Colin Marshall

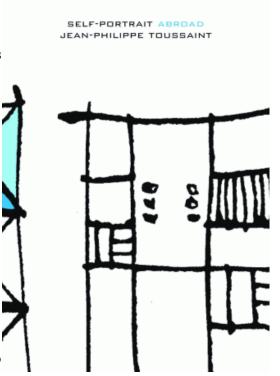
The War on Mediocrity

January 05, 2011

Jean-Philippe Toussaint: Self-Portrait Abroad

If we're drawn to the books we ourselves would like to have written, then it's no wonder I couldn't wait to read this one. After all 84 pages of vignettes from the protagonist's travels in Japan, Germany, the Czech Republic, Vietnam, and Tunisia — internationalism and textual brevity being two of my recent "things" as well — you're tempted to ask the same question <u>Dan Visel did</u>: "What, precisely, is this book?"

Despite the many resemblances, physical and stylistic, to Toussaint's other books, one factor complicates everything: this one's protagonist has a *name*. What's more, his name is Jean-Philippe, and his wife's name is Madeleine. ("I will call Madeleine Madeleine in these pages to help me get my bearings.") Jean-Philippe Toussaint's wife's name is Madeleine! (My own lady, by way of comparison, is named, with similar non-Anglo-standardness, Madelaine. One more on the pile of commonalities even now suggesting I can become as cool as him.) Both Jean-Philippe and Jean-Philippe Toussaint are globetrotting authors forever trying to make their various speaking engagements. I'd be tempted to call this straight-up nonfiction if Jean-Philippe the protagonist wasn't written as quite so buffoonish and Dalkey Archive wasn't selling it, seemingly, as fiction. I realize novelists often self-deprecatingly repurpose elements of their own lives up to and including their names, but damn.



On top of all this, I've heard rumors that the pieces *Self-Portrait Abroad* comprises are all or mostly previously-published travel journalism. ("Journalism" in the loosest sense, that is.) So jeez, I don't really know *what* to say about the nature of this book, other than that it delivered to me an unpindownable sense of literary pleasure. Whether you'll feel the same depends on how you like your stories told, and as I've written here many times before, I like my stories to barely be stories. So, apparently, does Toussaint; keeping the plot running in the lowest possible gear allows him the time and space to make his usual fascinatingly detached observations before his characters reach their miniscule victories or, more likely, their wet-fuse fizzles.

One of the Kyoto sections begins with "I didn't get much chance to improve my German in Kyoto" and ends with Jean-Philippe arriving at a friend's house (in an ambulance on which he had hitched a ride) only to find him not at home. A chapter in either France or Corsica describes a game of *boules* (which I've always known as the old Italian guy-friendly *bocce* or the nudist colony favorite *pétanque* David Sedaris wrote about) that Jean-Philippe wins with a particularly lucky move. "The best day of my life," he declares it.

"Narratives of futility," I could grandly call these but won't. But if it's not futility, what is it? These events seem thin, but this book teaches more sharply the lesson I've drawn from everything else I've read of Toussaint's: no matter what happens or doesn't happen, who it happens or doesn't happen to, and where it does or doesn't happen, a skilled writer can approach the

material with the right mindset to crank out a thin volume that appeals highly to Colin Marshall. It helps if you include the following, which Toussaint does:

- A flower-arranging publishing house liaison desribed as "a thug from a film by Godard"
- A battle of wills with a German butcher shop attendant
- A beerishly hazy on-train meal in Prague of "sausages and pork embellished with an unavoidable side of potatoes"
- A Japanese girl who speaks only in Spanish
- A fish-slicing class under an impossibly stern master
- Surely the lease erotic strip-club visit ever taken
- A motorcycle ride through Hanoi
- An academic conference that forces Jane Birkin to sing a song
- A hilariously prolonged and futile effort of trying, and failing, to will oneself to tears of wistfulness

That last one's familiar. Life gets a lot easier when you give up being outwardly sad about anything, in my opinion.

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