

MOVING TARGETS: FRENCH FICTION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

by

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Moving Targets: French Fiction in the Twenty-First Century

Thesis directed by Professor Warren Motte

This dissertation examines the return to story in the French novel that begins in the mid-1980s, some decades after the New Novelists called into question the most fundamental elements of the traditional novel. The first chapter focuses on certain hallmarks of literary innovation in the twentieth century, from Marcel Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu* to the novels published by Philippe Sollers and Pierre Guyotat. In the body of the dissertation, I devote one chapter each to five writers—Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Marie Redonnet, Éric Chevillard, Christine Montalbetti, and Xabi Molia—who reconsider the potential of “the critical novel,” namely, novels that call into question literary norms and explore new narrative possibilities through innovations of form and content.

In his triptych *Faire l'amour* (2002), *Fuir* (2005), and *La Vérité sur Marie* (2009), Jean-Philippe Toussaint seek to capture what he has described as “a pure literary energy,” combining sheer novelistic pleasure with rigorous formal structures. Marie Redonnet’s novel *Diego* (2005) builds upon her earlier works, amplifying and developing some of her most distinctive themes, while striking off in a new direction toward a more explicit sense of social and political engagement. Éric Chevillard exploits what André Gide describes as the “lawlessness” of the novel, expanding its bounds beyond all measure as he deals with the limitations, possibilities and potentialities of language and writing. Parodying a wide variety of literary genres and a staggering number of scientific discourses, Chevillard is beholden to no logic but his own. An accomplished literary theorist, Christine Montalbetti has published critical works on topics such

as narrative digression, the status of readers and characters, and the relations between fiction and reality. Her fiction writing, however, calls our scholarly certainties into question, blurring narratological categories and exploding the boundaries between her fiction and the phenomenal world. Xabi Molia's *Reprise des hostilités* (2007) weaves a dense web of fiction and reality as he considers the cultural and literary heritage of the twentieth century, constructing a virtual space within his novel where voices from the past and figures from the present mingle together.

I would like to express my gratitude to my parents for teaching me how to read the first time around, and to Warren Motte, for teaching me how to read a second time. Particular thanks are due to Warren for his careful eye, warm encouragement, and for introducing me not only to a fascinating field of study, but also often to the writers themselves. I would like to thank Marie Redonnet, Christine Montalbetti, and Xabi Molia for sharing their thoughts about their work. I am grateful to the members of my committee and to the entire faculty of the Department of French and Italian at the University of Colorado. I am also grateful to my family and friends, particularly Katina Rogers, for her thoughtful comments. Most of all, special thanks are due to Rachel, for her unwavering love and support.

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

For the last half-century or so, vocal contingents of critics and journalists have bemoaned “the death of the novel.” As other critics have pointed out, that claim recurs over and over despite a wealth of evidence to the contrary, as writers continue to explore the boundaries of the novel as a cultural form from a variety of fascinating perspectives.<sup>1</sup> In France, the “crisis” of the novel has occasioned a great deal of ink to flow, and while hundreds of new novels are published every year in France, that phenomenon in itself provides fuel for both supporters and detractors of the contemporary novel.<sup>2</sup> For some, that proliferation is a sign of the novel’s enduring vigor, while for others it is an indication that the standards for publication of a novel have become loose to the point of irrelevance. While the debate rages on, a cohort of writers who inaugurated their careers during the latter part of the twentieth century continue to produce some of the most distinctive novels published in France today. While a handy appellation—such as the *nouveau roman*—does not yet exist for the output of those writers, they make a compelling case for the vitality of the novel as an important cultural form.

This study will provide a sampling of some of the ways in which the French novel continues to evolve, renewing itself while interrogating its origins, its intentions, and its relationship with its readers. Following the lead of other critics, I will refer to the period that I investigate here—from 1990 to the present day—as the “extreme contemporary,” and to the type of text that intrigues me as the “critical novel.”<sup>3</sup> One of the essential traits of the critical novel is the desire to interrogate narrative conventions and to examine the literary tradition from which it emerges. The authors whom I examine in the body of my dissertation are acutely aware of the

writers who precede them, and in order to understand more fully the strategies that they deploy and the questions that interest them, it is necessary to situate their works with regard to their literary forerunners. In this introduction, I will focus on some of the more distinctive works of the literary avant-garde of the twentieth century, choosing texts that typify some of the major groundbreaking developments in the twentieth-century French novel. Each of the novels that I will discuss embodies in its own way a practice of stylistic and formal innovation whose influence continues to be felt to this day.

An intense vein of self-consciousness runs throughout French fiction in the twentieth century. Authors as distinct as Marcel Proust and Georges Perec, Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Alain Robbe-Grillet call the novel into question, interrogating its form and content in a variety of ways. The reconsideration of the notion of the novel as practiced by nineteenth-century authors such as Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola takes place in a volatile century against the backdrop of two world wars and the end of the colonial era. The questioning of literary form extends to language itself as developments in the social sciences come to influence literary theory and practice. The novel is the most protean of genres—accommodating the dilatory expansions of Proust and the reductions of Robbe-Grillet, the ludic structures of Perec and the impoverished narratives of Beckett. I make no claims to summarize an entire century's worth of novelistic production in the pages of this chapter. Rather, I will focus on certain hallmarks of literary innovation that manifest themselves in twentieth-century authors' attempts to remake the novel. I will concentrate on a period of time that begins with the publication of the first volume of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* in 1913 and runs until the early 1980s, which saw the first publications of the cohort of authors on whom I focus in the body of my dissertation.

In André Gide's *Les Faux-monnayeurs* (1925), the writer Édouard muses upon the novel's character, describing it as "de tous les genres littéraires, [...] le plus libre, le plus lawless" (183). That freedom and a corresponding lack of codification provide fertile territory for writers who wish to push and pull at the limits of the novel. Throughout the twentieth century, authors question the norms and conventions of the novel, and Balzac's claim that "*All is true*" (*Le Père Goriot* 48) gives way to Nathalie Sarraute's "ère du soupçon" (*L'Ère du soupçon* 63). Indeed, Antoine Compagnon appropriates Sarraute's term for the title of the first chapter of his literary history of the twentieth century, placing the entire period under the sign of suspicion as he describes a series of efforts by writers to rethink literary conventions (*La Littérature* 545). A number of debates and polemics over topics such as formalism and engagement erupt as various avant-garde movements spring up over the years, yet one common theme emerges—a desire to innovate on the levels of content and form as the novel changes to reflect shifting views of language and reality.

My discussion of the twentieth century begins with Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927). In the title of his study on the author of the *Recherche*, Antoine Compagnon claims that Proust sits "between two centuries," and chronologically as well as figuratively, Proust forges a link back to an earlier era while remaining inescapably modern in his formal innovation. The complexities of Proust's novel have provided material for innumerable studies; for the purposes of the present analysis, I will focus on a few key aspects of his work, most importantly the tension between the Narrator's frequent detours and the deep teleological construction of the *Recherche*. Conceived with a tight structure, the *Recherche* becomes highly digressive, focused on detail while concerned with the universal, obsessed with the past yet ultimately oriented towards the future. The frailest of plots serves as a support for the

amplification of discourse, as Proust challenges narrative conventions. The *Recherche* is a *künstlerroman* and the ultimate revelation of the Narrator's "vocation" (*Recherche* IV: 478) is alluded to throughout the novel, yet even if we accept Gérard Genette's assertion that the "sujet de la *Recherche* est bien 'Marcel devient écrivain'" (*Figures* III 237), why does it take him so long to get there?

Novels are teleological in nature, and Proust plays on the reader's desire to find out what happens, hinting occasionally at what is to come, then drawing out events and deferring revelations to pique the reader's interest. Indeed, Genette claims that:

Ce principe de la signification différée ou suspendue joue évidemment à plein dans la mécanique de l'*énigme*, analysée par Barthes dans *S/Z*, et dont une œuvre aussi sophistiquée que la *Recherche* fait un usage peut-être surprenant pour ceux qui placent cette œuvre aux antipodes du roman populaire — ce qui est vrai, sans doute, de sa signification et de sa valeur esthétique, mais non pas toujours de ses procédés. (*Figures* III 97)

The hero's gradual process of deciphering, of learning to read signs, mirrors that of the reader, although the hero attempts to make sense of his fictional world, while the reader follows the utterances of the Narrator. Gilles Deleuze describes the *Recherche* as the "récit d'un apprentissage," where "[a]pprendre concerne essentiellement *les signes*" (8). The reader must learn to read—and read through—the signs that proliferate throughout the text, traveling alongside the hero until the ultimate revelations of *Le Temps retrouvé* are divulged. The Narrator "is the one who knows" (Prince, *Dictionary* 39), yet he draws out his disclosure of the hero's vocation, along with the myriad discoveries of various characters' true natures (Charlus, Saint-Loup, Albertine) for so long that the reader may begin to wonder: is the story still really

the point? Novels are typically end-loaded, with endings that tie things together, but the fact that the reader must navigate thousands of pages to discover that Marcel does in fact decide to become a writer both relieves and calls into question the reader's expectations of what a novel is supposed to deliver.

Proust's desire to enforce unity and create a cohesive whole hearkens back to the nineteenth-century works of Balzac or Zola, yet the fragmentation of vision, the playing of the hero's limited point of view against the knowledge of the Narrator, places the novel firmly within the modernist tradition. That fragmentary vision is a thematic concern from early on within the text, as in the Narrator's incomplete memories of Combray until the episode of the madeleine (*Recherche* I: 43), or in the passage where the Narrator describes rushing back and forth from window to window on his first train ride to Balbec, "pour rapprocher, pour rentoiler les fragments intermittents et opposés de mon beau matin écarlate et versatile et en avoir une vue totale et un tableau continu" (*Recherche* II: 16). That principle informs the narration of the *Recherche*. As the hero encounters various characters, he perceives mere fragments of their identities, which only emerge over the course of time. It is only much later that the hero—and the reader—gains a panoramic view of the events and characters of the novel.

Compagnon notes that "most of the early readers of *Du Côté de chez Swann* [ . . . ] blamed the novel for an absence of construction" (1). A full sense of the structure underlying the *Recherche* only emerges upon reading the final volume, *Le Temps retrouvé*, yet the novel as Proust originally envisioned it changes greatly with the addition of the novel of Albertine.<sup>4</sup> An interesting paradox emerges; the carefully planned narrative initially conceived by Proust expands over the years to incorporate entire new volumes, just as the Golo of the hero's childhood "lanterne magique" (*Recherche* I: 9) assimilates everything he passes over:

Le corps de Golo lui-même, d'une essence aussi surnaturelle que celui de sa monture, s'arrangeait de tout obstacle matériel, de tout objet gênant qu'il rencontrait en le prenant comme ossature et en se le rendant intérieur, fût-ce le bouton de la porte sur lequel s'adaptait aussitôt et surnageait invinciblement sa robe rouge ou sa figure pâle toujours aussi noble et aussi mélancolique, mais qui ne laissait paraître aucun trouble de cette transvertébration. (*Recherche* I: 10)

Yet perhaps that image is not completely apt, for while Golo seamlessly incorporates everything in his path, the narrative does change as a result of its incessant assimilation, becoming something new. A suggestive analogy is proposed in *Le Temps retrouvé*:

Un général est comme un écrivain qui veut faire une certaine pièce, un certain livre, et que le livre lui-même, avec les ressources inattendues qu'il révèle ici, l'impasse qu'il présente là, fait dévier extrêmement du plan préconçu. Comme une diversion, par exemple, ne doit se faire que sur un point qui a lui-même assez d'importance, suppose que la diversion réussisse au-delà de toute espérance, tandis que l'opération principale se solde par un échec; c'est la diversion qui peut devenir l'opération principale. (IV: 341)

For Genette, that is one of the striking features of the *Recherche*, which, if it inaugurates “avec quelques autres, l'espace sans limites et comme indéterminé de la *littérature* moderne, elle le doit [. . .] à cette invasion de l'histoire par le commentaire, du roman par l'essai, du récit par son propre discours” (*Figures* III 265). Genette's study is fascinating for the attention it calls to the process of composition at work in Proust's novel. Despite the Narrator's oft-quoted claim that “Une œuvre où il y a des théories est comme un objet sur lequel on laisse la marque du prix” (IV:

461), the *Recherche* abounds with theories, subverting traditional notions of genre while revolutionizing narrative conventions.

While structure is deeply submerged in Proust's *Recherche*, Gide brings the process of literary construction to the very forefront of *Les Faux-monnayeurs*. While ostensibly inspired by a *fait divers* involving a band of counterfeiters, Gide's novel exemplifies what Warren Motte describes as "the notion of the specular text, the book-as-chronicle-of-its-own-elaboration," a theme that "has become in a sense the imposed figure of 'serious' writing, in the absence of which no text can aspire to distinction" (*Fables* 5). At once "novel, antinovel, and theory of the novel" (Goux 873), *Les Faux-monnayeurs* critiques the genre from within, calling into question its norms and conventions while developing a sustained meditation upon its possibilities and potential. Gide plays with literary conventions from the incipit of the text, as the character Bernard tells himself "C'est le moment de croire que j'entends des pas dans le couloir" (11). But no, no one arrives, despite Bernard's assertion that it would be a perfect novelistic moment. Just as a counterfeiter passes off one thing for another, Gide employs a similar tactic with the title and ostensible plot of his novel. The patience of a reader who opens the book expecting to find a gripping tale of a band of counterfeiters will be sorely tested: a counterfeit piece appears for the first time approximately halfway through the almost four-hundred-page novel, and no one attempts to pass one of the false coins until the third and final part of the novel. On the other hand, the reader has the pleasure of tracing a dense web of narrative strands that intersect and overlap on a variety of levels.<sup>5</sup>

Weaving together those narrative threads is a narrator who is happy to share his thoughts about the characters and appears to pull back the curtain on the action of the novel, as if he wished to share the process of composition with the reader:

Profitons de ce temps d'été qui disperse nos personnages, pour les examiner à loisir. Aussi bien sommes-nous à ce point médian de notre histoire, où son allure se ralentit et semble prendre un élan neuf pour bientôt précipiter son cours.

Bernard est assurément beaucoup trop jeune encore pour prendre la direction d'une intrigue. [...] Je retrouve sur un carnet quelques phrases où je notais ce que je pensais de lui précédemment. (216)

In many cases, the frequent addresses to the narratee create a feeling of complicity between the narratee and the narrator, yet they also highlight the constructed nature of the novel. Throughout the text, Gide plays the notion of the novel as a representation of reality against the notion of the novel as a fictional construct. At times, the narrator claims a certain status for the fictional world that he creates, implying that it exists in some way external to his narration and that his knowledge of that fictional world is necessarily incomplete: “J’aurais été assez curieux de savoir ce qu’Antoine a pu raconter à son amie la cuisinière; mais on ne peut tout écouter. Voici l’heure où Bernard doit aller retrouver Olivier. Je ne sais pas trop où il dîna ce soir, ni même s’il dîna du tout” (20). While the narrator appears to wrestle with his duties, describing himself as an “auteur imprévoyant [qui] se demande avec inquiétude où va le mener son récit” (215), it is the character Édouard who voices the strongest opinions regarding the novel as a genre.

At the center of his novel, Gide places an author, Édouard, who is in turn writing his own novel entitled *Les Faux-monnayeurs*.<sup>6</sup> Interspersed throughout the main narrative strands of Gide’s text are extracts from Édouard’s journal, in which he describes his own thoughts upon the novel in general, as well as his struggles to find an adequate form for his desire to depict “la rivalité du monde réel et de la représentation que nous nous en faisons” (201). As Édouard describes to his companions:

Ce que je veux, c'est présenter d'une part la réalité, présenter d'autre part cet effort pour la styliser, [. . .]. Pour obtenir cet effet, suivez-moi, j'invente un personnage de romancier, que je pose en figure centrale; et le sujet du livre, si vous voulez, c'est précisément la lutte entre ce qui lui offre la réalité et ce que, lui, prétend en faire. (185)

Édouard's novel will presumably never be written, but his failure is Gide's success. In his *Journal des faux-monnayeurs*, which itself reflects Édouard's journal in the novel, Gide insists that the reader must be an active participant in the construction of meaning, "une sorte d'intérêt vient, pour le lecteur, de ce seul fait qu'il ait à rétablir [les évènements du récit]. L'histoire requiert sa collaboration pour se bien dessiner" (31). Linda Hutcheon claims that "By reminding the reader of the book's identity as artifice, the text parodies his expectations, his desire for verisimilitude, and forces him to an awareness of his own role in creating the universe of fiction" (139). The active reader that Gide's writing requires is an essential component of the modern novel, and represents an important shift from the nineteenth-century vision of the novel as an unproblematic teleological representation of the world. The twentieth-century avant-garde novel calls attention to the process of its own construction, and articulates a new role for the reader as a vital participant in the creation of meaning.

In *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932), Louis-Ferdinand Céline attacks novelistic convention from a very different angle than Proust and Gide. The picaresque plot of the novel is structured conventionally, and events are narrated throughout in the unchanging voice of Bardamu. It is precisely that voice, however, which injects the rhythms of spoken, rather than literary, French into the twentieth-century novel. At the antipodes of the elaborate and elegant sentences of Proust, Bardamu's tale begins with the phrase "Ça a débuté comme ça" (15).

