from the countryside near Orléans, where the novel-narrator was visiting some friends, to the film-narrator's position, alone in the very port where he has made the declaration, indicating that Pascale has responded negatively. If the limits to the narrator's ability to atemporalise, as in a photograph, an image of his personal identity, 'comme on immobiliserait l'extrémité d'une aiguille dans le corps d'un papillon vivant' (*AP*, 127) (*S*, 1:25:18), are keenly felt in the *L'Appareil-photo*, the film takes this a step further.

The previous chapter contrasted the static nature of the photograph with the dynamic nature of the text's reflexive narration, suggesting that the text of

*L'Appareil-photo* assumes the 'role of both the apparatus (narration, *l'appareil*) with which to capture the dynamic 'air' or 'character' of an *ipse* identity, and the expression of that identity itself (the narrative, *la photo*).' Both *La Sévillane* and *L'Appareil-photo* assume ironic postures of humour, non-engagement or disinterest from which their narrators then move towards a desire for a more fundamental kind of self-recognition. However, the film can also be read as ironically thematising its own failure to effectively reproduce the novel's transition from the humorously inflected treatment of 'la difficulté de vivre' towards the interrogation of more existential anxieties associated with a 'désespoir d'être', and this seems strongly connected to its inability to reproduce the sense of driving, configuring intentionality which is intrinsic to its source novel. As Kawin notes, 'most filmmakers express themselves somehow in their films',<sup>332</sup> and *La Sévillane* can be read as incorporating certain expressions of a reticence with regard to the possibilities of the cinematic form itself, via the instantiation of its secondary, metafilmic and ironic voice.

### ***La Patinoire***

As Sobchack points out, even in films where an auteur appears to exert a high degree of control, the creative intentionality of the filmmaker, as opposed to that of the novelist, is always fractured by the 'concrete, situated, and synoptic presence'<sup>333</sup> of the many people involved in a film's realisation. As will now be suggested, this is a thematic concern which is self-reflexively central to *La Patinoire* (1999), a comedy

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<sup>332</sup> Kawin, *Mindscreen*, p. 147.

<sup>333</sup> Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, p.9.

about the difficulties of making a film which, in much more explicit fashion than *La Sévillane*, takes up the question of the threat posed to individual creative aspiration in the encounter with others.

As opposed to the earlier film, *La Patinoire* is neither adapted from a source novel, nor is it implied to be mediated through the perspective of any one diegetic character, however, Mireille Raynal-Zougari suggests that Toussaint's film 'incarne, par des figures cinématographiques, des principes esthétiques qui sous-tendent toute son œuvre.'<sup>334</sup> For Raynal-Zougari, this aesthetic is one of the burlesque, in that it 'manifeste volontiers une improductivité opposée à l'action tournée vers une fin',<sup>335</sup> which she connects to the ways in which Toussaint's novels frequently display a concern with the incompleteness of human projects associated with the disruptive power of unanticipated events. *La Patinoire* centres around the efforts on a unnamed cinematic *auteur* (Tom Novembre) and his film crew as they attempt to shoot a diegetic movie, named *Dolores*, on an ice rink, working against the time pressure of a submission deadline for the film's participation in the upcoming Venice Film Festival competition. The possibilities for physical comedy that this location presents are well exploited, with a series of falls, tumbles, and injuries befalling the many non-proficient skaters who make up the diegetic film's cast and crew. However, the location is more than simply a pretext for slapstick, or source of practical challenges to the completion of *Dolores*, although it certainly plays on both of these things. The titular ice rink also serves as the metaphorically 'unstable ground' upon which these multiple individuals, ostensibly involved in a common creative endeavour, but each with their own, conflicting intentional 'trajectories', narcissistic tendencies and

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<sup>334</sup> Mireille Raynal-Zougari, 'Mise en scène de l'écrivain en cinéaste patineur', *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 57-66 (p. 57).

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

problematic ‘automaticities’, will inevitably come into collision. As Ricœur writes, in general ‘action est interaction, et l’interaction [est] compétition entre projets tour à tour rivaux et convergents.’<sup>336</sup> In *La Patinoire* the emphasis is predominantly placed on the rivalries and conflicts involved in human interaction, the film playfully evoking the difficulties and struggles of what Kawin refers to as the ‘collaborative reality’ of film practice, which he says is responsible for the way in which a film’s ‘coherence functions at a [...] systematic level rather than proceeding directly from the intentions of a particular artist’.<sup>337</sup>

This concern with the difficulties involved in realising a collaborative work, one which is in harmony with the conflicting intentions and desires of its various contributors, is suggested from the very outset of the film; as the opening credits roll, we hear an orchestral motif from Brahms’s Hungarian Dance No. 5 fading in and out, competing on the sound track with a variety of unrelated sound effects, including bagpipes, ringing telephones, hammering, the sound of a tuba tuning up. As the credits give way to the images of the first scene, these incongruous sounds disappear, and the Hungarian Dance No. 5 begins to play uninterrupted as a number of vehicles arrive outside the ice rink in sequence. First, the crew of the diegetic film, unloading metallic cases full of equipment from a parked truck; then an overloaded and battered wood-panelled coach pulls into the lot, transporting the heavily-laden Lithuanian national ice hockey team and their luggage; this is followed by a red convertible<sup>338</sup> from which the writer-director confidently strolls, carrying his script;

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<sup>336</sup> Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, p. 173.

<sup>337</sup> Kawin, ‘An Outline of Film Voices’, p. 44.

<sup>338</sup> Raynal-Zougari notes the car, an Ala Roméo, is a reference to Godard’s *Mépris* (1963), and suggests that *La Patinoire* could almost be considered ‘un remake parodique’ of Godard’s film. ‘Mise en scène de l’écrivain en cinéaste patineur’, p. 64.

finally a limousine arrives, from which emerges the male lead of *Dolores*, an American film star named Sylvester, played by Bruce Campbell.

This scene juxtaposes the initial ‘lightness’ of the director, calmly walking with his script, with the weight of the various forms of baggage, of both the literal and figurative variety, brought to the production by the cast and crew. Recalling the longed-for ‘marbre immuable de quelque étude idéale et achevée’ (*T*, 113) imagined by the narrator of *La Télévision*, the script carried by the director here takes on the value of a kind of material embodiment of his initial, uncompromised creative aspiration, as yet untainted by the collaborative exigencies and practicalities of the filmmaking process, as well as the litany of technical and interpersonal issues this *auteur* will encounter, which are themselves incarnated here by the various individuals arriving in the other vehicles. As Daniel Frampton says, ‘[f]ilms can think via music as much as noise affects, and each choice powerfully reconfigures the images’<sup>339</sup> and the tension between the director’s ‘pure’, unrealised intentions and the anticipated disruptions relating to collaboration, the difficulties of ensuring that this group of individuals ‘keeps it together’, is musically reflected not only by the initial sonic interference of the sound effects with Brahms’s ensemble piece during the opening credits, but also in the way that the arrival of the director character is accompanied by one section of the Hungarian Dance No. 5, while the other individuals are sonically associated with a different one.

The differences in melody and tempo of the two sections are especially pronounced, perhaps because, as Elizabeth Loparits notes, this piece was the result of Brahms ‘arrang[ing] two different [pre-existing] works into one composition’.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Frampton, *Filmosophy*, p. 121.

<sup>340</sup> Elizabeth Loparits, ‘Hungarian Gypsy Style in the Lisztian Spirit: Georges Cziffra’s Two

Whereas the initial shot of the crew's lorry and the arrival of the Lithuanian van are accompanied by the frantic, anxious tempo and melody of the *allegro* section of Hungarian Dance No. 5, the arrival of the director coincides with an abrupt musical shift into the simpler melody, the swelling major chords and more sedate tempo of its *vivace* section, which lasts just long enough for the director and his assistant to exit the convertible and walk up to the window of Sylvester's arriving limousine, before the music switches once again to frantic *allegro*, at precisely the moment the limousine door malfunctions, requiring the director to subject Sylvester to the indignity of physically dragging him through a half-open window, in full view of a documentary crew which is shooting a 'making of' feature. From the outset, this creates an association between misfortune or malfunction with the cast and crew, via the *allegro* motif, in a way which sets them apart from the figure of the director, through the *vivace* motif.

This is not to suggest that *La Patinoire* originates or appears intended to be understood as originating from the director-character's subjectivity, but rather that the film's formal features, in this case the musical score, contribute towards 'thinking', in the sense described by Frampton, the conflict between his aspirations and the presence of the other individuals. We suggested that *La Sévillane* reflexively thematises its failure to communicate a subjectivity analogous to that of the emotionally detached speaker of *L'Appareil-photo*. Bordwell insists that we should not misunderstand the nature of the film medium: 'A film [...] does not "position" anybody. A film cues the spectator to execute a definable variety of operations.'<sup>341</sup> However, while it is true that *La Patinoire* provides no speaker-position analogous to

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Transcriptions of Brahms' Fifth Hungarian Dance' (unpublished dissertation, University of North Carolina, 2008), p. 77.

<sup>341</sup> Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 29.

that of the narrators of Toussaint's novels, this does not, as will be suggested, make it impossible to speak of the film expressing a particular sensibility, for, as Sobchack puts it, 'however mechanical in origin, the moving picture is experienced semiotically as also intentional and subjective, as *presenting a representation* of the objective world'<sup>342</sup> and, as we will infer, this sensibility, intentionality or 'transsubjective being', responsible for the ways in which *La Patinoire* presents a representation of the filmmaking process, is a particularly ironical one. The most significant ironies of Toussaint's novels can be traced to the adoption of various postures or pretences by his narrators – the third-person narration of *Monsieur*, the affective detachment of novels such as *La Télévision* or *L'Appareil-photo* – as one means of reflectively disrupting facets of habitual experience by artificially reifying them, in ways which simultaneously draw attention to this activity as itself being, in Lear's terms, 'a disruption of the repertoire' which 'in the disruption, [...] brings to light that the established repertoire is just that'<sup>343</sup> and ultimately contributes to the possibilities of thinking 'beyond', or rethinking, that repertoire.

As Frampton argues, film constitutes a form of thinking 'that can describe [...] and transfigure the objects and people within it',<sup>344</sup> and it is in this manner which *La Patinoire* operates ironically; by 'thinking' its characters as if they were simply postures, postures which it then repeatedly undermines. In this regard, it seems significant that, in the film's end credits,<sup>345</sup> all of the characters, including the few of them who given proper names within the film, are referred to only by their diegetic roles; 'le metteur en scène', 'l'acteur Américain', 'la Scripte' etc. In a way this is highly reminiscent of the rather instrumentally drawn or functional secondary

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<sup>342</sup> Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, p. 62. Sobchack's emphasis.

<sup>343</sup> Lear, *A Case for Irony*, p. 31.

<sup>344</sup> Frampton, *Filmosophy*, p. 129.



characters which tend to populate Toussaint's novels, perhaps with the only real exception being Marie de Montalte, who appears in the tetralogy discussed in the following chapter, and which that narrator's attempts to get beyond instrumental judgements itself constitutes central thematic issue of the series.

As in Toussaint's novels, part of the ironic work of *La Patinoire* depends on drawing the viewer's attention to its own formal features, in this case by focusing on various forms of artifice; that includes those forms of artifice which are inherent in the practice of acting and playing and in the creation of its diegetic and extra-diegetically framed film-worlds, but also in terms of the kinds of 'social' artifice involved in the interpersonal demands of working together in a professional context, which we could associate with Lear's 'established repertoires'. As David Bordwell says, a 'film-within-a-film structure [...] allows unexpected shifts between levels of fictionality'<sup>345</sup> and *La Patinoire* uses such shifts to examine the pitfalls associated with the collaborative activity required of those working in cinema by deploying its characters as recognisable types, each with their own human frailties; the pomposity of the writer-director, the vanity of the lead actress, the placatory and emollient demeanour of the diegetic film's producer, and the narcissism of the insufferable ice rink manager who has to be endlessly humoured by the other characters due to the access to the filming location he represents. Sylvester, 'the American Actor', is established by the shorthand of his dark glasses and leather jacket emblazoned with 'USA' along the arm and an American flag on his back, encouraging us to see, with Zougari, that the character's name is a reference to the stereotypically macho American star, Sylvester Stallone.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, pp. 211-212.

<sup>346</sup> Raynal-Zougari, 'Mise en scène de l'écrivain en cineaste patineur', p. 61.

In this way, *La Patinoire* focuses on the cinematic medium as a space of conflict between individual aspiration (which is not only that of the writer-director, but is distributed, via the pervasive egocentrism of the majority of its central characters) with the necessary plurality that Sobchack associates with her notion of the ‘filmmaker’.<sup>347</sup> One scene comically presents just the sort of absurdity that would be involved in a single individual attempting to incarnate all the different parts of a dramatic work when, during a last-minute casting call to find a replacement for the (non-speaking) role of an ice hockey referee, one of the auditioning actors attempts to impress the director by performing part of his one-man adaptation of *King Lear*. When prompted to begin, however, he prefaces his performance by explaining that, in the particular scene he has chosen, Lear is ‘dans l’élán seul, désespéré, la tempête autour de lui’ (*P*, 5:20), thereby making his grand claim to be able to play all the roles irrelevant and ridiculous; in any case, ultimately the choice of actor for the role will be dictated not by acting talent, but rather by practical necessity, as only one of the auditionees is capable of skating without falling over.

The ice rink manager, played by Jean-Pierre Cassel, is exemplary of this kind of inflexible egocentrism, conveying something essential of the ‘mechanical’ quality which Bergson sees as crucial to character humour, and which we have repeatedly associated with the reifying component of ironical dissimulation: ‘La cause de raideur par excellence, c’est qu’on néglige de regarder autour de soi et surtout en soi.’<sup>348</sup> The character seems oblivious to the appropriateness of a given conversational context, constantly diverting exchanges with those around him into a pretext for talking about himself, taking any opportunity to reminisce about his

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<sup>347</sup> Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, p. 9.

<sup>348</sup> Bergson, *Le Rire*, p. 112.

experience of competing at the Olympic games in Innsbruck, even insisting on showing the editing team the VHS tape of the event just at the point when they are faced with a imminent deadline of editing for submission to the Venice film festival, forcing them to ‘physically’ edit the film reels in the helicopter which flies them to Venice at the end of the film. Although the ice rink manager represents perhaps the clearest example of this kind of unflinching lack of self-awareness, it is a characteristic which is shared by most of the film’s principal characters, and particularly Tom Novembre’s writer-director. We see this when, after telling Sylvester that he is going to give him some notes to explain the motivation of his character, he proceeds by doing no such thing, but rather only by talking about himself and his creative process. ‘A propos de l’histoire d’amour, je voudrais vous dire deux ou trois choses sur le personnage’ (*P*, 23:38), he says in French to the apparently monolingual American film star, as they walk through the tunnel into the ice rink, flanked by the documentary crew, before continuing, ‘Tout ce que je fais est toujours indirect, détourné, secret... Même dans le film je veux dire.’ (*P*, 23:44) The fact that Sylvester does not appear to understand French underlines the way in which the director’s exposition of his methods is of a monological nature, delivered less for the benefit of the actor, and more for that of the documentary cameraman following behind them.

After explaining that he is particularly interested in this exploration of intimacy, drawing on experiences in his own life, ‘pour en faire de l’art, des livres, ou, là, un film’ (*P*, 24:20), he responds to Sylvester’s uncomprehending expression with the entirely unhelpful clarification in English, ‘A movie’, whereby Sylvester claps him on the back, telling him, ‘Whatever you want to do.’ (*P*, 24:28) Something similar is repeated when he tells the lead actress, Sarah, of another ‘deux où trois

petites choses que j'avais envie de vous dire à propos du personnage', before this time seguing into what looks more like a romantic overture, deepening his voice and pausing dramatically at several points,

...parce que c'est histoire d'amour, je ne sais pas si je devrais la traiter vraiment où attendre que les choses se fassent toutes seules, en espérant que quelque chose arrive... malgré nous, quelque chose qu'on aurait pas prévu...ni vous ni moi... Est ce-que vous aimez la cuisine Chinoise? (*P*, 31:25)

In a later scene, he will even step in to 'demonstrate' how a kiss between Sylvester and Sarah (who by this point are romantically involved) should be performed, asking permission to do so from Sylvester rather than Sarah, who looks distinctly uncomfortable as he kisses her. At another point, he begins to explain to the Lithuanian hockey team, through an interpreter, what he wants them to do; all he needs to explain is that, since there is only one goal on the ice rink, they should remain in one half so the camera can be positioned in the other half to capture their movements, but he begins with a theoretical digression into Robert Bresson's notion that 'pour atteindre le vrai, il faut passer par le faux' – before changing his mind and telling the interpreter, 'non, ça ne le traduisez pas. Traduisez juste que c'est du cinéma.' (*P*, 10:55) In each of these scenes, after initially making a cursory effort to creatively involve the other characters, his own desires take over, whether in pretentiously exhibiting his own artistic sensibility or creative vision with Sylvester or the Lithuanians, or in abusing his position in an attempt to seduce Sarah, and in

each case he ultimately fails to convey the necessary information which might contribute to actually improving the film, corresponding to his failure to ‘autour de soi et surtout en soi’.<sup>349</sup>

The moment of Sylvester’s arrival at the set, which sees him unceremoniously pulled through the window of his limousine, punctures the mystique associated with his ‘star power’, and also as Raynal-Zougari puts it, sees him ‘démystifié dans sa virilité prétentieuse’.<sup>350</sup> More generally, though, this moment anticipates this rather objectifying manner in which the film’s cast and crew are instrumentalised in service to the director’s creative aspirations, reducing them to something more like functional human props. The actor ultimately chosen for the role of hockey referee is referred to by the director only as ‘le moustachu qui patine bien’, shortly before he decides, on a whim, that he would prefer the character to be clean-shaven, relaying this to the makeup artist via walkie-talkie, an instruction which the actor listens with an expression of unease. In the course of filming the scene in which Sylvester’s character sees Dolores for the first time, we see him repeatedly lowered, via a trolley mechanism, uncomfortably and at speed, face first onto the ice, at which point he is sprayed with ice-cold water by an assistant, before looking up and painfully intoning, ‘Dolores...’ The actor’s performance cedes primacy to the task of making sure all of the mechanical details function in harmony, with each take getting some aspect wrong, requiring Sylvester to be raised and lowered onto the ice again and again, and despite the physically arduous and tedious experience of the multiple takes for Sylvester, the director will ultimately decide to cut it from the film.

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid.

<sup>350</sup> Raynal-Zougari, ‘Mise en scène de l’écrivain en cinéaste patineur’, p. 64.

In shooting this scene, with Sarah having not yet arrived on set, a milk jug perched upon a stepladder stands in her place, in order to make sure that Sylvester's gaze is fixed at the appropriate height for the shot. The indignity and discomfort to which Campbell's character is subjected here is repeated by the notion that the lead actress could be replaceable by an inanimate object, particularly when Sarah belatedly turns up and replaces the jug, causing Sylvester to frustratedly mutter that, 'it was better before', translated by the Ukrainian sound engineer for the benefit of the director as, 'il a dit que c'était mieux avec l'autre cruche' (*P*, 29:30), 'cruche' establishing the connection between Sarah and the inanimate object, but also evoking the French word's colloquial use to refer to an idiotic or stupid person.

After having effusively expressed to Sylvester, in English, just how pleased she is to be working with such a 'big American star', Sarah takes her place out of shot, ready to provide her reactive presence, not only insisting on actively 'participating' in the scene, despite the fact that there is no need for her to physically be there, but egocentrically making the focus of the shoot her own absent 'performance', assuming a privilege which is normally that of the director by shouting 'Non, coupez!', just as Campbell's character is lowered onto the ice once again, explaining, 'Excusez moi, j'y suis pas encore' (*P*, 30:12), before asking for a glass of water to be brought to her, further delaying the shoot. When the director finally gets the take he wants, 'Coupez, c'était parfait', this is directed towards Sarah, who proudly beams at him, while Sylvester incredulously looks at the two, still strapped to the gurney and unable to move. Throughout the film we find single individuals repeatedly attempting to narcissistically assert their own authority, outwith the boundaries of the role they have been attributed in the filmmaking process. Carroll Hodge describes what she calls an 'egalitarian/authoritarian

continuum' which aspiring filmmakers must learn to negotiate in order to effectively handle the collaborative nature of filmmaking, 'in ways that do not threaten a colleague's authority', while also 'adjust[ing] to a professional power structure for the good of the film'.<sup>351</sup>

Given the way in which the cast and crew are subjected to these kinds of demands, to which they generally acquiesce ('Whatever you want to do'), it is significant that both the diegetic film and character played by Sarah are called '*Dolores*' ('pains' in Spanish), a word with multiple resonances in *La Patinoire*. At one point we see the entire cast and crew assembled for a screening of the multiple takes of Sylvester smashing into the ice, his single word line, 'Dolores...', rhythmically punctuating the various interactions and side-conversations taking place throughout the room. David Bordwell suggests that '[s]ound recording, mixing, and reproduction rework the raw material of acoustic phenomena to construct cues' for the spectator,<sup>352</sup> and in this scene, the levels of the sound track are varied in such a way as to repeatedly emphasise the line, 'Dolores...', at particular moments of awkwardness or interpersonal conflict between the seated characters. A particularly booming iteration is heard just after Sarah deliberately drops her earring and both the director and Sylvester rush to pick it up, 'Dolores...' playing over the shot which frames the two characters glaring at each other, serving to identify them, both to each other and to the spectator, as rivals for her affection. Another accompanies the ice rink owner entering with the producer to sit in the back row, telling her 'Ça a l'air bien votre film' (*P*, 32:18), an absurd statement given the single, decontextualized, and repeated scene they are watching. Initially, the *dolores* seem to belong to the

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<sup>351</sup> Carroll Hodge, 'Film Collaboration and Creative Conflict', *Journal of Film and Video*, 61 (2009), 18-30 (p. 23).

<sup>352</sup> Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 119.

squirming producer, humouring this bore and seemingly reluctant to tell him to be quiet as he becomes excessively animated in response to her whispered mention of the Venice film festival, prompting him to go off on a tangent about his glory days as a professional ice-skater, and about his romantic tryst with his skating partner at the time. The assistant director, Véronique, stands and turns to exaggeratedly gesture for him to be quiet, ‘sshhhh!’, framed against the image of Bruce Campbell’s head turning towards the audience, to loudly intone ‘Dolores...’ once again. For Raynal-Zougari, the flurry of activity driven by the one-track-minded characters who populate *La Patinoire* is reminiscent of the films of Jacques Tati, in that the film ‘démocratise le comique [...] en le diffusant sur toutes les figures’<sup>353</sup> and this scene exemplifies the way in which the film also works to distribute their interpersonal tribulations and frustrations with one another.

The director will later respond to a question by the documentary cameraman who interviews him, about whether he wants to ameliorate the world through his art, by once again talking about himself, ‘Disons que je m’expose et je me protège en même temps. Je m’expose vraiment et puis je me protège derrière une technique.’ (*P*, 48:30) We may be tempted to read this as more than just a comment by the character, and note a correspondence between the practices of the diegetic and non-diegetic filmmakers of *La Patinoire*, in instances such as when an assistant is sent to find the absent Sarah and Sylvester, who are making love, and the camera frames the pair through an exaggeratedly classic keyhole filter. Although the gaze is ostensibly established by a shot/reverse shot as that of the assistant peering through the keyhole, this could also be read as something of an ironic reticence on the part of the non-diegetic ‘filmmaker’ (in Sobchack’s non-unitary sense), the keyhole shape

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<sup>353</sup> Raynal-Zougari, ‘Mise en scène de l’écrivain en cineaste patineur’, p. 61.



suggesting a rather childlike fascination or prurience when it comes to sex. This reflects a remark made by the director to Sylvester, in which he discusses his ‘indirect’ methods, anticipating that the actor may find it strange that the diegetic film’s love story is only allusively dealt with, ‘comme si j’aurais de la pudeur à traiter une histoire d’amour, comme si j’éprouvais toujours le besoin de me protéger à travers les formes très élaborées.’ (*P*, 24:00) In this regard, it is perhaps notable that, particularly in Toussaint’s early novels, and at least prior to the *Marie* series, depictions of sexual activity are largely omitted, as if textually approximating a kind of cinematically discreet ‘fade to black’: ‘J’ôtai mon pantalon pour lui être agréable. 18) Après avoir dénoué notre étreinte...’, (*SB*, 19-20) ; ‘nous nous étions aimés (je n’en dirai pas plus, il est des moments où il faut savoir privilégier les faveurs de l’action aux agréments de la description).’ (*T*, 212-213) What *Dolores* is actually ‘about’ remains entirely unclear – the handful of scenes we see being filmed look like they come straight out of a classical love story, but this does not square with the director’s statement that the love story is ‘à peine abordé’ in the film; the implications of what he tells Sylvester, Sarah and the documentary crew at various points, is that the film is *really all about himself*.

The tension between the director’s desire for self-expression and an anxiety relating to self-examination is emphasised shortly after he discovers that the hot studio lights have melted the ice of the ice rink, when we see him walking through the tunnel to the newly refrozen ice, when he suddenly, aggressively shoves the documentary cameraman filming him into a pile of rubbish bins. Despite being played for laughs in *La Patinoire*, this looks reminiscent of other moments in Toussaint’s works where protagonists lash out with sudden violence in response to scrutiny at a moment of weakness – the prominently emphasised light on the

documentarist's camera visually rhymes with the hot lights responsible for disrupting the production by melting the ice, suggesting an analogical 'melting' or destabilising effect of produced by the pressures of observation on the director. This scene is intercut with shots of Valerie Lecomte's character, unnamed but credited as 'la Scribe' (the continuity editor or script supervisor), dancing on the ice to the jaunty cadence of David Bowie's 'I'm Not Losing Sleep' playing diegetically. It seems contextually relevant that the lyrics of the song can be read as a broadside against the pretensions of an aspirational interlocutor, with James Perone describing it as 'addressing someone who has taken up with [...] the upper socioeconomic class', and 'has left the old gang behind', while Bowie's character makes it clear that he is unconcerned with emulating this sort of inauthentic dissimulation in order to get ahead, 'fully content with his lot in life.'<sup>354</sup> The musical choice also further accentuates an impression that 'la Scribe' contrasts with the director not just in her relaxed demeanour and high degree of proficiency on the ice, but also in her ability to wordlessly mobilise the cast, crew and members of the Lithuanian hockey team to join her in a spontaneous moment of collective action, as she joyfully and skilfully skates around them, and as they happily join in and dance together. Just as the director, after having assaulted the documentary cameraman, arrives at the rink and sits down in his chair, we hear the lyrics, 'I would walk with you / Talk with you, drink with you / If you drop that halo that you're wearing on the ground', whereby the song is abruptly cut off, just at the moment we see a close shot of one of the circular studio lights being illuminated. (*P*, 18:54)

The situational irony of the narrator's instruction to Véronique here ('on va commencer') (*P*, 19:03) is highlighted by the fact his presence has put a stop to the

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<sup>354</sup> James E. Perone, *The Words and Music of David Bowie* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2007), p. 3.

preceding, undirected expressive activity of his collaborators. If any character in *La Patinoire* represents the kind of ‘human excellence’ discussed by Lear, it is the Scripte, in the manner of her unfeigned sociability and her ability to engage with those around her in a non-coercive way, an interpersonal ease which the director appears to lack. We see this when, upon her initial arrival on set, the Scripte greets each of the members of the technical crew with a kiss on the cheek (*P*, 4:48), later greeting the director in the same manner the following day, which may suggest a less hierarchically-minded attitude towards the different participants engaged in the film’s production. This is amusingly counterpointed with the attitude of the director, when the Lithuanian hockey players see her greeting him and make to follow her lead, lining up to kiss the startled director on the cheek as he attempts to go over his script. Despite the visible discomfort on his face, he is incapable of communicating to the players to stop, due to the language barrier, instead delegating this task to Véronique. Rather than having a quiet word with the Lithuanian interpreter, she humiliatingly conveys the director’s instruction to everyone present through a megaphone, marking him out as someone who does not see himself as one collaborator among equals, but rather as an individual conscious of his own, elevated position, with a close-up of his face emphasising his discomfort.

