Slacker heaven

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Camera Jean-Philippe Toussaint *Dalkey Archive Press, 125pp, £8.99*

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In one of the set pieces in Jacques Tati's *Playtime*, Monsieur Hulot enters a friend's apartment, but as viewers we stay back, as we do throughout a film of long-range shots and no close-ups, observing this beautiful glass-and-metal complex from across the street through the large, square windows that look out on it. The four elegant, blueish-grey flats have occupants of matching muted elegance who come and go before sitting down to watch the televisions embedded in the walls of their booths for living. We are not being invited to condescend, just to note the oddness of these intriguing sophisticates ignoring each other and their surroundings in favour of flickering images that we can barely see ourselves.

There is a reverse echo of this moment in the Belgian novelist/film-maker (and 1973 World Junior Scrabble Champion) Jean-Philippe Toussaint's novel *Television* (1997), in which the nameless hero gives up television but is confronted with its images wherever he goes, as when, staring at the flats opposite him, he can clearly make out the screens in each apartment (*Baywatch* is showing on most of them) and changes channels by looking from one silent window to the next, but can't see their viewers.

Television's nameless protagonist is just one of Toussaint's heroes conducting an amiable, one-sided battle against the world by giving something up or by concentrating on doing something very small. As the narrator of the newly translated *Camera* says, "In the battle between oneself and reality, don't try to be courageous." And as the author says in an interview reprinted at the end of this edition, he is writing in response to Kafka's aphorism: "In the fight between you and the world, back the world." Yet these declarations of intent do not convey what an effective resistance Toussaint's creations put up against the obstacles they encounter every day; nor do they convey what good company his characters can be.

Many novels sound eventful when you describe their plot, yet feel anything but eventful when you are actually reading them - like a bad experience that gets better when you tell someone else about it afterwards. However, Toussaint's

novels have no conventional narrative and are not improved by summary. *Camera* begins:

It was at about the same time in my life, a calm life in which ordinarily nothing happened, that two events coincided, events that, taken separately, were of hardly any interest, and that, considered together, were unfortunately not connected in any way. As it happens I had just decided to learn how to drive, and I had barely begun to get used to this idea when some news reached me by mail: a long-lost friend, in a letter composed with a typewriter, a rather old typewriter, had informed me he was getting married. Now, personally, if there's one thing that terrifies me, it's long-lost friends.

The deadpan narrator spends a lot of *Camera* trying to complete the application for the driving course he wants to take. He doesn't get very far but does get into the habit of dropping in to the driving-school office, where he reads the paper, drinks tea and starts spending time with Pascale, the woman who runs the office.

The nicest aspect of Toussaint's work is its tact. Not only are the heroes trying to keep a private space for themselves, but the reader is also given space. Far from being alienating, this feels like a mark of respect; the author is never a *claqueur* holding up placards telling us what to feel. As they move through the situations the author sets up for them, his characters get to like each other through doing simple things together. The fact of relationships - the narrator's with Pascale, for instance - is always slightly surprising, but it is the kind of pleasant surprise that contrasts with *Camera*'s cold, public settings.

At one point the narrator describes a neighbourhood that seems "a vast model in which we, like pieces fit to scale, leisurely moved about between two rows of buildings". He is correspondingly fond of small, enclosed environments and sits in places such as photo booths whenever he can get the chance. At another point, back in the driving-course office, he watches the street outside and sketches rectangles on a window, creating frames for imaginary photos: "a single car, a single person walking on the sidewalk".

Just as the narrator selects what he wants to see in a scene, he is choosy about what he wants to feel, saying it is "better to be picky than embittered in life". As he moves between the driving-school office and train stations, train stations and ferry ports, what he wants most of all is "another life, identical to this life in shape and scope, its breathing and its rhythm, a life in every way comparable to life, but with no wounds imaginable, no aggression, and no possible pain". It's philosophical-slacker heaven, and although, in the same way as *Playtime*'s paradise of glass and steel, it may not be for everyone, Toussaint makes *Camera*'s vision of utopia seem like an attractive destination as he describes it.

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