Bardamu's slang-filled, staccato narration ushers the reader into a world divested of glory or redemption, and Céline spares nothing and no one in his ferocious critique of war, colonialism, capitalism, and poverty. While the hero of Proust's *Recherche* can conjure a mythical vision of the glories of France from the mere mention of the name "Guermantes" (I: 169-70), for Bardamu,

la race, ce que t'appelles comme ça, c'est seulement ce grand ramassis de miteux dans mon genre, chassieux, puces, transis, qui ont échoués ici poursuivis par la faim, la peste, les tumeurs et le froid, venus vaincus des quatre coins du monde. [. . .] C'est ça la France et puis c'est ça les Français" (16).

No longer simply the province of the elite, with Céline the novel finds its footing in the gritty quotidian reality of the common man.<sup>7</sup>

The passionate, vulgar voice of Bardamu finds its direct opposite in the flat, dispassionate narration of Meursault in Albert Camus's *L'Étranger*. The stark minimalism of that novel astonished readers upon its appearance in 1942. Motte notes that "Camus refuses traditional hierarchies of structure and theme," and while the "novel is written in the first person, [. . .] it is denuded of the effects of usually associated with first-person narration. It is neither personal nor confessional" (*Small* 25). Most significantly, Motte argues, "Camus's decision to use the *passé composé* as his principal narrative tense rather than the *passé simple* is a deliberate frontal assault on literary convention" (*Small* 25-26). Roland Barthes famously advances Camus's novel as an exemplar of an *écriture blanche* that challenges the ideological implications of traditional literary custom (*Degré* 27-34).<sup>8</sup> Camus denies the reader's expectation of psychological depth, rigorously refusing any explanation of his narrator's actions, as Compagnon notes: "Meursault ne dit jamais ce qu'il pense, mais note ses sensations, rapporte des faits et gestes, comme un

narrateur extérieur” (*Littérature* 699-700). Motte contends that just as Meursault refuses to play society’s games, “Camus refuses to play the game of literature—or rather he plays it more subtly and on his own terms” (*Small* 26). That gesture proves to be influential, and the flat, declarative tone of Meursault’s narration and Camus’s systematic eschewal of psychological interiority inform many works that follow.

Barthes asserts that *L’Étranger* inaugurates a “parole transparente, [. . .] un style de l’absence qui est presque une absence idéale de style” (*Degré* 60). Samuel Beckett, an Irishman, once claimed that his decision to write in French made it easier for him to write “without style,” yet style is just one of the aspects of literary convention that Beckett strips away in his novelistic trilogy of *Molloy* (1951), *Malone meurt* (1951), and *L’Innommable* (1953). In the trilogy, Beckett progressively does away with plot, character, and spatiotemporal indicators; by the end of *L’Innommable*, the final volume, the unnamed narrator is simply a voice, an indistinct “I” creating—and perhaps created by—the words he utters.<sup>9</sup> Compagnon asserts, “Le langage se réduit, l’espace devient désertique. Un moi à l’agonie cherche le sens de sa vie, s’invente des doubles, se raconte des histoires, comprend qu’inventer une fable, c’est se mentir, mais continue à parler faute de pouvoir se taire” (*Littérature* 772). Language speaks unceasingly, forever bringing itself into being although already exhausted:

il faut continuer, je ne peux pas continuer, il faut continuer, je vais donc continuer, il faut dire des mots, tant qu’il y en a, il faut les dire, jusqu’à ce qu’ils me trouvent, jusqu’à ce qu’ils me disent, étrange peine, étrange faute, il faut continuer, c’est peut-être déjà fait, ils m’ont peut-être dit, ils m’ont peut-être déjà porté jusqu’au seuil de mon histoire. (*L’Innommable* 261-262)

William Thompson argues that two main trends dominate the French postwar literary field: literary engagement and the New Novel (5). Those two currents call into question novelistic form and content from very different perspectives. The engaged writer seeks to use the novel as a tool to help in the struggle for human liberty, while the new novelists spark a crisis of literary representation that resonates to the present moment. Writing just after the Second World War, Jean-Paul Sartre elaborates the notion of *littérature engagée* in a series of essays compiled in a volume entitled *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1947). In those essays, he asserts a clear distinction between poetry and prose based upon their relationship to language. He defines “le prosateur comme un homme qui *se sert* des mots” (25), while in the case of poetry, “elle ne s’en *sert* pas du tout; [...] elle les sert. Les poètes sont les hommes qui refusent d’*utiliser* le langage” (18). For Sartre, the engaged writer wields words like “n’importe quel outil” in the transmission of content (26). Language becomes “une pure fonction” and serves as an “instrument privilégié d’une certaine entreprise” (26). Within that utilitarian framework, content is privileged over form in remarks such as: “le style [...] doit passer inaperçu. [...] [L]’harmonie des mots, leur beauté, l’équilibre des phrases *disposent* les passions du lecteur sans qu’il y prenne garde, [...] s’il vient à les considérer par eux-mêmes, il perd le sens [...]. Dans la prose, le plaisir esthétique n’est pur que s’il vient par-dessus le marché” (30-31).

Sartre’s argument provoked sharp replies. In *Pour un nouveau roman* (1963), Robbe-Grillet labels engagement as a “notion périmée,” along with other aspects of the traditional novel such as “le personnage” and “l’histoire” (29, 31, 34). Robbe-Grillet disparages the notion that the form of a novel should be subordinate to a larger message conveyed within. He claims:

l’art ne peut être réduit à l’état de moyen au service d’une cause qui le dépasserait, celle-ci fût-elle la plus juste, la plus exaltante; l’artiste ne met rien au-

dessus de son travail, et il s'aperçoit vite qu'il ne peut créer que *pour rien*; [...] l'instant de la création ne peut que le ramener aux seuls problèmes de son art. (42)

For Robbe-Grillet, engagement can only take place of the level of writing: “Au lieu d’être de nature politique, l’engagement c’est, pour l’écrivain, la pleine conscience des problèmes actuels de son propre langage, la conviction de leur extrême importance, la volonté de les résoudre de l’intérieur” (46-47).

For Sartre, the novel is the means to an end, while for Robbe-Grillet the novel *is* the end. Both seek to challenge and to awaken the reader’s consciousness in different ways. Sartre’s project is ultimately to change the world; Robbe-Grillet, already suspicious of such grand claims, seeks to change the novel. Of the two projects, Robbe-Grillet’s is the more immediately successful in terms of its influence on other writers. The *nouveaux romanciers*—in particular Robbe-Grillet, Robert Pinget, Nathalie Sarraute, Michel Butor, and Claude Simon—change the landscape of the novel in ways that continue to resonate to this day. As has been well documented in a variety of studies, despite attempts to group them, the new novelists were in fact a heterogeneous assemblage of writers. Thompson quotes Simon as stating “Je crois que ce que l’on peut dire c’est que nous nous trouvons spontanément d’accord pour rejeter un certain nombre de conventions qui régissent le roman traditionnel. Mais à partir de là, chacun de nous œuvre selon son tempérament” (8-9).

Although each of the new novelists approaches the novel from a different perspective, they all resist or question literary commonplaces such as well-rounded, clearly defined characters and linear plots. In their theoretical works *L’Ère du soupçon* (1956) and *Pour un nouveau roman*, Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet confront the conventions of the traditional realist novel as enshrined in the works of Balzac.<sup>10</sup> Of course, by the time the new novel appeared, there was

already a long and vigorous tradition of challenging the traditional novel, and both authors take pains to mention their predecessors: “Flaubert écrivait le nouveau roman de 1860, Proust le nouveau roman de 1910” (*Pour un nouveau roman* 11). While they propose different solutions in their own fiction, Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet agree that the world has changed greatly since the era of Balzac, and the novel needs to keep pace.

Stephen Heath calls attention to Balzac’s famous remark in the preface of the *Comédie Humaine*: “La Société française allait être l’historien, je ne devais être que le secrétaire” (15). Heath argues that it is precisely that notion of a reproducible, signifying reality that can be mastered through language that is challenged in the works of the new novelists, in what he describes as “a radical shift of emphasis in the novel from this monologistic realism to what I shall call *the practice of writing* (22). Robbe-Grillet insists:

le monde n'est ni signifiant ni absurde. Il est, tout simplement. [ . . . ] Et soudain cette évidence nous frappe [ . . . ]. D'un seul coup toute la belle construction s'écroule: ouvrant les yeux à l'improviste, nous avons éprouvé [ . . . ] le choc de cette réalité tête dont nous faisons semblant d'être venus à bout. [ . . . ] Toute notre littérature n'a pas encore réussi à en entamer le plus petit coin, à en amollir la moindre courbe. (*Pour un nouveau roman* 21)

The world has its own reality, and our attempts to apprehend it are necessarily fragmented and contingent. The well-rounded characters and linear teleologies of traditional novels seek to impose an order on the world that does not exist. For Robbe-Grillet, the novel cannot simply reflect a preconceived notion of the world: “le roman n'est pas un outil du tout. Il n'est pas conçu en vue d'un travail défini à l'avance. Il ne sert pas à exposer, à traduire, des choses existant avant lui, en dehors de lui. Il n'exprime pas, il recherche. Et ce qu'il recherche, c'est

lui-même” (*Pour un nouveau roman* 174). Literature becomes process rather than product, overturning notions of representation and highlighting the essential quality of form. Robbe-Grillet asserts that for the novel, meaning and reality are inseparable from its form, and ultimately, “si l’art est quelque chose, il est *tout*, qu’il se suffit par conséquent à soi-même, et qu’il n’y a rien au-delà” (*Pour un nouveau roman* 49).

In *Pour une théorie du nouveau roman*, Jean Ricardou describes that shift with a metaphor borrowed from Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et le noir*: “Le roman, ce n’est plus un miroir qu’on promène le long d’une route; c’est l’effet de miroirs partout agissant en lui-même. Il n’est plus représentation; il est auto-représentation” (262). Ricardou famously characterizes that movement as the passage from “l’écriture d’une aventure” to “l’aventure d’une écriture” (32). The rejection of literary convention and the practice of writing championed by the new novelists is adopted and then quickly radicalized by authors associated with the journal *Tel Quel* in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>11</sup> Beginning in 1960, at the height of the influence of the new novel, the journal *Tel Quel*, under the direction of Philippe Sollers, initially publishes pieces on and by Robbe-Grillet, Simon, Sarraute, Ricardou, and Butor, among others (Marx-Scouras 62). Relatively quickly, however, the tone changes, and articles criticizing the new novel begin to appear. While Robbe-Grillet had asserted that “il semble qu’on s’achemine de plus en plus vers une époque de la fiction où les problèmes de l’écriture seront envisagés lucidement par le romancier, et où les soucis critiques [ . . . ] pourront [ . . . ] lui servir de moteur” (*Pour un nouveau roman* 12), the writers associated with *Tel Quel* sought to take things much further.

Gerald Prince states that whereas the new novelists “had been interested in the factors governing the writing of fiction and the construction of fictional space, [*Tel Quel* authors] concentrated on the factors governing writing, period, and the elaboration of textual space”

(“The Nouveau Roman” 992). With the publication of works by figures such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Derrida, *Tel Quel* becomes a hotbed of structuralist and then poststructuralist theory. While Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet question the foundations of the novel, the theorists of *Tel Quel* elaborate a critical interrogation of the very foundations of language and the Western philosophical and intellectual tradition. Simultaneously, the novels that appear in the 1960s and 1970s under the aegis of *Tel Quel* push form to the limits of intelligibility. Authors such as Sollers, Mauriche Roche, and Pierre Guyotat conceive the novel as an *expérience-limite*, an abstract textual space characterized by free-floating signifiers. As I mentioned above, Ricardou characterizes the shift from the traditional novel to the new novel as a movement from representation to auto-representation. The *Tel Quel* novel, however, performs an even more drastic maneuver, moving into the domain of “l’anti-représentation,” in what Ricardou describes as a “radicalisation par *Tel Quel* de l’activité du Nouveau Roman” (265). According to Ricardou, that move is necessary, because although the new novel challenged traditional modes of representation, it did not do away with them altogether: “trop représentative encore est l’auto-représentation” (265).

As Susan Rubin Suleiman and others have noted, what is initially perceived as transgression can quickly become assimilated or blunted through familiarity. Suleiman speaks of a process of “*récupération* whereby works that were intended as a ‘machine of war against order’ (the expression is Robbe-Grillet’s) have become ‘classicized’ and classified. This kind of *récupération* is perhaps the tragic fate of every successful avant-garde” (43). Contemporary authors have indeed incorporated many of the narrative innovations practiced by the new novelists. The literary experiments of the *Tel Quel* group, however, are much less assimilable. Texts such as *H* (1973) and *Eden, Eden, Eden* (1971) so radically challenge traditional modes of

reading and interpretation that they essentially paint themselves into a corner. Motte argues that following the *Tel Quel* period, the avant-garde novel has moved in a rather different direction: “In the last twenty years or so, [ . . . ] the novelistic avant-garde has assumed yet a new shape. It has become what might be called the avant-garde with a human face, an avant-garde that seems to welcome its readers with open arms, while still insisting on innovation” (*Fables* 4).

Motte makes the case that that trend was inaugurated in the novels of Raymond Queneau and Georges Perec: “Clearly and demonstrably experimentalist in character, relying on systems of formal constraint that are in some cases impossibly arcane, those texts are nonetheless novels that can also be read luxuriously, ‘flat out on one’s bed,’ as Perec himself put it” (*Fables* 4). The desire to innovate, whether on the level of form or content, informs all of the novels that I explore in the body of this study, yet so too does the desire to tell stories. Colin Davis and Elizabeth Fallaize argue that after the new novel and after the *Tel Quel* movement, we see “three returns [ . . . ]: the return to history, the return of the subject, and the return of storytelling” (*French* 13). The return to history they describe is a reengagement with memory, a reengagement with the real world and with social issues. Davis and Fallaize assert that “the reassessment of history through fiction” began after the events of May 1968, and claim, “By the 1980s, the principle that fiction is bound up with history was firmly re-established; and this was no longer conceived as necessarily retrograde or naïve” (13). The return to subject can be thought of as an attempt to reconsider the notion of a human subjective awareness that organizes the way we perceive the world—a notion that the *Tel Quel* writers were hostile to. Davis and Fallaize note, “A self-conscious, self-aware human subject, locatable within an individual ‘self’, has been assumed to be the ground of intention, and thus of artistic endeavour, for much of European history” (13). Pointing out that Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute later turned to

autobiographical works, and that Barthes published *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* only seven years after declaring “the death of the Author” in 1968, Davis and Fallaize assert that “However fractured, fictional, illusory, or elusive the subject might be, the questions of subjectivity, of the relationship between author and narrator, or author and text, were restored as valid topics for literary investigation, especially in relation to the central issues of identity, memory, and desire” (14). Finally, the return of storytelling is self-explanatory, as writers return to creating strong narrative structures and re-embrace the pleasures of reading and writing. Davis and Fallaize affirm that “Authors of fiction with serious intellectual and aesthetic ambitions no longer inevitably set themselves apart from the interests of a broad reading public” (15). Gerald Prince employs the term “narrativity” to describe the features within a given text that contribute to its narrative interest for readers within a given context, and I will argue that a renewed attentiveness to questions of narrativity characterizes the works of contemporary authors (“Revisiting Narrativity” 28).

However, it is important to note that “this readiness to return to what seemed to have been lost [ . . . ] cannot be a simple regression, since what is revisited is necessarily seen with different eyes” (*French* 13). Contemporary French authors also exhibit a strong desire to come to terms with the literary tradition that has preceded them. Dominique Viart describes contemporary “littérature critique” as being situated “dans un rapport majeur avec la littérature passée, fortement sollicitée non comme modèle mais comme interlocutrice et partenaire” (“Le Moment” 30). My dissertation explores the different manners in which French novelists of the extreme contemporary participate in that process as they situate themselves with respect to their literary predecessors, interrogating the shape of the novel and reinvigorating it for a new era. I have chosen five authors—Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Marie Redonnet, Éric Chevillard, Christine

Montalbetti, and Xabi Molia—who, though their work differs in significant ways, provide examples of the novel as a critical cultural form, calling into question both what a novel “should be” and how novels should be read. These authors focus on a variety of concerns, from a re-imagining of the textual contract between author and reader to the destruction of the environment, yet each writer makes a convincing claim that the novel has something fresh to say.

In his recent trilogy *Faire l'amour* (2002), *Fuir* (2005), and *La Vérité sur Marie* (2009), Jean-Philippe Toussaint sends his narrator around the globe, from Elba to Shanghai, in an attempt to make sense of a tumultuous love affair. The passion and mobility evinced by that narrator contrasts strikingly with the (in)action of Toussaint’s earlier narrators, impassive men immobilized by their inability or lack of desire to engage with the world. While the narrator of *La Salle de bain* (1985), Toussaint’s first novel, is content to muse upon the nature of time and existence from the comfort and safety of his bathtub, his most recent novels seek to capture what Toussaint has described as “a pure literary energy” (Kaprièlan 1), combining sheer novelistic pleasure with rigorous formal structures.