If the director confesses his tendency towards an ‘indirect’ treatment of his subjects, there is a more general sense of dissimulation on the part of the characters, in the adoption of other forms of inauthenticity. Early in the film, the director complains to his producer about the presence of the documentary crew while being filmed by one of their cameramen, who records their conversation from an exaggeratedly intrusive distance. As the cameraman continues to film this ‘private’ conversation, the producer, in a stage whisper, acknowledges her own frustration at

the arrangement, while telling him that ‘malheureusement, maintenant c’est impossible de faire marche arrière’ (*P*, 13:08), the TV channel having stipulated the presence of the documentary crew as one of their conditions for funding the project. As if suddenly remembering that they are being scrutinised by the very people she is complaining about, she turns to the cameraman, fixing a big smile and raising her glass as she says into camera, ‘C’est quand même une chance extraordinaire qu’une chaîne s’investissent autant dans un film.’ (*P*, 13:20) What is presented by the producer as gratitude that the television company is taking such an ‘interest’ in the film seems motivated more plausibly by their financial investment.

As Frampton writes, ‘a conversation between two people can be immeasurably inflected or revealed by the will of film framing.’<sup>355</sup> Here, the doubly ironic humour of the scene (both rhetorical and situational) comes from the fact that both the honest exchange between the producer and the director about their frustration with the TV channel documenting the creative process and the producer’s subsequent, disingenuous flattery of their funders are recorded in full by the cameraman. While, for the producer, her words seem to attest to a necessary professional dishonesty, rather than being themselves an instance of intentional irony on her part (as, presumably, she does not want to betray the insincerity of what she is saying to the film’s funders), the sequence codes her discourse as rhetorically irony; that is, as an affirmation of the importunate nature of funders’ stipulations via an unconvincing declaration to the contrary. Also salient in this exchange is that, when the producer turns to smile at the camera, her gaze simultaneously addresses both the diegetic documentary camera and the non-diegetic gaze of *La Patinoire*, which could perhaps be read as an additional, extra-textual layer of irony, relating to the financial

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<sup>355</sup> Frampton, *Filmosophy*, p. 126.

conditions of the production of *La Patinoire* itself, which, in reality, was also partly funded by a television channel, Canal+.

As Lear says of the ‘Socratic’ irony he advocates, ‘it is as affirming as it is negating’<sup>356</sup> and *La Patinoire* not only develops an ironical discourse on the difficulty of cinematic production to translate a creative project initially conceived by a single individual into a finished reality, due to the necessarily plural nature of the ‘filmmaker’ and the intervention of other intentional subjects with their own desires, neuroses, and convictions. It also develops a number of ideas relating to pretensions associated with often exaggerated notions about the greater degree of equality involved in filmmaking than in writing. At the wrap party for the completion of the film, as the director stands at the podium to give a speech, the Lithuanians, who frequently burst into song together, suggest through their translator that the director should mark the occasion with a song of his own. He chooses from his student days, a protest chant about solidarity with workers – although most of the crew join in, the cruel irony of his choice is underlined by a shot of the dejected looking, seriously injured Ukrainian sound engineer in a wheelchair, who has hardly benefited from the kind of working conditions demanded by Sciences Po students.

Spurred on by the enthusiasm of those around him, the director decides to lead another chant, this time the revolutionary anthem, *La Jeune Garde*, with the lyrics ‘Nous combattons pour la bonne cause / Pour délivrer le genre humain.’ (*P*, 1:06:40) One imagines that the ‘bonne cause’ which the director has in mind has little to do with goals of social justice or equality, but rather with the completion of *his* film, almost *in spite of* the presence of other people, and the indifference to

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<sup>356</sup> Lear, *A Case for Irony*, p. 36.

casualties in the process of realising that goal ('tant pis si notre sang arrose les pavés sur notre chemin') seems not to be one of brave and principled self-abnegation; the fact that the director is free of his neck-brace by this point suggests that his fall on the ice was not particularly serious, whereas the sound engineer seems to have suffered much more serious injuries. As the assembled group join in with this anthem, they begin to make a circuit of the ice rink, skating slowly around as a single peloton of sorts, while the two elderly Chinese caterers, the only ones not to be wearing ice skates, follow behind at some distance; despite being encouraged to participate in the wrap party, they represent another hierarchical level in the power relations of filming, not properly considered as equals in the same sense as the cast and crew.

The film ends with a screening of the film for the benefit of a seriously ill Venice Film Festival judge who watches the film from a stretcher, hooked up to an intravenous drip. The extent to which he is 'lying in judgement' of the film is emphasised by his magnified silhouette projected onto the screen (*P*, 1:13:48), covering over the action, and suggesting yet another hierarchical level, 'above' that of the director, and incarnating the authority to pass judgement and influence the critical reception of the final work. An assistant to the ailing judge, who, himself, looks singularly uninterested in the events of the film, even dozing off at one point, approaches the stretcher to find out what he thinks, before solemnly returning to the director, producer and editor with the news that he the judge has died ('È morto'), during the viewing of *Dolores*, at which point the film ends. The fact that Italian is a 'pro-drop' language allows the subjectless third person singular here to be read as referring not only to the death of the judge, but to that of the film itself, all the human activity that constituted its realisation having ceased, as if to say, 'all those *dolores* for

nothing'. This perhaps reflects what Toussaint has since said himself about the cinematic medium in a 2005 interview with *Les Inrockuptibles*: 'Je ne dirai pas [...] que la littérature est supérieure au cinéma. Mais je suis de plus en plus convaincu par la force de la littérature et presque sceptique quant à celle du cinéma.'<sup>357</sup>

## Conclusion

The first part of this chapter argued that *Monsieur* and *La Télévision* use different strategies which, in a thematic sense, can be productively understood as the modal, affective or rhetorical ironic enunciations of his narrator-protagonists, which, in the first instance, appear to offer them a powerful means of indirectly engaging in self-reflection and addressing problems in their lives, particularly with regard to the relationship between their own desires and societal or intersubjective pressures associated with the world of work. In the second instance, and particularly in the case of *La Télévision*, with its explicit focus on the relationship between work and creative activity, we argued that such ironic strategies serve to lay the groundwork for reflexive questioning of literary production and the act of writing itself.

The second part of the chapter analysed *La Sévillane* and *La Patinoire*, considering whether features analogous to the ironic strategies of Toussaint's novels can be identified within his non-literary, cinematic texts. It was argued that, despite the change in medium, the films nevertheless suggest a certain consistency in terms of their thematic concern with problems of subjective articulation and enunciation, of

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<sup>357</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, 'Écrivain contemporain', *Les Inrockuptibles*, 507, 17.08.2005.

creative production and the workplace, as well as with reflexively interrogating the medium's formal possibilities, but also that the particularity of the cinematic medium is such that, although it allows for the coding of new forms of ironic discourse, it does so, and must do so, in different ways, through the instantiation of its own 'transsubjective' filmic ironies.



### Chapter 3: Selfhood in the Other

This chapter will examine the relationship between narrativity and intersubjectivity in Toussaint's *Marie* tetralogy (*Faire l'amour* (2002), *Fuir* (2005), *La Vérité sur Marie* (2009), *Nue* (2013)) by drawing on different historical conceptualisations of the sublime. This series of novels elliptically details the experiences of its narrator over the course of around a year and a half of his life, centred on his relationship with a globally renowned artist and fashion designer, Marie Madeleine Marguerite de Montalte, arguably Toussaint's first extensively drawn secondary character.

The first chapter aimed to demonstrate how Paul Ricœur's hermeneutic phenomenology provides a valuable framework through which to read Toussaint's early work by showing how these '*fables sur le temps*'<sup>358</sup> approach aporetic questions of the relationship between the narrating self and external reality through the transformative, heuristic processes of narrative configuration and refiguration. Drawing on Ricœur's characterisation of fiction's essentially heuristic character led us to suggest that these narrators can be understood as attempting to refigure or 'work-through' difficult past experiences, deploying the formal and structural resources of narrativity to generate novel and alternate possibilities for action. The unusually configured structure of *La Salle de bain* set the stage for the narrator's traumatic lived past to be meta-textually transformed into an avoidable, fictional future, as an alternative to having it play out again in reality. In *L'Appareil-photo*, we saw how the narrator's initially relaxed and playful submission to the flow of time was gradually eclipsed by an anxiety relating to the expression or

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<sup>358</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit II: La configuration dans le récit de fiction*, 3 vols (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984), II, p. 192.

externalisation of personal identity in a meaningful, non-reductive way, arguing that this is, ultimately, perhaps better approximated (however temporarily or partially) not by the photographic images upon which the narrator dwells, but in the articulation of the text itself, as configuring act, which we linked to Ricœur's concept of selfhood as narrating-identity.

Just as Ricœur argues that fiction provides these sorts of hypothetical spaces in which to work through first-person experience, he sees an equally important role for fiction in the critical interrogation of intersubjectivity, writing that 'l'affection du soi par l'autre que soi trouve dans la *fiction* un milieu privilégié pour des expériences de pensée que ne sauraient éclipser les relations « réelles » d'interlocution et d'interaction.'<sup>359</sup> For Ricœur, bringing together and confronting multiple, divergent or competing accounts of reality, incarnated by particular subject positions, allows fiction to both exchange and reshape these multiple perspectives and, in doing so, can create the possibility for new kinds of understanding between subjects. While the first chapter explored the relationship between narrators' individual subjectivity, narrativity and an object-world presented as hostile and entropic, this chapter will focus on the relationship between narrativity and *intersubjectivity*, that is, the extent to which the narrator of the series can be understood as deploying fictional resources to mediate intersubjective encounters, primarily with regard to the figure of Marie.

This difference of focus could be described in terms of the constituent categories into which Heidegger divides *care*, that is, our involvements in the world around us. Heidegger described a necessary difference between how we relate to

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<sup>359</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Soi-Même Comme Un Autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), p. 381. Ricœur's emphasis.

potentially useful ‘equipment’, that is, nonconscious objects and entities within our environment (*concern*), and how we relate to conscious, purposive subjects with their ‘ownmost possibilities’ (*solicitude*), on account of the fact that the latter ‘do not have the kind of being which belongs to equipment ready-to-hand; they are themselves Dasein.’<sup>360</sup> We could say that, in reading Toussaint’s earlier novels, we placed the accent principally on a problematic of *concern*, that is, on his narrators’ uses of narrative configuration and refiguration in negotiating a hostile object-world grounded in a threatening temporality. In considering the *Marie* series, we turn more towards the problem of *solicitude*, examining how Toussaint presents a narrator attempting to reconcile his own lived experience and psychological interiority with those of another acting subjectivity. The approach here also differs from that taken in Chapter 2, which focused on the interrogation and manipulation of the ‘sameness’ or ‘automatic’ aspects of character, constitutive of both the narrators themselves and those around them, in the spheres of work, romance, or artistic creation. The focus of Chapter 3 is, instead, on the *Marie* tetralogy’s sustained exploration of the perspective-taking powers of reflexive narrativity, that is, on the possibility of genuinely understanding the first-person experience or ‘selfhood’ of the Other.

Jean-Louis Hippolyte suggests that the aporias of self-knowledge and knowledge of the Other are intermeshed concerns throughout all of Toussaint’s published work, writing that ‘[e]ach individual is hopelessly alone in Toussaint, a solitary figure lost among peers, for whom knowing the other proves to be as frustrating as knowing the self.’<sup>361</sup> While it is true that the earlier narrators are

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<sup>360</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John & Robinson Macquarrie Edward (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1962), p. 157.

<sup>361</sup> Jean-Louis Hippolyte, *Fuzzy Fiction*, Stages, 21 (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), p. 50.

frequently shown struggling to relate to secondary characters, it can also be argued that the *Marie* series represents a fairly major shift in Toussaint's literary output; if the earlier novels asymmetrically lean towards the problem of 'knowing the self', the later tetralogy is Toussaint's first work to incorporate a properly sustained probing of the problems of 'knowing the Other'. We suggested that secondary characters in the earlier novels, particularly the female characters Edmondsson and Pascale, functioned as 'affective anchors', that is, as vaguely stabilising presences or reactive mirrors of the narrators' own actions and the consequences of those actions. They might sooth, entice, frustrate, or amuse the earlier narrators, but they remain sketchily drawn, never developing into fully-fledged individuals projecting their own sense of agency.

In the *Marie* series, however, the narrator's anxieties are framed against those of a substantially developed secondary character, and indeed, it is this very *substantiality* of Marie which provides one of the central thematic concerns of the novels. As Jordan Stump has noted, the impassive narrator of the series remains 'very anonymous, [...] even by Toussaint's standards',<sup>362</sup> while, in the figure of (the far from anonymous) Marie Madeleine Marguerite de Montalte, we find an assertive individual whose eminent position within her highly exclusive world of work drives the events of the novels forward, dragging along a resentful and, at least initially, mentally unstable narrator, who feels profoundly marginalised, 'dans son ombre, son accompagnateur en somme, son cortège et son escorte.' (*FA*, 23) The *in media res* opening to the series introduces us to the couple in wintery Tokyo, on the brink of terminating their long-term relationship, and shows the narrator's alternating extremes of passion towards Marie, his seething bitterness and urge to run away

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<sup>362</sup> Jordan Stump, 'Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Unfinished', *SubStance*, 35.111 (2006), 95–111 (p. 102).

from the obligations, engendered by her world of fashion, art and business, remaining in constant tension with an adoring, intoxicated and nostalgically-fixated fascination with her. In *Faire l'amour*, we encounter a narrator utterly preoccupied with his own feelings of dejection, seemingly incapable of seeing events from Marie's perspective and here, it will be suggested, she is predominantly characterised in a binary 'angel-whore' configuration, of the kind which may be onomastically signalled by her name, Marie Madeleine (Mary/Magdalene). It will be argued that, from this starting point of mutual animosity and anticipated rupture, the subsequent novels of the series represent successive attempts by the narrator to refigure his reductive characterisations of Marie, and that a key theme of the tetralogy as a whole is the narrator's attempt to develop a more 'truthful' understanding of her; 'Dire d'elle,' as the epigraph of *Nue* reads, 'ce qui ne jamais fut dit d'aucune.' (N, 7)

### **The sublime**

A number of commentators note that the deep unease frequently provoked in Toussaint's narrators by the entropic ravages of time could be related to an aesthetic of the *sublime*,<sup>363</sup> such as Sylvie Loignon, for whom the aporetic disconnection between self and temporal reality in Toussaint's work leads to a sublimely productive melancholy of his narrators, 'un décalage, voire une discordance d'avec le monde comme d'avec soi-même, qui ouvre à un sublime en mode mineur'.<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> Sylvie Loignon, 'Comment finir? La Mélancolie de Jean-Philippe Toussaint', *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 88-98 ; Houppermans, 'L'autre fugitive', *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 109-20. ; Jacques Dubois, 'Avec Marie', *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 13-23.

<sup>364</sup> Loignon, 'Comment Finir? La Mélancolie de Jean-Philippe Toussaint', p. 94.

Kant described the sublime as a conscious experience prompted by objects of nature of such enormous power or magnitude as to effectively incapacitate human imagination. Stormy seas, vast abysses, towering mountains; all were associated by Kant with an idea of *limitlessness* ('judged as [the] absolute measure beyond which no larger is subjectively possible')<sup>365</sup> which he saw as defying the subject's ability to synthesise these objects of contemplation into an distinctly graspable whole. As well as this limitlessness revealing the limitations of imagination to handle certain kinds of vastness presented to the senses (the 'mathematical sublime'), the Kantian sublime is also manifested in other situations of contemplative indeterminacy, in terms of chaos and disorder (the 'dynamical sublime'), again most often found in nature, 'in its wildest and most ruleless disarray and devastation'.<sup>366</sup> Citing Edmund Burke, Kant argues that the imaginative deficit produced in the sublime encounter initially prompts repulsion or terror, linked to a fear of the dissolution of self, but that this fear is also partially mitigated: 'the feeling of the sublime is based on the impulse toward self-preservation and on *fear*, [...] a certain tranquillity mingled with terror'.<sup>367</sup> The feeling of terror provoked by the failure of imagination is accompanied by Burke's 'certain tranquillity', which Kant refers to both as 'negative pleasure' and as 'respect'. This 'respect' derives from how the sublime encounter allows us to transcend the initial prohibition on imagination, which instead opens itself to the productive contemplation by the 'higher faculties', with the result that 'this inadequacy itself is the arousal in us of the feeling that we have within us a supersensible power'.<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. by Werner Schrutka Pluhar (Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 1987), p. 107.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>367</sup> Edmund Burke, cited in Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p. 138.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

When the ‘sensible’ powers of imagination are rendered impotent in an encounter with the uncategorisable, the Kantian subject resorts to the superior faculty of abstract reason which is able to carve out concepts through which to defy that initial unknowability of the object. This transcendent move (the pole of ‘respect’ in sublime experience) is made possible for Kant both on account of the way he understood reason, as a cognitive faculty essentially separated from that of imagination, and because he considered the sublime to be an experience which provokes ‘*the mind to think of nature’s inability to attain an exhibition of ideas.*’<sup>369</sup> Contrary to the ‘intrinsic purposiveness’<sup>370</sup> of the human being, objects which bring about the sublime feeling are not capable of conscious initiative according to Kant, and it is this ‘contrapurposiveness’ of the object which ultimately works to shore up the primacy of the reasoning subject. Because the natural object of the sublime is characterised as unthinking vastness or chaos, limitless but thoughtless contingency, Kant believed that the intentional, ordering powers of ‘supersensible’ contemplation could essentially conquer, pin down or domesticate the object of a sublime encounter via the synthesising powers of reason. As Bettina Reiber puts it, ‘[i]n the face of the terrifying power of nature we become aware of our innate capability to choose, of our power to determine our lives ourselves.’<sup>371</sup>

We can identify this kind of sublime subject/object relationship at work in Toussaint’s novels, particularly in terms of what Loignon sees as an ‘*esthétique des ruines*’,<sup>372</sup> in the pronounced desire of each of his narrators to subordinate

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<sup>369</sup> Ibid., p. 127. Kant’s emphasis.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid., p. 306.

<sup>371</sup> Bettina Reiber, ‘The sublime and the possibility of meaning’, in *The Sublime Now*, ed. by Luke White and Claire Pajaczkowska (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 77-91 (p. 85).

<sup>372</sup> An aesthetic tendency which, she suggests, predominates in Romantic literature. Loignon, ‘Comment finir? La Mélancolie de Jean-Philippe Toussaint’, p. 94.

destructive and chaotically incomprehensible time to the ordering powers of a thinking or narrating subject, even if their infrequent triumphs over this entropic world are never assured. There may be a great deal more to say about how a Kantian conception of the sublime, as a fundamental experience of certain kinds of subject/object encounters, can be related to Toussaint's work; however, in this chapter, the focus is on the place of a sublime aesthetics in the central subject/*subject* relationship of the *Marie* series. If the series is to be understood as successive attempts by the narrator to *identify* Marie, he initially does so in such a way as to cast her as something resembling a 'contrapurposive' sublime *object*, and it will be argued that this is a manifestation of a more general desire on his part (and on the part of Toussaint's protagonists in general) to establish order and meaning in the face of a troubling, contingent reality which is of both a physical and social nature. Examining the significant place of Marie's world of work in the novels, this chapter will begin by drawing on critical analyses of the Kantian sublime by writers such as Christine Battersby and Barbara Freeman, suggesting that the egocentric narrator we meet at the outset of the series implicitly associates Marie with a form of sublimity which effectively robs her of acting selfhood, but also that, paradoxically, he appears to do so precisely *on account of the fact* that Marie is capable of initiative, of self-actualisation and 'purposiveness' in a way that he is not.

Reading *Fuir*, in which the narrator meditates on events which preceded those of *Faire l'amour*, the focus will be on familiar Toussaintien themes/practices of heuristic, analeptic refiguration, showing how this refigurative work intersects with the textual emergence of speculative shifts by the narrator into Marie's perspective. Both in *Fuir*, and in *La Vérité sur Marie*, where these simulated adoptions of perspective are more fully manifested, the narrator even physically



absent for a large part of the novel, we will look at how his characterisation of Marie gradually develops beyond the aggressively reductive binary judgements of *Faire l'amour*. However, it will be argued, these developments lead the narrator to adopt new forms of sublime judgement, which will be associated with the 'immanent' sublime aesthetics of Jean-François Lyotard, and which remain problematic in terms of Marie's selfhood. Finally, it will be argued that the fourth and final novel of the series, *Nue*, revisits core themes and practices of the preceding novels, (the anxiety and resentment of *Faire l'amour*, the analeptic refiguration of *Fuir*, the poetic appropriation of Marie's perspective in *La Vérité sur Marie*) but also that these are presented with a great deal more narratorial self-awareness, counterpointed by the introduction of new sources of troubling uncertainty which will only be resolved beyond the text.

### ***Faire l'amour* and the Conquering Sublime**

*Faire l'amour* plays out over the period of around a week and a half in Tokyo, during the apparent collapse of a relationship which has lasted at least seven years. Marie is in Japan, accompanied by the narrator, to oversee the opening of a major exhibition of her work, to launch a retail line of dresses, and to present her new *haute couture* collection. Her father has died a few months prior to the events of the novel and the couple has reached an impasse: 'Nous nous aimions,' the narrator tells us, 'mais nous ne nous supportons plus.' (*FA*, 68, 69)

The opening makes clear the gravity of this state of crisis, via the narrator's disturbing admission that he has taken to carrying around a vial of hydrochloric acid

which he intends to throw in somebody's face, its constant proximity making him feel 'curieusement apaisé' (FA, 11). This is a world away from the memorably aimless opening of *L'Appareil-photo*, where narrative tension and its anticipated resolution were playfully suspended through the evocation of an apparently trivial, disconnected pair of events, setting the stage for an equally directionless narrator to expound his easy-going *modus vivendi*. In that novel, a key strategy for the narrator in resisting the damaging effects of time was to treat life like a chess game where, even with all one's pieces *en prise*, (just as any deliberate action is accompanied by a multitude of risks) the idea of simply contemplating an open field of possibilities was comforting. In *Faire l'amour* we find something closer to the textual equivalent of *zugzwang*, a situation in chess in which, though the rules stipulate that a move must be made, to do so will necessarily weaken the player's position and open them to attack. From the first mention of this vial of acid, Marie implicitly emerges as prospective victim:

Mais Marie se demandait, avec une inquiétude peut-être justifiée, si ce n'était pas dans [...] mon propre regard, que cet acide finirait. Ou dans sa gueule à elle, dans son visage en pleurs depuis tant de semaines. Non, je ne crois pas, lui disais-je [...] et, de la main, sans la quitter des yeux, je caressais doucement le galbe du flacon dans la poche de ma veste. (FA, 11)

This association between violence and the visual, particularly in terms of hostility towards observation, will recur throughout the series. Firstly, though, we should ask why the narrator derives comfort from the presence of the vial of acid. As Hippolyte

has noted, throughout Toussaint's work, 'physical violence stands as the polar opposite of inaction (or impassivity)',<sup>373</sup> citing the example of the unforgettable moment in *La Salle de bain* where Edmondsson is brutally attacked with a dart as she implores the narrator to leave his hotel room, pleading with him to *do something*. A similar relationship between an anxious inability to reconcile incommensurable urges and an abrupt lapse into violence can also be seen in Toussaint's non-fiction piece, *La Mélancholie de Zidane*,<sup>374</sup> which speculates on the state of mind of the French football captain as he delivered a spectacular head-butt to an Italian opponent in the 2006 World Cup Final. Toussaint understands Zidane's behaviour as anxiety coming to a head, prompted not only by the reported insults made the Italian player about his family, but also due to an experience of simultaneous, contradictory impulses, a feeling of paralysing indecision with which he says he identifies deeply, the first, 'lié à la tristesse de la fin annoncé [...] du joueur qui dispute le dernier match de sa carrière et ne peut se résoudre à finir', the second, 'l'envie d'en finir au plus vite, l'envie, irrépressible de quitter brusquement le terrain' (MZ, 10, 11).

Jet-lagged, beset by the many obligations of Marie's world of work, and unable to decide upon a course of action (whether or not to stay with her) the extreme violence of an acid attack appears to represent an extreme escape plan, a 'nuclear option', with a clear and unambiguous narrative structure, comprising a preparative action in the pluperfect ('J'avais fait remplir un flacon...'), an imperfective action in the narrated present ('je le gardais sur moi en permanence') and the projected realisation of a future action in the conditional ('Il me suffirait d'ouvrir le flacon, [...] de viser les yeux et de m'enfuir') (FA, 11). It is not clear

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<sup>373</sup> Hippolyte, *Fuzzy fiction*, p. 27.

<sup>374</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *La Mélancholie de Zidane* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2006).

what has brought the narrator to this breaking point, although there are a handful of possible indications. The recent death of Marie's father seems significant, although this is mentioned only briefly, with reference to her sustained mourning,<sup>375</sup> and will not be elaborated upon until the novel's analeptic sequel, *Fuir* (other than indirectly, as in repeated descriptions of Marie as 'Ophelian'). Other possible circumstances for the imminent rupture are textually withheld, and only obscurely signalled towards, such as when the narrator speculates that Marie may have vindictively invited him to accompany her to Japan *because* he wouldn't be able to accept the invitation '(pour de multiples raisons, mais pour une, surtout, dont je n'ai pas envie de parler)' (*FA*, 22).

Despite this avowed impassivity on the part of the narrator, it becomes clear that at least part of his antipathy towards Marie stems from the many commitments and appointments associated with her world of work. Obligation motivates the trip itself, but also repeatedly punctuates it, importunately for the narrator, with new demands for action. If the precise nature of the narrator's work is referred to only briefly as involving taking photographs, 'qu'il fallait sortir [...] clandestinement de tel ou tel pays' (*FA*, 22),<sup>376</sup> Marie is an eminently successful and famous artist, the object of global admiration, which leaves the narrator feeling side-lined and neglected, in the shadow of his fated lover. Christophe Meurée offers a compelling account of this narratorial anxiety, suggesting that it centres on a dually panoptic and 'panchronical' experience, which he links to multiple 'incursions [...] d'événements

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<sup>375</sup> 'Son père était mort quelques mois plus tôt, et tant de larmes [...] coulaient depuis des semaines dans le cours tumultueux de nos vies' (*FA*, 20).

<sup>376</sup> As will be suggested, in discussing the 'instrumental' environments that Toussaint portrays, there is perhaps an irony in the narrator's profession involving the furtive production of *clichés*.

non programmés où, pis, tout à fait programmés mais à l'insu des personnages',<sup>377</sup> and that the narrator's desire to extract himself from these situations of obligation is prompted by the threat they pose to the preservation of his own desire, his own freedom. With everyone's eyes on Marie, the great artist, there is a tension between the narrator's displeasure at being observed by others, of being constantly available to them (exemplified by an episode involving a devastatingly timed fax notification which interrupts their lovemaking), and the fact that the narrator is not actually the focus of this constant pressure of the gaze, but rather, as Meurée says, its *scotoma*<sup>378</sup> or blind spot.

