

The Elegant Variation

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March 05, 2009

TOUSSAINT'S TRANSLATORS

*In the new LA Weekly, FOTEV [Jim Ruland](#) takes a look at a pair of novels by [Jean-Philippe Toussaint](#). Regular readers will remember his [review of *Monsieur on Bloomsday*](#) of last year. He continues his obsession with all things Toussaint by tracking down some of his translators.*

JORDAN STUMP translated *La Télévision* ([Minuit](#), 1997); it was published as *Television* by [Dalkey Archive](#) in 2004.

PAUL DE ANGELIS co-translated *La Salle de bain* (Minuit, 1985) with Nancy Amphoux; it was published as *The Bathroom* first by Obelisk / E. P. Dutton in 1990 and then by Dalkey Archive in November of 2008.

MATTHEW B. SMITH translated *L'Appareil-photo* (Minuit, 1989); it was published as *Camera* by Dalkey Archive late last year. Smith is also translating *Fuir* (Minuit, 2005), which will be published as *Running Away* by Dalkey Archive in the fall of 2009.

TEV: What is it about Toussaint's style that sets him apart from other minimalists?

STUMP: It's hard to answer because (no matter what anyone may say) I'm not convinced he is a minimalist. I'd call him more laconic than minimalist. If I had to make a comparison, I guess I'd say he has a more tender gaze than most minimalists.

DE ANGELIS: I was attracted to him because he was so clearly in the French tradition from [Beckett](#) to Robbe-Grillet but was so clearly contemporary (at the time). He took [Robbe-Grillet's](#) and [Butor's](#) chosisme and turned it on its head. He was funny.

SMITH: I don't know who the other minimalists are nor am I sure if I know what minimalist actually means. Although the word is attractive, I think it can be somewhat misleading. That is not to say that minimalism isn't somehow at work in his writing, but I am hesitant to say that it characterizes his work as a whole. His sentences can sometimes be exceedingly long and his descriptions are often far from bare. In fact, it is not unusual for an extra adjective, which may be in its right place in the French but dangling awkwardly in the English, to be suppressed in the translation. And, in terms of plot, there is actually a lot going on. In *Camera*, the narrator travels to Milan and London; he goes on an adventure through Paris; he steals a camera; he falls in love. These are all big events. It's just that they are handled in an offhand way. As is often pointed out, narrative focus and attention are given to the insignificant, the banal, the infra-ordinary. But I guess that if it's this last point that makes him a minimalist, then I'd have to agree.

TEV: Is Toussaint a comic novelist?

STUMP: Yes, of a melancholy kind, and again of a very laconic kind. And his humor often gives way, particularly in the later novels, to a kind of disorientingly sincere emotion. He doesn't crack jokes (usually); he gives us situations, ordinary or otherwise, that are looked at with a certain quizzical distance. Humor is never the point of his books, but it's always there.

DE ANGELIS: No question about it, in the tradition of [Calvino](#), I'd say.

SMITH: Definitely. This is one of the main reasons I wanted to translate his work. I think it's also what sets him apart from other writers. Toussaint uses a certain type of situational humor whose operating principle is actually quite simple. It consists of relating a comic act or absurd situation--such as a man shaving in a public space as in *Camera*--in a markedly flat and unassuming way. Although it sounds simple, I think to actually pull it off and make it funny takes a tremendous amount of skill. After reading and rereading Toussaint, it still remains somewhat of a mystery to me how he makes it seem so effortless.

TEV: Is Toussaint's writing difficult or challenging to translate?

STUMP: Very, very difficult. You don't want it to be flat, you don't want it to be poetic; you don't want it to be breezy, you don't want it to be stuffy, you don't want it to be too oral-sounding, you don't want it to be too written-sounding. It has to be balanced right between all those things, and that's a terrifically difficult feat to pull off.

DE ANGELIS: Yes and no. There's an off-handed quality to the voice that needs to be captured that would be utterly destroyed by any bit of translatese. Yet it's essential to be really loyal to the original, because every word counts and the entire book is about subtleties. I was the acquiring editor of the book and hired Nancy Amphoux, who'd worked on a lot of other translations for me. The first translation she finished didn't get the voice right, so we worked intensely together to rework it and she insisted I get co-translation credit.

SMITH: Yes, but maybe no more so than any other writer. He's the first and only writer I've translated so far so I have no basis for comparison.

TEV: What is Toussaint's greatest strength?

STUMP: Hard to name one. I guess I'd say his vagueness: you're never quite sure what you're supposed to do with one of his books. Miraculously, he's managed to write eight novels without ever falling into the trap of predictability; I still pick up his books knowing I'm not going to know what to think of it right away.