Marie Redonnet’s most recent novel, *Diego* (2005), breaks the mold of her early works with its depiction of a very recognizable twenty-first century Paris and the trials and dangers faced by illegal immigrants who arrive there. *Diego* in many ways builds upon Redonnet’s earlier works, amplifying and developing some of her most distinctive themes, while striking off in a new direction, toward a more explicit sense of social and political engagement. That dimension has long been latent in her writing, and Redonnet’s reconsideration of the potential of the *roman engagé* follows a sustained reevaluation of the writer’s role in society, which manifests itself in a series of essays she published in the late 1990s. During the same period, Redonnet published a book-length essay on Jean Genet, and her reading of Genet’s work

illuminates *Diego* as a potent response to the questions that have concerned her throughout her career.

Éric Chevillard, on the other hand, exploits what Gide describes as the “lawlessness” of the novel, expanding its bounds beyond all measure as he deals with the limitations, possibilities and potentialities of language and writing. Parodying a wide variety of literary genres and a staggering number of scientific discourses, Chevillard is beholden to no logic but his own as he crafts a post-apocalyptic tale of the end of life as we know it in *Sans l'orang-outan* (2007). Chevillard’s novel considers the ecology of the natural world as well as the landscape of the novel, suggesting that we should pay closer attention to both.

An accomplished literary theorist, Christine Montalbetti has published critical works on topics such as narrative digression, the status of readers and characters, and the relations between fiction and reality. Her fiction writing, however, calls our scholarly certainties into question, blurring narratological categories and exploding the boundaries between her fiction and the phenomenal world. While Montalbetti’s novels serve as a laboratory of fiction, it is important to note that she is emphatically not taking part in dry technical experiments, quite the contrary. Her fictions are exemplary of a massive return to storytelling, and her recent novel *Journée américaine* (2009) offers a sustained meditation on both the construction of stories and how we use narrative to make sense of our lives.

Finally, Xabi Molia’s *Reprise des hostilités* (2007) challenges our assumptions about beginnings and endings through the story of the life and the death of Marin, a young author struggling with his frustrated desires and an ill-conceived plan to avenge the death of his father. His own unexpected death, far from giving closure and a sense of meaning to his life, opens up a new horizon, and Molia uses his story as a starting point for a reflection upon the state of France

at the turn of the third millennium. Molia weaves a dense web of fiction and reality as he considers the cultural and literary heritage of the twentieth century, constructing a virtual space within his novel where voices from the past and figures from the present mingle together.

These liminary remarks make it clear that each of these five authors approaches the contemporary novel from a very different perspective, and my goal is not to force each author to fit within a reductive interpretive or theoretical framework. Every author works to find a balance between tradition and innovation, and my readings will respect their different practices, while locating them within the larger tradition of the avant-garde or critical novel. Whether through formal innovation, linguistic originality or choice of subject matter, each of the authors examined here makes a strong case for the abiding importance of the novel as a vital cultural form, renewing the traditions that preceded them while evolving and finding new directions and new concerns for the twenty-first century.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, among others, Bruno Blanckeman, *Les Fictions singulières* 5-12; Colin Davis and Elizabeth Fallaize, *French Fiction in the Mitterrand Years* 1-17; Jean-Louis Hippolyte, *Fuzzy Fiction* 1-23; Warren Motte, *Fiction Now: The French Novel in the Twenty-First Century* 9-16; and William Thompson, *The Contemporary Novel in France* 1-5.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson employs the term “crisis” in *The Contemporary Novel in France* 1.

<sup>3</sup> I borrow the terms “extreme contemporary” and “critical novel” from Motte’s *Fiction Now* 11-15. On the other side of the Atlantic, Dominique Viart employs the term “fictions critiques” in “Le Moment critique de la littérature” 29-31. Motte describes the critical novel as a text that “is aware of the tradition that it has inherited, and [ . . . ] positions itself with regard to that tradition in a variety of manners; it puts its own ‘literariness’ into play for the benefit of readers who are attuned to that discursive gesture. It is also at least mildly avant-gardist in nature. It questions [ . . . ] prevailing literary norms; it puts commonplaces on trial through irony or parody; it seeks to adumbrate fresh possibilities; it asks us to rethink what the novel may be as a cultural form” (*Fiction Now* 15).

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of this development, see Jean-Yves Tadié’s introduction to the Pléiade edition of the *Recherche*, ix-cvii.

<sup>5</sup> Antoine Compagnon claims that Gide conceives of his novel “comme une synthèse de toutes les formes romanesques alors disponibles” (“La Littérature” 637), while Jean-Joseph Goux notes that *Les Faux-monnayeurs* “contains a novel of apprenticeship [ . . . ], a detective story [ . . . ], a *roman noir* [ . . . ], several loosely linked sentimental adventures [ . . . ], not to mention a quantity of sketchy secondary plots, [ . . . ] to which must be added the ‘Journal d’Édouard’” (“Mise en abyme” 876).

<sup>6</sup> For the classic study on this narrative device, the *mise en abyme*, see Lucien Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*.

<sup>7</sup> Of course, the “common man” has long been a source of fascination and inspiration for novelists. Think for example of Proust’s interest in the servant Françoise’s native patois (I: 122), or practically any volume of Émile Zola’s Rougon-Macquart cycle. In those cases, however, an outside observer describes the common man, while Céline’s novel is recounted entirely in Bardamu’s voice.

<sup>8</sup> For Barthes, “une écriture blanche” is one that is “libérée de toute servitude à un ordre marqué du langage” (*Degré* 59). Motte notes, however, that ideal state is short-lived, as “another sort of recuperation begins in *L’Étranger* itself [. . .], Camus’s attack on style, as Barthes points out, ultimately falls into the trap it has created and becomes a style of its own” (*Small* 26).

<sup>9</sup> Compagnon claims that “cette œuvre retrace le chemin de la parole vers le silence, de la volonté de dire au constat de sa vanité. Au bout, il n’y a plus ni lieux ni personnages, mais un monologue interminable allant vers un silence impossible” (*Littérature* 771).

<sup>10</sup> Robbe-Grillet states that “La seule conception Romanesque qui ait cours aujourd’hui est, en fait, celle de Balzac” (*Pour un nouveau roman* 17).

<sup>11</sup> For detailed discussions of the new novel and the evolution of *Tel Quel*, see Patrick Ffrench, *The Time of Theory: A History of Tel Quel (1960-1983)*; Heath, *The Nouveau Roman: A Study in the Practice of Writing*; Danielle Marx-Scouras, *The Cultural Politics of Tel Quel: Literature and the Left in the Wake of Engagement*; Ricardou, *Pour une théorie du nouveau roman*; and Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*.

## CHAPTER II

### **Love, Death, and Misdirection: Jean-Philippe Toussaint's Fictional Worlds**

Jean-Philippe Toussaint is an exemplary case with which to begin this study, for over the course of the last twenty-six years, his writing practice has evolved in ways that illuminate some of the central concerns facing the French novel today. The author of ten books, all published by the Éditions de Minuit, his recent novels represent a fascinating change from his earlier works.<sup>1</sup> His early novels are clearly influenced by the *nouveau roman*, yet over the course of time, Toussaint has adopted a variety of different narrative strategies, moving away from his minimalist beginnings. In his recent trilogy, *Faire l'amour* (2002), *Fuir* (2005), and *La Vérité sur Marie* (2009), Toussaint leaves behind the impassive narrators and denuded plots of his early novels for a baroque meditation on the venerable themes of Eros and Thanatos, as a tumultuous, passionate love story between an unnamed narrator and his lover Marie plays out against the backdrop of life in the globalized twenty-first century.

Toussaint began his career in 1985, with the publication of *La Salle de bain*. That slim novel was a breakout success, and served to establish Toussaint as one of the leading figures of a new generation of writers published by Minuit in the 1980s, alongside Jean Echenoz, Marie Redonnet, Éric Chevillard, Christian Oster, and Marie NDiaye, among others.<sup>2</sup> Up until that point, Minuit's renown derived largely from its publication of works by Samuel Beckett and the *nouveaux romanciers* Michel Butor, Marguerite Duras, Robert Pinget, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, and Claude Simon in the 1950s and 1960s. As it became increasingly clear in the 1980s that an important resurgence of the novel was underway, journalists and critics scrambled to come up with a new name to describe the emerging “génération de Minuit” (Schoots 16). Fieke Schoots notes the variety of different labels that critics sought to attach to

those writers: “le Nouveau Nouveau Roman; le renouveau romanesque inauguré par Minuit; la génération salle de bain; le roman minimal, auteurs ou romans minimalistes; romans impossibles” (16). As Schoots remarks, the sheer diversity of those labels and the fact that each critic assembles a different combination of authors under those various groupings points to the difficulty of describing a phenomenon while it is happening (15-21). Furthermore, while certain writers in the Minuit stable might display common themes or narrative strategies in their works, more often than not their novels differ quite significantly in their concerns. William Thompson points out that the *nouveaux romanciers* often bristled at being grouped together, and we should therefore be careful of forcing writers into boxes in which they don’t fit (8-9). While Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet wrote theoretical works, such as *L’Ère du soupçon* (1956) and *Pour un nouveau roman* (1963), outlining some of the principles underlying their literary practice, none of the new writers from Minuit have published literary manifestos. Although the heritage of the *nouveau roman* still looms large over the contemporary landscape, French writers today are generally suspicious of any grand claims about the novel.

In interviews, Toussaint has discussed the importance of the heritage of the earlier generation of Minuit writers:

Robbe-Grillet est une vraie influence pour moi. Je suis d'accord avec toutes ses théories sauf celle du personnage. Il faut des éléments de romanesque . . . La façon qu'avait Robbe-Grillet de déshumaniser le personnage ne me semble pas intéressante. On perd un rapport sensuel, émotif, quelque chose qui passe entre l'écrivain et le lecteur. Il ne faut pas que la littérature soit trop abstraite. Cela dit, je suis contre l'idée que le Nouveau Roman aurait fait du mal à la littérature

française [ . . . ]. Pour moi, les avant-gardes n'ont été en aucun cas un poids: une stimulation, plutôt. (Kaprièlian 1)

Like many examples of the *nouveau roman*, *La Salle de bain* challenges traditional expectations of narrative coherence and psychological depth. Writing about *La Salle de bain*, Warren Motte notes, “the little stories Toussaint tells question the very notion of narrative logic” (*Small Worlds* 70). While Toussaint’s first novel puts its formal structure on display very directly, the events depicted in the narrative are only tenuously connected. The novel is composed of one hundred seventy numbered fragments, divided into three sections, labeled “Paris,” “Hypoténuse,” and “Paris.” The sole epigraph is the Pythagorean theorem: “*Le carré de l'hypoténuse est égal à la somme des carrés des deux autres côtés*” (7). Motte points out that while the numbered segments do not actually conform to that theorem, “the formalist concerns that the epigraph announces are amply confirmed in the text: *La Salle de bain* is animated by concrete, formal geometries; by pleasantly quirky triangulations; and, more generally, by a concern for symmetry that is characteristic of minimalist writing as a genre” (*Small* 71). Those formal structures are submerged, however, and on a surface level, the plot seems arbitrary. Jean-Louis Hippolyte argues:

In Toussaint’s work the concept of the aleatory seems to inform much of the narrative peripeteia. Character’s decisions seem marked by indecision, as they do and say things apparently at random; go to foreign cities for no specific reason; stare at blank TV screens; sit in bathrooms, on beds, in picture booths, and on toilets for hours on end. (31-32)

Indeed, a significant portion of the *La Salle de bain*’s plot is a narrative of immobility, recounting the hesitancy of the unnamed narrator to leave his bathroom, a *locus amoenus* for his

musings on time and existence: “1) Lorsque j’ai commencé à passer mes après-midi dans la salle de bain, je ne comptais pas m’y installer; non, je coulais là des heures agréables, méditant dans la baignoire, parfois habillé, tantôt nu” (11). As far as gripping narratives go, we’ve seen stronger stuff. He does leave the bathroom eventually however, embarking unexpectedly and with no explanation on a journey to Venice, only to sequester himself in a hotel room, where he occupies himself principally by orchestrating elaborate one-man dart tourneys, eschewing more conventional touristic pursuits.

The narrator is not a socially marginalized figure, as he takes pains to note: “Dans un passé récent, exerçant en quelque manière la profession de chercheur, je fréquentais des historiens, des sociologues. J’étais l’assistant de T. qui présidait aux destinées d’un séminaire, j’avais des étudiants, je jouais au tennis” (21-22). Nevertheless, his existence within the pages of the novel is closely circumscribed. Motte remarks:

The principal technique used is that of reduction: reduction of stage (the bathroom *is* the world, or at least the only pertinent world); reduction of intrigue, of action (the narrator dwells far longer on the act of shaving, for instance, than on his trip from Paris to Venice); reduction of narrative form (studied flatness of narration, simple declaration, little or no explanation or modification). (*Small* 73)

As Motte points out, one of the principal effects of that technique of reduction is an “impression of concentration” within the remaining narrative elements, a phenomenon that “is heightened by iterative effects of various kinds” (74). The plot is organized by patterns of iteration that reveal themselves in different ways. On the most basic level, the narrator starts off in his bathroom in Paris, travels to Venice, and then finally returns to Paris—and to his bathroom—at the end. Although the final sentence of the novel is “Le lendemain, je sortais de la salle de bain” (123),

Motte points out that the sense of closure suggested by those words is illusory, for we have heard them before in the text, almost verbatim, which implies “that the narrator’s final act, which should by all rights be definitive, is on the contrary progressive, recurrent, habitual” (*Small* 75). The recursive ending of *La Salle de bain* mocks narrative closure, and Hippolyte argues that reading the novel in a loop, without stopping at the end, “is clearly one of the reading strategies suggested by Toussaint” (60).

That strategy of recursion manifests itself in Toussaint’s works in a variety of ways. Most apparently, certain images and themes return throughout his novels. Structurally, his narratives are characterized by series of repetitions and echoes, both in terms of the narration and in the events portrayed. At the same time, over the course of his career, Toussaint takes evident pleasure in his evolution as an author, consciously seeking to break new ground in his fiction. In an interview that appears in 1994, when he had published just four novels, he claims already, “D’ailleurs, en continuant à écrire, je perturbe les hypothèses des spécialistes qui travaillent sur mes textes. [. . .] Et c’est très bien comme cela; en tant qu’écrivain, je suis là pour bousculer les choses et ne pas entrer dans une moule” (Ammouche-Kremers “Entretien” 27). It is clear that in his most recent novels, Toussaint seeks to widen the scope of his fictional worlds. While the narrators of *La Salle de bain* and *L’Appareil-photo* might head off on a brief excursion from Paris to Milan, or perhaps Venice, in the trilogy formed by *Faire l’amour*, *Fuir*, and *La Vérité sur Marie*; the narrator and his lover Marie travel from Paris to Tokyo, to Kyoto, to Elba, to Shanghai, to Beijing, and then back again.

In fact, it would be more accurate to say that in his recent works, Toussaint both widens and *deepens* the scope of his fictional worlds. While the protagonists of his early novels may share “striking mutual affinities” (Motte, *Small* 70), the unnamed narrator of each volume of the

trilogy is clearly and unequivocally the same character.<sup>3</sup> The narrator's lover Marie, an internationally renowned fashion designer, also appears throughout the trilogy, and the three separate novels all recount a shared series of events. Speaking of the first two novels in the series, Jordan Stump points out that although each volume is self-contained and can be read on its own, with no knowledge of the other, there is an "implied invitation" to read the novels together, which reveals a "complex set of interactions, correspondences, and divergences, and an intriguing meditation on the subject of endings, in life and especially in literature" ("Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Unfinished" 104). The third novel extends and deepens the meditation begun in the first two volumes, as Toussaint elaborates a gripping, *romanesque* tale of passion, love, and jealousy while maintaining a rigorous concern with structure and form.

A comparison of the incipits from one early novel and one more recent one demonstrates Toussaint's evolution as he moves away from ludic anti-plots in search of "une énergie romanesque pure" (Desplechin 1). In the first lines of *L'Appareil-photo*, from 1988, the narrator declares:

C'est à peu près à la même époque de ma vie, vie calme où d'ordinaire rien n'advenait, que dans mon horizon immédiat coïncidèrent deux évènements qui, pris séparément, ne présentaient guère d'intérêt, et qui, considérés ensemble, n'avaient malheureusement aucun rapport entre eux. Je venais en effet de prendre la décision d'apprendre à conduire, et j'avais à peine commencé de m'habituer à cette idée qu'une nouvelle me parvint par courrier: un ami perdu de vue [...] me faisait part de son mariage. Or, s'il y a une chose dont j'ai horreur, personnellement, c'est bien les amis perdus de vue. (7)

Throughout this paragraph, Toussaint systematically subverts our expectations about what novels typically offer their readers. Calm lives where nothing ordinarily happens are perhaps common enough in daily existence, but in principle they do not make for intriguing novels. The reader might gain a bit of hope at the mention of not one, but two events that could potentially change that state of affairs, only to have those hopes dashed before the sentence even ends, as the narrator assures us that those events are neither worthy of our interest, nor even connected. That assertion seems to fly in the face of our most basic assumptions about what sorts of stories are worthy of being told. If Gerald Prince notes that “Much fiction derives some of its force [...] from making narratively interesting what is commonly viewed as entirely lacking in interest” (*Narrative as Theme* 29-30), he points out elsewhere that readers typically have certain expectations about “what is sometimes called reportability or tellability (what makes a narrative worth telling, interesting, appealing in a given context)” (“Revisiting Narrativity” 31). Almost denuded of context, as it is only the second sentence of the text, the narrator’s decision to learn how to drive does not seem like a particularly compelling *raison d’être* for an entire novel. Despite the narrator’s claim that it too is uninteresting, the story of the long-lost friend who just got married may pique the reader’s interest a bit more. The reader may be curious about the shared history between the narrator and that friend—why does the narrator react so strongly to the news? The narrator passes quickly over the decision to learn how to drive, and seems to linger over the long-lost friend. It is surprising then, to turn the page and read the next sentence: “Ainsi, un matin, me suis-je présenté aux bureaux d’une école de conduite” (8). The following seven pages are devoted to the narrator’s activities as he prepares to begin taking driving lessons, an activity that eventually takes up a significant portion of the novel. The long-lost friend who

got married? He's never heard from again. Clearly enough, Toussaint has other things in mind than capturing the reader's attention through conventional plotting.