As the passive object of the gazes and actions of others, including the professionally occupied and recently bereaved Marie, the narrator's own agency is curtailed and, as Ricœur says, 'avec la diminution du pouvoir d'*agir*, ressentie comme une diminution de l'effort pour *exister*, commence le règne proprement dit de la souffrance.'<sup>379</sup> One expression of these feelings of impotent despair can be seen as Marie is preparing her art exhibition and the narrator compares himself to Denis Thatcher during an official visit, looked after by staff while a cruel and dominant figure ('Marie [...] impériale') (*FA*, 89), is attended to by her colleagues and subordinates. In the brief, evocative descriptions of these peripheral characters, the narrator repeatedly focuses on their traits of self-confidence, or on details associated with their potential for action; the 'indéniable assurance' (*FA*, 91-92) of a sympathetic representative from the French embassy charged with looking after him, the 'taciturn Kawabata' who intervenes in a group meeting at an opportune moment,

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<sup>377</sup> Christophe Meurée, 'Temps de la résistance: résistance au temps', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 50 (2010), 83-98 (p. 85).

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, p.87.

<sup>379</sup> Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, p.371. Ricœur's emphasis.

having pushed himself back against his seat before speaking, ‘comme pour prendre son élan et bondir en avant’ (*FA*, 93), or the gallery director with his commanding voice and the affected informality of his salt-and-pepper beard and Puma-logo trainers, ‘avec un fauve stylisé [...] prêt à bondir de ses talons’ (*FA*, 99).

The miserable narrator appears to have little in common with these dynamic individuals, and perhaps more so with the succession of diminutive, faltering males encountered in the streets of Tokyo; the ‘emaciated’ businessmen seen conversing in the shadow of a tall, redheaded woman, a balding older man who dejectedly stands by some rubbish bins wearing a sandwich board and handing out flyers, or the indecisive, ‘ageless’ salary-man who slowly inspects cellophane-wrapped packets of seaweed and mushrooms in a 24 hour shop, ‘les chaussures mouillées et le front humide’ (*FA*, 62). The placement of this last phrase produces a referential ambiguity where it is unclear whether the description is of the salary-man’s shoes and forehead or those of the narrator himself, suggesting an identification with the former by the latter. When the narrator eventually runs away from Tokyo and Marie to the refuge of an old friend’s house in Kyoto, having panicked upon listening to the day’s busy schedule being read aloud by one of Marie’s employees (*FA*, 93), the act of buying mushrooms almost seems take the form of an affirmation of his newfound independence, while at the same time ironically recalling the solitude of the old man in the 24 hour shop – ‘Le seul désir que j’exprimai [...] fut d’acheter des champignons [...] J’avais envie de champignons. Voilà.’ (*FA*, 115)

The narrator wonders why Marie even invited him on the trip, given that its packed schedule seems likely to heap additional stress onto an already fraught relationship, perhaps even to the point of bringing it to an end. He begins with a benign interpretation, posing and then answering his own question (‘En avait-elle

conscience, [...] et m'avait elle invité sciemment pour rompre [...], je ne crois pas'), (FA, 22) but the very next sentence switches to attributing highly aware, malicious intent to Marie, suspected of taking pleasure in the opportunity to lord her relative status over the narrator, 'elle couverte d'honneurs, de rendez-vous et de travail [...] et moi sans statut, dans son ombre' (FA, 23). This is characteristic of the narrator's oscillation between affection and resentment towards Marie throughout the novel, and is reminiscent of the two secondary characters who elicit profound, but very different, emotional responses from the narrator of *La Réticence*.

In Chapter 1 we saw how, in that earlier novel, Paul Biaggi looms over the narrative in spite of his complete physical absence and constitutes the imagined site for the narrator's increasingly paranoid chains of speculation. Counterpointing Biaggi is the intermittent reappearance of the narrator's baby son, each time imparting a calming effect and drawing the narrator back from the brink of his elaborate paranoia in order to affectionately attend to him. In *Faire l'amour*, Marie assumes aspects of both of these roles, fluctuating between object of resentment and object of affection. Like Biaggi, she is an elusive individual associated with creative labour who provokes anxiety in a profoundly indecisive narrator but at the same time, like the baby son, she seems to represent unqualified affection and the horizons of an open, non-conceptualised future, of the kind that Poulet suggested is common to the adult in the first stages of romantic love and the infant, both of whom 'attend chaque demain comme quelque chose de tout nouveau qui n'est rien de l'espèce d'aujourd'hui ou d'hier'.<sup>380</sup> The connection Poulet draws, between the experience of an adult falling in love and the naïve experience of being a conceptually

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<sup>380</sup> Georges Poulet, *Études sur le temps humain IV: Mesure de l'instant*, (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1968), p. 306.

impoverished infant, can be associated with the narrator's characterisation of Marie, for it is strongly grounded in how she appeared to the narrator at the very beginning of their relationship, these nostalgic fixations throwing her antipathetic manifestation in present-day Tokyo into relief. Perhaps what the multiply named Marie Madeleine Marguerite de Montalte most shares with these earlier characters, however, is the way in which she remains unmistakably an *object* of the narrator's fevered mind, a living mirror for his many projections, which are in a state of tension between something like what Gilbert and Gubar call the 'paradigmatic polarities of angel and monster'.<sup>381</sup>

This is the starting point for the methodological recourse to the multiple conceptualisations of the sublime considered in this chapter. For Kant, the sublime encounter is that which provokes a 'mental *agitation* connected with our judging of an object',<sup>382</sup> primarily objects of nature which defy categorisation. However, as Christine Battersby systematically argues in *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*,<sup>383</sup> the conceptualisation of these objectifying judgements which underpin the Kantian sublime has, frequently throughout history, been used in such a way as to treat women and the feminine as sublime objects, rather than as determining or judging subjects themselves. Battersby notes how this tendency is exemplified in certain kinds of Romantic literature, which she suggests constitute a logical outgrowth of the 'dominating' character of Kantian aesthetics, where unthinking, contrapurposeful or wild nature is habitually couched in images associated with femininity which are apprehended and ultimately tamed by self-actualising,

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<sup>381</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 76.

<sup>382</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p. 101.

<sup>383</sup> Christine Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference* (London: Routledge, 2007).



intentional males, ‘the ego encountering “nature” or a “feminine” other, and then re-establishing control via a return to a self that is confident in its underlying freedom, its mastery of otherness, and in the (male) poet or philosopher’s right to speak or be heard.’<sup>384385</sup> In *Faire l’amour* the narrator’s desire to impose categorical limits on the threateningly dynamic Marie in just this manner is reflected in a passage in which he contemplates her name, tinged with a melancholy at his inability to lay unique and exclusive claim to her on account of the competition he must face from multiple sources; from the genealogical belonging to a particular family history (‘Marie, c’était son prénom, Marguerite, celui de sa grand-mère, de Montalte, le nom de son père’); from Marie’s autonomous (autonymous) wishes (‘elle se faisait appeler Marie de Montalte, parfois seulement de Montalte’); and from Marie’s friends and colleagues:

...ses amis et collaborateurs la surnommaient Mamo, que j’avais transformé en MoMA au moment de ses premières expositions d’art contemporain. Puis, j’avais laissé tomber MoMA, pour Marie, tout simplement Marie (tout ça pour ça). (*FA*, 46).

Barbara Claire Freeman notes that a gendered aesthetic of possession or domination of the indeterminate feminine other in the post-Kantian Romantic sublime frequently corresponds to a longing ‘to give the unnameable a name and thereby defend against

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>385</sup> Meretoja cites an important distinction made by Tournier, pointing out that Romantic literature cannot be reduced to just that ‘which imitates medieval obscurantism’, which risks covering over the ‘hermeneutic strain of Romanticism, which sees literature essentially as a form of world-interpretation’, and which she associates with the Early German Romantics. Hanna Meretoja, *The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory: The Crisis and Return of Storytelling from Robbe-Grillet to Tournier* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 139.

it.’<sup>386</sup> Whereas Marie’s nickname (Mamo) is simply a contraction of her full name, the narrator’s own ‘pet name’ for her (MoMA), with its capitalised possessive pronoun, could be read as connecting the artistic world she inhabits to the narrator’s desire for transformative ownership, even articulating a tension between the two. There is an ambiguity as to whether ‘pour Marie’ pertains to abandoning the nickname *in favour of* calling Marie by her first name, or *on account of* Marie’s wishes, but the general impression is one of the narrator’s exasperation at being unable to pin Marie down to a stable and knowable identity. This is emphasised by the buzzing sonorous flow of the repeated nasal ‘m’ sound in, ‘...Mamo, que j’avais transformé en MoMA au moment...’ and also the doubled indeterminate demonstrative pronouns which close out the passage, drawing attention to this objectifying impulse, while also hinting that her character will remain in suspension. Throughout the series, the narrator’s desire to confer a static or ‘closed’ configuration of identity upon Marie, which we could associate with the externality or ‘recognisability’ of *sameness* identity in Ricœur’s terms, is mirrored by his frustrations with her untidiness and her general tendency to leave everything ‘open’; ‘Marie, et son goût épuisant pour les fenêtres ouvertes, pour les tiroirs ouverts’ ; ‘elle était superficielle, légère, frivole et insouciante (et [...] elle ne fermait jamais les tiroirs).’ (*FA*, 15) (*N*, 35)

The Kantian sublime is strongly linked to visual perception, and the narrator’s inability to effect a ‘conquering’ move of identification (in the categorising, rather than empathetic sense) with regard to Marie may offer an explanation as to why the novel’s opening lines introduce the possibility of the

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<sup>386</sup> Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women’s Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 108.

narrator targeting either her, or his own, eyes with the acid. Their asymmetrical power relationship is frequently expressed in highly visual terms, for example when, during a dispute following the narrator's failure to hail a taxi in the streets of Tokyo, the characters reproachfully glare at each other. While Marie's gaze seems almost to induce a puncturing, sinking effect in the narrator, who suddenly finds himself 'pataugeant dans mes sandales en mousse qui prenaient l'eau de toutes parts' (FA, 67), the narrator's own furious 'daggers', rather than provoking any corresponding physical metaphor of Marie's distress, are instead followed by multiple references to his awareness of being observed by passers-by: 'des gens passaient à côté de nous en se demandant ce qui se passait, nous regardaient un instant [...], parfois se retournaient pour nous jeter un ultime regard', and, '[d]es gens attablés dans l'étroit local nous voyaient à travers la vitre, je sentais leurs regards, je sentais leurs regards posés sur nous.' (FA, 67-68)<sup>387</sup> The narrator's anxiety at being witnessed at the moment when a private disaster is subjected to the public confirmation of watching eyes contrasts with the inscrutable Marie's apparently limitless confidence in presenting herself to others, 'impériale, le visage toujours offert aux morsures des regards.' (FA, 89)

When the tense, jet-lagged pair have sex in their hotel room, initiated by Marie forcefully putting his hand between her legs, 'd'un geste autoritaire' (FA, 25), it is significant that Marie's eyes are covered with an airline sleeping mask, denying the possibility of harmonious mutual recognition. The encounter is described as being of an 'exclusively sexual' nature, each character absorbed in a solitary 'recherche de plaisir purement onaniste' (FA, 29), and it seems as if it is this denial of visual attention, which places the narrator in the position of what Meurée calls the

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<sup>387</sup> My emphasis.

*scotoma*, prompts the narrator to imaginatively transform the prone Marie into something of a fantastical object associated with sex, grief and madness when he contemplates her lying motionless atop a swirling pile of her haute-couture dresses, ‘figure vaincue et ophélienne dans son lit mortuaire d’étoffes alanguies et des couleurs de cendres, les épaules enfoncées dans l’émolliente mollesse aquatique d’une de ses robes froissés’ (FA, 24). Surrounded by the dresses which appear to ‘faire cercle autour de son corps à moitié dénudé’ (FA, 20), as the products of her critically (and financially) recognised artistic labour, Marie’s body becomes a site for the narrator’s projections in the form of an aggressive visual ‘act’ of resistance, in a way which is reminiscent of the voyeurism described by Denis Sullivan on the part of Marcel in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, as he watches the sleeping Albertine and effects ‘an imaginary synthesis’<sup>388</sup> which elevates her to an iconic status, but in doing so simultaneously essentialises her in such a way as to subordinate her own subjectivity to that of his own: ‘Vision, within this context, achieves the status of an *act*. It is situated [...] within the category of aggression.’<sup>389</sup> With Marie’s dominant, determinant gaze withheld, symbolically ‘blinded’ by the mask, the narrator effectively enacts the reductive movement of the conquering sublime, temporarily mitigating her troubling indeterminacy by casting her in the culturally ready-made image of Shakespeare’s Ophelia.

Their sex is interrupted by a clicking sound as the room is silently lit by a blue light as a message appears on the TV screen with the words, ‘*You have a fax. Please contact the central desk.*’ (FA, 30) The blindfolded Marie notices no change, while the narrator is deeply shaken. Meurée suggests that the distressing, dampening

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<sup>388</sup> Dennis G. Sullivan, ‘On Vision in Proust: The Icon and the Voyeur’, *MLN*, 84 (1969), 646-61 (p. 659).

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 661.

effect of the fax message on the narrator is due to the intrusion of the external world into the intimate setting of the hotel room, ‘car le monde extérieur et ses exigences se rappellent au souvenir du narrateur’, which he relates to our technologically determined contemporary condition of constant availability.<sup>390</sup> Despite the fax notification’s ambiguous address in the second-person, the narrator will later discover that Marie is, in fact, the sole intended recipient of this demand for attention, revealed during the couple’s night-time journey around the streets of Tokyo when its re-emergence into the narrative directly precedes the moment at which the narrator describes how ‘Marie *me faisait part de ses inquiétudes* pour l’exposition d’art contemporain qu’elle devait inaugurer’(FA, 56-57).<sup>391</sup> This act of confiding her professional nervousness serves not to bring them closer together but rather to decisively rupture the suspended bubble of calm which they had fleetingly rediscovered, ‘dans l’illusoire protection de la nuit’ (FA, 58), engendering further mutual hostility.

Although it is not explicitly mentioned at the moment the fax message arrives, the sudden illumination of the hotel room must also cast light upon Marie’s dresses, ‘emmêlés autour de nous’ (FA, 28), which a few pages earlier are described as covering every surface of the hotel room, indelibly marking this *non-lieu* with the signs of her ability for creative action, making the space radiate with her primacy

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<sup>390</sup> ‘[L]e monde technologique est chronophage, c’est un constant et lancinant appel à être regardé en lequel déconsiste le sujet en tant que personne.’ Meurée, ‘Temps de la résistance: résistance au temps’, p. 85, p. 87. With regard to the sublime, Meurée’s analysis could perhaps be associated with a concern with the ‘something else’ described by Frederic Jameson’s terms of the sublime subject/object relationship in advanced capitalist societies, where the ‘*other* of our society is [...] no longer Nature at all, [...] but something else which we must now identify’. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 35.

<sup>391</sup> My emphasis.

and the evidence of her purposiveness. The dresses are personified as *altières*,<sup>392</sup> connoting a sense of lofty superiority, *incarnadines* and *parées*, suggesting corporeal, vulnerable fleshiness, and sexual desirability, *décolletées*, *séductrices* (FA, 20). The diversely anthropomorphic treatment of the dresses again reflects the ‘mental agitation’ between attraction and repulsion which is characteristic of the conquering sublime, and which sees the narrator transferring his impressions of Marie’s uncategorisable position, between menace, vulnerability and desirability, onto the objects of external reality in the form of diegetic metaphor.<sup>393</sup> In the long series of adjectives here, the singular invariability of *amaranthe* is rather conspicuous, and the construction of the phrase, beginning ‘Autour d’elle, toutes ces robes...’ (FA, 20), is such that it creates a referential ambiguity, which may encourage the reader to attach *amaranthe* to the characterisation of Marie herself. Given the narrator’s persistent nostalgia and idealisation of the very beginning of their relationship, it seems rather significant that the colour is derived from the plant ‘amaranthe’ (amaranthus) which, etymologically, means ‘never-fading’ or ‘everlasting’ flower. This, it will be suggested, is relevant to the novel’s final scene, in which the narrator empties his vial of acid onto a unidentified flower with white and mauve petals, just like those of the ‘amaranthus’.

After the fax message incident, Marie physically kicks and pushes the narrator away, and suddenly he is standing in the bathroom, staring intently into the mirror, ‘nu en face de moi même, un flacon d’acide hydrochlorique à la main’ (FA, 33), as little icons of Marie’s presence, her beauty products and toiletries, continue

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<sup>392</sup> Suggesting a relationship of verticality in the characters’ asymmetrical statuses, also connoted by Marie’s surname, *de Montalte*.

<sup>393</sup> The connection between superficial characterisation of Marie and the narrator’s reaction to her dresses is one which will be considered in depth in our analysis of *La Vérité sur Marie*.

to surround him. As he re-enters the bedroom the text becomes spatially jarring, perhaps in part a stylistic reflection of the effects of jet lag,<sup>394</sup> but it is also unclear whether the narrator is merely imagining himself moving through the room, towards Marie from the bathroom doorway ('Je visualisais très bien le parcours qui me séparait de la chambre...'), or if he is actually doing so. Here, Marie's dresses take on disturbing forms, appearing as twisted, hanging corpses as the narrator thinks about going to comfort her ('J'aurais aimé aller embrasser Marie...') (FA, 34), before this seemingly imagined action, expressed only in the conditional, abruptly shifts into reality when he takes her hand, relayed in the preterit. Marie pushes him away again, and the narrator 'realises' that he is next to her, gripping his vial of acid. As if fleeing his violent urges which could, like his imagined, tender movement towards Marie in the hotel room, suddenly become manifest action in reality, we are again spatially jolted, this time into the corridor of the hotel, before ascending the building in a lift, as violent images occupy the narrator's thoughts.

He imagines spraying the hotel room's window panes with the acid, burning an opening in the glass, to leave 'une mélasse gluante de verre fondu [...] qui dégoulinait sur la vitre en longues traînées sirupeuses et noirâtres' (FA, 36). This may reflect an urge to cathartically rupture the transparent physical boundary between the heavily charged atmosphere of the hotel room and the outside world, with its alluring possibilities of withdrawal or flight (as the narrator exits onto the top floor, the signs which greet him look like commands written in fluorescent light, 'EXIT, EXIT, EXIT') (FA, 36), but the streams of blackened, melted glass also suggest deformed visual rhymes, both with the running of Marie's thick black

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<sup>394</sup> '...nos repères temporels et spatiaux s'étaient dilués dans le manque de sommeil' (FA, 33-34). <sup>41</sup> My emphasis.

mascara in the taxi at the beginning of the novel and with the moment of sexual rupture caused by the fax notification, where ‘des larmes fuyaient de toutes parts sous les interstices de ses lunettes de soie’ (FA, 30). Now in the silence, darkness and isolation of a swimming pool on the top floor of the hotel, the narrator gazes down from a ‘point de vue imprenable’ (FA, 42), considering a comfortingly minimised Tokyo as if it were a toy city or theatre set. Distanced from both the determining influence of Marie and elevated above the city’s overwhelming conglomeration of activity, framed against the curvature of the Earth, he is able to momentarily re-establish a sense of his own perspective, ‘représenter concrètement que je me trouvais à l’instant quelque part dans l’univers’ (FA, 40). Contrary to his feelings in the hotel room, impregnated with the signifiers of Marie’s overpowering presence, here the narrator seems to achieve the necessary physical elevation above the lofty ‘Montalte’ in order to replay his violent fantasies on a grand and artificial scale, entertaining apocalyptic visions of the entire city reduced to ashes, ‘abolissant la ville et ma fatigue, le temps et mes amours mortes.’ (FA, 42) As Meurée suggests, ‘la vision cataclysmique et prophétique apporte au narrateur un profond apaisement [...] parce que la sensation dont il fait l’expérience lui ouvre “des perspectives illimitées”’<sup>395</sup>

The momentary isolation within a dominant perspective, the approximation of a ‘God’s-eye’ view, seems to temporally reinvigorate the narrator, which we could associate with the conquering sublime as described by Freeman, in terms of ‘Kant’s topographical, and territorialistic, view of knowledge as a geographical realm that reason can chart, divide, bridge and then connect to other domains.’<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>395</sup> Meurée, *Temps de la résistance, résistance au temps*, p. 91.

<sup>396</sup> Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime*, p. 87.



Initially expressed as destructive urge, the tone changes when the narrator enters the water of the pool, the language becoming decidedly cosmological as he savours the impression of swimming amongst the stars, newly visible at this altitude, above the light-pollution of the city below, and moving ‘comme dans un cours d’eau céleste, au coeur même de cette Voie lactée qu’en Asie on appelle la *Rivière du Ciel*.’ (FA, 43) As with the enclosed spaces of Toussaint’s earlier novels, which offer moments of stillness, silence or darkness propitious to reflection, here the narrator begins to let his mind run free, as if unhindered by worldly concerns: ‘[mes pensées] s’écoulaient au gré du temps qui passe et coulaient sans objet dans l’ivresse de leur simple écoulement.’ (FA, 43) This attentive distancing, both from the physical object-world and from Marie *as* object, as the site of the narrator’s frustration and resentment, is mirrored by the fact that, having entered the pool, he gradually shifts his gaze away from the city, to instead let his eyes flit back and forth, ‘entre la surface de l’eau [...] et le ciel immense dans la nuit’ (FA, 43). The desire to judge, dominate or domesticate unnerving objects of contemplation shifts into a desire to destroy them, and then to a desire to simply escape them, which perhaps foreshadows the narrator’s flight from Marie as unnameable object, when he travels Tokyo to an old (male) friend’s serene and Spartan Kyoto apartment.

In any case, this newfound tranquillity is revealed to be short-lived when the narrator makes to return to the hotel room, which he refers to as *his* room several times,<sup>397</sup> enumerating the closing distance with his anticipatory counting of the metal numbers on the room doors before he is suddenly troubled (‘comme je m’apprêtais à entrer pour rejoindre Marie je me ravisai’) (FA, 45), and descends instead to the

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<sup>397</sup> ‘Arrivé devant la porte de ma chambre...’, ‘...je regagnai ma chambre...’, ‘...j’avais été averti dans ma chambre de l’arrivée d’un fax...’ (FA, 45-46).

hotel reception. Here he reunites with Marie, precipitating an ill-fated trip into the streets of Tokyo, during which she is wearing one of her own *haute couture* creations, a midnight blue, starry dress which visually rhymes with his own cosmological experience in the solitude of the swimming pool, as if to ironically dislodge or replace him once again as the determining force, the quasi-divine figure at the centre of his universe.

This kind of diegetic metaphorical material, which we have suggested often reflects the internal states of Toussaint's narrators, is employed here to transfer Marie's 'sublimity' onto other objects which enter the narrator's field of perception. A key instance of this is the sight of the massive chandeliers of the hotel lobby, the curvature of their inverted pear shapes described as 'presque ronds à la base, enveloppés, féminins' (FA, 87), the narrator envisaging them as giant drops of water, combining their revealingly gendered description with notions of the potential for dynamic, catastrophic motion, and a sense of anxiety about the passage of time (this is directly preceded by a scene of the narrator contemplating his face in the mirror, 'déjà vieux et pourtant mien' (FA, 86), during which he makes reference to his upcoming fortieth birthday). When it comes time to leave the hotel with Marie's business associates, to prepare for her gallery exhibition, these giant droplets metamorphose into tears in the narrator's mind, with the scattered light they emit ('un poudroiement de paillettes et de nacre') (FA, 88) evoking materials used by Marie in the design of her dresses, as if to signal the imminent return of new intrusions from Marie's dynamic professional world.<sup>398</sup> This also illustrates how the narrator's sublime treatment of Marie is deeply associated with temporality, as with

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<sup>398</sup> Significantly, in *Nue*, the narrator will describe the superficial way in which people sometimes relate to Marie in terms of 'des éclairs de paillettes [qui] aveuglaient parfois le premier regard' (N, 36).

the image of the ‘Ophelian’ Marie lying among her dresses, bringing to mind the river in which Shakespeare’s character drowned and linking the couple’s altered circumstances, on account of the eventful passage of time, to both the death of Marie’s father and to her rise to prominence as a successful artist.

The first section of the novel comprises a number of short, analeptic scenes from the very beginning of the couple’s relationship, repeatedly counterpointed with visually similar scenes in the narrated present. The narrator recalls how he was moved and perplexed to watch Marie in a taxi in Paris seven years ago, crying tears of joy, ‘*légères comme de l’écume, qui coulaient en apesanteur*’, signalling an affection which, in another taxi in present-day Tokyo, has been replaced by mutual irritation, as Marie writhes about trying to get comfortable in the overheated vehicle, ‘*paraissant m’en vouloir, alors que je n’y étais manifestement pour rien, merde*’ (FA, 13). The juxtaposition of the two moments highlights a transition from the relative ‘lightness’ of the first scene, to the accumulated weight of lived time and shared experience in the second, marked by Marie’s ‘*lourdes larmes de tristesse qui l’enlaidissaient et faisaient couler le maquillage de ces cils.*’ (FA, 12) Remembering the first night they spent together, bar-hopping by the Seine, the narrator reminisces about the intense pleasure he felt in deferring the moment of their first kiss, before we are again jolted back to present-day Tokyo, with the couple wordlessly traversing a deserted hotel lobby, its chandeliers oscillating like enormous pendulums in response to a minor earthquake. The connection between the beginning of the relationship and its anticipated dissolution is then made explicit when the narrator tells us that ‘*à chaque fois, ces deux soirs, à Paris et à Tokyo, nous avions fait l’amour, la première fois, pour la première fois – et, la dernière, pour la dernière.*’ (FA, 14-15) However, if this appears to signal a decisive moment of rupture, as

conveyed by the pluperfect construction, its narrative certainty is immediately thrown into question when the following paragraph continues, ‘Mais combien de fois avons-nous fait l’amour ensemble pour la dernière fois? Je ne sais pas, souvent. Souvent...’ (FA, 15).

This sense of an indeterminate outcome is reflected in the narrator’s deictic phrase, ‘il y a quelques semaines’ (FA, 12), which establishes temporal proximity between the narrated events and the moment of their configuration, as somewhere between the couple’s separation (towards the end of the novel) and the narrator’s fortieth birthday.<sup>399</sup> The repeated juxtapositions of the early Parisian scenes with their visually similar, corrupted iterations taking place in Tokyo, with the couple on the verge of separating, suggests a narrator whose mind is heavily occupied with the connection between past and present, but in spite of this there is a remarkable absence of information as to what has actually occurred between the characters in the intervening years. The intense anticipatory pleasure that the narrator remembers feeling in the act of deferring his first kiss with Marie in Paris is mirrored in his refusal to kiss her in Tokyo, seemingly convinced, as Hippolyte says, that ‘a kiss, [...] would mark the end of their relationship, just as another kiss kicked it off years ago’.<sup>400</sup> When the distraught Marie pushes him away after the fax notification incident, telling him, ‘Tu m’aimes plus’, this prompts another memory, from which we cite at length:

Sept ans plus tôt [...], en me voyant faire ce geste *si simple* [...] de rapprocher très lentement mon verre à pied du sien pendant le repas [...]

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<sup>399</sup> ‘[J]e n’étais pas encore vraiment vieux, j’allais avoir quarante ans dans quelques mois’, (FA, 86).

