



# Self-Portrait Abroad by Jean-Philippe Toussaint

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Review by Josh Maday — Published on September 6, 2010



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**REVIEWED:**  
**Self-Portrait Abroad, by Jean-Philippe Toussaint**  
 (trans. John Lambert) Dalkey Archive Press. 96 pp.,  
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Much like *Running Away*, a previous Toussaint title from Dalkey Archive, *Self-Portrait Abroad* is narrated by a writer reflecting on his travels through Europe and Asia. Although the book is billed as “a novel” and weighs in at a slim 84 pages, fans of Toussaint’s work will find much of the visceral description, humor, and philosophical undertone that has built the author’s reputation as a contemporary literary force.

Each section of *Self-Portrait* is titled after the locale in



which it takes place, and the sections function more like vignettes than traditional chapters. They do not share a particular storyline other than being the narrator's personal experiences, and this differs somewhat from much of

Toussaint's earlier work in English translation, where sections often maintain a more solid narrative. The self-portrait is less a Toussaintian chronology with direct relation of minutiae than a collection of impressions and particular moments that have shaped the narrator's adult life.

And yet, chronology and minutiae play a powerful role in *Self-Portrait Abroad*. Toussaint captures the small, quirky occurrences that become part of the atmospheric memory of a place. For instance:

I had strange experiences with my hands in Japan. I don't know if it was because of the hotel I was staying at, the types of material the building had been constructed from—the fact, for example, that its doorknobs were mostly made of metal and not wood—or whether the cause of all these little irritations had more to do with my wool cardigan (a New Year's gift from my parents) . . . nevertheless, each time I was about to take hold of a doorknob or press an elevator button, I got a shock of static electricity. But enough of personal matters.

Such whimsical observations are par for the course. In Berlin the narrator refuses to be intimidated by a rude young woman tending the counter in a store where the shopkeepers are notorious for being “terse and impatient” with customers. And a section entitled “Prague” opens with Toussaint's stone-faced humor, “Let's not talk about Prague.” At first it feels like cheap irony, but the narrator means what he says and proceeds to talk about the train ride with his lover, Madeleine, before arriving in Prague, when “the immanent promise of Prague (which no reality, however small, had yet tarnished).”

Later on, Toussaint captures another one of those small, unexpected moments that end up being incredibly significant in retrospect. Having eaten their meal, the narrator and Madeleine relax in “an almost deserted restaurant car,” drinking beer and watching the scenery flow past when the sun comes out. The narrator says,

That is the image I will remember from this trip, Madeleine and I sitting face to face in the sunny restaurant car on our way to Prague. . . . I'd finished my beer a few moments earlier and my whole being was bathed in the feather-light beginnings of drunkenness, massaging my temples like an aura of honey. . .”

But Toussaint finishes the vignette with a twist:

. . . the air shimmered around us, wafting softly and lightly along the stitched lace curtains of the compartment window, above our plates, over the knives and forks, over our glasses, over our hands entwined on the table, over the flies.

This recalls the short paragraph at the beginning of the book, before the first section opens, which sets the tone for the entire work:

*Every time I travel I feel a very slight feeling of dread at the moment of departure, a dread sometimes shaded with a soft shiver of elation. Because I know that any trip brings with it the possibility of death—or of sex (both highly improbable of course, yet not to be excluded altogether).*

This sense of dread manifests through an almost black humor, where Toussaint conveys the narrator's gut-flinching as his plane spirals in descent "at a ridiculously low altitude . . . the immense mass of the Boeing slamming down onto the runway after barely scraping over the rooftops." As here, throughout *Self-Portrait* Toussaint always keeps that a cerebral sense of mortality in the periphery—he places it at an intellectual distance where it remains palpable, yet allows one to function in life without the paralysis of looking squarely into the inevitable.

Toussaint is never morbid or heavy handed, though. Instead, he lingers in existential moments, as he does in most of his books, and experiences a kind of release at the same time as an intense feeling of being alive that comes with allowing himself to be carried along by what's going on around him, much like the narrator in *Running Away*. When in Vietnam, he takes a ride on a cycle rickshaw and begins to feel the pulse of the city's traffic.

The traffic in Hanoi is like life itself, generous, inexhaustible, dynamic, in permanent motion, constant imbalance, and slipping into its midst and becoming one with the chaos gives you an intense feeling of being alive. Very often, . . . I let myself be carried along the streets of Hanoi for hours at a time, abandoning myself to the random succession of crossroads and avenues. . . . letting myself be pulled along by the traffic and the flow of time, I accepted the movement of life and accompanied it without resistance . . . I made no effort to hold time back, I consented to get older, accepted the idea of death with serenity. Time passed and I couldn't do a thing about it . . .

From here on Toussaint keeps death in the rear view, especially in the vignette featuring the narrator's travels in Tunisia. The opening line says, "I no longer know how this strange premonition came about, but I was certain I was going to die on this trip to Tunisia," and the narrator proceeds to see his death in everything. Small, seemingly innocuous details begin to accumulate into a sense of something that overtakes the narrator in the final section during his return to Kyoto, where everything has changed: the subway station locked and abandoned, platforms deserted, pillars beginning to rust, and even the billboards faded into unintelligibility. It is here that the narrator can no longer keep time and death in the periphery.

This wasn't the first time I'd seen a place I'd frequented in the past disappear in this way, the transformation of a location I'd known, but seeing this desolate spectacle, this abandoned station out of bounds behind iron bars, this deserted station with its disused platforms, whose tracks had become a craggy rain-soaked wasteland and whose main hall with its ticketing machines was now a junkyard where a rickety turnstile lay askew in the mud, I realized that time has passed since I'd left Kyoto . . . I suddenly felt sad and powerless at this brusque testimony to the passage of time.

Yet again, Jean-Phillipe Toussaint's work defies appearances while rewarding close reading and re-reading. Certainly not maximalist in any way, *Self-Portrait Abroad* is, however, an iceberg with incredible mass below the surface. Some moments in the book share similarities with moments in *Running Away*, but in *Self-Portrait Abroad* Toussaint further explores the experience of the effects of time and focuses on moments and their accumulation into a life.

Josh Maday lives in Michigan. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *New York Tyrant*, *Action Yes*, *Apostrophe Cast*, *Barrelhouse*, *elimae*, *Keyhole Magazine*, *Lamination Colony*, *Word Riot*, and elsewhere. He is a member of the National Book Critics Circle and keeps a blog [here](#).

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