While Toussaint employs a deft strategy of bait-and-switch in the incipit of *L'Appareil-photo*, the first lines of *Faire l'amour* snap the reader to attention:

J'avais fait remplir un flacon d'acide chlorhydrique, et je le gardais sur moi en permanence, avec l'idée de le jeter un jour à la gueule de quelqu'un. Il me suffirait d'ouvrir le flacon, [ . . . ] de viser les yeux et de m'enfuir. [ . . . ] Je me sentais curieusement apaisé depuis que je m'étais procuré ce flacon de liquide ambré et corrosif, qui pimentait mes heures et acérait mes pensées. Mais Marie se demandait, avec une inquiétude peut-être justifiée, si ce n'était pas dans mes yeux à moi, dans mon propre regard, que cet acide finirait. Ou dans sa gueule à elle, dans son visage en pleurs depuis tant de semaines. Non, je ne crois pas, lui disais-je [ . . . ]. Non, je ne crois pas, Marie, et, de la main, sans la quitter des yeux, je caressais doucement le galbe du flacon dans la poche de ma veste. (11-12)

The threat of violence contained in the first sentence grabs the reader's attention and immediately raises a number of questions. Why would someone do such a thing for no apparent reason? The mention of "Marie" raises even more questions: who is she? Why has she been crying? Why is she worried that the narrator might last out at her? The reader might well share her concern, for the narrator's reassurance that she is not the intended target is far from comforting, his words belied by his fetishistic caress of the vial.<sup>4</sup> The presence of the acid permeates even the language the narrator uses. While he describes the hydrochloric acid as "sharpening his thoughts," the verb he uses, *acérer*, is etymologically linked to terms referring to acid, such as *acescent*, an adjective referring to that "Qui s'aigrit, devient acide" (*Petit Robert*

22). The vial of acid is analogous to Chekov's gun on the wall. Once it is introduced, the reader expects it to figure in the action of the story. While the narrator of *L'Appareil-photo* introduces his long-lost friend only to drop the subject entirely, the narrator of *Faire l'amour* returns to the vial of hydrochloric acid throughout the text.<sup>5</sup> His frequent references to the vial, and the threat of violence it represents, impel the reader to keep reading. While the narrator of *L'Appareil-photo* calmly assures us that his tale will contain little material of conventional narrative interest, with just the title and the first sentence of *Faire l'amour*, Toussaint conjures the promise of sex and violence, Eros and Thanatos, guarantors of narrative intrigue since time immemorial.

The threat of violence seems both shockingly immediate and strangely diffuse. While the narrator constantly thinks about the vial and the potential it represents, his seeming indifference as to the target of the acid—"someone's face"—makes his desire harder to read. Marie's concern that the acid represents a threat to the narrator himself rears its head in an intriguing mirror scene:

De mon visage dans le noir n'émergeait que le regard, mes yeux fixes et intenses qui me regardaient. Je me regardais dans le miroir et je songeais à l'autoportrait de Robert Mapplethorpe, où, du noir de ténèbres des profondeurs thanatéennes du fond de la photo n'émergeait, au premier plan, qu'une canne en bois précieux, avec un minuscule pommeau ciselé en ivoire, sculpté en tête de mort, auquel, sur le même plan, avec la même parfaite profondeur de champ, répondait comme en écho le visage du photographe qu'un voile de mort avait déjà recouvert. Son regard, pourtant, avait une expression de calme et de défi serein. Debout dans l'obscurité de la salle de bain, j'étais nu en face de moi-même, un flacon d'acide chlorhydrique à la main.

Et, peu à peu, la menace s'était précisée. (37-38)

Mapplethorpe is both dead and still present through his self-portrait.<sup>6</sup> In the photograph, the juxtaposition of the face of the artist and the death's head atop the cane captures that strange duality. The knowledge of death is immanent; Mapplethorpe seems to be contemplating his own annihilation, yet that ending is also deferred through the power of the image to capture a moment in time. The narrator's self-identification with Mapplethorpe suggests his anxiety about existence, and the "menace" he speaks of suggests a desire for self-annihilation.

At the same time, the narrator's reflection upon Mapplethorpe's art also points toward the narrator's desire to capture the reality of a moment in time through art. At that point in the novel, the narrator has already noted that he is describing a situation that has already taken place: "La même scène s'était reproduite à Tokyo il y a quelques semaines, mais nous nous séparions alors pour toujours" (12). He implies that they have already separated, yet he describes their lovemaking in great detail, trying to capture that moment through his narration, although he knows now—and in fact, knew then—that the end of their relationship was preordained: "Le jour même que Marie me proposa de l'accompagner au Japon, je compris qu'elle était prête à brûler les dernières réserves amoureuses dans ce périple" (24). As Jordan Stump points out, however, that "pour toujours" is immediately questioned ("Unfinished" 105-106). Just after claiming that, "à Tokyo, nous avions fait l'amour [ . . . ] pour la dernière [fois]," the narrator goes on to state, "Mais combien de fois avions-nous fait l'amour ensemble pour la dernière fois? Je ne sais pas, souvent. Souvent..." (16). Stump argues, "In short, Toussaint seems to work quite deliberately to remove every trace of a conclusion from this end-of-the-affair tale. Or rather: the end of the affair is always there, looming, and at the same time always fading" ("Unfinished" 106).

That already present knowledge of the impending breakup suggests another possible interpretation of “la menace.” While it initially seems to refer to the narrator as he contemplates his own mortality, two pages later, the narrator seems to come to his senses, disoriented, hovering above a slumbering Marie’s nude body: “Mais où étais-je? [. . .] Étais-je revenu dans la chambre? J’étais assis à côté d’elle, le flacon d’acide chlorhydrique ouvert à la main. Et c’était ça qui puait, l’odeur âcre de l’acide” (40-41). The narrator flees the room, but his distress remains:

Plusieurs images de cauchemar me hantaient, fragments de visions récentes qui surgissaient dans des éclairs fugitifs de ma conscience, fulgurances hallucinées qui se déchiraient dans des éblouissements de rouges et d’ombres noires: moi nu dans les ténèbres de la salle de bain qui jetais de toutes mes forces l’acide chlorhydrique à la gueule du miroir pour ne plus voir mon regard, ou moi encore, plus calme et beaucoup plus inquiétant, le flacon d’acide chlorhydrique à la main, regardant le corps dénudé de Marie. (42)

The extreme tension and the sense of alienation that pervades that extended scene is almost instantaneously relieved in the next moment in the text, as the narrator contemplates Tokyo—and the universe that contains it—from the pool on the top floor of his hotel:

J’avais le sentiment de nager au cœur même de l’univers, parmi des galaxies presque palpables. [. . .] Je nageais comme en apesanteur dans le ciel, respirant doucement en laissant doucement en laissant mes pensées se fondre dans l’harmonie de l’univers. J’avais fini par de se déprendre de moi, mes pensées procédaient de l’eau qui m’entourait, elles en étaient l’émanation, elles en avaient l’évidence et la fluidité, elles s’écoulaient au gré du temps qui passe [. . .], et je

pensais, mais c'est déjà trop dire, non, je ne pensais pas, je faisais maintenant corps avec l'infini des pensées, j'étais moi-même le mouvement de la pensée, j'étais le cours du temps. (51-52)

That oscillation between states of tension and moments of relief structures the rhythm of all three novels, and is thematized throughout by scenes of the narrator and Marie's interrupted lovemaking. Sexuality is relatively unproblematic in the earlier novels: when his companion wishes to make love, the narrator of *La Salle de bain* notes, "J'ôtai mon pantalon pour lui être agréable" (19). In the trilogy, the sexual connection between the narrator and Marie is central to their relationship, yet the physical act is often a battleground. In *Faire l'amour*, the narrator describes their lovemaking as "une jouissance délétère, incandescente et solitaire, douloureuse comme une longue brûlure et tragique comme le feu de la rupture que nous étions en train de consommer" (33). Rather than a union of two bodies, "notre bras-le-corps était devenu cette lutte de deux jouissances parallèles, non plus convergentes mais opposées, antagonistes [ . . ]. Et, à mesure que l'étreinte durait, que le plaisir sexuel montait en nous comme de l'acide, je sentais croître la terrible violence sous-jacente de cette étreinte" (33-34). The narrator suggests that if he and Marie had been able to bring their lovemaking to its natural conclusion, their tension would have dissolved, perhaps saving their relationship, but such is not the case (34). The release promised by their lovemaking is systematically deferred, and Stump notes that such a moment occurs in the beginning of both *Faire l'amour* as well as *Fuir*: "Each opening is thus headed toward an act of love—and of course the act of love itself is by its nature headed toward a conclusion—but in both novels that act is abruptly halted (and that conclusion prevented)" ("Unfinished" 106). He points out that those two moments are significant, for they reflect a larger phenomenon at work in each text, as "Each of these novels [ . . ] has a complex

and seemingly contradictory relationship with its own ending, and with the idea of the end” (“Unfinished” 106).

The narrator’s description of their sexual pleasure as “acid” links the title to the threat of violence announced in the incipit, reinforcing the themes of Eros and Thanatos as the engines of narrative potential within the text. The narrator and Marie initiate sexual encounters on multiple occasions throughout the text, but those acts never come to fruition. Similarly, the narrator’s constant mentions of the vial of acid keep heightening the tension associated with that plot thread, which is only resolved on the final page of the novel. Toussaint ratchets up the tension in the final pages, crafting a harrowing moment where the narrator fantasizes yet again about throwing the acid in Marie’s face:

Ce ne fut pas à proprement parler une hallucination, car la scène eut lieu en dehors de toute représentation visuelle, mais dans un registre purement mental, dans un éclair fugitif de la conscience, comme si j’appréhendais la scène d’un seul coup sans en développer aucune des composantes potentielles, de fulgurance du bras et de forme fuyante et tombant sur le sol, d’affreuses odeurs de fumées et de chairs brûlées, de cris et de bruits de fuite éperdue sur le parquet du musée, scène qui restait en quelque sorte prisonnière de la gangue d’indécidabilité des infinies possibilités de l’art et de la vie. (177)

While the narrator claims that it surpasses the limits of visual representation, he nevertheless evokes the scene through language. It is an ultimately cathartic moment for the narrator—the final evocation of the horror releasing him from the necessity of turning fantasy into reality. Actually throwing the acid into Marie’s face is an impossible act for the narrator—it would represent a closure that seems destined to be forever deferred. At the same time, the

representation of such a scene is a necessity, in a sense, for Toussaint. The acid is begging to be thrown; it is as if the moment itself needed to find its place in the text, whether in the “reality” of the text or through its symbolic release through art. In the contract Toussaint implicitly sketches out for his reader, he cannot introduce the vial of acid without it ending up tossed in someone’s face. As we will see through an examination of *La Vérité sur Marie*, the “undecidability” of art and life emerges as a major theme throughout the trilogy, and presenting the horrific scene as a phantasm of the narrator reinforces a reading of the trilogy as the expression of the narrator’s obsession. In any case, with that evocation of the violence of the act intact on the page, the acid has done its work, the reader has made it to the end of narrative, and the tension can finally be released. In the final lines of the novel, the narrator empties the vial of acid on a flower, “une fleur sauvage”:

sans faire un pas de plus, las, brisé, épuisé, pour en finir, je vidai le flacon d’acide chlorhydrique sur la fleur, qui se contracta d’un coup, se rétracta, se recroquevilla dans un nuage de fumée et une odeur épouvantable. Il ne restait plus rien, qu’un cratère qui fumait dans la faible lumière du clair de lune, et le sentiment d’avoir été à l’origine de ce désastre infinitésimal. (179)

The narrator gives voice here to the narrative itself, which can go no further. Spilling the acid onto a flower is both a fulfillment of the promise made in the incipit, as well as a subversion of that promise. The narrator uses the acid, but not in the way the reader might have expected. As in his earlier novels, Toussaint is still engaged in challenging traditional conceptions of narrative closure. At the same time, the destruction of the flower does constitute the end of that particular narrative—if not the end of the narrator and Marie’s story, as we learn in the later volumes—and the annihilation of the flower is highly symbolic. At least since *Le Roman de la rose*, the flower

has stood as an overdetermined symbol for love or for the beloved. Stump notes that the ending of *Faire l'amour* can be read in many different ways, depending on our interpretation of what the flower might mean:

Does it perhaps stand for Marie? For the couple's relationship? If so, we might conclude that their love is well and truly over. Then again, perhaps we should be thinking less of the flower and more of the narrator's abandonment of his cherished acid, which might mean a renunciation of fear and defensiveness, and so a renewed ability to love. There is perhaps a kind of conclusion here, but we have no way of knowing what it is. ("Unfinished" 105)

Stump points out that that refusal to end things is central to the relationship between *Faire l'amour* and *Fuir* ("Unfinished" 105-06). The latter novel begins with the question, "Serait-ce jamais fini avec Marie?" (11). Although it was published three years after *Faire l'amour*, *Fuir* recounts a series of events in the narrator and Marie's relationship chronologically anterior to the events of the first novel. Therefore, even though the narrator and Marie seem headed toward reconciliation at the end of *Fuir*, our knowledge of their subsequent rupture, recounted in the preceding novel, complicates that theoretical closure: "having read *Faire l'amour*, we know that the narrator's renewed love for Marie won't last long" (Stump, "Unfinished" 105).

Both *Fuir* and *La Vérité sur Marie* complicate and enrich our understanding of the events of the first novel, and as Stump notes, although each novel is self-contained, reading them together reveals a dense network of thematic and stylistic resonances and echoes, in complex and often paradoxical relationships "of opposition, or parallelism, and even of tangency or intersection" ("Unfinished" 108). The underlying iterative patterns that served to organize the individual earlier works are now free to extend themselves across all three volumes of the

trilogy, as the later novels weave themselves in and around the narrative structures set in place in *Faire l'amour*. While Toussaint's early novels bear the mark of Robbe-Grillet, *Faire l'amour*, *Fuir*, and *La Vérité sur Marie* seem to take inspiration from an earlier novelist, Marcel Proust. In their insistence on returning to the past, their obsession with filling in the gaps of the story, in their use of absence as a narrative motor, the affiliation with Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* seems clear, particularly the section of the *Recherche* that scholars refer to as the “roman d'Albertine.” It is important to note that that affiliation is a tensive one, however, fraught with irony. While the story of Albertine is but a part of the much larger edifice of the *Recherche*, in Toussaint's trilogy, the narrator's obsession with Marie *is* the story, period.

In *Albertine disparue*, the narrator thinks back on his relationship with Albertine following her death. Obsessed with her absence, the narrator attempts to reconstruct her story, to fill in the gaps in his knowledge about her. The so-called “roman d'Albertine” is sometimes criticized by scholars who feel that it breaks the unity of the *Recherche* as it was originally conceived, but I'd like to consider it here as a fascinating example of the power of narrative to ramify almost endlessly.<sup>7</sup> After reading *La Vérité sur Marie*, one has the sense that as is the case with Proust's *Recherche*, Toussaint has hit upon an almost infinitely expandable narrative structure that allows him to move back and forward through time and space as the narrator contemplates his relationship with his beloved. Significantly, it is primarily her absence—or the narrator's knowledge of their imminent rupture—that provides the impetus for the narrator's constructions. Throughout the entire trilogy, Marie is often asleep, unconscious, indisposed, or physically separated from the narrator. The moments when they are together, however, vibrate with passion and potentiality, as the narrator describes at one point in *La Vérité sur Marie*:

nous avons vécu là de merveilleux moments de complicité et de tendresse silencieuses, [ . . . ] dans un état de suspension du temps extraordinairement dynamique, un rien, un vide potentiellement chargé d'une énergie invisible qui semblait pouvoir exploser à tout moment, un rien constamment nourri par de nouveaux éléments, épars, minuscules, anodins, qui survenaient à intervalles réguliers pour relancer la tension. (41-42)

Their explosive relationship serves as the core of the narrative potential of the entire trilogy, almost infinitely expandable through the introduction of new narrative elements that heighten the tension, whose release is then almost always systematically deferred. The “state of suspension of time” is the space of memory, given voice through narration, that makes the relationship constantly available, as the narrator is free to return to any moment in the relationship that he wishes to conjure.

