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Tryst and Shoot

Reviewed by TOM McCARTHY

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CAMERA

By Jean-Philippe Toussaint. Translated by Matthew B. Smith

122 pp. Dalkey Archive Press. Paper, \$12.95

The Belgian novelist Jean-Philippe Toussaint is frequently, if anachronistically, grouped with early cinematic masters like Buster Keaton and Jacques Tati. Reading the opening sequences of “Camera,” one understands why. The hero — ambling into a driver’s ed office, amusing himself by triggering and retriggering the automatic bell, fluttering his eyelids at the pretty secretary, opening drawers and moving objects around on her desk before posing as an employee when a rival customer-cum-suitor shows up — acts out a medley of moments instantly recognizable from Harold Lloyd or Charlie Chaplin films. When, a little later, he shaves in a cramped gas station office, elbowing the mechanic who plays pick-up sticks while a Slavic type suggests moves, I almost expected [Groucho Marx](#) to pop up, telephone in hand, and call room service for more room.

Toussaint’s writing is comic in a very formal sense — the sense in which, for example, Henri Bergson used the term. For Bergson, comedy entailed a tendency toward the mechanical. People, gestures and events become like automata — compressed, sprung, interlocked and endlessly repeating. Not for nothing does the action in “Camera” take place among automobiles: contraptions whose very name encodes self-generated motion without end. The hero’s repeated trysts with the driving-school secretary (the book’s only — and magnificently derisory — nod in the direction of plot) play out amid a mechanized landscape whose kinetic and linguistic rules must be learned and negotiated: gear-shifting, reverse-parking, street signage and game moves, on and off the board.

Not much happens in “Camera.” The hero takes driving lessons, falls in love, goes on a desultory journey. Who, then, is the opponent, the examiner, the rule-setter? Why, reality itself. In the first of several almost perfectly paced passages in which he waxes philosophical, the hero muses that “in my struggle with reality, I could exhaust any opponent with whom I was grappling, like one can wear out an olive, for example, before successfully stabbing it with a fork.” That olive is reprised a few pages later, in a restaurant scene whose dialogue is passed over entirely, the better to let us appreciate the olive’s lined surface, its “resistance diminishing” beneath the pressure of the tines. In moments like this, Toussaint closes in on the essence of literature as practiced by Francis Ponge or [Wallace Stevens](#). For him as for them, writing enacts a head-on collision with the material realm, a struggle with brute facticity. Ponge and Stevens also use fruit as

their battleground: Ponge's orange, "expressed," leaves sticky residue across the hands; Stevens's plum "survives its poems." It seems that Toussaint's fruit might prevail too — as "Camera" progresses there's a sense that reality, not the hero, will end up on top. In an interview reproduced at the novel's end, Toussaint cites Kafka: "In the fight between you and the world, back the world."

What concentrates and frames this battle — literally frames it — is another of modernity's mechanisms, the camera. Snapshots appear throughout; sitting in a photo booth, the hero understands the flow of thought and the world, the artificiality of halting it before it must once more "give way to itself." Thinking, like living, is a question of capture and release, of shutter-speed. Here, too, the ultimate mood is capitulation. Before chucking a camera into the night-time ocean, the hero accepts that "having temporarily given up fighting a seemingly inexhaustible reality . . . you move progressively from the struggle of living to the despair of being." Comedy is much darker than tragedy, make no mistake.

That "Camera" should have waited 20 years to find an English-language publisher is scandalous. That the wonderful Dalkey Archive has taken on the task is unsurprising. While Toussaint's long, chatty sentences sometimes trick the translator Matthew B. Smith into losing his syntactical thread, this version admirably renders the frankness that makes Toussaint so alluring.

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