<sup>400</sup> Hippolyte, *Fuzzy fiction*, p. 33.

de façon tout à fait incongrue pour deux personnes qui ne se connaissaient pas encore très bien [...] elle m'avait avoué [...] qu'elle était tombée amoureuse de moi dès cet instant. Ce n'était donc pas par des mots que j'étais parvenu à lui communiquer ce sentiment [...] mais par l'élégance de *ce simple geste* de la main qui s'était lentement dirigée vers elle avec une telle délicatesse métaphorique qu'elle s'était sentie soudain étroitement en accord avec le monde jusqu'à me dire [...] *avec la même spontanéité naïve et culotté*, que la vie était belle, mon amour. (FA, 18)<sup>401</sup>

This passage is directly followed by an abrupt return to Tokyo, just as Marie turns on her bedside lamp to illuminate 'l'ampleur du désordre dans lequel nous avons laissé la chambre' (FA, 19), her dresses hanging everywhere, as the idyllically inflected prior situation evaporates. The substitution of an earlier condition of simplicity and blissful ignorance with an intolerable accumulation of knowledge and complexity is redolent of cautionary narratives of the biblical 'Fall', which have often been associated with gendered recrimination for a change in circumstances, expressed as a *change in character* on the part of a gregarious woman, as in Sandra Gilbert's reading of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where the figure of Eve is 'is gradually reduced from angelic being to a monstrous and serpentine creature'.<sup>402</sup> This polarised division of Marie's character is perhaps also expressed by the biblical,

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<sup>401</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>402</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert, 'Patriarchal Poetry and Women Readers: Reflections on Milton's Bogey', *PMLA*, 93 (1978), 368-82 (p. 372). It may be thematically relevant to note that Marie's surname, 'de Montalte', was also the alias used by Blaise Pascal in his *Lettres Provinciales*, a defence of Jansenism, a Christian sect which was heavily invested in notions of Original Sin, the original female transgression, as well as a highly deterministic conception of the universe, and resistance to the monarchical absolutism incarnated by de Richelieu – which chimes with various descriptions of Marie as 'royal', 'imperial' and 'sovereign'. Louis de Montalte, *Lettres Provinciales*, (Paris: Charpentier, 1862).

onomastic allusion mentioned above, with the same individual (Marie Madeleine) incarnating both the naïve innocent of Paris-past (the Virgin Mary) and the tainted figure of Tokyo-present (Mary Magdalene) in the narrator's mind.

The movement from a state of happy ignorance to one of unbearable familiarity is further emphasised by the new information introduced just after the above citation; it is here that the narrator first explains why they are in Tokyo, divulging the recent death of Marie's father, as he watches her lying on the bed crying the 'same tears' 'qui coulaient depuis des semaines dans le cours tumultueux de nos vies' (*FA*, 20). Here he thinks once more about his vial of acid, which may itself symbolise this sort of 'corrupted iteration' (he mentions that the vial previously contained oxygenated water), whereby an inaugural, tentative gesture of approach (edging the glass stem towards Marie), symbolically attributed with bringing the couple together, is refigured as a potentially decisive, ultra-violent gesture of termination, that is, the prospect of throwing the acid in Marie's face. It is the disturbed narrator's ambivalence at the idea of the relationship's definitive dissolution which seems to provoke his nostalgic longing for the moment of its beginning, a longing for the impression of limitless possibility of the kind described by Poulet, where 'à partir de cet instant, le temps est autre; et cette altérité n'est pas simplement de broderie ni de surface, elle semble devoir inépuisablement se continuer dans l'avenir'.<sup>403</sup>

An obsessive desire to return to an idealised past, neglecting the constructive and adaptive character of love in favour of the ecstatic, consumptive moment of its beginning, reflects the kinds of longing which Battersby sees as typically manifested

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<sup>403</sup> Poulet, *Mesure de l'instant*, p. 308.

in post-Kantian Romantic literature, with its aesthetics of domination and asymmetrical gender relations where the desired ‘feminine object is no more than the counterpole to masculinised self.’<sup>404</sup> Cornelia Klinger has suggested that the sublime is, by its very nature, a fundamentally nostalgic concept which frequently re-emerges as a theoretical concern in times of crisis, ‘one that goes together with a determined will to power and an effort to re-establish old power relations under new conditions’.<sup>405</sup> It seems that Toussaint’s narrator takes this nostalgic approach in *Faire l’amour*, desperately cleaving to the idea of a quasi-mythical, originary moment of love, while resenting Marie and casting her as solely responsible for the processuality by which these two people seven years ago, ‘qui ne se connaissaient pas encore très bien’ (*FA*, 18), have become the people they are now, and this seems in large part rooted in the development of a power differential between them over time. The narrator’s feelings of marginalisation and neglect lead him to adopt a fundamentally egocentric position, but he seems to do this precisely on account of the fact that he associates the narrowing of his own possibilities for free action with Marie’s purposiveness, the evidence for which continuously surrounds him, and his incorporation into a world largely delimited by her domain of action.

In the gallery space, Marie tells him that she thinks it is best they separate, but that she can’t bear to do so at just yet; she is still grieving for her father and this is also a professionally critical week for her, involving not just the gallery exhibition,

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<sup>404</sup> Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*, p. 99. Battersby convincingly argues that the sublime can only remain a valid theoretical concept if we can divorce aesthetic judgement from universalising pretensions and recognise the particularity of individuals’ aesthetic experiences, a conception of the sublime which will be especially relevant to our discussion of *La Vérité sur Marie and Nue*.

<sup>405</sup> Cornelia Klinger, ‘The Sublime, a Discourse of Crisis and of Power, or; “A Gamble on Transcendence”’, in *The Sublime Now*, ed. by Luke White and Claire Pajaczkowska (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 92-112 (p. 109).

but also a fashion show (which will appear analeptically in the final novel of the series, *Nue*) and the launch of a *prêt-à-porter* range. However, consumed as he is with his own misery, the narrator abruptly leaves Tokyo for Kyoto without telling Marie, where he spends several days with Bernard, a mutual friend. We find a typically Toussaintien description of the effects of temporal compression induced by the train journey: ‘le sentiment que c’est à l’écoulement du temps qu’on assiste [...] pendant que défile le paysage’ (*FA*, 110), and, symbolically at least, the narrator *is* going back in time, having last visited Bernard together with Marie some years previously. There is an easy familiarity between the two men, and on the night of the narrator’s arrival, as they drink and chat together we see the emergence of a mildly humorous, deadpan tone which would not be out of place in Toussaint’s earlier novels but which has, up to this point, been almost entirely absent in *Faire l’amour*, such as the narrator sitting with his legs splayed out across the floor as he critiques the image of a sumo wrestler on a magazine cover, ‘en supermauvaise posture, putain’ (*FA*, 120).

This oasis of tranquility is ephemeral, however, for Bernard has his own professional obligations, teaching at a distant university, and so he must leave the narrator alone for a few days in his spartan flat. This space is completely empty, stripped of both stimulation or obligation, and the narrator spends these days doing next to nothing, other than nursing a cold and feeling sorry for himself – as in *La Salle de bain*, physical pain seems to serve as a brutal reminder of the narrator’s embodied solitude and the continuing march of physical time from which he cannot extract himself, reminiscent of Levinas’s description of pain as representing the ‘impossibilité de se détacher de l’instant de l’existence [, ...] l’irrémissibilité même



de l'être.<sup>406</sup> Eventually he grows restless and decides to venture outside. Worrying he will lose his bearings in an indistinct neighbourhood, he initially uses a neighbour's car as a visual 'waypoint', before realising that it is not fit for purpose, susceptible to being moved by the intentional behaviour of its human owners and constitutes only 'un repère éphémère et mobile, précaire, impermanent' (FA, 127). Walking towards the hostel where he once stayed with Marie, he passes a canal by which he remembers being photographed ('il y avait, quelque part à Paris, une photo de Marie et moi sur ce banc') (FA, 129). As with his idealised memories of Marie, this photograph in their Parisian apartment is itself now merely a frozen, atemporal 'waypoint' incorporated into a living present with which it is no longer properly commensurable, a fact which the narrator seems to tentatively recognise when he closes the paragraph with 'je n'avais rien à faire là.' (FA, 130)

Armed with this growing realisation, he decides to call Marie from a phone-box, but the immediacy of her voice down the phone obliterates any newfound understanding he might have acquired, and he rushes back to Tokyo, 'infinement heureux et malheureux' (FA, 136), vomiting in the train toilets while the Beatles' *All you need is love* incongruously plays in his head. Upon his return he enters the closed *Contemporary Art Space*, wielding his vial of acid. Upon being seen by the security guard, he imagines himself hurling his acid, this possible action and its horrific consequences (burned flesh, screams, the sounds of running footsteps) appearing before him as a mess of synchronic, temporally indistinguishable images, 'comme si j'appréhendais la scène d'un seul coup sans en développer aucune des composantes potentielles' (FA, 145). Unlike the sequential, grammatical stages of the 'comforting' contingency plan of the novel's opening, this lapse into a kind of

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<sup>406</sup> Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983), p. 55.

dream logic shows the rupturing of phenomenological time, reflected in the narrator's inability to reconcile the past and present or the sublime poles of Marie that each time period represents, a fragmentation which is textually mirrored by inconsistencies in cosmological time, where the 'fin croissant de lune dans le ciel' (FA, 141) witnessed by the narrator as he enters the exhibition space is replaced by the 'faible lumière du clair de lune' (FA, 146) as he exits the building the very same night. This provides another echo of *La Réticence*, where an unchanging full moon was a key indicator of both the novel's fractured temporal structure and, as a surrogate eye, a reflection of anxiety around being observed. The narrator realises that he is in such a fraught emotional state that his violent impulses could soon spill over into a violent reality, in this 'scène qui restait en quelque sorte prisonnière de la gangue d'indécidabilité des infinies possibilités de l'art et de la vie, mais qui, de simple éventualité – même si c'était la pire – pouvait devenir la réalité d'un instant à l'autre.' (FA, 145)

Fleeing the gallery, he hides in a wooded area by the gallery, in which he empties his acid onto a small flower. Meurée interprets this as a symbolic attack on Marie, a potentially cathartic, sublimating act by which the violence the narrator feels towards her is enacted not on her physical body but on this flower, a substitution which reflects the mediating effects of the text itself.<sup>407</sup> While this is a persuasive reading, there is also a sense in which the destruction of the flower has a more specific symbolic value, in the narrator's abandonment of a certain *representation* of Marie, that is to say, the 'amaranthe', the static 'everlasting flower' of the sublime construct to which he has reduced her, and which is largely incompatible with a proper respect for her lived perspective or the dynamic aspects

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<sup>407</sup> Meurée, 'Temps de la résistance: résistance au temps', p. 95.

of her subjectivity, her selfhood. In this moment, the narrator recognises that he does not know ‘ce que c’était comme fleur’, unable to identify this ‘fleur sauvage, une violette, une pensée’ (*FA*, 146), the wordplay on the French word for pansy suggesting the mentally constructed nature of this as a symbolic image, caught between ‘wildness’ or ‘savagery’ (Marie present) and the humility or modesty historically associated with violets (the uncomplicated Marie of the past), as well as the transience they represent due to their ‘ephemeral blossom’.<sup>408</sup> If, at the outset of the novel, the narrator identifies Marie as the sole source of their shared unhappiness (his protest in the taxi, ‘je n’y étais manifestement pour rien, merde’, could almost be read an attribution of responsibility for the relationship’s imminent dissolution more generally) these final words also seem to suggest the possibility of recognising a degree of his own responsibility, leaving him alone gazing at a burned out crater with nothing but ‘le sentiment d’avoir été à l’origine de ce désastre infinitésimal’ (*FA*, 146).

### ***Fuir***

The second novel of the series, *Fuir*, published three years after *Faire l’amour*, takes the form of something like a ‘prequel’ taking place during the summer which preceded the winter of *Faire l’amour*. For the reader coming to *Fuir* after *Faire*

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<sup>408</sup> Paul Andrew Tipper, ‘Flower Imagery in “L’Education Sentimentale”’, *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 20.1/2 (1991), 158–76 (p. 158). As will be argued, symbolically charged references to flowers and plants play an important role throughout the series, particularly in the way they are associated with different aspects of Marie’s subjective experience (and the simulations of that experience produced by the narrator). Given the significance of the Isle of Elba to the series, central to a quasi-mythically inflected past of the couple’s relationship, it is perhaps also interesting to note Tipper’s suggestion that, in France, ‘the violet is revered, and just before his exile Napoleon is reported as having picked a few blooms from the grave of Josephine which was found in a locket he was wearing on his death bed.’ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

*l'amour*, the couple's separation has, in a sense, both already happened and is yet to happen, giving the novel the value of an external completing analepsis, in that its events 'viennent combler [...] une lacune antérieure du récit',<sup>409</sup> recounting the events surrounding the death of Marie's father, which in *Faire l'amour* resonates as a powerful signifier of a determinant, but only obscurely presented, recent past. While the first novel has an almost emetic quality, carried along by the narrator's fixation on the apparent irreconcilability of his, and Marie's, past and present, which translates to profound emotional disturbance, the manner in which the past is revisited in *Fuir* suggests a significantly more reflective, directed, *heuristic* approach.

The narrator is in Shanghai, partly on holiday and partly at the behest of Marie, who, for reasons which are textually withheld, has charged him with delivering twenty five thousand dollars in cash to one of her business associates, Zhang Xiangzhi, a man with largely unspecified connections to organised crime. Accompanied by Zhang and a female Chinese character, Li Qi, the narrator spontaneously takes a night-train from Shanghai to Beijing. Just as he is about to clandestinely have sex with Li Qi in the train's toilet cubicle, fearful of a reprisal by Zhang (with whom Li Qi may or may not be romantically involved), the narrator instead receives a shocking phone call from Marie, informing him of her father's death, which prompts his abrupt return to Europe and to the Isle of Elba for the funeral. Given the analeptic nature of *Fuir*, it makes sense to view these events in the light of the troubled situation towards which they are progressing and this movement towards an already determined future is reflected by the fact that, unusually for Toussaint, the internal chronology of *Fuir* is strikingly linear, every line, every

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<sup>409</sup> Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972), p. 92.

paragraph, narrowing the distance between the two time periods, bringing us ever closer to the terminus of the Tokyo separation.

This inevitable temporal progression is mirrored by the narrator's near-constant spatial displacement in various forms of transport; a Chinese night-train, a plane to Paris-Roissy on the way to Elba, an unexplained motorbike chase through the streets of Beijing. On the plane journey, the narrator, deeply apprehensive about reuniting with the bereaved Marie, observes the little blue arrow moving across the information screen in front of him, a diminutive visual representation of his body being transported 'régulièrement d'un point géographique vers un autre' (*F*, 123), leading him to reflect upon the similarly irresistible flow of time to which he is subject: 'mon corps, immobile, se déplaçait dans l'espace, mais également, [...] de façon invisible [...], continue, altérante et destructrice, dans le temps' (*F*, 124).

Alina Cherry convincingly associates the characteristic ambivalence towards modern methods of mass transport in Toussaint's work, at times experienced by his narrators as pleasurable, at others provoking anxiety, with the fact that they necessarily entail a limiting of the directional intentionality of the individual passenger '[qui] ne peut pas en altérer le trajet, [...] où les départs, les escales et les destinations sont fixés à l'avance.'<sup>410</sup> Pleasurable experiences of travel tend to be associated with narrators losing themselves in movement, in a way analogous to watching the raindrops falling past a fixed space in the sky, as described in *La Salle de bain*, ('cette manière, reposante pour l'esprit') (*SB*, 36), whereas the anxiety of travel is centred on the anticipation of a final destination and associated with an inescapable future horizon ('vers la mort, qui est immobilité') (*SB*, 36).

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<sup>410</sup> Alina Cherry, 'Transports, croisements, traversées dans *Fuir* de Jean-Philippe Toussaint', *French Forum*, 37 (2012), 143-62 (p.146).

Although she is absent for much of the novel, Marie's phone call will lead the narrator to embark on a trajectory not just towards a geographic endpoint, but also on a course of events which cannot be altered, on account of them having already happened. For it is not only the reader who has a privileged knowledge of the events which will follow those of *Fuir*, but the narrator too, as noted by Jordan Stump who writes that its words 'even if they speak of an earlier time, are nevertheless [...] speaking after the words of *Faire l'amour*.'<sup>411</sup> The significance of *Fuir*'s status as not really a 'prequel' to *Faire l'amour*, but rather its analeptic sequel, is that the novel becomes not just a completing analepsis, but also a *repeating analepsis*, in that the narrator can be understood to be revisiting past events which he has already lived through, but from a new temporal and epistemological standpoint.

For Ricœur, this kind of contextual *distanciation* is a critical feature of how we modify our preexisting structures of understanding, writing that '[I]a distanciation, sous toutes ses formes et dans toutes ses figures, constitue par excellence le moment critique de la compréhension.'<sup>412</sup> The onward march of time may make it impossible to literally change events in our lived past, but revisiting them from new positions may allow for the revision of our existing interpretations of those events, and the generation of new judgements and different possibilities for action when faced with similar circumstances in the future. *Fuir* constitutes a fictional attempt at this kind of distanced, revaluating activity on the part of the narrator, diegetically prompted by his incipient awareness of the problematic character of his judgements of Marie at the end of *Faire l'amour*. A remarkable

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<sup>411</sup> Stump, 'Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Unfinished', p. 109.

<sup>412</sup> Ricœur, *Du texte à l'action*, p. 60.

character of fiction, Ricœur tells us, is this ability to ‘se dédoubler en *énonciation* et *énoncé*’,<sup>413</sup> creating a hypothetical space between the experiential reactualisation of the narrated past and the interpretive work of the narrating present. *Fuir* repeatedly relies upon this kind of deliberate confusion between, on the one hand, the presentation of the narrator’s experiences in China as he really experienced them and, on the other, critical retrospection associated with his knowledge of how these events will ultimately play out, which necessarily entails a modification of their significance to him. As Sjef Houppermans has pointed out, these two levels of discourse are tightly intermeshed, meaning that ‘[I]a question de savoir “qui raconte quand” reste souvent sans réponse’.<sup>414</sup>

This can be seen in the novel’s opening line, which asks, ‘Serait-ce jamais fini avec Marie?’ (*F*, 11). On one reading this seems to express a recollected state of uncertainty about the relationship’s future, experienced by the narrator at the outset of his journey to China, simply *represented* in accordance with the conventions of narrative fiction. However, if this is the case, the very next line (‘*L’été précédent notre séparation, j’avais passé quelques semaines à Shanghai...*’) (*F*, 11)<sup>415</sup> provides a response in the affirmative, which may encourage us to understand the question as pertinent to another source of uncertainty, emanating from some point after the relationship has already ended. This reading is encouraged by a similar formulation a few pages later, when the narrator gazes upon the shifting waters of the Huangpu river, and wonders, ‘Était-ce perdu d’avance avec Marie? Et que pouvais-je en savoir alors?’ (*F*, 19) The first question implicitly expresses a narrator’s desire to identify where his relationship with Marie went wrong, whereas the second, as

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<sup>413</sup> Ricœur, *Temps et récit II*, p. 115. Ricœur’s emphasis.

<sup>414</sup> Houppermans, ‘L’autre fugitive’, p. 113.

<sup>415</sup> My emphasis.

Jordan Stump has pointed out, seems to imply that the narrator *does* ““know about it” now—but what does he know? [...] And for that matter, when is “now”?”<sup>416</sup>

Contrary to the explicit deictic indications of *Faire l’amour* (‘il y a quelques semaines’), this will remain unclear.

Despite Marie’s physical absence for much of the novel, this opening nevertheless appears to introduce the fate of the narrator’s relationship with her as its central *enjeu*. The alternation between extremes of intoxicated fascination and resentful animosity found in *Faire l’amour* also persist, although this time the objects of this dichotomous attitude are incarnated not by opposing traits assigned to Marie herself at different points in time, but rather through proxies, in the figures of Li Qi and Zhang Xiangzhi. Both of these characters appear more as ‘types’ than as fully fledged individuals and Toussaint has confirmed in an interview that he intended their rather essentialised characterisation to symbolise the two ‘poles’ of a lover, (l’un positif, féminin, attirant, Li Qi, et l’autre, répulsif, inquiétant, masculin, Zhang Xiangzhi).<sup>417</sup> Zhang Xiangzhi’s constant, vaguely threatening, enigmatic presence, with its echoes of the ‘inscrutable Chinaman’<sup>418</sup> trope, seems reminiscent of the dominant, decisive traits of Marie that unnerved the narrator in *Faire l’amour*, ferrying him about, checking into the hotel on his behalf, taking charge of organising the train journey to Beijing that the narrator has privately planned with Li Qi, (‘il prenait tout en mains et ne me laissait aucune initiative’) (*F*, 14). When Zhang hands the narrator a mobile phone, he suddenly becomes anxious that it will be used ‘pour me localiser en permanence, surveiller mes déplacements et me garder à l’œil’ (*F*,

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<sup>416</sup> Stump, ‘Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Unfinished’, p. 105.

<sup>417</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, ‘Écrire, c’est fuir: Conversation à Canton entre Chen Tong et Jean-Philippe Toussaint les 30 et 31 mars 2009’, interview with Chen Tong (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2009), pp. 173-185 (p. 182).

<sup>418</sup> John McLeod, ‘Beginning Postcolonialism’ (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000). p. 44.



12), and Cherry points out that this manner of seeing a communications device as primarily threatening rather than functional gives it the value of an ‘objet qui amorce un jeu du pouvoir’ between the narrator and Zhang.<sup>419</sup> We could also relate this to the breakdown of communication and mutual recognition in the narrator’s relationship with Marie, the power relation of observation and surveillance here subordinated to that more central one, with Zhang standing in for the active, threatening gaze of Marie, the narrator’s employer, embodying the discomfiting possibility that whatever he gets up to in China risks being reported back to her; it is through this mobile phone that Marie will devastatingly rematerialise with the news of her father’s death, just as the narrator is about to make love to Li Qi.

Li Qi, at least initially, appears as a desirable and passive object for the narrator’s gaze (we first encounter her ‘adossée au mur’ (*F*, 20) in a Shanghai art gallery!), meeting several of the criteria for what Sheridan Prasso describes as the ‘geisha girl’ or ‘China Doll’ trope; ‘servile, submissive, exotic, sexually available, mysterious and guiding’.<sup>420</sup> Contrary to the threatening, active gaze of Zhang, Li Qi is all but defined by her passivity, a characteristic which is explicitly linked to her desirability in the eyes of the narrator (*F*, 35). During their first meeting, drinking beer outside the art gallery, he leans in to make himself heard over the rock music blaring from inside, and is both delighted and surprised to find that ‘elle se laissait faire, elle ne bougeait pas, elle n’avait rien entrepris pour se soustraire de ma présence’ (*F*, 21), quite different to the various instances of Marie physically pushing and kicking him away in the previous novel. Li Qi seems to represent a possibility of new beginnings for the narrator, outside of his fraught, complicated

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<sup>419</sup> Cherry, ‘Transports, croisements, traversées dans *Fuir* de Jean-Philippe Toussaint’, p. 149.

<sup>420</sup> Sheridan Prasso, *The Asian Mystique: Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls & Our Fantasies of the Exotic Orient* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006) p. xii.

life with Marie (and one manifestation of the titular act of running away) into something resembling the ‘consumptive’, ecstatic nostalgia that haunted him in the form of the distant Parisian memories of *Faire l’amour*. This longing for both novelty and simplicity is expressed by the exoticised, idealised characterisation of Li Qi, with ‘son nom qui avait un goût de fruit’, ‘son amulette de jade autour du cou’, ‘dans un halo de tiédeur’ (*F*, 65, 34, 39). Recalling the newly encountered Marie glimpsed in the analeptic Parisian sections of *Faire l’amour*, the description of the pleasurable anticipation felt by the narrator prior to kissing Li Qi even parallels that of the ‘delicious moment’ which preceded his first kiss with Marie in Paris, including the directly repeated line, ‘Nous ne nous étions pas encore embrassés’ (*F*, 35).<sup>421</sup>

When Li Qi and the narrator eventually *do* kiss her appealingly reserved quality vanishes, and her determined physical gestures, directing the narrator into the train’s toilet cubicle, begin to resemble the physical forcefulness of Marie in the Tokyo hotel room, ‘m’entraînant avec elle [...], en me prenant par le bras [...], elle me fit entrer [...], me poussa [...] et plaqua ses lèvres contre ma bouche’, (*F*, 38) a development which appears to alarm the narrator. Whereas, just moments before, he was savouring the intimacy of drinking beer with Li Qi on the floor of the train, with an ‘agréable vent de fraîcheur’ (*F*, 37) billowing through the broken window of a connecting door, after having crossed the threshold into the violent clarity and confinement of the toilet cubicle, each of his senses is disagreeably assailed. His nose and ears are filled with ‘un courant d’air moite mêlé au grondement du train’ (*F*, 38), evoking a mechanically informed kind of nausea,<sup>422</sup> he glimpses his body in

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<sup>421</sup> ‘Nous ne nous étions pas encore embrassés’, (*FA*, 12).

<sup>422</sup> This also recalls the scene of the narrator vomiting in the train toilets of *Faire l’amour*.

the mirror and instantly jerks his head away, as if repulsed, and he receives an electro-static shock as he removes Li Qi's blouse, 'comme si je m'étais accroché à un chapelet de fil de fer barbelé' (F, 39), suggesting the physical danger of traversing a boundary.

Suddenly the narrator receives a phone call from Marie with the news that her father has died, apparently having drowned, a devastating interruption which recalls another instant of technologically facilitated *coitus interruptus*, in the Tokyo hotel room, and is perhaps another reason for his strong emotional reaction to the fax notification. As he listens, stunned, the starkly opposed spaces inhabited by the two interlocutors (the mobile darkness of the Chinese train and the static, blinding afternoon sun of Paris seen through the roof of the Louvre, from where Marie is calling) become confounded in his mind as he is 'assailli d'images contradictoires, [...] d'éblouissement et de ténèbres.' (F, 48) In *Faire l'amour*, the scene of the narrator's phone conversation with Marie from the Kyoto phone box is accompanied by brief but highly detailed descriptions of Marie's physical surroundings in the Tokyo hotel room, as the narrator imaginatively approximates his interlocutor's physical surroundings, and something similar appears here, but in a significantly more developed form. Mentally dissociating himself from his immediate physical surroundings, the narrator closes his eyes and feels Marie's voice 'passer [...] à mon cerveau, où je la sentais se propager et vivre dans mon esprit' (F, 46), visualising her trajectory as she attempts to find the exit to the Louvre, creating an effect of spatial incongruity which is underlined when Li Qi suddenly reappears in the narrator's field of vision, and he tearfully embraces her, 'dans une étreinte de deuil et de compassion qui ne lui était pas destiné.' (F, 49)

Uncomprehending and unable to console the distraught narrator, Li Qi leaves him alone in the blank space of the train carriage. This disappearance coincides with the moment Marie exits the Louvre and marks a more profound perceptual shift; suddenly it as if the narrator is no longer merely imagining Marie's surroundings, but rather directly perceiving them, signalled by an incongruously masculine agreement on *pris* and then a pronominal shift from the third person *elle* to the first person *je* ('...pris de vertige, pressant le pas dans les galeries souterraines du Carrousel du Louvre, je – ou elle –, je ne sais plus, la rue de Rivoli était déserte au débouche des escaliers.') (*F*, 49-50) Cherry suggests that this unexpected transgression of the novel's predominant narrative mode is both facilitated by and reflective of the fact that, while the narrator's immediate Chinese surroundings represent an 'univers étranger [...] le lointain spatial (Paris) constitue un terrain familier.'<sup>423</sup> As the narrator listens to Marie's voice, not only do the affective resonances associated with the different spaces appear to permeate one another, his phenomenological experience appears to become subsumed by that of Marie, suggesting an intrinsic relation between perspective and spatiality. Ricœur argues that, just as the metaphors we use to talk about time are unavoidably of a spatial nature, so too are those which concern narrative point of view, which we never entirely uncouple from notions of an embodied 'where' of a particular subject: 'la perspective spatiale, prise littéralement, [...] sert de métaphore pour toutes les autres expressions du point de vue.'<sup>424</sup>

In the narrator's description of this effect of Marie's voice 'qui me transportait littéralement comme peut le faire la pensée, le rêve ou la lecture' (*F*, 47),

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<sup>423</sup> Cherry, *Transports, croisements, traversées dans Fuir de Jean-Philippe Toussaint*, p. 150.