The narrator knows a great deal more than we do, as Stump points out, for “the curious relationship between each novel’s events and the moment of their narration” is deliberately left unclear (“Unfinished” 106). In *Faire l’amour*, the narrator speaks of the events as taking place a few weeks earlier (12), and while he situates the action of *Fuir* during “L’été précédent notre séparation” (11), it is irresolvable whether the moment of narration is meant to be the same in both novels. In *La Vérité sur Marie*, the first events of the novel take place “plus de deux mois” after *Faire l’amour* (44), only to jump back analeptically in the second section to the exact time of the first novel, and then leaping forward proleptically in the final section to “un an” after the death of Marie’s father, which was recounted in *Fuir* (153). The ambiguous status of the narration—the narrator opens the text with the simple deictic “Plus tard, en repensant aux heures

sombres de cette nuit caniculaire” (11)—is then layered on top of the chronological mobility of the diegesis.

The narrator’s epistemological relationship to the events portrayed in the novel is perhaps even more intriguing than his ambiguous relationship to time. *La Vérité sur Marie* begins with a realization by the narrator: “je me suis rendu compte que nous avions fait l’amour au même moment, Marie et moi, mais pas ensemble” (11). The narrator follows that sentence with an intimately detailed description, twenty-four pages long, of a night of love between Marie and a certain “Jean-Christophe de G.” (35). It seems hard to conceive, to say the least, that the narrator could have access to such a detailed scene. How, for example, could he know that “Jean-Christophe de G. était nu à la fenêtre de l’appartement de la rue de La Vrillière, et il regardait la nuit avec cette inquiétude diffuse qui lui oppressait la poitrine”? (17). The fact that Jean-Christophe dies later that night, from a heart attack, could explain the narrator’s evocation of the feeling in his chest, but the degree of precision in the rest of the description boggles the imagination.

The narrator does have an eye for detail, as we discover when he walks into Marie’s apartment and notices Jean-Christophe’s shoes: “C’était la seule trace qui demeurait de la présence de l’homme dans la pièce. [ . . . ] [Des] chaussures italiennes allongées, élégantes, puissantes [ . . . ], l’empeigne veloutée, légèrement pelucheuse, étayée de multiples petites perforations décoratives qui soulignaient discrètement la ligne surpiquée des coutures” (45). If the narrator seems to put himself figuratively in Jean-Christophe’s shoes, embroidering his story from the embellishment on the footwear, we realize that the same principle of substitution animated his earlier description of his rival at the window, for he too once stood at the same

window, looking out on the city in the middle of the night (41). The key to the narrator's description in the first part of the novel reveals itself in another small detail, a bottle of grappa:

il y avait une inconvenance dans la présence de cette bouteille de grappa cette nuit dans la chambre, une impudeur, une indécence foncière, car, m'étant aperçu de la présence de la bouteille de grappa, je ne pouvais plus ignorer maintenant qu'elle avait bu de la grappa cette nuit en compagnie de Jean-Christophe de G., et, dès lors [...] je pouvais imaginer ce qui s'était passé entre eux dans la chambre. [...] [Cette] bouteille de grappa était le détail tangible à partir duquel je pourrais imaginer ce qu'elle avait vécu, [...] je pourrais reconstituer tout ce qui s'était passé entre eux dans la chambre [...], j'étais désormais en mesure de combler le vide de ce qui s'était passé cette nuit dans l'intervalle, et de reconstituer, de reconstruire ou d'inventer, ce que Marie avait vécu en mon absence. (51-52)

Conjuring a wealth of detail from a minuscule telltale feature, his claim that he can "reconstituer" or "reconstruire" a series of past events makes him appear as a Sherlock Holmes figure. The final verb, "inventer," however, suggests a different story, and the narrator now appears to be channeling the jealous narrator of Proust's *Recherche*, the tiniest detail sufficient to give rise to a towering obsession. While Proust's narrator hires an agent, Aimé, to track down the details of Albertine's possible liaisons, Toussaint's narrator employs a more prosaic—and modern—strategy to learn what he can about Jean-Christophe, researching the details of the dead man's life on the Internet (72).

Jean-Christophe may be dead, but he does not disappear from the narrative, quite to the contrary. The narrator attempts to reconstruct the final months of Jean-Christophe's life, particularly as it relates to his liaison with Marie (72-73). In addition to his online searches, the

narrator presses Marie for details about her former lover, and his quest to learn more becomes an obsession:

Parfois, à partir d'un simple détail que Marie m'avait confié, qui lui avait échappé ou que j'avais surpris, je me laissais aller à échafauder des développements complets, déformant à l'occasion les faits, les transformant ou les exagérant, voire les dramatisant. [ . . . ] Je me trompais peut-être parfois sur Jean-Christophe de G., mais jamais je ne me trompais sur Marie, je savais en toutes circonstances comment Marie se comportait, je savais comment Marie réagissait, je connaissais Marie d'instinct, j'avais d'elle une connaissance infuse, un savoir inné, l'intelligence absolue: je savais la vérité sur Marie. (73-74)

The narrator's desire to reconstruct "the truth about Marie" takes its most startling turn in the second section of the novel, when, after stating "basta avec moi maintenant," he disappears for sixty-four pages, clearing the stage for Marie, Jean-Christophe de G., and a horse named Zahir. The narrator recounts the moment when Marie and Jean-Christophe meet, in Tokyo, at Marie's gallery opening, an event first presented in *Faire l'amour*. Although the narrator is physically absent from the events he describes, his narration is astonishingly mobile. While he has already displayed his ability to get inside Marie's head, he also narrates a scene from the perspective of Zahir, Jean-Christophe's champion racehorse. As the narrator notes, the name of the horse appears in Cabala as well as a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, "le Zahir est cet être qui a la terrible vertu de ne jamais pouvoir être oublié dès lors qu'on l'a aperçu une seule fois" (106). If that symbol of obsession seems to be a clear reference to Marie's hold on the narrator's imagination, we should also consider that at the end of Borges's story, the narrator is no longer

able to distinguish fiction from reality, just as Toussaint's narrator perhaps wanders blissfully ever deeper into a labyrinth of his own making.

The narrator's absence from a large part of the novel becomes less surprising when we consider that distance and absence are necessary conditions for his narrative constructions. In *Albertine disparue*, Proust's narrator affirms, "Quand notre maîtresse est vivante, une grande partie des pensées qui forment ce que nous appelons notre amour nous viennent pendant les heures où elle n'est pas à côté de nous. Ainsi l'on prend l'habitude d'avoir pour objet de sa rêverie un être absent" (*Recherche* IV: 104). In a similar fashion, Toussaint's narrator explicitly states that Marie's absence provides the spur for his thoughts about her: "C'était comme si je prenais soudain conscience visuellement que, depuis quelques jours, j'avais disparu de la vie de Marie, et que je me rendais compte qu'elle continuait à vivre [...] en mon absence—and d'autant plus intensément sans doute que je pensais à elle sans arrêt" (147). Stump asserts that in *Fuir*, at times the narrator and Marie "seem almost literally to meld into one" ("Unfinished" 109). If anything, in *La Vérité sur Marie*, that phenomenon seems to become more pronounced, due to the intensity of the narrator's obsession: "Ou bien était-ce dans mon propre esprit que s'écoulaient maintenant les rêves de Marie, comme si, à force de penser à elle, à force d'invoquer sa présence, à force de vivre sa vie par procuration, j'en étais venu, la nuit, à imaginer que je rêvais ses rêves" (183-84).

The "truth about Marie" may exist only within the narrator's imagination. As he notes,

Je savais qu'il y avait sans doute une réalité objective des faits [...] mais que cette réalité me resterait toujours étrangère, je pourrais seulement tourner autour, l'aborder sous différents angles, la contourner et revenir à l'assaut, mais je buterais toujours dessus, comme si ce qui s'était réellement passé cette nuit-là

m'était par essence inatteignable, hors de portée de mon imagination et irréductible au langage. J'aurais beau reconstruire cette nuit en images mentales qui auraient la précision du rêve, j'aurais beau l'ensevelir de mots qui auraient une puissance d'évocation diabolique, je savais que je n'atteindrais jamais ce qui avait été pendant quelques instants la vie même, mais il m'apparut alors que je pourrais peut-être atteindre une vérité nouvelle, qui s'inspirerait de ce qui avait été la vie et la transcenderait, sans se soucier de vraisemblance ou de véracité, et ne viserait qu'à la quintessence du réel, sa moelle sensible, vivante et sensuelle, une vérité proche de l'invention, ou jumelle du mensonge, la vérité idéale. (165-66)

Like Proust's narrator, the narrator of Toussaint's trilogy seems to opt for art over life, yet we may wish to avoid pronouncing any final verdicts. Just as the narrative questions the notions of certainty and narrative closure, any reading of Toussaint's novels should recognize their mobility, their ability to jump back and forth, their ability to serve multiple ends at the same time. Stump points out that while his study offers a primarily formalist reading of *Faire l'amour* and *Fuir*, "there is absolutely no reason why Toussaint's novels must be read in [...] an abstract way" ("Unfinished" 110). He continues:

*Faire l'amour* and *Fuir* are also beautiful, complicated love stories, genuinely moving and convincing in their mapping out of the tortured terrain of human affection and disaffection. [...] [It] would be equally apposite to see in them a sort of reclaiming of emotion—delicate, troubled, noble and ignoble—as a possible preoccupation of the postmodern, post-*nouveau roman* novel.

("Unfinished" 110)

Stump's argument that Toussaint's novels can and should encourage multiple interpretations is a notion that Toussaint himself suggests in an interview with Martin Riker:

The difficult thing is to manage both to renew your writing while always writing the same book, all at once. I like the idea of doing both all at once, all at once black and white, hot and cold, not gray or lukewarm, but *both* hot and cold. That's what makes literature what it is (unlike politics, for instance): the simultaneous possibility of two opposite things, instead of a middle ground (gray, lukewarm). Such a juxtaposition of opposed extremes creates ambivalence and ambiguity, and that's another essential literary quality. (Riker 1)

In his continued search to renew his writing practice, Toussaint seeks to demolish the outdated notion that novels must be either “pleasurable” or “serious.” His novels are simultaneously one and the other. They pull the reader into a gripping fictional world, full of tears and sex, love and death, yet they also offer a sustained commentary on the construction of narrative, for readers alert to that level. While his early novels gently push back at the reader, challenging us to find interest in unusual stories, in his recent trilogy Toussaint plays lustily on the narrative potential of age-old themes. Even just the titles of his recent novels pull us in: *Faire l'amour?* Say no more. *Fuir?* Flee what? Why? *La Vérité sur Marie?* As Toussaint points out in an interview, “le terme ‘vérité’ implique le thème du secret,” and we naturally wish to learn what that secret is (Demoulin 1). Of course, as I have tried to show, what Toussaint promises is not always what he delivers, and although *La Vérité sur Marie* finally ends with a consummated act of love on the very last page, an act long-deferred throughout three volumes of their story, we would do well to consider that in Toussaint’s world, endings are not always what they seem.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Toussaint has published eight novels at Minuit: *La Salle de bain* (1985), *Monsieur* (1986), *L'Appareil-Photo* (1989), *La Réticence* (1991), *La Télévision* (1997), *Faire l'amour* (2002), *Fuir* (2005), and *La Vérité sur Marie* (2009). In addition to those novels, he has also published two other works that challenge traditional generic descriptions. *Autoportrait (à étranger)* (2000), is a book of travel vignettes that stretches the boundaries of what readers might expect to find in a theoretically autobiographical work, while *La Mélancholie de Zidane* (2006), is a very short philosophical essay about the French soccer player Zinédine Zidane, who headbutted an opponent during the 2006 World Cup Final.

<sup>2</sup> On the success of *La Salle de bain*, see Motte, *Small Worlds* 71, and Hippolyte 24.

<sup>3</sup> For a description of the early protagonists' shared features, see Hippolyte 25-30.

<sup>4</sup> The narrator's "caress" is echoed almost verbatim later in the text, when the narrator recalls the moment seven years earlier that Marie "était tombée amoureuse de [lui]," when he leaned over the table, "pour aller caresser le galbe de son verre" (20). If that nonverbal sign represented the start of their love, perhaps his caress of the vial of acid will represent the end.

<sup>5</sup> See 23, 37-38, 40-41, 42-43, and *passim*.

<sup>6</sup> The narrator is referring to Robert Mapplethorpe's *Self-portrait*, 1988.

<sup>7</sup> In her study *Proust's Deadline*, Christine M. Cano discusses the reception of the *Recherche*, noting that some critics "would call Proust's novel disproportionate, disharmonious, and even dysfunctional. The new site of this putative disorder was the 'roman d'Albertine'" (60).

## CHAPTER III

### The Clandestine Art of Resistance in Marie Redonnet's *Diego*

Marie Redonnet exemplifies the efforts of contemporary authors to come to terms with the legacy of the New Novel. There was a twenty-year gap between the peak of the New Novel and the first publications of several of the authors who interest me here. Referring to that gap, Jérôme Lindon, who published many of the New Novelists at Les Éditions de Minuit, surmised in an interview that “Il faut peut-être, après les grandes périodes de création, un trou, un vide, une distance qui permet à une nouvelle génération de se reconstituer librement” (Ammouche-Kremers 2-3). The legacy of the New Novel loomed large upon the novelistic landscape, and it took some time for a new generation of writers to emerge, bearing, in Warren Motte’s phrase, “novels displaying both a mixture of experimentalist features and a high degree of narrativity” (*Fables* 5). Redonnet’s early novels earned her a place at Minuit alongside writers such as Jean Echenoz, Jean-Philippe Toussaint, and Eric Chevillard in a wave of authors who made their literary debuts in the mid-1980s.<sup>1</sup> Of that generation of Minuit writers, Redonnet is the most clearly influenced by the works of Samuel Beckett and the New Novelists, and I will explore how she comes to terms with that literary heritage in order to find her own path. In her novels, Redonnet thematizes issues of personal, cultural, and literary heritage and transmission, constructing sites of mourning and renewal in inhospitable fictional worlds.

In her early works, Redonnet is deeply indebted to Beckett, as she typically practices a spare style characterized by its spatiotemporal indeterminacy. There are very few signposts to help the reader situate the action, and the few indicators that present themselves are either studiously vague or refer to sites found on no map. Her most recent novel, *Diego* (2005), breaks that mold with its depiction of a very recognizable twenty-first century Paris and the trials and

dangers faced by illegal immigrants [*clandestins*] who arrive there. Although this degree of specificity differentiates *Diego* from Redonnet's other novels, *Diego* in many ways builds upon Redonnet's earlier works, amplifying and developing some of her most distinctive themes, while striking off in a new direction, toward a more explicit sense of social and political engagement. That dimension has long been latent in her writing, and Redonnet's reconsideration of the potential of the *roman engagé* follows a sustained reevaluation of the writer's role in society, which manifests itself in a series of essays she published in the late 1990s.<sup>2</sup> During the same period, Redonnet published a book-length essay on Jean Genet, and her reading of Genet's work illuminates *Diego* as a potent response to the questions that have concerned her throughout her career.

Jean-Louis Hippolyte has described Redonnet's early works as "an elegy to contemporary literature" (*Fuzzy* 106), and her writings up through the mid-1990s confirm that assessment. Redonnet has written that "d'étape en étape, de réponse en réponse, mon œuvre a à résoudre une question, qui est sa question de fond: celle de l'héritage, du deuil et de son dénouement pour commencer une nouvelle histoire" ("Parcours" 490). The terms "héritage" and "deuil" must be considered here on a variety of levels, from the personal to the cultural to the literary. Throughout her works, Redonnet attempts to come to terms with her personal and familial history as well as the cultural history of French—and by extension, Western—society at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century. To respond to those concerns, she must also examine the literary tradition that she has inherited in order to create new forms that will prove adequate to the task. She describes that process as a "Question posée de façon urgente aux écrivains de ma génération conscients des enjeux de la Littérature comme de

l’Histoire: où il s’agit vraiment d’en finir (après en avoir fait le deuil) avec nos héritages pour s’affirmer autres et recommencer une nouvelle histoire de la littérature” (“Réponses” 46).

Redonnet’s attempt to create a new history of literature involves a systematic rejection of the conventions of the “bon vieux roman” (“Réponses” 45). That rejection plays out in a variety of ways. She writes in a terse, flat, non-metaphorical style; and her early works appropriate various infrequently practiced genres, such as the haiku and the fairy tale. In all of her works prior to *Diego*, Redonnet creates a very distinctive but amorphous literary time and space, largely free from spatiotemporal signposts. Those spaces, which are closer to those commonly found in myth or fairy tales, are populated by marginalized characters caught up in roles they cannot escape as they struggle against their oppressive heritages in an unforgiving world. I will investigate each of those characteristics briefly in turn, before examining how *Diego* serves to revitalize Redonnet’s own project of renewal.