DE ANGELIS: I think he's really truthful about the narrow nature of life among the Western elite during the 1980s.

SMITH: There are many stylistic features I really appreciate. I think his use of dialogue, which is highly infrequent, is amazing. It is often nothing more than two people saying very little or repeating the same word to each other. There's a great little exchange between the narrator and his driving instructor in *Camera* in which, together in a small brasserie with nothing to talk about, the only topic of conversation they find is provided by a beer logo from a coaster on the table:

Tuborg, he'd remark, nodding his head lost in thought. Yep, I'd say, Tuborg. I'd then find it appropriate to bring up other beers that were served on tap at the brasserie. He'd sit unresponsive, putting his coaster on its side and balancing it with his finger. A Danish beer, I'd say, Tuborg's Danish. He knew that, and would nod his head to express that he knew it. I knew that, he'd say. Yep, a Danish beer, and, sighing, he'd take a small sip of his espresso.

I also think that his use of spacing is striking. This is best seen in *The Bathroom* where each paragraph is numbered and framed by white space. This numerical ordering of discreet micro-segments of text is one of the many ways in which Toussaint gives significance to the trivial: no matter what a two or three-sentenced paragraph has to say, its privileged status as an autonomous, numbered paragraph already qualifies it as important and necessary.

TEV: What would you like readers discovering Toussaint's work in English for the first time to know about his work in the original French?

STUMP: I think it would be useful for American readers to remember that he's Belgian. I don't know if I believe there is such a thing as "Belgian humor," but if there is, Toussaint is a wonderful example of it: self-deprecating, earthy, wry, and reserved.

DE ANGELIS: I don't think there's anything so French about the language, but the conceit lies in a clearly French literary/cultural line.

SMITH: Maybe just the simple fact that it is quite common to have a novel of this size in France without considering it a slim novella or an amusing sketch.

TEV: In what ways are these novels that were published 20 years ago still relevant?

STUMP: Oh, they still feel new. And anyway, they weren't necessarily "relevant" 20 years ago, so nothing's changed there.

DE ANGELIS: For all the usual reasons that real literature (yes, it does exist) remains relevant, because it talks about the human condition.

SMITH: I'm not sure... Good writing doesn't age? I don't know how to answer that question but I think it's interesting. In an academic setting I've been thinking about a way to answer a very similar yet decidedly different question: How are these novels, published only 20 years ago, already worthy of critical attention? For both questions it's a matter of historical distance: in the first, the risk is that there's too much, in the second, not yet enough.

TEV: Is there a passage that you are fond of or an anecdote you'd like to share?

STUMP: There are passages from *Television* that absolutely slay me (106-116), and others that move me (59-62).

DE ANGELIS: The book (*The Bathroom*) was edited just before I and everyone else in any kind of senior position at E.P. Dutton was fired in one of those typical book publishing purges, on Halloween of 1989. So the book was orphaned and largely abandoned by the new crew that took over. Nancy Amphoux had a recurrence of her cancer and died a year or two later. Still the book has made its way.

SMITH: There are many. I like at the beginning of *Camera* when the narrator, for no good reason, begins showing Pascale pictures of himself as a kid. Also the moment right after that when, back in the driver's ed. office the following morning, Pascale asks the narrator if he'd like some tea. He refuses, but then asks for coffee. As Pascale goes to make some for him, he calls out to her "grab some croissants too while you're up." I also like the part when the narrator sketches rectangle frames with his finger on the window in the driver's ed. office to create make-shift photos of the outside world. And many, many more...

The Elegant Variation would like to thank these gentlemen for taking time away from their work. If this has whet your appetite for more Toussaint, read this [interview](#) at the [Quarterly Conversation](#).

Posted by Lazy Mick at 11:16 AM in [Guest Bloggers](#) | [Permalink](#)

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Some twenty years ago, while they were preparing my second novel for publication, Grove Press took me on as an unofficial "reader" of French novels for possible purchase and translation by the publisher. I was sent "La Salle de Bain", along with my fee and some publicity material from his French publisher, Minuit. I read the book in a sitting and loved it, though reported to Grove that I was torn: the book was terrific, but I couldn't say with any certainty that it would be a success here in the States. The book was completely original, utterly quirky, and the audience would probably be minimal, i.e. me and a few other like-minded souls. So Grove passed, Dutton picked it up immediately and thus ended my job as reader of French for Grove Press.

Posted by: [JP Smith](#) | [March 06, 2009 at 04:59 AM](#)

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