<sup>424</sup> Ricœur, *Temps et récit II*, p. 179.

the use of *littéralement* looks oxymoronic, given that the three acts to which this ‘transporting’ effect is compared (thinking, dreaming, reading) are all associated with virtual rather than literal movement. However, what they share is an ability to synthesise multiple, seemingly incommensurable truths, a reading advocated by Isabelle Ost, who suggests that Marie’s phone call forms a series with the physical modes of transport that we see in *Fuir*, since both produce destabilising effects in terms of the narrator’s attentive focus, associated with ‘le principe de la pluralité des réalités’.<sup>425</sup> The articulation of the narrator’s imagined empathetic shift into Marie’s visual and, to a lesser extent, psychological perspective is made possible not only by the impression of his simultaneous belonging to multiple spatial realities, produced by the intercontinental phone call, but also by the fact that this is doubled by his simultaneous belonging to two different *temporal* realities; an experiential one (the time of the *énoncé*), and a refigurative one (the time of the *énonciation*).

Such effects, allowing for the multiplication of simultaneous truths, may be associated with the emergent possibility of the narrator moving beyond his inflexibly delimited identifying judgements about Marie, of the kind we saw in *Faire l’amour*, opening up the possibility of the narrator developing a more complex less reductive characterisations. The description of these various forms of virtuality as representing ‘un ébranlement, une lézarde, dans la mer de larmes séchées qui est gelée en nous’ (*F*, 47-48), connects this scene to the violent, hermetic subjectivity of the narrator in the wintery Tokyo of *Faire l’amour*, which is radically transcended here via the transgression of narrative mode, and there is also perhaps an intertextual allusion to Kafka’s dictum that the only books worth our time are those which do not

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<sup>425</sup> Isabelle Ost, ‘Dispositifs techniques et place du sujet dans quelques romans de Jean-Philippe Toussaint’, *Textyles*, ed. by Laurent Demoulin and Pierre Piret, 38 (2010), 77–87 (p. 85).

pander to our existing beliefs or reinforce what we already know, but rather serve as ‘la hache qui brise la mer gelée en nous’,<sup>426</sup> disrupting sedimented knowledge. On the refigurative level, this represents an act of ‘appropriation’ in Ricœur’s terms (‘faire que ce qui était étranger devient propre’),<sup>427</sup> the necessary counterpoint to the contextual ‘distanciation’ permitted by fiction and the apparently ‘direct’ perceptual connection made by the narrator with the distressed Marie may indicate the possibility of him starting to widen his gaze beyond the egocentric confines he will come to occupy at the moment of their Tokyo separation.

At the same time, on the level of the narrated events, the description of the phone call’s transporting effect as ‘literal’ is perhaps not so oxymoronic after all, since it will indeed result in the narrator embarking on a voyage of obligation, having successfully delivered Marie’s cash-filled envelope, but forced to give up on the week of holiday he had planned (‘pour mon propre agrément’) (*F*, 14), returning to Europe from Beijing without any of his possessions, which are abandoned in the Shanghai hotel. The narrator’s dread as to the inevitability associated with this voyage is suggested when the phone call is suddenly terminated and he sticks his head out of the train window, experiencing a sensation of barrelling unstoppably towards a destination (‘je sentais l’horizon et la courbure de la terre planer et tournoyer autour de moi’) (*F*, 53), as the details of his Chinese surroundings appear to be ‘swallowed’ by the speeding train.<sup>428</sup> Just as the perspectival variations

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<sup>426</sup> Toussaint cites this phrase directly in *L’Urgence et la Patience* (*U&P*, 78) to describe the disorientating effects provoked in him *Crime and Punishment*, both due to the experience of psychologically identifying with the murderer, Rashkolnikov, and to his fascination with the novel’s innovative formal features, especially in terms of Dostoyevsky’s strategies of dissimulation (‘ce crime si difficile à nommer pour les personnages – semble même indicible pour l’auteur lui-même’) (*U&P*, 76). He also notes his sustained interest in Kafka more generally, saying of Kafka’s diaries (‘j’y revenais sans cesse, je l’ai étudié, annoté, médité’) (*U&P*, 27-28).

<sup>427</sup> Ricœur, *Temps et récit II*, p. 60.

<sup>428</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s description of the dynamic and highly mutable nature of the synthesising behaviour that temporal reality forces us to engage in seems highly apposite here; ‘le temps dans

engendered by the phone call are expressed in visual terms, suggestive of the narrator refiguratively widening his gaze in the empathetic appropriation of Marie's state of mind, there is also an opposing movement suggested by his eyes painfully filling with dirt and sand, violently *limiting* his gaze, ('ma vue commença de se brouiller, et, [...] mes yeux embuées conçurent dans la nuit noire des larmes aveuglantes') (*F*, 53), almost as if these were the first drops of the narrator's 'frozen sea' that the memory of the phone call, revisited on the refigurative level of the *énonciation*, will perhaps provide the means to 'shatter'.

This double movement at the very heart of *Fuir* is metaphorically expressed as the narrator dines with Li Qi and Zhang in a Beijing fish restaurant, contemplatively fixing his gaze on the spinning 'lazy susan' in the centre of the table. While the objects on the spinning plate do not change their relative spatial relationship, like the concrete reality of past events which cannot be altered, each turn presents the narrator with a different angle, a new perspective or 'interpretation' of these same objects, and, as Mireille Raynal-Zougari suggests, this 'surimpression constante d'une image et d'une autre a pour effet de les réévaluer':<sup>429</sup>

...alors que les plats restaient immobiles sur leurs bases [...], chaque fois que l'un ou l'autre déplaçait le plateau [...] il composait en fait une nouvelle figure dans l'espace, [...] en vérité porteuse d'aucun

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l'expérience primordiale que nous en avons n'est pas pour nous un système de positions objectives à travers lesquelles nous passons, mais un milieu mouvant qui s'éloigne de nous, comme le paysage à la fenêtre due wagon.' Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de La Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 482.

<sup>429</sup> Mireille Raynal-Zougari, 'Mise en scène de l'écrivain en cineaste patineur', *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 57-66 (p. 63).

changement réel, mais [...] une facette différente de la même et unique réalité. (*F*, 69-70)

Raynal-Zougari and Isabelle Ost both identify this as something of a metaphor for Toussaint's literary practice, the manner in which his texts privilege a multiplicity of interpretations, and this is key in this scene which reflects the way that the narrator's intercontinental communication with Marie seems to prompt a 'rewriting' of the reductive assumptions he initially made about the Chinese characters. The loss of Li Qi's exaggerated passivity, prefigured in the toilet cubicle, is compounded when the narrator witnesses Zhang passing her the cash-filled envelope when his back is turned, thus implicating her as very much an active participant in Zhang's and, by extension, Marie's affairs. Zhang's motivations are similarly reassessed, the narrator considering that perhaps his overbearing presence may indicate no threatening intent, but 'devait sans doute également être lue comme un marque de générosité et de prévenance à mon égard.' (*F*, 70) This attests to a growing awareness of the highly partial nature of his knowledge about these mutable characters, who are not simply fixed quantities determined by his initial judgements and, on the refigurative level, may suggest the possibility for an analogous re-evaluation of the atemporalised polarities of Marie, exotically unfamiliar angel of the past and the unbearably familiar monster of the present, however, the scene's closing words discourage us from reading it as an unambiguous expression of the narrator's burgeoning appreciation of the complex identities of other subjects.

When he takes hold of the spinning plate himself, 'pour me mettre moi aussi de la partie [...] car je n'étais peut-être pas au bout de mes surprises' (*F*, 70), the



lazy susan *does* come to a stop,<sup>430</sup> and here the narrator once again fixates on a singular image, focusing on a tray of cooked duck tongues, repulsive, mutilated objects which he is unable to stop himself from associating with the tongue of Li Qi in his mouth the previous night, covering over his initial ‘souvenir délicieux’ (*F*, 71)<sup>431</sup> with feelings of disgust and horror. Not only does the violent and incongruous image of these lumps of dead flesh evoke the severing effect that Marie’s phone call has on the narrator’s anticipated sexual union with Li Qi, it also anticipates the narrator’s tendency throughout *Faire l’amour* to juxtapose positive images of Marie, associated with simplicity and desirability, with their corrupted, repellent iterations in the present, associated with complexity and resentment.

The sense in which the narrator’s possibilities for free action are limited by the obligation to return to Europe is symbolically suggested when Zhang takes him to visit an ancient Beijing temple, and he dejectedly sits by a stone basin, ‘qui avait dû contenir de l’eau et des feuilles de lotus en suspension’ (*F*, 75), but which is now completely dried out by the oppressive, vertical sun which hangs overhead. William Ward writes that, in the Buddhist aesthetic tradition, the lotus is ‘a symbol of creation out of water,’ and he suggests that the blossoming lotus, as an object of beauty emerging from out of mud or slime, has frequently represented the self-abandonment of Buddhist contemplatives, rising above the grubby realities of the world towards the ‘powerful wisdom of *Nirvana*, the end of all individualised existence’.<sup>432</sup> Dark, enclosed spaces habitually offer Toussaint’s narrators a degree of respite from the world and, as Pierre Piret puts it, the possibility to ‘rejoindre

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<sup>430</sup> ‘Le plateau s’était arrêté, et, regardant devant moi...’, (*F*, 70).

<sup>431</sup> Which, again, echoes the ‘moment délicieux’ (*FA*, 13) that he described as preceding his first kiss with Marie.

<sup>432</sup> William E. Ward, ‘The Lotus Symbol: Its Meaning in Buddhist Art and Philosophy’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 11 (1952), 135-46, (p. 138, p. 146).

[leur] propre mouvement intérieur'.<sup>433</sup> The moments of contemplation which take place in such spaces are frequently described in terms of unconstrained movement and serve as starting points for attempts to negotiate difficult or hostile realities, often through the recourse to heuristically inclined analepses.

Battersby shows how the conquering rationality of sublime aesthetics as it appears in Kant has been associated with height or elevation all the way back to the sublimity of 'elevated' or exalted discourse with which Longinus defined the sublime in his *Peri Hypsous*, where, if *hypsous* was generally translated as *sublime* in French and English, it more clearly maintained its relation to spatial loftiness in the various German translations linked to the verb *erhaben*.<sup>434</sup> Unlike in the elevated swimming pool of *Faire l'amour*, however, in the temple there is 'pas un coin d'ombre, [...] seulement le soleil écrasant, lourd et vertical, [...] omniprésente', and the narrator describes how time appears to stand still in this heat which 'engourdissait mon esprit' (*F*, 75), reflecting an inability to intellectually circumvent the brute truth of an event which has taken place in reality, but also mirroring the oppressive sunlight seen by Marie through the roof of the Louvre, which she frantically tries to leave after learning of her father's death, 'comme fuir la nouvelle qu'elle venait d'apprendre' (*F*, 44).

With his flight booked to Paris, the first stage of his long journey to Elba, the narrator craves distraction, and seems relieved when Zhang takes him on the back of his motorbike to a suburban entertainment complex, crowned with a capitalised name in English, 'LAS VEGAS', where they play a game of ten-pin bowling. As Hippolyte notes, throughout Toussaint's work, 'reality remains a stifling force, and

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<sup>433</sup> Pierre Piret, 'Portrait de l'artiste en Oriental', *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 35-56 (p. 39).

<sup>434</sup> Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*, p. 161.

the protagonists show a single-minded reluctance to confront it.<sup>435</sup> On the way to the bowling alley, the narrator gradually realises that Zhang is not taking him back to the hotel, but unlike the suspicion and paranoia associated with such situations of uncertainty in the first part of the novel, here he appears to be comforted by his ignorance as to their ultimate destination. There is now a much more frightening ‘destination’ on the horizon in the form of his anticipated reunion with Marie and he seems grateful for the opportunity to let himself be ‘encore une fois porté par les événements sans rien dire.’ (*F*, 86) As he intently focuses on the act of throwing a perfect ball within the virtual space of the game, he is briefly distracted from his thoughts of what awaits him on Elba. In the anonymous globalised space of the bowling alley, its name connoting indeterminacy, gambling and chance, the narrator seems at ease, for here his actions have no real-world consequence, recalling the narrator of *La Salle de bain* who sought to escape the perception of temporal reality through a retreat into games and geometrical abstraction (‘car la géométrie est indolore, sans chair et sans idée de mort’) (*F*, 92):

J’étais seul sur la piste [...] ce seul endroit au monde et ce seul instant de temps qui comptaient pour moi [...] à l’exclusion de tout autre, passé ou à venir. (*F*, 92)

This distraction is short-lived, disrupted when Li Qi arrives, discretely passing Zhang a mysterious package. Sitting at the bar, her figure illuminated, she extends her hand behind her back, and the moment, too, appears to stretch out, as the narrator

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<sup>435</sup> Hippolyte, *Fuzzy fiction*, p. 43

contemplates her from the semi-darkness in which he is standing, becoming increasingly consternated. Longing to take her hand, to lose himself in the pleasure of physical contact, this desire segues into antipathy as he describes Li Qi in exactly the same, resentful terms used in *Faire l'amour* in relation to Marie, leading him to explicitly state the connection between the two women – ‘opiniâtre, royale, altière et presque indifférente – Marie, cela me sauta soudain aux yeux, c’était une attitude de Marie’ (*F*, 96-97). However, if this scene presages the narrator’s later feelings of bitter resentment in Tokyo, it is also slightly nuanced by his admission that he may be mistaken in his conclusions when the next paragraph continues, ‘Mais peut-être pas, peut-être la scène avait-elle échappé à tout autre que moi’ (*F*, 97).

After a long, arduous voyage to the isle of Elba, the narrator finally manages to get in touch with Marie by telephone but she refuses speak to him, the reason for which becomes clear when he hears the sound of funeral bells, simultaneously resonating down the phone and in the street outside, ‘un son de cloches lent, régulier, lugubre, tout près de moi’ (*F*, 132). Realising that he has interrupted the funeral ceremony with his call, the narrator frantically rushes to find the church and, upon doing so, noisily enters through its closed, creaking doors, still dressed in his bowling shoes and soiled white shirt ‘propre de la veille [...] amidonnée de crasse et de peur’ (*F*, 119). Marie, conversely, is bizarrely wearing full horse riding gear (including an immaculate white shirt) and from this arresting image, the narrator begins to imaginatively reconstruct the rest of her day and how she must have spent it. He seems to instantly comprehend that she must have lead the funeral cortège on horseback through the streets of Portoferraio, ‘pour rendre un dernier hommage à son père’ (*F*, 132), marking this unique event in a deeply personal way, in stark contrast to the generic, impersonal platitudes of the Catholic memorial service

delivered in Italian, on the inevitable liturgical progression between first communion and the ‘rebirth’ of death, listened to mainly by the regular congregation who are not in attendance on account of Marie’s father.

Seemingly unable to bear the upsetting effects of his own unhelpful presence, (‘Marie [...] me dévisagea avec détresse, une bouffée de douleur envahit son visage’) (*F*, 134) disrespectfully attired and overdue, he suddenly vanishes, both physically and textually, before the end of the service. In a development of the perspectival shift provoked by Marie’s phone call, the reader is here thrown into a section of omniscient third-person narration which details Marie’s movements, but also her thoughts, as she sees out the rest of the service and funeral procession alone. This time, the virtual movement is anticipated by the narrator dwelling upon a mutual gaze that he imagines having shared with her, Marie leading the cortege along a street by the harbour that morning, him standing on the prow of the arriving ferry, at which point ‘nos esprits [...] avaient communié dans l’hommage et la douleur, c’étaient rejoints et enlacés dans l’azur’ (*F*, 139). This moment of recognition is fictional, as the narrator has already mused at length upon the disappointment of his accumulated, habitual expectations associated with arriving on Elba, of being joyfully greeted by Marie and her father in the harbour as he has done so many times in the past (‘il n’y avait rien de tout cela, Marie n’était pas là et son père était mort.’) (*F*, 128)

In the section which follows, Marie wanders rather aimlessly through the streets, distractedly stopping to drink espressos and eat ice creams, as she muses on the cruelty of the narrator’s behaviour, ‘la privant de ma présence en même temps que je la lui faisais miroiter, dans un brutal chaud et froid dont j’étais coutumier.’ (*F*, 144) Here, the narrator’s oscillation between attraction and repulsion towards Marie

in *Faire l'amour* is inverted, attributed this time not to Marie, but to the narrator himself, casting him as no longer simply the passive victim of a capricious, or fantastical 'Other', but the agent responsible for inflicting an analogous experience of suffering on another human being, reflected in the progressively growing panic with which she searches for him: 'M'était-il arrivé quelque chose? Étais-je là, mort, sur le lit, derrière la porte?' (*F*, 151) The seemingly trivial description of an indecisive Marie struggling to choose which flavour of ice cream she wants, is followed, as she attempts to stop the 'haemorrhaging' of her ruptured cone, by the narrator's reflection on a dress she made some years back, itself constructed from melting ice-cream. Although the textual focus dwells almost exclusively on the technical and aesthetic details of the dress, rather than on any motivation that Marie may have had in creating it,<sup>436</sup> the narrator revealingly notes that it formed part of her 'collection de l'éphémère' (*F*, 147). While the allusion to the dress at this particular moment may appear simply associative, its implied thematic and symbolic pertinence<sup>437</sup> may also suggest an identification by the narrator with meanings invested by Marie in her creative labour, in a way which is totally absent from *Faire l'amour*, even if it is not yet properly articulated. This may reflect a degree of engagement with her subjective experience and recognition that she is not just the unfeeling, invulnerable figure he has painted her as.

In spite of a possible development towards greater empathetic engagement on the distanced, refigurative level of the text, this simulation of Marie's perspective is abandoned at the point that she finally rediscovers the narrator in his hotel room. The reader's focus is drawn back to the time of narrated events as the couple's

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<sup>436</sup> A crucial point which will be discussed in depth regarding the narrator's presentation of Marie's dresses in *La Vérité sur Marie* and *Nue*.

<sup>437</sup> Toussaint, in *La Salle de bain*, has been known to invest images of melting ice cream with the symbolism of destructive temporality and its contemplation.

wordless and agitated attempt to have sex ends badly, anticipating an ‘échange de mauvais procédés à distance sexuelle et textuelle’<sup>438</sup> which will characterise their interactions in *Faire l’amour*, culminating in Marie suddenly contorting her body to smash the narrator in the face with her pelvis, ‘un coup de chatte dans la gueule’, which is followed by a paragraph break of some ten lines (almost a graphical representation of the narrator being physically stunned), before the text resumes with, ‘Il n’y eut pas un mot, pas une explication [...] Je l’avais laissée seule, j’étais sorti de la pièce...’. (F, 155) Here, the transition from the past historic to the pluperfect could be read as expressing the narrator’s movement out onto the balcony of the hotel room, but equally as an *explanation* for Marie’s sudden, bodily rejection of him, that is to say, on account of his selfish abandonment of her at a time when she could have most used his support, which will repeat itself in his decision to abruptly abandon her in Tokyo a few months later

Marie decides she wants to go swimming, and the pair travel to the beach in her father’s old truck, a heavily charged space scattered with multiple signifiers of his former presence – parking tickets, a half-drunk bottle of water, and a bouquet of dried herbs which includes rosemary and fennel, herbs which, in Hamlet, are offered by the grieving Ophelia to other characters following the death of her father. Philippa Berry points out that Ophelia’s garlands of rosemary are etymologically connected with the river in which she drowns, ‘a herb [...] with a watery etymology, as *ros marinus* or dew of the sea’,<sup>439</sup> which suggests a similarly Heraclitean concern with temporality to that connoted the ice-cream dress. Telling the narrator to meet her in the neighbouring bay, on the other side of a rocky outcrop, Marie swims off

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<sup>438</sup> Dubois, ‘Avec Marie’, p. 17.

<sup>439</sup> Philippa Berry, *Shakespeare’s Feminine Endings: Disfiguring Death in the Tragedies* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 71.

into the Mediterranean, but as he makes his way up the hillside to join her, she suddenly vanishes from view. Initially absorbed by his own misery ('moi aussi, j'étais triste, moi aussi, je souffrais, est-ce qu'elle pouvait le comprendre, ça') (*F*, 162), her disappearance fills him with dread when it crosses his mind for the first time that her father likely drowned in one of these bays just a few days earlier, since this is where they typically used to swim together: 'c'était *nos* criques, [...] c'était ces criques que nous fréquentions'<sup>440</sup> (*F*, 168). Believing Marie's life, too, might be in danger, he begins frantically running to find her:

je ne voyais pas Marie à l'horizon, et je compris alors ce que c'était d'être abandonné, je compris le ressentiment de Marie à mon égard quand j'avais disparu cet après-midi (*F*, 167).

The sudden connection that the narrator makes between Marie's father drowning and the possibility that she, too, will be torn away from him, creates an association between his own anxiety in that precise moment and that of Marie as she searched for him earlier that afternoon, but it also connects the prospect of Marie's disappearance to the painful reality of the narrating present, in which she already *has* vanished from his future horizon, and to his own responsibility for abandoning her in Tokyo. Just as with the imagined mutual gaze in the harbour, the signification of the real event of the narrator's disappearance is refiguratively modified in light of the new epistemological context of the narrating present, offering what appears to be the motivation for the narrator's imagined shift into Marie's perspective in the streets of

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<sup>440</sup> Toussaint's emphasis.



Portoferraio, puncturing the integrity of the experiential, narrated level with new understanding on the refigurative level.

Mirroring the double effect of Marie's phone call, simultaneously shattering the 'frozen sea' within the narrator and drawing forth 'blinding tears', the novel closes on scene of pronounced indeterminacy. Marie reappears in the narrator's field of vision, filling him with relief as he swims to embrace her in the sea. Here it is she who bursts into tears, the narrator holding her with 'de l'eau de mer dans les yeux, et Marie pleurait dans mes bras, dans mes baisers, elle pleurait dans la mer.' (*F*, 169-170) Perhaps read in isolation, without prior knowledge of *Faire l'amour*, this scene would appear as somewhat more of an unambiguously hopeful and tender moment of harmony or communion, but considered as part of the series its horizons are strikingly multiplied, with a characteristically Tousaintien resistance to resolution. A symbolic reading could take into account Marie's tears, the salty waters of the sea denoting their metonymic expansion in every direction, entering the narrator's eyes and evoking a corresponding expansion of his visual field, signalling the burgeoning possibility of empathising with Marie's grief and moving beyond the aggrieved solipsism of *Faire l'amour*. Marie's tears entering his mouth and swirling on his tongue could also symbolise the narrator's emergent 'ability' to fictionally appropriate her voice, to simulate aspects of her subjective experience through the identification of similar emotional experiences he has himself experienced.

However, as with the scene of the narrator in the moving train, these closing words may also point towards a different horizon of *Fuir*, one which is in direct opposition to the first. We could instead see here the narrator's gaze being assailed and *limited* rather than expanded, 'blinded' by these emanations of Marie's grief, the horizons of which terrifyingly extend in every direction, for in the Tokyo of *Faire l'amour* these

tears ('qui coulaient depuis des semaines dans le cours tumultueux de nos vies') will be associated with the narrator's violent urge to commit extreme violence against Marie (and against her gaze in particular).

These two readings reflect the divergent realities with which *Fuir* repeatedly presents the reader. While there are indications that the narrator has perhaps taken the first steps towards a more empathetic way of relating to Marie, the novel also anticipates the narrator's violent solipsism, the characters' mutual hostility, and their wounded emotional state which will have deteriorated further by the time of *Faire l'amour*. As Sylvie Loignon has noted, the question with which *Fuir* opens, 'relance sans cesse l'écriture',<sup>441</sup> and the novel's closure on this scene leaves the reader, like the narrator himself, in a state of suspension, unable to provide any clear answer to the question, 'Serait-ce jamais fini avec Marie?' (*F*, 11)

### ***La Vérité sur Marie and the Immanent Sublime***

The third novel of the tetralogy, *La Vérité sur Marie*, published some four years after *Fuir*, details events taking place both during the period covered in *Faire l'amour* and also a few months later, when the characters' are reunited by a chance event. Echoing the scene of their suspended, floating embrace in the Mediterranean, *La Vérité sur Marie* opens with another vision of immobility, albeit one which is characterised not by weightlessness or expansiveness, but rather by an opaque, oppressive atmosphere of arrested movement<sup>442</sup> heavy with potential energy, as a storm builds over Paris in a heat-wave. When it erupts a few pages later, this is

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<sup>441</sup> Loignon, 'Comment finir? La Mélancolie de Jean-Philippe Toussaint', p. 90.

<sup>442</sup> 'immobile, lourd', 'sombre et statique' (*VM*, 12, 13).

evoked via synonyms of consequences, with branching forks of lightning ‘aux multiples ramifications électrisées’ illuminating the sky, and the rumbles of thunder resonating with their ‘répercussions en cascade’ (VM, 21, 22).

Having been almost entirely absent from one another’s lives since their separation in Tokyo, Marie makes a phone call to the narrator out of the blue in the middle of the night, following the heart attack of her new lover, the art-collector and horse breeder Jean-Christophe de Ganay. After the first thirty pages, recounting the events of that evening between Marie and Jean-Christophe, prior to the narrator’s arrival, Marie’s phone call prompts the narrator to rush to her opulent apartment, where until recently they had lived together, arriving just in time to witness the unconscious Jean-Christophe being driven away in an ambulance. This prompts him to reflect on just who this other man is, and also to attempt to imaginatively reconstruct the details of Marie’s life in the months since their separation, a significantly more developed version of the fictional appropriations of Marie’s perspective encountered in *Fuir*, of which the long, fictional analepsis of the opening scene between Marie and Jean-Christophe is revealed as just one constituent part. Frank Wagner has described this as ‘un véritable art poétique intégré au roman’,<sup>443</sup> for much of *La Vérité sur Marie* takes the form of a third-person narrative with the narrator physically absent, ostensibly presenting Marie’s point of view.

To build this speculative narrative, the narrator collates information from various sources. For example, a half-drunk bottle of Elban grappa which he notices sitting on Marie’s mantelpiece provides the jumping-off point for his anachronous extrapolation whereby, in the novel’s preceding scene (which he could not have

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<sup>443</sup> Frank Wagner, ‘Monsieur Jean Philippe Toussaint et la notion de vérité (pour une poétique perspectiviste)’, *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 25-34 (p. 32).

actually witnessed), Marie and Jean-Christophe are drinking grappa together, creating a properly fictional effect of backwards causation. He similarly extrapolates from the sporadic pieces of information Marie discloses about her relationship with Jean-Christophe ('dont je m'étais immédiatement emparé pour les poursuivre en imagination') (VM, 72), and also from the results of his subsequent online research into Jean-Christophe's family history and professional life, including a racehorse-doping scandal in which he was allegedly embroiled (VM, 77-78), this disjointed assortment of 'truths' providing the narrator with 'au moins quelques éléments de vérité incontestable à la mosaïque incomplète et lézardée' (VM, 75). The narrator readily concedes that the veracity of these speculations is uncertain, and that a definitively accurate account of such unwitnessed events, or of the life of Jean-Christophe (who he has never met), will always remain elusive to him, but he emphatically professes to have no such doubts when it comes to knowing the 'truth' about Marie (VM, 74).