Since it is one of the first things that strikes the reader, much has been written about Redonnet’s spare, flat style. Raymond Bellour associates it with Roland Barthes’s notion of an “écriture blanche” (55), while Hippolyte describes her writing as “unadorned and terse, rejecting both the flourishes of good style and the pyrotechnics of postmodernism” (109). Redonnet has written about her struggles in coming to terms with written language during her career as a writer, evoking what she describes as a “désaccord initial avec la langue [ . . . ]. Ce n’est sans doute pas par hasard que la langue à partir de laquelle mon écriture s’engendre est très pauvre, sur le plan lexical et syntaxique, et que la complexité de mon écriture doive se jouer sur un autre plan que ce qu’on appelle dans la tradition littéraire française le style” (“Redonne” 160). Of course, writing in a minimalist style is still a stylistic choice, and while Redonnet’s spare prose

may have little in common with the flourishes of Proust, it does have clear antecedents in works by Beckett and Camus, as well as similarities with more contemporary French writers.<sup>3</sup>

In his study on minimalism in contemporary French writing, Motte observes that “In Redonnet’s work [ . . . ] the deliberate renunciation of traditional compositional effects has the paradoxical result of drawing attention to the process of composition itself” (*Small* 85). Furthermore, “the purpose of the reductivist techniques is in fact an *amplification* of the artifact’s effect” (*Small* 86; emphasis in original). The systematic exclusion of any extraneous elements forces the reader to look more closely, to tease out the complex relationships of the elements at play just beneath the surface. As Motte notes, the process of composition comes to the fore, as Redonnet sustains “a relatively covert metadiscursive thread in her books, wherein [she] examines the *uses* of art. She invokes film, painting, music, photography, and so forth as stalking-horses for writing itself, commenting in that manner obliquely upon the very gesture that she herself is performing” (*Fiction* 56; emphasis in original). These more or less covert allusions to the process of writing are complemented by Redonnet’s more explicit discussions of her own writing practice in a series of essays published over the course of her career.

Over the last twenty-five years, Redonnet has experimented widely with different forms, exploring and appropriating a variety of literary genres. In discussing her writing, Redonnet has repeatedly returned to the foundational importance of her first book, *Le Mort & cie* (1985). In an essay from 2008 entitled “Parcours d’une œuvre,” she remarks that initially “La langue était devant moi comme un bloc qu’il me fallait fracturer, par minuscules éclats, pour faire advenir ma langue. Elle naquit par petits fragments sans lien narratifs les uns avec les autres” (490). Inspired by the poetic form of the haiku, she began to transform her “little fragments” into a series of three-line stanzas. At that point, however, Redonnet then had to “affronter l’expérience

inverse, le débordement, l'afflux des milliers de petits tercets—haïkus—qu'il me fallait coûte que coûte couper, couper, pour que l'écriture ne soit pas submergée, noyée, et que ne restent que les haïkus si rares où l'écriture se condensait dans sa plus grande intensité et pureté” (“Redonne” 161). Motte highlights the process of “distillation and condensation” that heightens the impact of what remains (*Small* 86), and indeed, the four hundred and fifty-six tercets of *Le Mort & cie* display in embryonic form the permutational arrangements of characters and thematic elements that ricochet and echo beneath the surface of the structures of all the books to follow.

Each successive work increases in complexity. *Doublures* (1986) offers twelve short stories populated by a dizzying array of characters named Lia, Lii, Gal, Gil, Gem, Gim, Sil, Sim, Lam, Lim, Nel, and Nil. These characters struggle with their heritages and their fates in a fairy tale-like setting. Yvette Went-Daoust maintains that “le recours à l'esthétique du merveilleux et au conte de fées comme moules fictionnels ne répond pas seulement à de simples affinités électives: l'œuvre s'y coule pour pervertir la rhétorique habituelle qui caractérise ces catégories” (387). Similarly, Hippolyte remarks that Redonnet successfully subverts the traditional gender hierarchy and narrative unity that characterize the typical *conte de fées*: “Choosing the fairy tale—a genre that has traditionally reinforced patterns of male authority—to articulate a new ‘feminine’ poetics, [. . .] was a rather unusual move, but one that allowed Redonnet to deconstruct and reconfigure her own ‘patrimony’” (120). Indeed, while certain elements of her early writings do hearken back to the folk or fairy tale, the creation of literary spaces located somewhere outside the usual grids of space and time provide a privileged space in which Redonnet can begin to come to terms with a host of pressing concerns.

The deceptive simplicity of the flat, affectless narration that characterizes Redonnet’s novelistic “triptych”—*Splendid Hôtel* (1986), *Forever Valley* (1986), and *Rose Mélie Rose*

(1987)—conceals intricate formal structures which lay just beneath the surface (“Redonne” 163).

In those three novels, issues of personal, cultural, and literary heritage come to the fore in a covert, allusive fashion. In terms of personal heritage, Redonnet has described how the triptych functions on one level as the story of “comment Martine L’Hospitalier est devenue Marie Redonnet” (“Redonnet” 339); that is to say, how she assumed her identity as a writer, after deciding to adopt her mother’s maiden name (Redonnet) in place of her father’s (L’Hospitalier).<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Fallaize claims “The transition to writing is thus also the transition from the patrilinear to the matrilinear” (“Filling” 320), and each novel of the triptych is narrated by a female voice. Although each narrator is a different character, in many ways they function as avatars of single female presence, in what Redonnet describes as “The history of a lost, mutilated, and prostituted femininity, which from one book to the next tries to win itself back by reinventing itself” (“Story” 119). Such a process of reinvention necessarily involves an engagement with the past and becomes the “projet personnel” of each of the three narrators (*Forever* 18). While the narrators of *Splendid Hôtel* and *Forever Valley* are largely unsuccessful in their attempts to come to terms with their pasts, Mélie, the narrator of *Rose Mélie Rose*, succeeds in creating a book that she will pass on to her infant daughter, Rose, to whom she gives birth at the end of the novel. Mélie’s book, which serves as a locus of reinvention and transmission, is composed of a “livre de légendes” (*Rose* 8), inherited from her adopted mother, also named Rose, into which Mélie inserts her own photos and captions, before finally inscribing it with her infant daughter’s name. That process of transmission is highlighted in the title *Rose Mélie Rose*, and serves as a “premier dénouement” to the triptych (“Parcours” 493).

While the guardedly optimistic ending of *Rose Mélie Rose* seemed to point the way toward the notion of a positive, transmissible heritage, the protagonists of Redonnet’s next three

novels labor in the attempt to bring that possibility into being. *Silsie* (1990), which can be read an “epilogue” to the triptych (“Interview” 108), features a woman adrift in an inhospitable world, struggling to reconstruct a past that continually eludes her. *Candy Story* (1992) and *Nevermore* (1994) strike off in new directions inspired by the detective novel and the *roman noir*, trading isolated hamlets and solitary narrators for settings in Paris and a fictionalized American West, densely populated by a host of writers, agents, politicians, bankers, filmmakers, and actresses. Despite references to Paris and other real-world locations, the settings are strangely dislocated, and the characters are seemingly caught up in a hall of mirrors as they seek new identities and struggle to escape their pasts. While the narrators of the triptych toil against obscure social and economic developments, the characters of *Candy Story* and *Nevermore* live in a world of contemporary media and market forces. Redonnet describes these novels as bearing the trace of a “recherche obscure et incertaine d’une autre voie, de cette volonté de conversion d’un temps dans un autre, d’une voix dans d’autres voix. Ils se situent dans un entre-deux douloureux, entre un deuil qui n’arrive pas à s’achever et qui fait blocage, et une volonté de s’en libérer et d’écrire des histoires du présent” (“Parcours” 495).

For Redonnet, the desire to write stories of the present moment necessarily requires a political engagement with contemporary issues. That commitment plays out in a variety of forms for Redonnet throughout the 1990s. In 1991, she writes that “Vouloir continuer d’écrire de la littérature en la renouvelant en fonction des nouvelles donnes de l’Histoire [...] contre un monde qui le menace de mort [...], c’est faire acte politique de résistance” (“Réponses” 48). Ruth Cruickshank describes Redonnet’s novel *L’Accord de paix* (2000) as an attempt to bring “the question of resistance to the fore” (500), and Cruickshank points toward a series of critical essays written by Redonnet that lead up to the publication of that novel. Motte in turn highlights

one article in particular, entitled “La Barbarie postmoderne,” in which Redonnet, beginning with a discussion the 1998 *affaire Houellebecq*,<sup>5</sup> “puts on display a new, reinvigorated model of the novel as a social gesture” (*Fiction* 39). In that essay, Redonnet laments the current state of the French novel, which has become commoditized by the media and powerless to resist “aux dérives de la société” (“Barbarie” 64). She posits a view of literature as a space of reinvention, of resistance, and of transmission, and issues a call to arms for authors to seek new ways to make their voices heard.

Shortly after the publication of “La Barbarie postmoderne,” Redonnet published a book-length essay entitled *Jean Genet: Le Poète travesti* (2000), which grew out of a doctoral thesis she defended in 1998. Although she describes her early perception of Genet as being “l’Autre, irréductiblement” (*Genet* 8), over the course of her study important affinities came to light. She writes:

Ce qui m’intéressait chez cet écrivain, c’était de s’être frayé seul, avec audace et défi, en marge des courants littéraires, un chemin qui rencontrait les questions que je me posais: le deuil d’une histoire (personnelle, sociale, historique) et la quête par la poésie d’un salut personnel; la tentative de donner voix à ceux qui n’ont pas de voix; une mise en procès de l’Occident et de la France [ . . . ]; une œuvre centrée sur la question de l’image, de la théâtralité et du pouvoir, une langue en perpétuelle métamorphose portée sur une quête à la fois poétique et politique.  
 (“Parcours” 495)

Redonnet’s reading of Genet illuminates *Diego* in important ways. For Redonnet, Genet’s marginality provides him with a privileged perspective from which to undermine the dominant ideology that surrounds him, through the power of writing to transform images and

confront history. Redonnet devotes a considerable portion of her study to Genet's final book, *Un Captif amoureux* (1986), which addresses Genet's engagement with the Black Panther Party and the Palestinian revolution. Significantly, she does not read that text only—or even primarily—as a political work; rather she examines the ways in which Genet utilizes the decision to write about the Palestinian revolution as a pretext for an examination of his own life. This in turn gives birth to a poetic quest to free himself from “la prison,” both literal and figurative, which haunted Genet throughout his life (*Genet* 11). Redonnet asserts that “La prison ruinée et la délivrance qu'elle accorde rendent possible une profonde transformation du poète. Le dernier jeu du ‘spontané simulateur’ est celui d'une naissance et d'une réconciliation” (*Genet* 309). At the same time, *Un Captif amoureux* is still very much a chronicle of Genet's experiences with the Black Panthers and the Palestinians, and the text serves as an act of remembrance and an act of witness. For Redonnet, that engagement with the real world is essential:

La modernité pionnière de Genet, c'est aussi de redonner du sens à l'expérience poétique en la branchant sur l'Histoire et en la reliant à une quête vitale.

L'aventure poétique de Genet ne peut se comprendre sans la question de la révolution qu'elle rencontre pour ne plus la lâcher. Même si l'issue révolutionnaire est un échec [ . . . ], la révolution, pensée comme mouvement poétique de contestation radicale de l'ordre existant, lui a permis de sortir de la fascination de la mort en ruinant sa prison. (*Genet* 319)

*Diego* can be read as Redonnet's poetic response to her study of Genet. In the novel, she explores the themes that run throughout her reading of Genet's works, giving voice to a protagonist who attempts to work through his own constricting past through a process of artistic creation.

After serving a twenty-year prison sentence for his revolutionary activities, the hero of the novel, Diego Aki, leaves his native Tamza, a fictional African country, for France, which he enters illegally in the hopes of remaking his life. As he attempts to make a place for himself in a generally inhospitable land, Diego examines his past and tries to imagine a way to fulfill his youthful dream of becoming a filmmaker. That is a forbidding task, to say the least, for Diego is largely without resources, and must rely on the assistance of a host of characters, all motivated by their own personal agendas. He is aware of the difficulties that he faces, for although he had lived “dans la clandestinité” in Tamza before his arrest, he knows that “pour un clandestin arrivant en France, sans argent et sans ami, le vie sera une épreuve” (8, 10). Motte takes note of the foundational importance of the repetition of the term *clandestin* in the first pages of the novel, and states that “More than anything else, that word *clandestin*, as Redonnet deploys it, designates the stranger, the foreigner, the ‘other’ who is characterized by his or her radical difference with regard to the social majority” (*Fiction* 46, emphasis in original). Motte goes on to observe that Diego’s social marginality paradoxically affords him a privileged position from which to observe society: “For any society defines itself differentially, distinguishing itself from everything that it is *not* in order to persuade itself of what it *is*. In that perspective, Diego the *clandestin* provides Redonnet with an acute lens through which to view French society, and to interrogate its norms from the outside in, as it were” (*Fiction* 46, emphases in original).

Although he is well placed as an observer, Diego is in turn acutely aware of the gaze of others, which he finds constricting. As was Genet, Diego has long been a marginalized figure, both in Tamza as well as in France. He remembers his childhood “malaise” caused by the absence of his father, whom he never knew (18-19), and reflecting upon his school days as “la brebis galeuse, le fils de pauvre qu’on avait accepté par charité,” he relives “la honte et la haine

qui ont empoisonné [sa] vie” (140-41). After his arrest by the Tamzan authorities, Diego found himself marginalized even in prison, separated from the other political prisoners and confined with ordinary criminals (24). In France, while sitting in an RER train filled with immigrants, Diego realizes that although he is wearing “les mêmes vêtements” as the other passengers, he feels apart from them: “Est-ce que je leur ressemble? Je ne sais même plus à quoi je ressemble, comme si j'avais perdu mon image” (20). Diego’s struggle to find his own identity, to reappropriate his image, and to find his place in the world will emerge as one of the central conflicts of the novel. Upon his arrival in Loisy, a suburb of Paris, Diego promptly discovers that although he may feel that his identity is ill defined, this is not the case for others. His acquaintance Amid informs him that, “Pour les gendarmes de Loisy, un clandestin qui débarque de Tamza est un terroriste ou un ami des terroristes. C'est leur obsession. Ils en voient partout” (22). Diego has long renounced the use of violence for political aims, but his previous identity as an armed revolutionary shadows him throughout the novel in his dealings with various characters. Diego’s past is inescapable, and he must address it before he is able to move forward with his life. As Motte puts it, “Ultimately, his story will play out one of the oldest lessons that Western civilization provides, the *gnōthi seauton*: in order to come to terms with the world, it is first necessary to come to terms with the self” (*Fiction* 47).

Diego’s self-examination not only conjures old injuries, it also reveals new desires that surprise him with their immediacy. In Tamza, Diego was deeply in love with a woman named Ama, who fled the country during his imprisonment. In Loisy, however, Diego is surprised to realize that he is attracted to another man for the first time, a fellow *clandestin* named Mateo. When they eventually make love, Diego describes it as “une expérience bouleversante. Nous jouissons ensemble longtemps, sans nous retenir. Mateo m'a donné une autre jouissance que

celle qu’Ama m’avait donnée, une jouissance qui me libère et me rend ma fierté d’être un homme” (77). Scenes of sexual initiation occur frequently in Redonnet’s novels, but this scene is quite distinct from those found in earlier novels. In her other novels, the protagonists’ sexual encounters are frequently disconcerting, all the more so because they are recounted in the flattest of tones.<sup>6</sup> In this case, however, the recurrence of the word “jouissance” and the feelings of freedom and pride that result from this encounter point toward a notion of sexual fluidity as a liberating force with the potential to escape limiting boundaries and constricting definitions.

His conception of his sexual identity is transformed even more significantly during an encounter with Marylin, a prostitute at the brothel Hôtel du Nord where Diego finds employment:

Je ferme les yeux et je me donne à elle comme si j’étais un homme dans les bras d’une femme en train de se métamorphoser en homme alors que moi je me métamorphose en femme. Marylin, c’est comme la chaussure de Cendrillon que j’aurais perdue. Elle est juste à mon pied. [ . . . ] C’est une expérience unique qui remet en question ce que j’ai été jusqu’à maintenant. (105)

In fact, Marylin is a man dressed as a woman, as are all the transvestite prostitutes at the Hôtel du Nord, and Diego’s experience of sexual metamorphosis and Cinderella-like transformation reflects Marylin’s extraordinary capacity to blur categories and shift identities. Her presence and her performance call to mind the character Divine from Jean Genet’s first novel, *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* (1944). In Redonnet’s reading, Divine exemplifies artifice and theatricality, transforming the world around her with the force of her creation. A similar transformation occurs with Marylin and her associates, manifesting itself initially in language, as Diego muses

to himself, “Mais pourquoi est-ce que je dis ils en parlant d’elles?” (96). Similarly, for Redonnet:

C’est d’abord dans la langue que Divine sème le plus grand désordre. Genet dit elle en parlant de Divine: elle, c’est lui. Tout est contaminé par ce brouillage pronominal. Nos plus sûrs repères sont de faux repères. [ . . ] La théâtralité et l’artifice, poussés à la limite, décollent et deviennent poésie. [ . . . ] [Divine] s’est créée poétiquement, à force de travestissement et de jeu. (*Genet* 52-53)

As does Divine, the prostitutes at the Hôtel du Nord revel in theatricality and play in an attempt to transform their reality. At first glance, they represent a sampling of the globally dispossessed, hailing from a variety of locales in war-torn or developing countries. Their profession marginalizes them still further, yet they take refuge in the brothel, which provides a privileged space for their performances. Each one adopts the name and costume of a favorite actress, which they then swap amongst themselves: “Chacune emprunte à l’autre ses robes, ses accessoires et même son accent, son vocabulaire et ses rôles. Elles jouent à se ressembler afin que les clients les confondent, ou à échanger leur surnom afin de créer la pagaille” (98).