In *Faire l'amour* Marie was characterised by a tension between two irreconcilable positions, as both the reductively idealised being first encountered by the narrator in Paris many years ago, and as the, similarly reductive, figure of cruelty, dominance, and self-interest in the narrated present of Tokyo. In *La Vérité sur Marie*, however, we find a statement of the narrator's absolute *certitude* that he has acquired such an intimate knowledge of Marie as to be capable of accurately determining not just her behaviour in any given situation, but even the content of her innermost thoughts:

Je me trompais peut-être parfois sur Jean-Christophe de G., mais jamais je ne me trompais sur Marie, je savais en toutes circonstances comment Marie se comportait, je savais comment Marie réagissait, [...] j'avais d'elle une connaissance infuse [...] : je savais la vérité sur Marie. (VM, 74)

The extreme anxiety provoked by the narrator's inability to deliver a determinate expression of Marie's identity in *Faire l'amour* appears to have been replaced by an inflated self-assurance that such a determinate characterisation is possible. While *Faire l'amour* showed almost no consideration of Marie's internal experience, psychologically holding her at arm's length and presenting her only as the external object of the aggrieved narrator's gaze, *La Vérité sur Marie* continues the movement tentatively undertaken in sections of *Fuir* by simulating Marie's ownmost subjective experience as if from within. Does this new appraisal really entail an abandonment of the objectifications of *Faire l'amour*, or an authentic presentation of the eponymous 'truth' of Marie's essential character? Or, as Jacques Dubois frames the question, in relation to the novel's title, 'Est-il une vérité de ou sur Marie?'<sup>444</sup> In this section, it will be argued that it does not and that, instead, it simply ends up fetishising her as another kind of a sublime object, albeit in a new configuration, which will be termed the 'immanent sublime' and associated with the thought of Jean-François Lyotard.

First, however, it is important to note that the narrator's adoption of Marie's perspective is not only such act of substitution which takes place in the novel. The

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<sup>444</sup> Dubois, 'Avec Marie', p. 13.

curious figure of Jean-Christophe, partly flesh-and-blood<sup>445</sup> but largely a product of the narrator's mind, stands at certain points as a kind of proxy for the narrator himself. The fictionality of the narrator's version of Jean-Christophe is highlighted by fact that he does not even use his real name, Jean-Baptiste, confessing to a vindictive pleasure in the 'posthumous vexation' of misnaming him. There is perhaps an ironic intertextual allusion here to Romain Rolland's *Jean-Christophe*,<sup>446</sup> a ten-volume work detailing the entire life of its eponymous protagonist from birth to death, and the source of the term *roman-fleuve*, defined by the Encyclopaedia Britannica as a 'series of novels, each one complete in itself, that deals with one central character, an era of national life, or successive generations of a family.' Whereas Rolland's work delivers vast quantities of intimate detail about *his* Jean-Christophe's life, the Jean-Christophe of *La Vérité sur Marie* is the product of a disconnected set of epistemic fragments, only of interest to the narrator in so far as his life intersects with that of Marie. This centrality of Marie is emphasised when the woman with whom the narrator is sharing his bed, and who is also named Marie, is summarily dismissed as irrelevant following Marie de Montalte's phone call: 'peu importe avec qui j'étais, ce n'est pas la question' (*VM*, 12).

As with the sight of the bottle of grappa which furnishes the scene of Jean-Christophe and Marie drinking grappa together, details of Jean-Christophe's final months with Marie borrow heavily from the narrator's own experiences with her, a fact which Ernstpeter Ruhe has related to the revealing abbreviation of Jean-Christophe's surname to 'de G.' throughout the novel, remarking that this resembles a 'variante du Je',<sup>447</sup> meaning, presumably, the perfective *j'ai* of lived first-person

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<sup>445</sup> 'un homme de notre temps qui était mort, un contemporain dans la force de l'âge' (*VM*, 70).

<sup>446</sup> Romain Rolland, *Jean-Christophe*, 1866-1944 (Paris: A. Michel, 1961).

<sup>447</sup> Ernstpeter Ruhe, 'D'une poignée de vent: la vie de Marie selon Toussaint', *French Forum*, 36 (2011), 95-114, (p. 103).

experience. Toussaint himself cites an example of this kind of experiential substitution, in the narrator's analeptic recollection of a night when he occupied the same physical space as Jean-Christophe (*VM*, 40-42), anxiously gazing out Marie's window and listening to alarms from the Banque de France sounding in the street below, with no ultimate explanation, nor subsequently consultable public record, of what has occurred. Toussaint suggests this provides the visual and psychological framework for the narrator to substitute himself with Jean-Christophe in the moments leading up to the latter's heart-attack, where his own experience, 'lui permettra d'imaginer ce que ressentira Jean-Christophe à cette même place'.<sup>448</sup>

However, in the narrator's memory of that night, as he stood at the window, he was in no personal danger, the mysterious incident having befallen an impersonal, inhuman object, (a financial institution) and his diffuse feelings of anxiety were powerfully mitigated by a presence he recalls in this 'souvenir délicieusement sensuel de complicité silencieuse avec Marie' (*VM*, 42), whereas Jean-Christophe (or rather the narrator's fictionalised version of him) is directly implicated, deeply unwell and anxious, his very mortality at stake. This sense of the extenuating effects of operating at a third-person 'remove' is also at play when the narrator recounts Jean-Christophe's frustrations with Marie's behaviour in Tokyo (at her tardiness, at her inability to find her passport, or at her disordered occupation of physical spaces), described as 'évidemment d'autant plus délectable qu'on n'était pas directement concerné.' (*VM*, 93) Although repeatedly presented as if these vexations were felt by Jean-Christophe, they seem clearly attributable to the narrator himself, given their (often direct) repetition of the language he has used in the previous novels to express

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<sup>448</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, 'Entretien avec Jean-Philippe Toussaint', ed. by Laurent Demoulin (*Culture. Le Magazine culturel de l'Université de Liège*: University of Liège, 2009), unpaginated.

his own frustrations, and also their recurrent appearance as free indirect statements within parentheses (*VM*, 83, 92). Toussaint habitually makes use of parenthetical statements to make ironic asides or convey the relatively unguarded, immediate personal impressions of his narrators, examples of which we see in those sections of *La Vérité sur Marie* in which the narrator is physically present; his palpable sigh of relief after momentarily mistaking the inert form of Jean-Christophe on the stretcher for Marie herself '(Marie, elle, n'avait rien, Marie était sauvée)' (*VM*, 44), or the private physical pleasure as he dries between his legs after running panicked through the rain to her apartment '(et je ne disconviendrai pas que c'était très agréable).' (*VM*, 49) Given the frequency of this kind of usage throughout the tetralogy, its continued appearance in the sections of the novel in which the narrator is physically *absent*, is suggestive of the fact that even in the novel's third-person sections where Marie's (simulated) perspective predominates, the narrative voice remains consistently that of the first-person narrator, supporting Wagner's contention that, in Toussaint's novels, 'le texte se développe toujours depuis la conscience médiate où il trouve son origine'.<sup>449</sup>

If at times Jean-Christophe 'stands in' for the narrator, he is also characterised in opposition to him. Dressed in his expensive boots, cashmere scarves and elegant coats, (repeatedly alluded to) and with a composed demeanour of commanding self-assurance, Jean-Christophe appears fully at home in Marie's mondaine reality. He shares with her the simultaneous belonging to the 'old money' of an aristocratic elite (indicated both by his surname's nobiliary particle and the details of an illustrious family history uncovered by the narrator in the course of his online research), and to the 'new money' of a global capitalist elite, like Marie a

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<sup>449</sup> Wagner, 'Monsieur Jean Philippe Toussaint et La Notion de Vérité', p. 32.



successful figure at the intersections of art and business. In terms of the narrator's 'replacement' by this individual, it seems significant that Jean-Christophe's allegedly doped racehorse is named Zahir. The narrator explicitly attributes this to a short story by Borges, where the Zahir is 'cet être qui a la terrible vertu de ne jamais pouvoir être oublié dès lors qu'on l'a aperçu une seule fois' (VM, 106). Perhaps the clearest implication of this naming choice is, as Ruhe suggests, the narrator's obsessional desire for Marie,<sup>450</sup> but it is also highly significant that the narrator fails to mention that in Borges's story, Zahir was not in fact a horse, or indeed a being at all, but rather a coin. This may suggest an onomastic reflection of how, in spite of the narrator's evident discomfort with Marie's moneyed world of work and leisure, corruption frequently appearing at its fringes,<sup>451</sup> he struggles to cope with his sudden ejection from this milieu in which he has spent the last six years of his life.

As he listens to Marie confiding her anxiety of being unable to receive news of Jean-Christophe's condition, he melancholically gazes into the mirror from a position of semi-darkness, 'sans visage, dans cette chambre où j'avais vécu près de six ans.' (VM, 50) He repeatedly refers to his 'petit deux pièces' on the rue des Filles-Saint-Thomas,<sup>452</sup> having moved out of Marie's luxurious, ornately furnished apartment ('chez nous, ou plutôt *chez elle*, il faudrait dire *chez elle* maintenant')<sup>453</sup> (VM, 12) upon his return from Tokyo. A lengthy description of Jean-Christophe's Italian leather boots, abandoned on the floor of the apartment, includes a degree of

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<sup>450</sup> Ernstpeter Ruhe, 'D'une poignée de vent: la vie de Marie selon Toussaint', p. 102.

<sup>451</sup> The interlacing of success with corruption is humorously suggested by insinuations made about Jean-Christophe's association with a disreputable Spanish veterinarian, involved in both horse-racing and competitive cycling '(où ses compétences vétérinaires devaient naturellement faire merveille)' (VM, 78).

<sup>452</sup> There is perhaps an irony to the choice of Parisian street name given the narrator's highly speculative imaginative endeavours in *La Vérité sur Marie*, adding to the Biblical allusions of 'Jean-Baptiste/-Christophe' and 'Marie Madeleine' that of 'Doubting Thomas' who refused to believe claims of Jesus's resurrection without tangible physical proof.

<sup>453</sup> Toussaint's emphasis.

sensuous detail normally found in advertising testimonials (*VM*, 45), as if they are very much at home with the ornate furnishings and designer lamps which populate the space, in contrast to the incongruous presence of the narrator's saggy old swimming trunks, 'dont la présence ridicule et touchante sur le sol de la chambre m'humiliat.' (*VM*, 54) Similarly, although the half-drunk bottle of Elban grappa on Marie's mantelpiece plays a role in allowing the narrator to imagine the events which have taken place in his absence, it is also a tangible manifestation of the fact that an artefact of intimate shared memories with Marie on Elba ('ce gout enfoui en elle depuis plusieurs étés') (*VM*, 13), has been shared with an interloper, as if to brutally attest to the consignment of symbols of their meaningful shared history to the past.

The narrator's exclusion from Marie's exclusive world is foregrounded when, after having been physically absent from the narrative for some sixty pages, he unexpectedly reappears. Just a few days after his return to Tokyo from Kyoto, (that is, a few days after the final scene of *Faire l'amour*) he and Marie suddenly catch sight of each other at the *Tokyo Shimbun Hai* racetrack, as she stands with Jean-Christophe on an escalator, moving towards a VIP area inaccessible to the narrator, and leaving him shocked by 'l'image de mon absence que la présence de cet homme révélait.' (*VM*, 147) The narrator is horrified by the impression that Marie is 'en train de passer sur une autre rive', and describes the escalator as 'un Styx vertical' (*VM*, 149), dragging the new couple into the 'Hades' of the VIP suite. Aside from the material transformation of the river Styx into a contemporary technological device made of rubber and metal, the text's presentation of Marie fixing the narrator with her gaze as she ascends the escalator replays the tragic Greek myth of Orpheus, but inverts its original positions of both gender and narrative

focus, with Marie as the vanishing protagonist looking back, leaving the reader alone once again with the narrator, as forsaken nymph Eurydice.<sup>454</sup>

We also see this kind of gendered substitution taking place around the figure of Zahir the horse. Emerging from his horse-box in Narita airport, he seems to incarnate both traditionally masculine traits of might, power, and violence, ('la force brute de cet étalon immobile, ses muscles, longs et puissants') and traditionally feminine traits of grace and elegance, ('la finesse des paturons, minces, étroits, délicats comme des poignets de femme') (*VM*, 101), an ambiguously gendered configuration which is echoed by Jean-Christophe explaining a linguistic difference to Marie at the Tokyo racetrack, 'la robe' said to be worn by horses in French and the 'coat' they wear in English. However, when Zahir breaks free of his constraints and runs wildly through the freight-zone of the airport, the manner in which the horse is deceptively brought back under control by an insincere show of affection by Jean-Christophe, whispering to him and stroking him, 'comme s'il caressait une femme' (*VM*, 115), the description of the positive impression that this display makes on Marie strongly indicates the narrator's identification of her with the horse.

This also seems to be the case when, after having finally managed to get Zahir onto the plane, Marie and Jean-Christophe are forced, by violent turbulence, to return to their seats. Zahir is illuminated by a small lamp, dropped by the couple between his hooves, but nauseated and panicked, he treads on it, 'mouchant d'un coup l'ultime infime lumière qui demeurait dans les soutes' (*VM*, 133), the disappearance of this final source of illumination coinciding with the departure of

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<sup>454</sup> This substitution also supports Jacques Dubois's contention that the presentation of Marie in the first three novels of the series, particularly the focus on her 'elemental' affinity with water, gives her a certain 'naiadic' quality. Dubois, 'Avec Marie', p. 23.

Marie, as the narrator's access to Marie's first-hand account of the situation (the truth 'from the horse's mouth') similarly vanishes, and here the point of view shifts more radically, this time into the mind of the terrified Zahir. In the confinement of his cage and wearing his blinkers, Zahir's conscious experience is described as one of pure anxiety, an intense and uncomprehending 'certitude d'être là' (*VM*, 136), and the seamless transition from a virtual simulation of Marie's subjective experience to that of a horse could encourage us to interpret this move once again in terms of the conquering sublime, or rather what Barbara Claire Freeman has called the 'misogynist sublime',<sup>455</sup> where the feminine is associated with irrational animality, incapable, like Zahir, of conceiving of the rationalistic and manifestly human 'désir immémorial de toujours vouloir repousser les limites pour aller voir au-delà' (*VM*, 137).

However, we could also associate this perspectival move with another, rather different configuration of the sublime. In the scene which directly precedes this, as attempts are being made to board Zahir onto the airplane, we see Marie filled with an irrepressible joy as she contemplates her overflowing piles of luggage sitting on the tarmac beneath the driving rain, 'en trouvant qu'ils présentaient [...] une sacrée homogénéité de formes et une subtile cohérence de couleurs.' (*VM*, 120) This superficially echoes other examples of Marie's haute-couture creations encountered throughout the series (such as the ice-cream dress in *Fuir*), which frequently appear as unique visual events involving the ephemeral co-arrangement of material forms and, in this sense, it seems reminiscent of the fundamentally non-representational sublime of Jean-François Lyotard. What Jerome Carroll has called Lyotard's

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<sup>455</sup> Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*, p. 68.

‘autotelist’<sup>456</sup> sublime is, for Lyotard, exemplified in the paintings of Barnett Newman, where ‘[i]t is chromatic matter alone, and its relationship with the material [...] which must inspire the wonderful surprise, the wonder that there should be something rather than nothing.’<sup>457</sup>

Both Kant and Lyotard identify conceptual indeterminacy as central to sublime experience. However, whereas Kant emphasised our ability to rationally overcome that indeterminacy as evidence for the intrinsic, causal ‘purposiveness’ of the higher faculties of the human mind (of the kind Zahir is identified as incapable of having), Lyotard explicitly ties the sublime to indeterminacy *in and of itself*, and largely in terms of art-objects in their moment of ‘immanent’ presence (the *quod*, or ‘that’), which may lead to, but will essentially precede, any subsequent interpretations of meaning (the *quid*, or ‘what’), thereby rejecting the tendency of Kant and the Romantics he influenced to treat ‘presence according to the exclusive modality of masterful intervention.’<sup>458</sup> The scene of Marie gazing upon her overfilled bags spilling out on the tarmac could also be seen as reflecting a Lyotard-influenced sublime of the kind which expresses the positive ‘excess’ valorised by both Barbara Freeman and Joanna Zylińska’s in their conceptualisations of a ‘feminine sublime’. Both Freeman and Zylińska relate Lyotard’s immanently unrepresentable, manifestly present sublime, which, for Freeman, ‘lays waste to binary (and inevitably hierarchical) distinctions’<sup>459</sup> to the feminine. Zylińska connects a steadfast refusal to domesticate or dominate indeterminate ‘excess’ (rejecting the ‘masterful’ tendencies of the conquering sublime) to a primacy of

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<sup>456</sup> J. Carroll, ‘The Limits of the Sublime, the Sublime of Limits: Hermeneutics as a Critique of the Postmodern Sublime’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 66 (2008), 171-81.

<sup>457</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 85.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>459</sup> Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women’s Fiction*, p. 45.

respect for the other that she derives from Levinasian ethics, where '[t]hrough the recognition of the particularity of the landscape in which the sublime event is taking place and of the alterity of the other who is participating in it, an attempt to master this alterity gives way to proximity and engagement.'<sup>460</sup>

This would seem to support a refusal to allow one's own aesthetic judgement to be subordinated to that of another subject, and Zylinska cites Levinas in support of this: 'No one can be radically substituted for the other, without depriving the other of identity.'<sup>461</sup> The act of contemplation performed by Marie in the Narita airport, however, clearly takes place at just such a moment in which she is being 'radically substituted' by the narrator. Two parenthetical interjections in this passage both remind us of the persistence of a single narrating voice in spite of the narrator's physical absence, and also serve to undermine his pretensions to a knowledge of the 'truth' of Marie's subjective, aesthetic experience, indicating a marked deficiency in his understanding. The first puts us on our guard, appearing as another expression of frustration at Marie's disordered habits with her bags ('aucun fermé naturellement, Marie ne fermait jamais rien') (VM, 120). While it could perhaps be argued that the scene is representative of the kind of positive feminine 'excess' advocated by Freeman and Zylinska, the impossibility of pinning Marie down to a fixed or closed identity, it also seems to indicate the narrator's *dissatisfaction* with this inability. The second parenthetical statement, which closes out the paragraph, is even more revealing, in that it appears to reduce Marie's aesthetic contemplation to a question

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<sup>460</sup> Joanna Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared: the feminine sublime* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 39.

<sup>461</sup> Levinas cited in Zylinska, *On Spiders, Cyborgs and Being Scared*, p. 74.

of style, of formal beauty: ‘de beige, de grège, de sable, d’écru et de cuir (la classe, quoi, Marie, jusque dans le naufrage).’ (VM, 121)

As Jerome Carroll has argued, one thread which ties together not just Lyotard’s and Kant’s sublime, but the majority of historical conceptualisation of the sublime, is their focus on the aporetic questions at the ‘*interstices* of philosophical issues – the nexus of subject and object, for instance’ while exhibiting a paradoxical tendency ‘to gravitate to the *poles* of these issues – the rational subject, the immanent object.’<sup>462</sup> Lyotard’s meditations on the sublime art-object as some kind of pure, immanent presence are, as Carroll argues, still ‘only conceivable within and against a background of a network of meaning and communication’.<sup>463</sup> There seems to be an implied triviality in the narrator’s presentation of Marie’s aesthetic judgement, motivated by ‘un élan de légèreté, d’insouciance et de fantaisie’ (VM, 121). It is as if the narrator is attempting to emulate her aesthetic experience as it has been externalised in her past fashion creations, but even if he succeeds in reproducing something of their visual allure, the striking effects of their ‘chromatic matter alone’, something essential remains absent, that is, the connection to the ‘networks of meaning’ Carroll mentions; any deeper sense of their *meaning-for* Marie.

This is not an isolated occurrence. At the race-track, just before the surprise visual encounter with the narrator, as Marie imagines ‘une collection de haute couture sur le thème de l’hippisme’ (VM, 140-141), the detailed description of her plans, however visually impressive, still centres only on their formal splendour. As

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<sup>462</sup> Carroll, ‘The Limits of the Sublime, the Sublime of Limits: Hermeneutics as a Critique of the Postmodern Sublime’, p. 173.

<sup>463</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

we saw at the funeral in *Fuir* and will see again towards the end of *La Vérité sur Marie*, the act of riding a horse has a particular significance for Marie, having done so for the first time the day of her father's funeral, but the narrator makes no mention of this. As Allbrecht Wellmer suggests, any 'art that was purified of the last vestige of signification, or representation, of meaning, would be indistinguishable from pleasant ornament, senseless noise, or technical construction.'<sup>464</sup> Since meaning is perspectively determined by the particular experiential reality of a situated subject, the fact that considerations of meaningful representation (for Marie) are continually eclipsed in favour of the narrator's focus on external qualities of 'style', 'taste', or 'class' in his presentations of her aesthetic experiences corresponds to the novel's wider thematic concern of the problem of ever directly inhabiting another person's subjective experience.<sup>465</sup>

With Marie absent, the nauseated Zahir begins to drift once more towards symbolically incarnating the position of the narrator. His attempts to reposition himself on the shifting floor of the plane, 'pour essayer de conjurer les secousses' (*VM*, 136), recall the ailing narrator in Bernard's Kyoto apartment, newly separated from Marie and drinking burning hot tea 'pour conjurer les frissons' (*FA*, 123). When Zahir, 'éprouvant soudain cette proximité concrète, physique, avec la mort', (*VM*, 138) finally vomits, it is as if it is a fictionalised image of the narrator in the train to Tokyo who described this sensation in the nearly identical terms of the 'proximité physique et concrète de la mort' (*FA*, 139), when he threw up in the train toilets. On this level, the fact that the scene of the vomiting horse is closely followed in *La Vérité sur Marie* by the moment of mutual recognition between Marie and the

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<sup>464</sup> Allbrecht Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1991), p. 57.

<sup>465</sup> An attitude which, particularly in *Nue*, will also be associated with the commodification of art, particularly in relation to the fashion industry.



narrator at the race-track, taking place just days after this train journey, connects these two time periods, while also marking the impending collapse of the narrator's speculative poetic apparatus built around an imagined, 'essential' Marie which takes place in this moment. The flowing descriptions of Zahir's inability to think beyond his immediate, solitary position ('son esprit butait sur [les parois] et rebondissait pour revenir aux nébulosités de sa propre conscience') (VM, 122) reflects an inability which is also that of the narrator, in attempting to depart from his own fundamental partiality and inhabit the mind of Marie. The artifice inherent in this simulating activity is emphasised by the physically impossible image with which the scene closes for, as the text explicitly notes ('Zahir, cette nuit, indifférent à sa nature, traître à son espèce') (VM, 138), horses are biologically incapable of vomiting.

Toussaint has said that he sees the 'starting point' for the telling of the 'visual monologue' of imagination, memory and artifice which constitutes *La Vérité sur Marie* as being centred in the half-asleep narrator's coursing of thought as he travels on the ferry to Elba.<sup>466</sup> At this point in the novel, following the reappearance of the narrator in the analeptic scene of the Tokyo racetrack, we find a second-order consideration of the difficulty of truly transcending his own subjective position, as he begins to recognise that the certitude he professed earlier as to Marie's essential character must give way to another kind of 'truth':

...une vérité nouvelle, qui s'inspirerait de ce qui avait été la vie et la transcenderait, [...] et ne viserait qu'à la quintessence du réel, [...] une

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<sup>466</sup> Toussaint, 'Entretien avec Jean-Philippe Toussaint', ed. by Demoulin (*Culture. Le Magazine culturel de l'Université de Liège*: University of Liège, 2009), unpaginated.

vérité proche de l'invention, ou jumelle de mensonge, la vérité idéale.

(*VM*, 166)

As we have seen elsewhere in Toussaint's work, this passage suggests a play on the multiple meanings of 'idéale', connoting not only the longed-for or the desired, but also the fundamentally perspectival (as in philosophical 'Idealism'), which suggests a growing self-awareness of his own partiality, the predominating influence of his own desires in the narration of these events. Just before the ferry arrives into the harbour, the narrator acknowledges that, despite not being asleep 'c'était le mystère irréductible du rêve qui était en train d'agir et de jouer en moi' (*VM*, 168); as with 'ideal', the word 'dream' has a similar double meaning, both of aspiration or desire, and of a perspectively rooted, egocentric experience, in which, as the narrator suggests, 'il n'y est toujours question que de soi-même' (*VM*, 168), an experience which he compares to the decision taken by the protagonist of a short story by Borges, *L'Île des anamorphoses*, 'où l'écrivain qui invente la troisième personne en littérature, finit, [...] par renoncer à son invention et se remet à écrire à la première personne.'<sup>467</sup> (*VM*, 168) This is, however, a piece of false intertextuality. The story, although plausibly Borgesian, does not exist, and this 'plagiarising' of the Argentine author by the narrator echoes his aesthetic appropriation of Marie's creative imagination in the description of her dresses while, at the same time, this apocryphal story ironically expresses the inadequacy and artifice involved in this kind of phenomenological appropriation. The narrator could also be seen as parenthetically

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<sup>467</sup> As Merleau-Ponty put it, 'Toute pensée de quelque chose est en même temps conscience de soi, faute de quoi elle ne pourrait pas avoir d'objet.' Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 430.

alluding to this from as early as the novel's opening scene, when Marie dances to an illegally downloaded piece of music, which he suggests is hypocritical given how much she invests in preventing 'la contrefaçon de ses marques en Asie', before conceding that '(nous avons, je le crains, les mêmes goûts)' (VM, 14).

Having joined Marie on Elba, we see the narrator attempting to move beyond his failed attempts at direct, unmediated knowledge of her. As they lie together on the rocks by the Rivercina creek, he considers multiple interpretations of her cryptic statement about Jean-Christophe, "'Tu sais, je n'étais pas sa maîtresse...'" (VM, 179), initially wondering, somewhat humorously, if she is expressing a rather 'Clintonian' definition of their sexual relations, 'ce qui exclut la fellation et le cunnilingus d'une telle jurisprudence' (VM, 180), but he is dissuaded of this trivial interpretation upon noticing the solemnity of Marie's tone and the seriousness of her expression. Perhaps, he thinks, her statement indicates a refusal of the label of 'mistress' on account of its reductive 'covering over' of the truth of her relationship as she lived it with the real Jean-Baptiste. Yet, after considering these various readings, the narrator accepts, in the present tense, that he simply cannot decide upon the meaning behind her utterance with any certainty ('Je ne sais pas.') (VM, 180). Lest we think that this statement of indeterminacy is just one more expression of Marie's fantastical 'mystery' or 'immanence', that it implies the absence of any determinate meaning, the repeated interrogative phrases<sup>468</sup> and modifiers contained in this passage suggest, rather, the narrator's awareness that Marie's phrase *does* correspond to a very real subjective meaning *for her*, but that it is one which he cannot directly intuit from his own subject-position.

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<sup>468</sup> 'Qu'avait-elle voulu me dire...' 'Peut-être avait-elle [...] voulu me dire...' 'Ou bien, avait-elle [...] voulu me dire...' (VM, 178, 179, 180).

The scene which directly follows this shows a reciprocal act of communication, this time in gestural form. When Marie approaches the narrator from behind to mockingly tickle his stubbly beard, he takes her hand and turns to meet her gaze, considering the corresponding uncertainty that this act of his may provoke in Marie's mind. Despite his professed intent with this gesture,<sup>469</sup> his uncertainty as to how Marie will interpret it and how she will respond is parenthetically expressed in terms of a playful diegetic metaphor which onomastically references the 'Marguerite' in Marie's name, as he gazes down at one of the plastic daisies on her old pair of sandals which has partially detached itself, '(un peu, beaucoup, passionnément)' (VM, 182).<sup>470</sup> His focus on Marie's pensive reaction, before she ultimately steps into his arms ('Une ombre de gravité traversa le regard, elle devint songeuse') (VM, 182) is, once again, suggestive of his growing awareness that Marie is not just some immanently sublime figure of fantastical mystery, but a flesh and blood human being who faces the same obstacles in deciphering his words and actions as he does hers. Together these two passages articulate the necessary persistence of ambiguity and uncertainty in interpersonal communication, the fact that, as Ricoeur writes, '[m]éconnu, reconnu, l'autre reste inconnu en termes d'appréhension originaire de la mienneté du soi-même,'<sup>471472</sup> but they also indicate the possibility of how, although this 'distance' between subjects can never be wholly transcended, the collapse into absolute *méconnaissance* of the

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<sup>469</sup> His communicative desire, 'd'une intention et d'un regard, d'une soudain gravité, [...] pour le souligner et le mettre en valeur comme je le fis ce soir-là' (VM, 181).

<sup>470</sup> 'Effeuille la marguerite' is the French equivalent of the game, 'She loves me, she loves me not'.

<sup>471</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2004), p. 373.

<sup>472</sup> 'Nos consciences ont beau, à travers nos situations propres, construire une situation commune dans laquelle elles communiquent, c'est du fond de sa subjectivité que chacun projette ce monde "unique".' Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 414.

other by the self, clearly manifested in *Faire l'amour*, can be held at bay by a reciprocal effort of respect for the purposive selfhood of each subject.

We see this gradual shift in the narrator's attitude when he describes how, lying in this bed each night, he listens to the noises Marie makes in the room above him. This activity seems initially to correspond to his hubristic poetical simulations of Marie, in that he not only 'hears' her fall asleep, but goes so far as to claim to hear the sound of the dreams 'qui s'écoulait dans son esprit', but as he pursues this reflection via a long, flowing series of verbs in the imperfect tense, suggesting that it takes place over the course of their fortnight together on the island, we find a growing awareness of the artifice involved in this direct access to Marie's mind, acknowledging that this is, 'comme si, [...] j'en étais venu [...] à imaginer que je rêvais ses rêves.' (VM, 183) Transcending this reductive paradigm may allow for a greater degree of mutual respect and understanding, at least within the intimately suspended space and time of the couple's stay at La Rivercina, where they are protected from the ravages of real life, filling their days with snorkelling, sunbathing, eating together and pottering around the old house, its name densely allusive in this regard. French *river* means to fasten, link or attach, and indeed, this is a place in which the couple are repeatedly at their most 'connected' throughout the series, both in *La Vérité sur Marie* and *Nue*, whereas in the transitional *Fuir* the narrator stays in a hotel rather than setting foot in the house. In English, there is also a watery connotation of the flow of time, and in Italian the verbs *riverire* (to pay one's respects, especially in a funereal context) and *riverbero* (reverberation), of the kind evoked in the description of the stormy night which opens the novel. The diminutive '-cina' is perhaps also reminiscent of the reduced 'vie en miniature'

adopted by the procrastinating narrator of *La Salle de bain* after he befriends his doctor in Venice.

Despite what appears to be progress by the narrator towards a new equilibrium of understanding and communication, the novel does not end here, the horrors of the external world suddenly returning in dramatic fashion. A devastating forest fire breaks out in the middle of the night, resulting in the death of several horses, including Nocciola, the horse ridden by Marie on the day of her father's funeral. With this unanticipated devastation, the sustainability of the new communicative equilibrium established between the characters within the protective, suspended 'bubble' of la Rivercina looks rather less assured, suddenly punctured as it is by the return of the disruptions, accidents, and disasters of life. The narrator responds pragmatically, acting in an inhabitually decisive way and protecting the near-catatonic Marie, taking the wheel of her father's pick-up truck and ferrying her out of harm's way. On the novel's penultimate page, with both characters profoundly shaken by these events, the narrator listens to Marie moving around upstairs – the verb *entendre* is rhythmically repeated multiple times – before hearing her descend the stairs, entering the room, as she 'leaves behind' her 'dimension imaginaire pour s'incarner dans le réel' (VM, 204). As they begin to make love in the liminal temporal threshold of the dawn, the final words of *La Vérité sur Marie* close with a direct address, as if speaking directly to Marie through the text for the first time:

l'ultime distance qui séparait nos corps était en train de se combler, et nous avons fait l'amour, nous faisons doucement l'amour [...] – et sur ta

peau et tes cheveux, mon amour, subsistait encore une forte odeur de feu.

(*VM*, 205)

This seems like a significant movement for the narrator, beyond his extreme impassivity towards Marie in *Faire l'Amour*, and Frank Wagner may be right to identify the third novel as presenting 'une perspective plus optimiste, où les pouvoirs de la création littéraire semblent désormais exaltés – au moins ponctuellement',<sup>473</sup> but both the fire and the implications of its lingering traces (the 'forte odeur du feu' on Marie's skin) mark the persistent ambiguity of the narrator's attitude towards her. Although his response to the threat of the fire is decisive, this seems possible because it represents a clearly identifiable physical danger, whereas, throughout the tetralogy, he repeatedly fails to exhibit this kind of decisiveness when faced with more quotidian, nuanced situations and events, instead, as Meurée puts it, going to great lengths to 'se prémunir des assauts de la réalité'.<sup>474</sup>

### *Nue*

The final novel of the series, *Nue*, takes this kind of inevitable and unpredictable recurrence of difficult events as its primary thematic focus, revisiting locations, time periods, and redeploying formal techniques encountered in the course of the series, moving between scenes of the present and the past and between the real and the

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<sup>473</sup> Wagner, 'Monsieur Jean Philippe Toussaint et la notion de Vérité', p. 33.

<sup>474</sup> Meurée, 'Temps de la résistance: résistance au temps', pp. 84-85.

imagined. Toussaint has described the novel as ‘repre[n]t d’une certaine facon tous les thèmes qui [sont] en jeu dans cette ensemble romanesque’.<sup>475</sup>

After an analeptic prologue, the first numbered section of the novel picks up where *La Vérité sur Marie* left off, the narrator growing increasingly anxious as he waits by the phone for Marie to contact him upon their return from Elba. As he does so, he reflects upon two of the three professional engagements which motivated their ill-fated trip to Tokyo in *Faire l’amour*, but which, until now, have not been evoked. The first of these, with which the novel opens, is Marie’s spectacular fashion show, ‘*Spiral: Maquis d’automne*’ (N, 16), at the Tokyo Spiral building, the second the opening of her gallery exhibition, ‘MAQUIS’ (N, 62), at Tokyo’s *Contemporary Art Space*, the latter involving an extended, self-consciously fictional, third-person narrative from the point of view of Jean-Christophe. The second numbered section of the novel, which begins at the moment Marie finally re-establishes contact with the narrator, largely dispenses with this combination of anachrony and self-conscious fictionality, reverting to a linear structure as it recounts the couple’s reunion in Paris after two months have passed and then their return, once again, to Elba, this time to attend the funeral of Maurizio, the former groundkeeper of Marie’s father, leading to an encounter with the possibly criminal figure of Maurizio’s son Giuseppe, before the novel, and the series, come to close shortly after Marie has revealed to the narrator that she is pregnant.

Before the first numbered section of the novel, its analeptic opening pages describe the preparation and exhibition of one of Marie’s haute couture dresses at ‘*Spiral: Maquis d’automne*’. We are told that Marie debuted her *robe de miel* here

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<sup>475</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, ‘*Jean-Philippe Toussaint – Nue*’, online video recording, YouTube, 10 January 2013, < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2yKKEH4IT0> > [accessed 10 October 2015].



(N, 12) a high-concept ‘dress’ made almost entirely of honey, worn by a model followed up and down a catwalk by a swarm of live bees, a vast undertaking requiring months of preparation and the employment of apiarists, armies of lawyers and the participation of a very young, clearly exploited<sup>476</sup> Russian model. The exhibition of the dress is initially recounted in a brief passage in the imperfect tense, implying that it is a *fait accompli* which went off without a hitch, however, it soon becomes clear that this is only a description of Marie’s initial design concept and that, in reality, the fashion show took a catastrophic turn when the model stumbled on stage, causing the bees to swarm and attack her. At the very moment of this incident we find a vivid description of the model hearing the sound of bees descending upon her as she collapses, followed by highly graphic details of them stinging her ‘de toutes parts, [...] dans les yeux, dans le sexe, à l’intérieur du sexe’ (N, 22) but then, in spite of the episode’s extreme violence, the tone abruptly becomes detached when Marie emerges onto the stage to greet the public, prompting confusion among the audience as to whether or not what they have just witnessed is planned, part of the show. With Marie’s appearance, the description of the stricken model shifts from being one of the ‘torche vivante, immolée’ (N, 22) of a few sentences previously, to transfiguring her into a ‘tableau vivant’ (N, 23), as if she were merely playing a part, just a *performance* of a figure in extreme pain, which the narrator likens to ‘une vidéo de Bill Viola’ (N, 23). Lisa Jaye Young notes this degree of artifice, the remove which operates in the encounter with the video artist’s figures, which she says do not ‘depict the gruesome reality of the material body

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<sup>476</sup> The narrator describes her lengthy contract as stipulating ‘des quantités d’avenants et des clauses inhabituelles’ (N, 17).

consumed by flames or flood, but rather articulates the body *immaterial*, a kind of spiritual or sublime consumption.<sup>477</sup>

As if utterly unconcerned with the model's gruesome reality, the text shifts into a description of the way in which Marie's appearance from behind the curtain effectively 'signs' and appropriates this horrific, unforeseen contingency, in a way which the narrator interprets as a reflection of a remarkable shift in her artistic sensibility. He tells us that, having always worked to maintain absolute control over all aspects of her creative process, Marie's behaviour here attests to a new acceptance that 'il y a la place, dans la création artistique, pour [...] le hasard, l'involontaire, l'inconscient, le fatal et le fortuit.' (N, 25) The narrator's decision to revisit this particular scene is revealing, given that the difficulty of coming to terms with dramatic, unanticipated events will be a central concern in the second half of the novel, in the form of Maurizio's death and Marie's pregnancy. As in the latter parts of *La Vérité sur Marie*, the quasi-theoretical nature of this opening section will echo throughout *Nue*, particularly in the sections in which the narrator is separated from Marie, suggesting a correspondence between the narrator's methodological interrogation of her fashion work and the self-conscious examination his own acts of textual configuration. The sudden abstraction away from any concern for the young model's wellbeing is also a reflection of the narrator's monomaniacal focus on Marie to the exclusion of much concern for anyone else, seen in his dismissal of the 'Marie' that he was sharing his bed with at the start of *La Vérité sur Marie* as irrelevant ('peu importe avec qui j'étais, ce n'est pas la question') (VM, 12), or in his more general tendency to reify real individuals (Li Qi, Zhang Xiangzhi, Jean-

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<sup>477</sup> Lisa Jaye Young, 'The Elemental Sublime', *Performing Arts Journal*, 19.3 (1997), 65–71 (p. 70).

Baptiste) in terms of their symbolic value, in service to his heuristic narrative contemplations about Marie.

The narrator describes that the honey dress is the product of theoretical reflections which have led Marie to return to the fundamental principles of *couture*, connecting disparate materials ‘par différents techniques, le point, le bâti, l’agrafe ou le raccord’ (N, 11), and it does not seem fortuitous that the first half of *Nue* sees the narrator revisiting several of his own ‘techniques’ and ‘materials’ from earlier in the series, but perhaps with a greater degree of self-awareness and candour than we have seen from him previously, representing a further development of the emergent tendency found towards the end of *La Vérité sur Marie*, in which he began to doubt the legitimacy of his perspective-shifting simulations of Marie’s subjective experience. In each case, these ‘techniques’ involve the stitching or tacking together of multiple or incongruous ‘materials’ (and psychological) realities; attraction-resentment and the oscillation between them, as in *Faire l’amour* ; past-present, and the attentive duality inherent in acts of remembering, as in *Fuir* ; the real-imaginary, and the possibilities that the latter has to mediate the former, as in *La Vérité sur Marie*.

As the taxi drops the narrator off at his flat, upon the couple’s return from Elba, he believes that Marie is waiting for him to make some kind of declaration, ‘un dernier geste, un aveu’ (N, 30). He fails to do so, attributing this to being disconcerted by the presence of the taxi driver, and here he repeats a phrase (only to himself, as indicated by its parenthesisation) from *Faire l’amour* ‘(je n’ai pas été capable d’exprimer [m]es sentiments [...] mais en ai-je jamais été capable?)’ (N,

29),<sup>478</sup> attesting to his characteristic reticence towards making decisive moves, even symbolic ones, as with his reluctance to kiss Marie in the earlier novel. Initially confident that Marie will call him, as days turn into weeks and she fails to do so (he does not appear to entertain the possibility of initiating contact himself) his impatience segues into bitterness and he describes how, by the end of the month he begins to ‘laisser libre cours à mon ressentiment.’ (N, 34) Here he begins to list several of his now familiar criticisms of Marie – frivolity, superficiality, thoughtlessness – before qualifying these as perhaps belonging, themselves, to a rather superficial vision of Marie, associated not with her essential character but rather with the social and professional milieu that she inhabits, recognising that ‘ce serait la méconnaître de la restreindre à cette écume de mondantés qui bouillonnait dans son sillage.’ (N, 36)

He then shifts into listing Marie’s more ‘positive’ attributes, suggesting that what is really the most essential aspect of her character is what he calls her ‘*disposition océanique*’ (N, 36). This is a reformulation of Romain Rolland’s concept of the *sentiment océanique*, defined as the psychological source of religious experience, the perception of a kind of limitlessness, no longer clearly distinguishing between the limits of one’s own body and the material universe.<sup>479</sup> Whereas Rolland’s *sentiment océanique* describes a necessarily transitory psychological state, one which Meurée has linked to the narrator’s soothingly cosmic scene of self-dissociation in the swimming pool of *Faire l’amour*,<sup>480</sup> the narrator renders it as a *disposition*, a permanent character trait of Marie, capable of achieving an effortless

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<sup>478</sup> ‘Je n’ai jamais su exprimer mes sentiments.’ (FA, 27).

<sup>479</sup> ‘...sentiment d’union indissoluble avec le grand Tout, et d’appartenance à l’universel’. Roger Dadoun

*Revue d’Histoire littéraire de la France*, 6, Romain Rolland (1976), 936-946 (p. 938).

<sup>480</sup> Meurée, ‘Temps de la résistance: résistance au temps’, p. 89.

harmony with the material universe and with natural elements in particular, ‘dans une dissolution absolue de sa propre conscience’ (N, 36). While Marie’s creative work frequently incorporates natural elements, particularly plant-life, this description of her, in spite of its reverential tone, repeats the narrator’s previously encountered reductions of Marie to an immanently sublime object. This account of Marie’s *disposition océanique* can be related to the opening lines of the novel, in which the narrator draws a distinction between the ‘spectacular’ nature of some of her fashion creations – ‘la robe en sorbet, la robe en calycotome et romarin, la robe en gorgone de mer que paraient des colliers d’oursins et des boucles d’oreilles de Vénus’ (N, 11) – and a more radically experimental thread of her work, to which he says the honey dress belongs.

The ‘spectacular’ dresses are considered as visually impressive, immanent material happenings, sublime objects in themselves, but this forgoes any consideration of their representational value *for* Marie, the necessary persistence of a degree of agent-driven mimesis in aesthetic judgement, which Wellmer calls those ‘structures of meaning we inhabit in our everyday world’.<sup>481</sup> Each of these ‘spectacular’ dresses contain details which can be traced back to Elba, that bastion of personal signification for Marie – not just via the ‘robe en sorbet’ evoked in *Fuir*, but in the thorny flowering bush, calicotome, which populates the island,<sup>482</sup> in the densely symbolic rosemary, and in the sea urchins and the shimmering *oreilles de Venus* shells, native to Mediterranean coastal waters and which make an appearance

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<sup>481</sup> Allbrecht Wellmer, *Endgames: The Irreconcilable Nature of Modernity: Essays and Lectures* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), p. 169.

<sup>482</sup> Edda Lattanzi, ‘The distribution of three species of the genus *Calicotome* in Italy’, in *Flora Mediterranea*, 18 (2008), 123-25 (p. 124). Calicotome also belongs to the same botanical subfamily as the ‘genêt’ (broom) found in Marie’s father’s old truck, bundled with the Ophelian herbs rosemary and fennel, ‘que Marie, ou son père, avait du cueillir quelques années plus tôt.’ (F, 158).

in *La Vérité sur Marie* in the context of the narrator and Marie swimming together in ‘ces criques que nous fréquentions’ (*F*, 166), the site of both the couple’s multiple reunions and of the drowning of Marie’s father. As with a carefully selected bouquet of herbs and flowers Marie arranges to lay upon her father’s grave in *La Vérité sur Marie*, which the narrator attributes, at that point, only to her ‘raffinement inné pour assembler les couleurs et les tissus’ (*VM*, 162), rather than to any personal significance or symbolic of the bouquet for Marie, echoed in a scene in which she buys flowers for Maurizio’s funeral and she is categorical that she does not want chrysanthemums, a refusal which seems to stem from their non-specificity, the impersonal generality of their ritual usage (in the Portoferraio cemetery, they are ‘encore, et toujours, partout’ (*N*, 138).

The narrator’s persisting treatment of Marie as both a naive purveyor of the spectacular, and as an immanent sublime object of sorts, is highlighted as he continues, attributing this oceanic disposition to her childlike nature, ‘avec son fond inaltérable de bonté innocente’ (*N*, 38), and when the passage culminates in a self-parodic, almost Disneyesque scene of Marie in the garden of la Rivercina house, ‘au nez éberlué de créatures qui la suivaient des yeux avec ravissement.’ (*N*, 39) It is at this point that the narrator appears to realise that an exaggeratedly positive vision of Marie is no more a definitive truth, no less reductive than the negative characterisation of her as carefree, cruel and capricious. Aware that he is simply ‘rehashing’ his memories of Marie in a simplified, tautological way which makes her conform to his prior judgements, this prompts him to wonder whether it is possible to escape from this cyclical behaviour:

Mais tout véritable amour, me disais-je, et, plus largement, tout projet  
[...] n'est-il pas toujours, nécessairement, un ressassement? (N, 42)

If this section reflects the narrator's growing awareness of the problematic manner in which he relates to Marie, his attempt to find a way out of this impasse ironically involves recourse to another 'rehashed', analeptic episode, seemingly triggered by the sight of a gutted apartment building standing opposite his own which 'semblait [...] se dérouler dans une grande métropole asiatique' (N, 43). Although it remains unclear whether or not he was actually present at the *Spiral* fashion show, he unexpectedly reveals that he was in attendance at the opening of Marie's other key professional engagement in Tokyo: 'j'étais présent, moi aussi, le soir du vernissage de son exposition au *Contemporary Art Space* de Shinagawa.' (N, 44)

The opening of the 'MAQUIS' exhibition takes place a few nights after the narrator forced his way into the gallery wielding his vial of acid at the end of *Faire l'amour*, and contains several second-order reflections on the work of memory, of the kind which remained only implicit in *Fuir*. He describes how, shaving beforehand, he gazes into the mirror, 'essayant de guetter ce que je ressentais maintenant [...] Je ne sais pas – de l'inquiétude [...] qui ne me quittait pas depuis notre séparation' (N, 45). This ambiguously situated 'now' makes it unclear which separation he is referring to, the remembered period following his rupture with Marie in Tokyo, as he gazes into the hotel mirror, or his present state of physical separation from her in Paris, as he stares out of his apartment window. We find a similar formulation when the narrator panics, believing he has been recognised by the same security guard as in *Faire l'amour*, and bizarrely scales a fire escape onto

the roof of the *Contemporary Art Space* building. Looking down through a porthole window at the crowd below, he describes the curious feeling of evoking this scene, whereby his conscious mind is situated simultaneously ‘à Tokyo [...] à guetter la présence de Marie à travers ce hublot [...] et à Paris [...] à attendre le coup de téléphone’ (*N*, 60-61), explicitly alluding to what was only implicit in *Fuir*, the act of remembering engendering an entanglement of the past and present.

In spite of his dread at having been recognised, it is not clear that he actually has been; the guard is standing on the other side of a ‘semi-opaque’ screen and his gaze, ‘vide, distrait’ (*N*, 52) passes only briefly over the narrator. However, it is significant that this panic-inducing moment of recognition directly follows the narrator attributing his inability to cross the gallery’s threshold, ‘symbolique, virtuel’ (*N*, 52) to nothing other than ‘l’anxiété qui ne me quittait pas’ (*N*, 52). Considered alongside the extensive references he makes to the doubling effects of memory, this may encourage us to identify an analeptic mobilisation of this remembered anxiety as constituting a heuristic attempt to interrogate his inability to cross another symbolic threshold in the present. When he wonders if he has now acquired the ‘recul nécessaire pour appréhender [...] la scène que j’étais en train de vivre’ before continuing ‘Mais où étais-je alors maintenant?’ (*N*, 60), just which scene and which ‘now’ is he talking about? His experience on the night of the exhibition, or his failure to reinitiate contact with Marie in the present? This reticence is illuminated towards the end of the novel when the narrator finally asks Marie why she waited so long to call him and she turns the question back at him: ‘Pourquoi, tu m’as appelée, toi?’ (*N*, 161).

It seems significant that, in contrast to the highly detailed description of the organisational work involved in the presentation of the ‘honey dress’, the artworks in



this exhibition remain almost entirely unrepresented. We discover only that at least one of them is photographic in nature, and they are presented only indirectly, in the form an imagined conversation taking place between Jean-Christophe, his friend, Pierre Signorelli, and a woman that Jean-Christophe mistakenly believes to be Marie. The lapse into this embedded fictional narrative appears to be provoked by the narrator suddenly remembering that this must have been the night that Jean-Christophe and Marie first met, ‘ce qui signifie que j’étais – que j’allais être ou que j’avais été – le témoin visuel de leur rencontre.’ (N, 61) When Jean-Christophe and Signorelli discuss their plans to attend ‘MAQUIS’, its title is described as an ‘écho au sous-titre du défilé de Marie au *Spiral: Maquis d’automne*, où avait été présentée la robe en miel’ (N, 62), rather than attributing its more likely derivation, from the rural guerrilla ‘maquisards’ of the Occupation, resistants so named for the arid ‘maquis’ scrubland which characterises the Corsican (and Elban) landscape. The embedded fictional characters’ interpretation of the title’s origin, ‘planted’ in their fictional minds by the narrator, casts the gallery work as something of a derivative addendum to Marie’s fashion show, in which ‘maquis’ cedes primacy to the space in which it occurs (the Tokyo Spiral building), reducing her creative involvement to mere subtitle. Lyotard acknowledges ‘a kind of collusion between capital and the avant-garde,’<sup>483</sup> and as with the narrator’s superficial critical engagement with Marie’s ‘spectacular’ dresses, here we find him drawing associations between his distaste for public presentation, particularly within a commercial context, and the erosion of the intimate networks of personal meaning that might underlie artistic creations.

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<sup>483</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p. 105.

This bad-faith attitude at the intersections of art and business is incarnated by Jean-Christophe's venality as an art collector, concerned only with the financial value of his acquisitions (*N*, 67), a materialism which is doubled by the instrumental judgements he makes of the other attendees in the gallery, 'estimant l'élégance des femmes, soupesant la richesse des hommes, la valeur de leur patrimoine.' (*N*, 65) Mistaking another woman, also called Marie, for the artist, Jean-Christophe approaches her, planning to seduce her, and here we find a direct repetition of the language used in relation to his taming of the agitated Zahir in *La Vérité sur Marie*, producing a good luck charm from his pocket to show 'Marie', a desiccated seahorse 'avec son allure piteuse et rabougrie de cavalier d'échecs rôsatre et desséché', in a movement described in the same terms as in the preceding novel, as being 'comme dans un tour de passe-passe'. (*N*, 71) This links together the scenes of the two novels, united by the fact that they both involve the narrator's fictional knight's moves away from lived reality, but it also provides a highly apposite play on the French word *hippocampe*, with its double value of seahorse and hippocampus. The former is suggestive of a link to paternity (it is the male seahorse which carries the child) evoking the narrator's professed doubts that he is the father of the child Marie is carrying (*N*, 160), while the latter is a structure in the brain associated with both the retrieval of 'spatially anchored episodic memory, which stores relational information that pertains to specific events',<sup>484</sup> and the simulation of counterfactual realities via the imaginative refiguration of past experience, playing 'a crucial role in the planning, foresight and programming of complex action sequences'.<sup>485</sup>

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<sup>484</sup> Shimon Edelman, *Computing the Mind: How the mind really works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.176.

<sup>485</sup> Daniel L Schacter, Donna Rose Addis, and Randy Buckner, 'Remembering the past to imagine the future: the prospective brain', *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 8 (2007), 657-61 (p. 657).

If the reticent narrator (unwilling to contact Marie in the present) appears to be retreating into this personally meaningful episode, at least part of which seems to have really taken place (his climb onto roof, his observation of the assembled guests through the porthole) he is simultaneously creating a fictional world where the confident and decisive Jean-Christophe is making precisely detailed plans for action in his stead; we were told that the latter's act of taming Zahir would have been impossible 's'il ne l'avait pas entièrement décomposé mentalement avant de l'accomplir' (VM, 114), and a similar formulation is repeated in relation to his planned seduction of Marie, 'l'artiste' that he has not yet met, 'qu'il avait déjà décidé mentalement' (N, 65) before even entering the gallery. However, this 'plan' is derailed when the subject matter of Marie's art is raised by Signorelli, leading to Jean-Christophe's utter perplexity when he hears the 'Marie' he is speaking to expressing her categorically dismissive judgement of the exhibited photographs, which she sees as highly derivative and superficial, 'un peu faciles, [...] toujours le même vieux fond de sauce' (N, 74). Disoriented by this apparently self-deprecating judgement, Jean-Christophe, in attempt to keep the conversation going, asks her where one of the photographs was taken, becoming still more confused when she responds that she has no idea. This emphasises a relationship between the inconsequentiality of Marie de Montalte's photographs in the eyes of 'Marie' and the fact that the latter does not have access to the intimately situated structures of meaning associated with their production. As Toussaint has suggests in his short text, *Le jour où j'ai fait ma première photo*, in art in general, and in photography in particular, the meaning of artistic works for their creators is at odds with their reception by spectators and resides, for the former, 'davantage dans sa réalisation

que dans les œuvres elles-mêmes'.<sup>486</sup> Given these remarks on photography, and the uncertain, obscured 'réalité cironstancielle' of each of Toussaint's narrators, which we have argued throughout this thesis is central to understanding how the novels present philosophical and thematic issues at stake *for them*, the value that a work has for Marie is largely covered over.