According to Marylin, however, that activity is much more than a game. For her, it is a response to the tragedy of her circumstances, “Jouer à changer de sexe est sa façon de répondre au drame de sa vie, de se moquer de la vie, tout le temps. Il n’y a que ça à faire, dit-elle, brouiller les cartes et dérégler le jeu” (99). Marylin’s invocation of “les cartes” and “le jeu” echoes Redonnet’s essay “Redonne après maldonne,” in which she refers to “le jeu de l’écriture” which allows her to reshuffle and transform “les cartes de [la] vie” (161-162). It becomes clear, however, that unlike Redonnet’s *écriture* and unlike Divine’s transformation of theatricality and artifice into poetry, Marylin’s performance is a limited response, a desperate attempt to make do

with what she has. Although she is skilled at manipulating images to deflect her real identity and the burden of her past, she is powerless to create a positive role for herself in the present and in the future. She asks Diego to create a role in his film for her to inhabit, as he notes:

Elle me dit qu'elle préférerait jouer dans un film plutôt que jouer à être Marylin avec les clients. [ . . . ] [E]lle me supplie: "S'il te plaît Diego, écris un rôle pour moi afin qu'une fois dans ma vie j'apparaîsse à l'écran telle que je suis et qu'on ne m'oublie pas. Tous les rôles que je joue ici sont faux. Je voudrais enfin jouer un rôle qui soit le mien et que je ne connais pas. (101-02)

Diego is at a loss to help her, however, since he has not yet discovered how to transform the elements of his own life into writing, how to turn life into art. His encounter with Marylin helps him to break down his preconceptions about who he is, but who he will become with this new knowledge remains to be seen. Marylin offers an initially seductive example of a fluid identity, yet she remains trapped by her own choices. It is only after Marylin's murder by a corrupt police inspector that Diego succeeds in writing his screenplay. Marylin's role-playing offers a temporary escape in a circumscribed environment, but does not present a way for her to move forward with her life. Her unhappy and untimely demise echoes the fate of her famous namesake, for although she appropriates the glamour and sex appeal of her "actrice de [ . . . ] rêve," she also inherits a negative charge, as Diego remarks, "Elle finit peut-être par s'identifier à son héroïne, même si elle prétend le contraire" (98, 100). Indeed, the other workers at the Hôtel du Nord are all too aware of the tenuousness of their adopted identities, for they abandon them abruptly as they prepare to leave the brothel after Marylin's death, "Elles sont redevenues des hommes, le temps de disparaître dans la nuit de Paris, en quête d'un nouveau refuge. [ . . . ] Elles tournent la page" (127).

Diego must find a way out of his own impasse and come to terms with his experiences if he wishes to fulfill his long-held dream of becoming a filmmaker. He discovered his “passion pour le cinéma” as a child, and he notes, “Quand je me suis engagé dans le Mouvement, j’ai pensé qu’après la révolution, je pourrais devenir cinéaste car chacun alors pourrait réaliser son destin” (26). Diego now realizes that his naïve belief in the Movement’s revolutionary potential was exploited by its leaders and the “Mouvement était déjà condamné” by the time he joined (69). Nevertheless, he still holds on to his dream, although he quickly comes to realize just how difficult it will be to bring it to fruition. And yet, throughout the novel, the power of cinematic representation plays a dominant role in how the characters perceive their surroundings. When Diego arrives at the auto repair shop of his aunt’s friend Amid, he realizes that it resembles and is named after the repair shop in a film entitled *Le Garage de l’Avenir*, Amid’s favorite movie (27). Similarly, the brothel where Diego finds employment is named the *Hôtel du Nord* after the “film culte” of its Madam (87), and Diego describes Paris as resembling a “décor de cinéma” three times in two pages, during his first foray into the city (88-89). As I mentioned above, each of the workers at the *Hôtel du Nord* has adopted the identity of a famous actress. Later in the novel, referring to the people whom he has met since his arrival in France, Diego claims that: “Ils sont tous des personnages de cinéma et ma vie depuis que je suis arrivé à la crique d’Ambre se déroule comme un scénario de film. L’important est de trouver comment l’écrire. Pour que mon histoire devienne un scénario, il ne suffit pas de raconter ce que j’ai vécu. Il faut que je réussisse à en faire une fiction” (112).

That question vexes Diego throughout a large portion of the novel. He realizes that he must first write a scenario before he can create a movie, yet he struggles greatly to find a way to begin his story. Diego has some experience as a writer, for during his long years of

imprisonment, he took solace in writing. Although his first love was of cinema, while in prison he found himself unable to remember more than a few fragments of the films he had seen. Those fragments, and the narrative possibilities that they engender, were all that he had to hold onto, as he relates:

Quand je n'étais pas trop abruti, en fin de matinée, j'essayais d'inventer une histoire avec ces images collées les unes aux autres. Il y avait beaucoup de variations possibles. Ma seule richesse était un cahier qu'un droit commun avait échangé avec moi contre ma montre. J'avais perdu l'heure et gagné un cahier pour noter ces histoires que j'inventais à partir des images qui me trottaient dans la tête. [...] Ça m'a beaucoup aidé à tenir. [...] [L]e jour, j'écrivais mes histoires qui me redonnaient vie. [...] [C]e cahier était ma force, alors que tout en moi était faiblesse. (40, 41-42)

The power of those stories is underlined by the echo of the author's last name in the phrase "mes histoires qui me redonnaient vie."<sup>7</sup> That allusion reminds the reader of Redonnet's insistence in "Redonne après maldonne" of the importance of "la question du Nom" at the beginning of her career as a writer (161). As she suggests in the title of her essay, the act of writing, which for her began with an instance of symbolic re-naming, allows her to reshuffle the elements of her life.

In turn, Diego's struggle to find his voice begins to ease when he imagines and *names* a literary double who will in turn write his own screenplay: "Je me demande si mon scénario ne pourrait pas être l'histoire de mon double. Je lui donne un nom: Samir. Grâce à son nom, il va peut-être pouvoir commencer à exister" (113). The double is a privileged and complex figure throughout Redonnet's works, as many critics have observed.<sup>8</sup> In many instances, the double serves as an avatar of a cursed, primordial identity, which shadows characters as they attempt to

escape the burden of history. Hippolyte, however, reads the double as a figure of a potential “emancipation [that] exists only in its perpetual deferral, in the promise that it might come to pass from one double to another” (*Fuzzy* 130). Referring to her novel *Rose Mélie Rose*, Redonnet speaks of the “question of using the work of writing to introduce the other into the double, [...] to escape from the repetitive circle of the double and its infinite variations, to enter into history and to create history” (“Interview” 110). Here, the invention of Samir initially provides Diego with a starting point for his scenario, yet Samir’s story, though based on Diego’s experiences, quickly deviates onto another path.

Motte notes that, “it is not until he realizes that his double is not himself that Diego will finally be able to write ‘his’ story” (*Fiction* 60). That realization is an important opportunity for Diego, as it enables him to discharge the failure and pain of his past history onto his double, freeing himself to move forward. In Diego’s screenplay, Samir’s fate mirrors that of Marylin, “Comme Marylin à qui il s’identifie, il se sent poursuivi par un destin tragique” (140). Unlike Diego, Samir is unable to leave his past behind and adapt to his new circumstances. To make his film, Diego must accept the financial support of the “réseau” (154), a mafia-like network of Tamzan nationals established in France. In Diego’s scenario, however, Samir:

n’a pas donné sa jeunesse et sa vie au Mouvement pour finir dans le réseau. Il reste fidèle à son passé, même si le Mouvement est mort. Il ne croit pas qu’il réussira à faire du cinéma, comme il en avait rêvé. Le cinéma qu’il aurait voulu faire était lié au Mouvement. Il est trop tard pour lui pour tout. La mort de Marylin est l’annonce de sa propre mort. [...] Il continue à écrire le scénario qu’il voulait écrire pour elle. Il l’écrit pour lui-même, sans aucun espoir d’avoir un jour un lecteur. (154-55)

Unlike Diego, who battles to make his film and to share his story, Samir is turned inward, toward death, and in Diego's scenario, Samir takes his own life in a suicide bombing that deliberately harms no one else, "seulement pour en finir avec sa vie, d'une façon parodique et spectaculaire, comme s'il était en train de tourner un film, ce film qu'il ne réalisera jamais" (173). Samir's failure is Diego's success, as it provides the structure for his film as well as a space for Diego to portray and exorcise the trauma and the shame that plague his life (141). Through the invention of his double, Diego finds a response to the urgent question posed by Redonnet throughout her study of Genet:

quelle expérience poétique, quel travail accomplir dans la langue pour réussir cette sortie de prison? Prison est à prendre [...] au sens de prison imaginaire, cette toute-puissante maison d'illusion construite à l'intérieur de soi, dans notre langue, pour nous asservir au Pouvoir qui ainsi, jusque dans notre imaginaire et nos désirs les plus intimes, nous contrôle et nous manipule perversement. [...] Sortir de la prison, c'est en finir avec les funérailles et naître vivant, alors même qu'on se vit mort. (11)

Writing is an act of liberation for Diego. It creates a space in which he can mourn the failures and the trauma of his past, and provisionally sketch out another vision of the future. Diego is finally able to reject the constricting and defining gaze of society and reappropriate his own image.

The act of writing his scenario is a crucial act for Diego, yet his story does not stop there. He still must turn his scenario into a film, which entails quite a different set of challenges. In order to finance his film, Diego must accept money from the Tamzan network, which has its own agenda, yet a fellow filmmaker tells Diego, "Ne te tracasse pas à cause de ta bourse, l'important

est que tu réalises ton film. On a de moins en moins le choix de nos financements. Ça ne veut pas dire qu'on ne peut rien faire de personnel. Il faut inventer une nouvelle façon de résister” (172). Diego accepts that lesson, and unlike Samir, for whom a cinema of resistance and the Movement were inseparable, he claims “Je n’ai pas changé d’idées même si le Mouvement était un rêve. Le cinéma que je suis en train de faire est habité par ce rêve” (180). Diego discovers that pragmatism does not necessarily entail the abandonment of one’s ideals. Additionally, he is delighted to find that “le scénario n’est qu’une étape dans une longue aventure collective” (169), and this collaborative effort can bear fruit for all those involved. Diego’s friend Nelly plays an essential role in the completion of the film, yet in many ways, she gains as much as he does from its success: “Sans elle, rien n’aurait été possible. Mais elle doit penser que moi aussi je suis sa bonne étoile. Sans moi, jamais elle n’aurait pu ainsi s’investir personnellement dans un film. [ . . . ] Mon film représente pour elle le début d’une nouvelle vie” (175).

While the film represents a rebirth for Diego and Nelly, Diego is troubled by the fact that he is able to create a role for Marylin in his film only after her death:

En dirigeant l’acteur qui joue Marylin, j’essaie d’imaginer ce qu’elle aurait pensé du personnage que j’ai inventé à partir de ma rencontre avec elle. [ . . . ] Je ne peux pas oublier qu’elle aurait voulu jouer dans mon film. Mais quel rôle aurais-je inventé pour elle si elle était restée en vie ? J’ai l’impression que sa mort a rendu possible l’écriture de mon scénario et que je commets un sacrilège en la mettant en scène. (178-79)

While Diego may feel that incorporating Marylin into his film is a “sacrilege,” it is important to note that he is also honoring her request, creating a role for her that will ensure that she is not forgotten. Although he was unable to help her during her life, he does have the power to

commemorate her death, and she will continue to exist through Diego's art. If he feels that her death is in some way her final gift to him, he returns the favor by paying tribute to her memory in his film.

Motte describes Diego's film as "a locus of memory," as well as "a site of hospitality. It provides Diego with an opportunity to recognize and reciprocate those gestures of kindness that have been extended to him" (*Fiction* 55). Diego's film retraces his steps following his arrival upon French soil, and the people who helped him along the way return in his film, even though many of them have already disappeared from his life. Indeed, Diego is surprised to discover just how quickly things can change as he returns to the places where he has lived during his short stay in France. His excitement at rejoining Rita, a woman who generously welcomed him as he arrived in France clandestinely, turns to disappointment as he realizes that she is already gone, "Je ne m'attendais pas à son départ. Ce n'est pas ainsi que j'avais prévu mon retour à la crique d'Ambre" (176). Nevertheless, the place is still imbued with her spirit and the "pouvoir de rêve" that he experienced there (176). Similarly, Amid has left Loisy, and his *Garage de l'Avenir* will soon be demolished, yet "Ils continueront d'exister grâce au film" (177). Most importantly, Diego will give voice to the marginalized and to those who are usually silenced, for, as Nelly tells him, his is an emblematic story, yet it is not one that is commonly presented (110).

Indeed, stories like Diego's are not frequently recounted, especially in recent "serious" literature. Redonnet's decision to reconsider the potential of the *roman engagé* is noteworthy, yet *Diego* is quite different from earlier notions of committed literature, such as the one proffered by Jean-Paul Sartre after the Second World War in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948).<sup>9</sup> *Diego* espouses no specific political philosophy and Redonnet herself claims that "Ce roman, comme les précédents, est à lire comme une fable" ("Parcours" 497). And yet, the novel becomes

inherently political through its portrayal of the challenges faced by illegal immigrants in a clearly delineated twenty-first century France. Motte highlights the explicit evocation in *Diego*'s pages of two frequently dissembled moments in recent French history: instances of French collaboration during World War II and dishonorable acts perpetrated during the Algerian War of Independence (*Fiction* 43-44). As he notes, those allusions to historical events cause the reader to reflect upon a variety of questions related to France's colonial past, as well as the continuing legacy of that past in the present moment. He observes, "Political questions such as these, grounded in history, are strikingly new features in Redonnet's work, testifying to a will toward engagement with the world of event and phenomena on fresh terms" (*Fiction* 44).

Redonnet suggests that just as Diego cannot move forward without first examining and confronting his own past, so too must France reexamine and come to terms its own history if it is to fulfill the promise of its own ideals. Those ideals figure prominently when the corrupt police inspector attempts to frame Diego for Marylin's murder, and Diego claims, albeit with some doubt in his mind, "Je crois à la justice française et aux lois de la République, même si je ne suis qu'un clandestin" (126). The inspector's furious response puts Diego's marginality on full display as he hurls back, "Que savez vous de la justice française et des lois de la République? Elles ne sont pas là pour protéger des gens de votre espèce" (126-27). The question is quite clear: do those laws protect everyone equally, even the most marginal? Or, to rephrase the issue in terms borrowed from Rita during her initial encounter with Diego, is it true that "la France reste une terre d'asile" (14)? Redonnet contends that essential questions such as those must be posed in the process of France's own self-examination.

The question of how France perceives itself is inseparable from the issue of how France perceives the other, represented here by the figure of the *clandestin* (Motte, *Fiction* 46). As if to

highlight the obscurity of these marginalized figures, the illegal immigrants in the novel, with a few important exceptions, are largely voiceless and nameless. The tenuous identity that they do have is strictly conferred by mainstream French society, which seeks to circumscribe and exploit their presence in the country. For the French authorities, illegal immigrants fall into three categories. The first group ends up inhabiting carefully delimited enclaves such as the “quartier des Perles, où vivent des immigrés, des clandestins, des réfugiés, des hors-la-loi et des marginaux de toutes nationalités. C'est un quartier à part que la police contrôle sans trop se montrer” (84). More acceptable is the second category, an anonymous mass of faceless workers, easily exploited and thus tacitly welcomed, as long as they keep their mouth shut and do their job: “Dans ce quartier aussi, la police ferme les yeux. Les clandestins, tant qu'ils ne posent pas de problèmes et restent à leur place, surtout les Chinois, sont les bienvenus en France” (161). The third category is the most politically useful precisely because it looms so large in the public imagination. That group consists of those who are designated as terrorists, whether for cause or simply by reason of geographic proximity. As Amid warns Diego, any illegal immigrant from Tamza is automatically considered a terrorist or a terrorist sympathizer (22). Aigle d'Or, a shadowy figure in the Tamzan underground, suggests that the French authorities have a barely-concealed desire to utilize the threat of terrorism to consolidate their own power, with contingency plans drawn up at the ready. As he envisions settling a score with the corrupt mayor of Loisy, he muses upon how that action would be interpreted, defined, and ultimately co-opted by the French authorities, “J'imagine déjà ce qu'ils écriraient dans les journaux: Des terroristes africains [...] viennent de faire sauter la maison du maire de Loisy. La France est désormais menacée. Le plan Ortec de lutte contre le terrorisme international est déclenché sur tout le territoire” (79-80). This scenario raises an important point—the power to control public

discourse is more potent than any physical action. If armed resistance ultimately reinforces the authority of those in power, then one must find another way to resist.