The democratising impulse of Lyotard's argument in *L'Inhumain* should not be brushed aside, when he argues that 'reflection on art should no longer bear essentially on the 'sender' instance/agency of works, but on the 'addressee' instance. [...] No longer "How does one make a work of art?", but "What is it to experience an affect proper to art?"'<sup>487</sup> However, Lyotard's position, while having an important descriptive value in terms of sociohistorical tendencies, ultimately, as Carroll suggests, constitutes just one 'antinomial pole' of aesthetic theorisation.<sup>488</sup> As Rancière puts it, in his political critique of the Lyotardian sublime, this suggests a notion of art which 'no longer carries any promise. [...] Resistance becomes nothing other than [...] the indefinite re-inscription, in written lines, painted brushstrokes or musical timbres, of subjugation to the law of the Other'.<sup>489</sup> It does not seem incompatible to valorise both the interpretive moment of the sender *and* that of the receiver *as* a 'sender', or interpreter, in their own right; this is key to the central argument of this thesis, of interpreting Toussaint's novels in philosophical terms, as

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<sup>486</sup> Jean-Philippe Toussaint, 'Le jour où j'ai fait ma première photo', 2 (2001) <<http://www.bon-a-tirer.com/volume2/jpt.html>> [accessed 10/05/2014], unpaginated. Our primary focus is the way in which Toussaint's characters relate to the production of meaning, but the novels could also be fruitfully analysed in a metatextual way which examines Toussaint's own 'creative context', as in Emmanuel Boujou, 'Énergie romanesque et reprise d'autorité (Emmanuel Carrère, Noémi Lefebvre, Jean-Philippe Toussaint)', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 54 (2014), 92-105 ; and Laurent Demoulin, 'Dans le scriptorium de Jean-Philippe Toussaint', *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 121-33.

<sup>487</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p. 97.

<sup>488</sup> Carroll, 'The Limits of the Sublime, the Sublime of Limits', p. 175.

<sup>489</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011) trans. by Steven Corcoran, p. 105.

valorising the possibilities engendered by hermeneutic processes while at the same time drawing attention to the necessarily fragmentary and uncertain nature of storytelling, as Meretoja puts it, its ‘openness and permanent contestability’.<sup>490</sup>

To return to the scene, this case of mistaken identity, seen through the perspective of this *grand séducteur* with ‘la confiance en soi sans limites’ (N, 65) ironically parallels the narrator’s own hubristic attitude in *La Vérité sur Marie*, signalled by the use of *évoluer*, used repeatedly in that novel in relation to his belief that he is capable of pinning Marie down to a fixed, *idem* identity and simulating her subjective experience without any active involvement on her part:

Jusqu’à présent, elle était restée une créature largement fictive pour lui, simple projection d’une femme fantasmée qui évoluait passivement dans son esprit tandis qu’il lui faisait la cour. (N, 75)

Jean-Christophe’s sudden realisation that this individual is not simply an object of value to be coveted, but a highly sensitive and vulnerable artist, seemingly unwilling to directly discuss her own work (failing to grasp that the woman he is speaking to is not, in fact, Marie the artist), echoes the narrator’s own false epiphanies as to the ‘truth’ of Marie, highlighted by his humorously sympathetic, parenthetical interjections, ‘(mais tout le monde peut se tromper)’, ‘(c’est fou ce qu’il y a de Marie, en réalité)’ (N, 68, 69). If the scene of the narrator at his Parisian window, newly separated from Marie, reiterates the problematically sublime configurations

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<sup>490</sup> Meretoja, *The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory*, p. 212.

found in *Faire l'amour* and *La Vérite sur Marie* (Marie as binary object of his attraction and resentment and as a spectacular, immanent creature at one with the world, respectively), the multiple reflections on time and remembering replay the narrating-narrated entanglement central to *Fuir*, this embedded narrative reproduces the narrator's recourse to poetic third-person simulations in *La Vérité sur Marie*, but does so with a new inflection, a new degree of self-awareness. Aside from the central fact that the narrator could not possibly have known Jean-Christophe at this point in time, the section includes several other markers of its artifice, such as in the introduction of Pierre Signorelli, where both his physical appearance ('un portrait d'Antonello de Messine') and his name ('un autoportrait de son homonyme Luca Signorelli') (N, 62) are ascribed to paintings found in the Louvre (a space with which we know from *Fuir* that the narrator is extremely familiar) and also the use of explicitly novelistic language, such as the description of Jean-Christophe's melancholy and embarrassment upon realising that 'Marie' is not Marie as his desire to 'disparaître tout à fait de ce récit' (N, 78).

If these replayings (or rehashings) of the thematic concerns of the previous novels in the first half of the *Nue* seem to reflect a development in the narrator's understanding of the workings of his own storytelling practices, somewhat analogous to Marie's own theoretical reflections described in the preparation for the honey dress, the second half of the novel is characterised by the reintroduction of new sources of profound uncertainty, analogous to the disaster which takes place on the evening of the fashion show itself. When they are united, it seems significant that they do so in a café on the *place Saint-Sulpice*, particularly given the insistence with which Marie is repeatedly described as gazing fixedly out onto the square in the

course of this encounter.<sup>491</sup> There is perhaps another chess metaphor here, following the initial situation of *zugzwang* of *Faire l'amour*, the onomastic of the enigmatic, manoeuvring Zhang as Bu Xiangzhi, the narrator's fictional 'knight's moves', and the image of Marie as powerful 'royal' queen with an exceptional freedom of movement (at odds her imbrication within a certain world which reduces her to a merely functional role, as 'queen bee'). In this scene, the narrator's deep uncertainty as to why Marie has made contact after all this time (even after she tells him of Maurizio's death, he believes she has an ulterior motive) is symbolically expressed by the central structure which stands in the square, the *fontaine Visconti*, with its four statues of bishops, facing out in four different directions, 'leurs profils mordorés en surplomb sur la place.' (N, 98)<sup>492</sup>

The uncertain future represented by the idea of these multiple bishops' possibilities for dramatic crosswise movements, in any of several different directions, is also expressed by the narrator's lapse into nautical imagery. Standing inside the café, contemplating Marie as she sits outside smoking, he imagines the café itself as a ship, with him standing inside on the bridge, 'qui donnait sur l'horizon enténébré', reflecting his unawareness of what lies before him, while Marie becomes the figurehead making direct contact with the stormy seas, 'devant l'océan invisible' (N, 97), a figurative image which is soon supplanted by a real one, as the couple travels together on the ferry towards Elba. Whereas in the previous novels, the Mediterranean is presented as calm and peaceful, here the seas are

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<sup>491</sup> '...regardant fixement la place Saint-Sulpice', '...elle se remit à regarder la pluie tomber [...] sur la place Saint-Sulpice', 'Marie continuait à regarder en silence la place Saint-Sulpice', '...la place Saint-Sulpice, [...] qu'elle regardait fixement' (N, 95, 95, 96, 97).

<sup>492</sup> Running to Marie's apartment in *La Vérité sur Marie*, the narrator briefly focuses on another Parisian square, la place des Victoires, with its equestrian statue of Louis XIV, 'qui semblait fuir l'orage.' (VM, 40).

choppy, compared to living scars, foreshadowing a dramatically different vision of Elba from the one we encountered during the summers of *Fuir* and *La Vérité sur Marie*.

As the ferry approaches the island, the couple see a plume of smoke rising, reinforcing the impression of the layering of past and present, as if the fire from the summer before had never stopped burning, and suggesting the presence of an unknown violence or danger which awaits them. In *Fuir*, we saw the way in which the habitually joyful scene described by the narrator of arriving in Portoferraio to be met by Marie and her father, was thrown into relief by the sobering reality that greets him on his return from China ('Marie n'était pas là et son père était mort') (*F*, 128), and here we find a similar image of disappointed expectations when Marie moves 'instinctively' towards the space where her father used to park in order to collect them, to instead be met by Maurizio's son Giuseppe, a character whom neither of them has met before. The narrator takes an instant dislike to this ominous and laconic figure in his black silk shirt and leatherette jacket, Ray-Bans and monogrammed gold bracelet, contemptuously describing him as resembling his car, in the manner of dog owners 'qui font toujours l'acquisition de sales bêtes à leur image' (*N*, 106).

There is something of the stereotypical *mafioso* to the presentation of Giuseppe, incarnating the obscure, threatening atmosphere which surrounds the couple during their stay on the island and he is suspected of being responsible for multiple incidents; the distant but approaching sound of gunshots that the narrator hears in the garden of the Rivercina house, the evidence they discover that



somebody has been squatting in Marie's father's old room,<sup>493</sup> and in an arson attack on a chocolate factory which is the source of the plume of smoke. Loading Marie's suitcase into his truck, Giuseppe dislodges a tartan blanket, uncovering jerrycans, and on the way to *La Rivercina*, without offering any explanation, he makes a stop at the site of the burned out chocolate factory where he enters the scene of the crime, 'passant [...] dans des zone interdites', (N, 114-115) speaking with the police officers on duty and examining samples taken by the crime scene investigators. Nothing precludes the hypothesis that he simply works for the police, as off-duty officer or as informant, or that his rancour and aloofness towards Marie and the narrator is simply the result of grief for his recently deceased father. The narrator, at least, seems to recognise the fact that, having never met him before, it is impossible to say whether Giuseppe's irritability is out of character, and when the couple see him led away by police, although the narrator is fairly convinced that he is witnessing an arrest, he concedes that '[u]n doute subsistait toutefois, l'ambiguïté demeurait' (N, 164).

Marie, on the other hand, is fully convinced of Giuseppe's guilt, leading her to behave rather outrageously, as she angrily pursues him in the middle of his father's funeral 'pour lui demander des explications' (N, 148) before losing her temper and shouting at him, drawing the attention of the entire congregation. Given the frequency with which the narrator judges Marie harshly for trivially vexatious acts throughout the series, and particularly when such moments are witnessed by others, as with the dropped umbrella of *Faire l'Amour*, the narrator now appears markedly more understanding of this clearly inappropriate behaviour, which seems

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<sup>493</sup> '([Marie] dit le mot en italien, *lattitanti*, qu'elle fit sonner avec délectation dans le dégoût), et le responsable, pour elle, avait un nom, cela ne faisait aucun doute : Giuseppe.' (N, 128).

connected to his reflections on the highly personal significance that the death of Maurizio has for Marie, representing as it does the loss of the last living link between her and her deceased father. While Giuseppe's abrupt and furious departure may be related to Marie having accurately implicated him in the various crimes of which he is suspected, it could equally echo the way in which Marie herself is aghast upon discovering the evidence of a squatter who has profaned her father's house, where 'l'absence de son père [...] se matérialisait dans chaque particule d'air', (N, 125) with Giuseppe's behaviour deriving from an unwillingness to share his grief with Marie, an interloper, on her own terms.

When Giuseppe, in his haste to leave, almost flattens Marie in his truck, she bends forwards, outstretching one hand and protecting her belly with the other, which for the narrator evokes an image which he will later think about in their hotel room (having fled the prospect of the returning squatter in the Rivercina house, they take a room in the *Ape Elbana*, the very same hotel in which the narrator stayed on his return from China). Mulling over this gesture as he lies on the bed, he suggests that it recalls Botticelli's *Annunciation* in which the Virgin Mary makes a similar gesture, describing it as highly unusual among such scenes, as 'l'unique exemple de cette attitude de réticence de la Vierge' (N, 158) leading him to contemplate how Marie's pregnancy is the source of an anxiety which echoes his own, reflected in his subsequent interpretation of the moment that she revealed the news to him, as 'pas un aveu, [mais] un reproche.' (N, 157)

Returning to la Rivercina house (having planned to return to Paris together the next day), he climbs the stairs to confront the intruder but, whereas at the end of *La Vérité sur Marie*, the physical peril of the fire provided the narrator with the uncomplicated opportunity to take charge, heroically shielding Marie from imminent

danger, *Nue* ends shortly after the anticlimactic reveal that there is nobody there, just an empty room. He describes how a physical confrontation would be much less frightening than the prospect of facing ‘cette pénombre silencieuse, immobile et trompeuse [...] sur laquelle je n’avais aucune prise’ (*N*, 167), one of several evocations of emptiness and silence, expressing the horizon of an uncertain future which is no longer appealingly open, but which fills him with a deep apprehension. We have seen the disturbing way in which the narrator has responded to such highly stressful situations of uncertainty in the past and here he appears to contemplate the risk that he will lapse back into his old ways, parenthetically sighing ‘(on ne se refait pas)’ (*N*, 153) as he lies on the hotel bed, staring at the ceiling, an image which he explicitly connects to a similar state of mind he experienced in the Tokyo hotel room, where he says he contemplated the ‘bitter truth’ of the ephemerality of human life, and scene in *Fuir*, preceding the deeply reluctant narrator’s return from China to Elba: ‘j’étais resté couché les yeux ouverts dans le noir à regarder le plafond’ (*F*, 122). This melancholic reflection seems attributable to a fear of the new obligations which will be engendered by Marie’s pregnancy, that his freedom will be, once again, profoundly limited by this new development, causing him to worry that ‘c’est l’idée même de notre séparation qui se trouverait menacée’ (*N*, 159). If the first half of *Nue* suggests that the narrator’s heuristic reengagement with his own past, of ‘thinking more and speaking differently’, may have created new possibilities for him to change his behaviour, the troubling uncertainty lying in the couple’s futures is articulated by the novel’s final line, as Marie poses a question which appears rhetorical in the context, as they make love in the liminal space of the dawn, but

which we know the narrator has always struggled to answer: ‘Mais, tu m’aimes, alors?’ (*N*, 170).<sup>494</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Toussaint’s *Marie* tetralogy constitutes a prolonged meditation on the problems of intersubjectivity, demonstrating the ways in which this is focused primarily on the narrator’s shifting judgements of the character of Marie (which we have associated with a number of conceptualisations of the sublime), but also the ways in which the movement between these successive kinds of judgement is enacted by the narrator’s reflexive, heuristic use of the narrative resources he is presented as mobilising. The series can be understood, in philosophical terms, as valorising the possibility of reworking or ‘rehashing’ our interpretations of ourselves and others, with the narrator progressing gradually towards a greater degree of communicative or intersubjective respect towards Marie, but at the same time rejecting the idea that such processes of reinterpretation can ever be definitively brought to a static conclusion, that life goes on, with the events of life presenting the possibility of new risks and dangers arising, as is suggested by the cyclical connotations of the seasonal epigraphs found in each novel; the ‘winter’ of *Faire l’amour*, the ‘spring’ of *Fuir*, the ‘spring-summer’ of *La Vérité sur Marie*, and the ‘autumn-winter’ of *Nue*.

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<sup>494</sup> ‘...mais ne lui-ai je jamais fait de déclaration d’amour?’ (*FA*, 12).

## Conclusions

This thesis has analysed nine novels and two films by Jean-Philippe Toussaint, spanning the period from *La Salle de bain* (1985) to *Nue* (2013).

The narrating personae of Toussaint's novels are typically highly guarded, providing the reader with very little direct exposition as to their identity and few properly explicit details of their psychological experience, and perhaps for this reason much of the critical literature on Toussaint's novels has tended to focus on analysing the degree of interpretive freedom which his texts grant their reader, while comparatively little attention has been paid to the ways in which Toussaint's texts fictionalise narrative reflexivity. The former kind of approach to Toussaint's fiction can be highly valuable, and this thesis has drawn on a number of them; as Jean-Benoît Gabriel notes, there are parallels to be drawn between the ways in which Toussaint's reader 'est laissé face à des traces, des indices dont il doit se contenter', and the ways in which 'dans l'œuvre romanesque [...] le narrateur pratique le hors-cadre'.<sup>495</sup> However, there has been a degree of asymmetry in the critical literature, in favour of examining the kinds of hermeneutic freedom that Toussaint's work grants the reader, whereas the corresponding hermeneutic processes of his fictional narrators have received less attention.

Drawing on the hermeneutic phenomenology of Paul Ricœur, this thesis represents the first sustained approach to all of Toussaint's published fictional novels which approaches them as fictionalised forms of reflexive narrativity, operating as practical philosophy. As Ricœur argues, narrative imagination is essential to our

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<sup>495</sup> Jean-Benoît Gabriel, 'Fuir l'image avec désinvolture', *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 47-56 (p. 56).

ability to contemplate future possibilities for action: ‘c’est dans l’imaginaire que j’essaie mon pouvoir de faire, que je prends la mesure du “Je peux”.’<sup>496</sup> Through the close readings of Toussaint’s texts presented in this thesis, it has been argued that his anonymous fictional narrators can be understood as both the readers and writers of their own lives, engaged in reimagining their own past experiences in ways which are heuristically motivated towards future possibilities for action, rethinking their pasts with a view to acting differently in the future, and that these reimaginings are represented both *as* and *through* the formal variations of the texts themselves. In analysing two of Toussaint’s films, which have a rather different status to his novels, the thesis also drew on the work of Vivian Sobchack and Daniel Frampton, arguing that these filmic texts problematise notions of intentionality, and in a way which the films themselves centrally thematise, but also that the films should be understood as engaging in their own imaginative variations, as forms of transsubjective ‘film-thinking’<sup>497</sup> which ‘function existentially not only as objects for vision, but also as subjects of vision’, and which are capable of ‘commuting perception to expression and expression to perception’.<sup>498</sup>

Throughout the thesis, Toussaint’s work has been interpreted as reflexively interrogating both the possibilities and the limits of narrative form to function as propaedeutics to reasoning. By grounding this in the imaginative operations of concrete (although fictional) individuals, Toussaint’s novels express something essential about narrative capabilities which are common to all of us, while never endorsing a utopic conception of reflexive narrativity, as seen particularly in the

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<sup>496</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Du texte à l’action: Essais d’herméneutique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986), p. 250.

<sup>497</sup> Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy* (London: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 59.

<sup>498</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 290.

interpretive malfunctioning of the narrator of *La Réticence*, and in the never-definitive nature of narrative refiguration to reshape human experience as can be read in *Nue*'s semi-ironic parenthesised utterance ('on ne se refait pas').

The first chapter, *Self in the World*, analysed three of Toussaint's early novels, *La Salle de bain*, *L'Appareil-photo* and *La Réticence*, focusing on the ways in which these novels engage thematically and philosophically with issues of subjectivity, identity, and the human capacity for reflexive narrativity. It was argued in this chapter that these novels reflect how the formal variations of Toussaint's texts not only imply their active configuration by fictional narrators, but that these variations are implicitly deployed in heuristic fashion, not only *reflecting* the processes of critical reflection through which narrators imaginatively reinterpret their own pasts, but textually demarcating themselves *as* the processes in a certain fashion, while at the same time suggesting that the actantial possibilities that such critical reflection might engender typically go unrealised, remaining 'beyond the text'. In discussing *La Réticence*, we emphasised the ways in which Toussaint shows the problematic malfunctioning of his narrator's interpretive practices, which we ultimately associated with a problem of insufficient critical 'distance'.

The second chapter, *The Other in the Self*, which analysed two novels, *Monsieur* and *La Télévision*, and two films, *La Sévillane* and *La Patinoire*, interrogated manifestations of just this kind of critical distance in Toussaint's texts. The chapter essentially focused on many of the same thematic issues discussed in the first chapter (subjectivity, identity, agency and their relationship to reflexive narrative practices), but with a different approach, framed in terms of the relationship between individual subjectivity and the exigencies of society, the workplace, and problems relating to creative agency. This chapter argued that Toussaint's texts

deploy various forms of ironic discourse in the critical mediation of these relationships, and suggested that these ironic practices can be understood, with Christine Korsgaard, as ‘a special manifestation of the general human capacity [for] reflective distance.’<sup>499</sup> The chapter began by analysing what we described as the ‘modal’ irony of the *Monsieur*, arguing that its third-person narrative mode can be understood as another form of heuristically motivated imaginative variation, in this case allowing its narrator-protagonist to engage in indirect forms in critical self-reflection. The chapter then turned to *La Télévision*, suggesting that the novel involves similar processes of distanced self-reflection, which we described in terms of ‘affective irony’, but also developed this to argue that the novel represents a kind of ‘Socratic’ irony engaged in the contemplation of the practicalities and difficulties involved in the practices of writing. Discussing *La Sévillane* and *La Patinoire*, it was suggested that these films can be understood as instantiating their own forms of ‘transsubjective’ ironic voice, which reflect upon the relationship between cinematic and literary media.

The final chapter, *Selfhood in the Other*, analysed the four novels of Toussaint’s *Marie* series, *Faire l’amour*, *Fuir*, *La Vérité sur Marie*, and *Nue*, focusing once again on questions of subjectivity, identity and personal agency, but in the specific context of how this series of novels interrogate philosophical questions of intersubjectivity. It was argued that the novels’ formal variations, particularly their use of anachrony and transgressions of narrative mode, can be read as heuristically motivated attempts by their narrator to reimagine and move beyond the confines of the solipsistic and violent position he occupies at the outset of the series,

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<sup>499</sup> Christine Korsgaard, ‘Self-Constitution and Irony’, in *A Case for Irony*, ed. by Jonathan Lear (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 75-83 (p. 75).



critically reflecting on his own ethical responsibility by revisiting his own past, by attempting to poetically simulate the character Marie's subjective experience. This chapter argued that the narrator's textually mediated contemplations ultimately express something of the existential solitude of an embodied agent, while at the same time suggesting the possibilities of progressing, through the mobilisation of practices of narrative refiguration, towards a greater degree of communicative equilibrium and respect for the selfhood of the other. Also emphasised, however, was the sense in which the ameliorative possibilities represented by such refigurative engagements can prove deceptive, most centrally in *La Vérité sur Marie*, where the narrator's simulation of Marie's subjective experience gradually reveals itself to him as reductive and objectifying in its own ways, and in *Nue*, where the emergence of novel and difficult situations in the narrator's field of experience suggests that the ethical 'gains' of his narratively mediated movement towards intersubjective respect are far from assured, exemplifying Hanna Meretoja's description of how 'narratives can have emancipatory and ethical potential, but they provide no guarantees that identities are ethically sustainable.'<sup>500</sup>

As noted in the introduction, a number of critics have identified Toussaint as a *post-nouveau romancier*, suggesting that elements of his fictional practice are traceable to the innovative textual practices of *nouveau roman* writers such as Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute. The close readings of Toussaint's texts contained in this thesis suggest that the way in which his fiction conceptualises narrative practices could also be associated with a tendency that Meretoja identifies in contemporary fiction as the 'literary narrative turn'. Central to this is a distinction she draws

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<sup>500</sup> Hanna Meretoja, *The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory: The Crisis and Return of Storytelling from Robbe-Grillet to Tournier* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 177.

between the ways in which these formally experimental writers of the mid-twentieth century sought to question and problematise generic, formal and discursive conventions in their fiction, associated with a ‘crisis of storytelling’,<sup>501</sup> and the novels of a number of more recent writers, a distinction which she illustrates by reflecting on the different conceptions of fiction that could be associated with the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet and the work of Michel Tournier:

...whereas the former suggests that the novel is primarily a textual construction, the latter stresses that it is always also a form of thinking, a way of interpreting and dealing with the human experience of being in the world.<sup>502</sup>

Meretoja emphasises that it would be excessively reductive to suggest a strict separation between a historically situated period of radically ‘antinarrative’ fiction and contemporary practices which recognise both the productive potential and necessity of narratives to human meaning-making while still maintaining a healthy degree of scepticism as to the limits of their transformative powers. Indeed, she suggests both that a strictly categorical historical delineation would be an inaccurate characterisation and that this latter conception of literature could not have taken place without the innovations of the former: ‘This is not the result of a sudden turn but of a multifaceted development in which the period of problematizing storytelling and subjectivity played a crucial role’.<sup>503</sup> The significance of the literary narrative

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<sup>501</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

turn is that it communicates something of the way in which ‘all processes of understanding are fundamentally uncertain and partial, but it emphasizes that the fragility and uncertainty of our processes of narrative construction in no way diminish our need for narratives or their power to produce and reshape reality.’<sup>504</sup>

As Ricœur says in the context of discussing how we can apprehend the aporias of temporal experience, to question the limits of narrative does not mean that ‘l’aveu des limites du récit, corrélatif de l’aveu du mystère du temps, aura cautionné l’obscurantisme; [...] il suscite plutôt l’exigence de penser plus et de dire autrement.’<sup>505</sup> This thesis has argued that Toussaint’s fiction provides a demonstration of what it can mean to use narrative form in just such a heuristic, mediated fashion, to ‘think more and speak differently’, but in ways which, at the same time, reflect upon their own inherent artifice and the limits of their own possibilities to definitively resolve the aporias of human experience.

### **Possible directions for future research**

This thesis has focused largely on analysing the engagement of Toussaint’s narrators with personal narratives about their own lives, which has left less room for an explicit focus on the culturally mediated nature of narrative experience, and how specifically cultural narrative traditions interact with the presentation of these personal narratives. As Meretoja points out, ‘[a]t the heart of the “return of storytelling” is an undertaking to engage in a critical dialogue with the narrative traditions in which we are entangled.’<sup>506</sup> Although this thesis does not present a

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<sup>504</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>505</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit III: Le temps raconté*, 3 vols (Paris: Seuil, 1985), III, p. 489.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

sustained study of the relationship between Toussaint's writing practices and the generic conventions which his novels play upon, for example, this is partly on account of the fact that, as indicated in the introduction, this approach has been fruitfully undertaken by a number of critics already. Nevertheless, more research in this area could uncover new correspondences, connections and cross-currents, in line with the approaches to Toussaint's work by Sarah Glasco, Ernstpeter Ruhe or Pascale McGarry.<sup>507</sup>

Since this thesis has focused exclusively on Toussaint's fictional output, there has not been sufficient space to consider his non-fiction works, *Autoportrait à l'étranger*, *L'Urgence et la patience*, and *Football*. As Frank Wagner has noted, to read Toussaint's non-fiction is to experience the ways in which, '[q]u'il s'agisse ou non de fictions, la voix qui résonne dans les textes toussainiens présente en effet les mêmes caractéristiques formelles'.<sup>508</sup> Wagner likens this to the 'effet-Bovary', in line with Flaubert's well-known dictum, describing how 'Madame Bovary, c'est moi'. While this thesis has followed a very different path, the identification of autofictional elements in Toussaint's fiction could be a propitious direction for future research; as he suggests, 'la parution d'*Autoportrait* engage une manière de recatégorisation des fictions précédentes, dont l'origine autobiographique des thèmes, des situations et de la voix narrative'<sup>509</sup>

Finally, more critical attention could be paid to Toussaint's non-textual and extra-textual practices (although in each case there are already some instances of this

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<sup>507</sup> Sarah L. Glasco, *Parody and Palimpsest: Intertextuality, Language and the Ludic in the Novels of Jean-Philippe Toussaint* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015). Pascale McGarry, 'La Dame Blanche et le coeur à la crème', *Estudios de Lengua y Literatura Francesa*, 8 (1994-1995), 101-114. Ernstpeter Ruhe, 'D'une poignée de vent: la vie de Marie selon Toussaint', *French Forum*, 36.1 (2011), 95-114.

<sup>508</sup> Frank Wagner, 'Monsieur Jean Philippe Toussaint et la notion de vérité (pour une poétique perspectiviste)', *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 25-34 (p. 29).

<sup>509</sup> Ibid.

kind work); his photography,<sup>510</sup> his series of *court-métrages* depicting scenes from the *Marie* series,<sup>511</sup> his engagement with questions of literary genetics and the hosting of intermediate drafts of his novels on his personal website,<sup>512</sup> his 2016 stage adaptation of the *Marie* series, or his engagement with digital storytelling collaborations.<sup>513</sup>

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<sup>510</sup> As discussed in Arcana Albright, 'Jean-Philippe Toussaint : écrivain de la photographie et photographe du livre', *Textyles*, 40 (2011), 65-74.

<sup>511</sup> As discussed in Gabriel, 'Fuir l'image avec désinvolture'.

<sup>512</sup> As discussed in Laurent Demoulin, 'Dans le scriptorium de Jean-Philippe Toussaint', *Textyles*, 38 (2010), 121-33.

<sup>513</sup> 'The Borges Project', in which Toussaint collects submissions from writers' own versions of the apocryphal Borgesian intertext in *La Vérité sur Marie*, 'l'Île des anamorphoses': <http://www.jptoussaint.com/borges-projet.html>.

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