Diego's resistance takes form in his scenario and in his film, entitled *Le Clandestin*. As I noted before, his film is intensely personal, paying homage to those who have helped him and those who have left him during his stay in France. At the same time, however, his film is inherently political, for it gives voice to the anonymous illegal immigrant, reappropriating the epithet and the image of that marginal figure from the authorities who wish to mark out and control the *clandestin*. It is to this political and poetic act of self-determination that Diego refers when he asserts "Je n'ai pas changé d'idées même si le Mouvement était un rêve. Le cinéma que je suis en train de faire est habité par ce rêve" (180). This admixture of the personal and the political recalls Genet's project in *Un Captif amoureux*. In Redonnet's reading, "Genet n'a pas rendu compte de *la révolution palestinienne*, il a récité *sa révolution palestinienne*. [ . . . ] Ce qu'il construit, organise, ordonne ne renvoie pas à la réalité de la révolution palestinienne, mais au rêve qui l'habite au moment où il écrit son livre de souvenirs" (*Genet* 249, 251; my emphases). Despite his sympathy for their cause, Genet realizes that "il reste étranger à leur mouvement de libération qui n'est pas le sien. Son regard de spectateur irréalise ce qu'il voit" (*Genet* 249). Genet's action can only be a "révolte poétique" (*Captif* 248), but through writing, he can contest the "question de l'image, liée à celle du Pouvoir" (*Genet* 317). For Redonnet, this is the essential act that literature must perform if it is to remain vital:

je conçois la littérature contemporaine comme un acte vivant de résistance à ce monde de l'image et du pouvoir [ . . . ]. Mais je ne peux écrire que captive de ce monde et mes personnages eux-mêmes peuvent apparaître comme des images.  
Tout est décor de film, scénario. L'enjeu de leur quête, de leur projet, est

d'exister vivant dans ce monde en créant leur propre image, leur propre regard, leur propre vision. La littérature contemporaine proposerait d'autres scénarios, écrits en détournant-récréant les images dans lesquelles elle est prise. ("Parcours" 498).

Diego emerges as a figure for the author, and Redonnet claims that "alors que [ . . . ] son histoire n'est pas la mienne, je me suis sentie en sympathie profonde avec lui, comme s'il parlait en mon nom [ . . . ]. Le clandestin ne serait-il pas alors une métaphore de l'écrivain contemporain?" ("Parcours" 497). Edward Said notes that "while it is true to say that exile is the condition that characterizes the intellectual as someone who stands as a marginal figure outside the comforts of privilege, power, being-at-homeness (so to speak), it is also very important to stress that that condition carries with it certain rewards and, yes, even privileges" (59). Working well outside the literary mainstream, the margin emerges as a privileged space of resistance in which the writer can interrogate the central figures of authority.<sup>10</sup> Redonnet poses hard questions about the current state of the French Republic, examining how France conceives of itself in regard to marginalized populations both within and without its borders. From a literary standpoint, Redonnet also questions the status of the contemporary novel as a space for performing this sort of self-examination. What sort of questions should a twenty-first century novel ask? How can a novel address social concerns without becoming reductive or dogmatic? What powers does a novel have in an age dominated by the image?

*Diego* is a response to these questions. With this novel, Redonnet finds a new way to resist (*Diego* 172), creating a work which is at once both deeply personal and intensely political. She proposes writing as a method to contest the discourse of power, yet she argues that any true critique must begin with a deep examination of the self. It is only through a process of self-

examination that the writer can come to terms with his or her own personal and cultural heritage, the crucial first step toward reconsidering the future. Redonnet thematizes that process of self-examination as Diego discovers his voice as a writer, however she positions that classic *künstlerroman* in a highly specific, politically charged setting. The sociopolitical dimensions of Diego's project are inseparable from his artistic vision, yet it is only through the creation of a fiction that he is able to tell his story. Redonnet's novel is in constant motion, oscillating between Diego's artistic endeavor and a sharp critique of French society in the twenty-first century. Exposing and examining both personal and cultural trauma and history, writing emerges as a locus of mourning and remembrance as well as a process of reconciliation and liberation. In *Diego*, Redonnet seeks to reinvigorate the novel as a site of transmission and resistance, integrating the poetic and the political into a new creation for a new time. Writing becomes a place to reshuffle the cards of life in a very serious game, since for Redonnet, “écrire est un jeu dangereux. [. . .] Rien n'est jamais gagné, la partie est toujours à rejouer, et cela sans garant” (“Redonne” 163).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> While Echenoz's first novel, *Le Méridien de Greenwich*, dates from 1979, his second novel, *Cherokee*, which was awarded the Prix Médicis in 1983, greatly increased his visibility.

<sup>2</sup> See Redonnet's essays "La Barbarie postmoderne," "Mais quel roman? La Littérature en question," and "Réponses pour une question brouillée."

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of minimalism in contemporary French writing, see Motte, *Small Worlds: Minimalism in Contemporary French Literature*; and Fieke Schoots, "L'Écriture minimaliste," and "Passer en douce à la douane": *L'Écriture minimaliste de Minuit: Deville, Echenoz, Redonnet et Toussaint*.

<sup>4</sup> That event is recounted in detail in Redonnet's essay "Redonne après maldonne."

<sup>5</sup> In 1998, the publication of Michel Houellebecq's novel *Les Particules élémentaires* provoked an immense amount of media coverage as the book and its author were vehemently criticized by a variety of commentators. The attendant controversy over issues such as misogyny, racism, eugenics, political correctness, and the heritage of the events of May 1968 became the most talked about event of the 1998 *rentrée littéraire*.

<sup>6</sup> See for example the unnamed narrator's sexual initiation in *Forever Valley* 35-37; Mélie's sexual initiation in *Rose Mélie Rose* 20-21; Silsie's encounter with the barman in *Silsie* 46-47; and Sœur Marthe's sexual initiation in *L'Accord de paix* 221.

<sup>7</sup> As Motte notes, "The French verb *redonner* is a homonym of 'Redonnet,' and Marie Redonnet plays cannily on that paronomastic potential here and elsewhere in her work" (*Fiction* 211).

<sup>8</sup> See, among others, Hippolyte, *Fuzzy Fiction* 130-38; Motte, *Fiction Now* 59-60; Jordan Stump, "Interview" 108-10, and "Separation and Permeability in Marie Redonnet's Triptych"

112-13; Evert Van der Starre, “Marie Redonnet” 57-58; and Yvette Went-Daoust, “Écrire le conte de fees: l’œuvre de Marie Redonnet” 390-91.

<sup>9</sup> In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, Sartre advocates the use of a transparent, transitive language in which literary style and the poetic quality intrinsic to all language are minimized (24-31). This utilitarian conception of literature tied to a specific political philosophy is quite different from Redonnet’s project in *Diego*. Dominique Viart speaks of the contemporary “critical” novel as a text which “ne vise pas à convaincre mais [ . . . ] à remettre en question” (“Fictions” 197). Redonnet certainly questions the discourse of power that seeks to marginalize and exploit certain populations, yet she also calls into question her reader’s expectations, as her “engaged” novel deals as much with art as it does with political issues, constantly oscillating between Diego’s artistic project and an examination of sociopolitical questions.

<sup>10</sup> Motte develops a similar notion in a discussion of margins and the center in the work of Edmond Jabès. For Jabès, “the center is construed as an oppressive force,” exemplified by “the tyrannical character of the center and the stifling effect it has upon the structure it purports to organize” (“Edmond Jabès” 12). Writing from a marginal position becomes a powerful method to interrogate and to counter this domineering presence: “Marginality is [ . . . ] a guarantor of freedom [ . . . ]. It is a position of opposition, and indeed of a certain critical vehemence [ . . . ]. Writing, then, will be eccentric [ . . . ]. It will be a discourse of alterity, erecting itself in opposition to the homogenous, the ortholinear, the totalizing” (“Edmond Jabès” 6-7).

## CHAPTER IV

### **The End of the World as We Know It: Éric Chevillard’s Wor(l)dplay**

Over the last twenty-four years, Éric Chevillard has carved out a niche as one of the most imaginative and idiosyncratic authors writing in French today. Playing on the referentiality and materiality of language, he creates self-contained worlds that call into question our beliefs not just about literature, but also about the world we inhabit. In André Gide’s novel *Les Faux-monnayeurs* (1925), the character Édouard muses upon the particularities of the novel as a genre, describing it as “de tous les genres littéraires, [. . .] le plus libre, le plus *lawless*..., est-ce peut-être pour cela, par peur de cette liberté même [. . .] que le roman, toujours, s’est si craintivement cramponné à la réalité?” (183). Chevillard, for his part, vigorously exploits the lawlessness of the novel for all that it is worth, liberating it from the clutches of mimesis in dizzying displays of the potential of language to remake the world. Over the course of a prolific career, with seventeen novels published at the Éditions de Minuit<sup>1</sup> and a host of shorter texts appearing at various smaller presses, Chevillard offers his take on everything from the prehistory of humankind to its post-apocalyptic aftermath.

Chevillard came to prominence at Minuit in the late 1980s, along with writers such as Jean Echenoz, Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Christian Gailly, and Marie Redonnet. An exceedingly mobile writer, Chevillard was grouped by critics with various other writers at early stages in his career, yet it quickly became clear that Chevillard had chosen to follow his own path.<sup>2</sup> Parodying a variety of literary genres over the course of his career, from travel literature to fairy tales, he is a singular writer, and as Pierre Jourde notes, like the proteiform creature Palafox from Chevillard’s novel of the same name, “[il] résiste obstinément aux tentatives classificatrices des savants acharnés à le définir” (204). Indeed, questioning the certainties of the “savants” is one of

the central goals of Chevillard's fiction. For Jean-Louis Hippolyte, "Chevillard's purpose is simple, yet one of the most radically ambitious in contemporary fiction: to deconstruct and carnivalize the *Encyclopédia*, [ . . . ] and with it the *homme rationnel* described by the philosophers of Ancient Greece and the Enlightenment" (66). In *Sans l'orang-outan*, starting from a simple hypothesis, Chevillard overturns existence as we know it, rigorously following the logic of his premise as it leads to terrifying conclusions. As he himself notes, that strategy is an integral part of his writing:

Je déroule toujours un fil logique dans mes livres, me semble-t-il, mais je ne m'arrête pas aux premières conclusions raisonnables auquel ce fil conduit. Je dévide toute la pelote et c'est ainsi, insensiblement, que mes textes basculent dans une forme de délire, qui n'est pas le délire du fou, encore moins le délire de l'ivrogne. C'est un délire scrupuleux, construit rigoureusement avec les outils mêmes de la raison, avec ces mêmes outils qui lui servent à édifier les structures et les architectures dans lesquelles nos existences se coulent. Je ne renonce pas à la méthode logique, au contraire, je l'épuise, j'en tire toutes les conséquences, tous les effets. ("Écrire pour contre-attaquer" 1)

According to Albert Moindre, zookeeper and narrator of *Sans l'orang-outan*, the precipitous decline of the world has a simple and obvious cause: the death of Bagus and Mina, the last two orangutans on earth. While the extinction of various species at the hands of the human race is hardly an unknown phenomenon, the zookeeper is nevertheless shocked when humankind allows the extinction of the orangutans to occur:

comment l'admettre et comment s'y résoudre, leur disparition n'était qu'une menace pourtant, une simple menace à laquelle je ne pouvais croire, il y aura un sursaut, pensais-je, on va prendre des mesures.

On va réagir avant d'en arriver là, je me disais, à ce désastre, à cette apocalypse, il existe certainement un moyen, peut-être plusieurs, le risque a été signalé, circonscrit, l'alerte donnée, on ne laissera pas s'aggraver la situation, un plan d'action sera mis sur pied, en trois ou quatre étapes, comme l'homme sait faire. (9-10)

The question of just what it is that “man knows how to do” recurs throughout the novel, as Chevillard pointedly and repeatedly calls into question humankind’s treatment of people, animals, and the rest of the natural world. Humankind’s knowledge of the world, and the actions we take as a result of that knowledge, are central to Chevillard’s text. The failure to save the orangutans is but the latest in a long list of human failures throughout history, and the first of many calamities to come as the novel progresses.

Moindre is personally devastated by the death of Bagus and Mina, for he was their principal caretaker, and even if their deaths were not his fault, they still occurred on his watch. The zookeeper insistently portrays their death neither as a solely personal loss nor as a localized disaster, however: from his perspective, humankind’s inability or unwillingness to save the orangutans carries grievous and unanticipated risks for society as a whole:

C'est fini, les orangs-outans, espèce éteinte comme bougie soufflée, dès lors vivre sans eux, s’acclimater, tout repositionner dans ce contexte nouveau, tout réordonner, [ . . . ] jamais je ne saurai pour ma part, je sais déjà que je ne pourrai pas, inévitablement s’ensuivra dans nos existences une certaine désorganisation.

[. . .] Des dysfonctionnements remarquables, la chaîne des relais est rompue, le seau n'arrive plus à l'incendie, la fiancée attend sa bague, on cherche partout l'éponge et le sel qui ne sont pas dans la cuisine et ne sont pourtant plus dans la mer. Nous allons payer cher notre désinvolture, je prévois de profonds bouleversements. (16)

For Moindre, orangutans are nothing less than the essential element that gives order to the world, and their disappearance manifests itself through a break in the chain of metonymical relationships that underlies the way we describe and make sense of our existence. Deprived of the orangutan, the organizing center, elements are cast adrift, disconnected from their origins as well as from their everyday functions.

The reader has no idea whether Moindre's warnings are those of a madman or of a seer, but it is clear that he seeks above all to challenge the anthropocentric foundations of a long line of Western thought that places man at the center of the world. Rather than mankind at the center, Moindre argues that "L'orang-outan était le subtil rouage" assuring the coherence of the system, permitting a degree of play and assuring the smooth functioning of existence, "Il y avait encore du jeu, mais voilà que tout se fige, se grippe, se bloque. À chaque chose sa place assignée dont elle ne bougera plus" (21). The zookeeper's explanation of the orangutan's role echoes Jacques Derrida's description in *L'Écriture et la différence* of the notion of the center in systems of knowledge:

Ce centre avait pour fonction non seulement d'orienter et d'équilibrer, d'organiser la structure [. . .] mais de faire surtout que le principe d'organisation de la structure limite ce que nous pourrions appeler le *jeu* de la structure. Sans doute le

centre d'une structure, en orientant et en organisant la cohérence du système,  
permet-il le jeu des éléments à l'intérieur de la forme totale. (409)

The substitution of the orangutan in place of humanity—and more specifically, in place of human reason—at the center of the logical system that we use to make sense of the world has a number of consequences. Shortcomings inherent in human logic and human nature come to the forefront when compared to the orangutan:

L'aventure humaine s'inscrit dans une histoire, on peut logiquement concevoir sa fin, mais l'orang-outan [ . . . ] se satisfaisait de son sort et vivait selon sa loi immuable, accueillant le progrès avec méfiance, une brindille pour pêcher les insectes dans les troncs creux, une large feuille vibrante pour amplifier les vocalises de l'amoureux, voilà pour le XX<sup>e</sup> siècle.

C'est bien assez de modernité, on ne va pas non plus consentir à tout ce qu'elle propose, [ . . . ] s'équiper de neuf chaque année comme si le principe de la vie n'était soudain plus le même [ . . . ]. Point d'accélération catastrophique dans le destin de l'orang-outan, nulle logique funeste à l'œuvre [ . . . ], il ne complotait pas sa propre extinction comme nous le faisons sournoisement. (51-52)

Confronted with the passage of time and obsessed with the notion of death, humankind is perpetually dissatisfied, while the orangutan finds peace in its environment (52). Unfortunately, by the time we begin to realize the importance of what we have lost, it is already too late, “C'est tout un pan de réalité qui s'affaisse, une conception complète et articulée des phénomènes qui fera défaut à notre philosophie. [ . . . ] Comment savoir ce qui tenait à lui, quels fils étaient réunis dans ses mains, les rênes de quels attelages? Nous l'apprendrons au fond du fossé, en massant nos membres endoloris” (18-19). Deprived of the presence of the orangutan, the world is a

changed place, and Chevillard follows through on that premise to its fullest and most horrific conclusions. Bruno Blanckeman notes that such a phenomenon occurs frequently in Chevillard's fiction:

L'écrivain s'attache à subvertir les règles et les usages de la logique issue des traditions aristotélienne et cartésienne en les accomplissant à l'extrême. Il suscite, entre les différents éléments de la fiction, un jeu de surdétermination hypothétique et de surimplication déductive qui provoque un véritable effet de surchauffe. [ . . . ] Le rationalisme nominaliste, rhétorique et philosophique propre à la civilisation occidentale est ainsi déjoué depuis ses engrenages logiques élémentaires. (*Les Fictions singulières* 81-82)

When considering the orangutan's relationship to humankind, it is essential to avoid the same assumption that underlies much of Western thought, namely, that humans are separate from the rest of the natural world. For Moindre, humans and orangutans are intimately linked. According to the zookeeper, orangutans play an essential role in liberating the potential of human creativity and wonder, “À croire que l'orang-outan [ . . . ] nous maintenait debout par les cheveux depuis sa branche. Il nous tirait vers le haut. Il nous ouvrait le ciel, écartait les nues, rapprochait la lune. L'orang-outan nous frayait un chemin entre les astres. Champ libre pour nos fusées, pour nos prières” (22). The orangutan offers not just an escape from history, but rather a fundamentally different way of life. In the zookeeper's view, the presence of the orangutan acts as a supplement to humanity, in Jacques Derrida's double sense of that word in *De la grammatologie*:

le concept du supplément [...] abrite en lui deux significations dont la cohabitation est aussi étrange que nécessaire. Le supplément s'ajoute, il est un surplus, une plénitude enrichissant une autre plénitude, le *comble* de la présence.

[...] Mais le supplément supplée. [...] Il intervient ou s'insinue *à-la-place-de*; s'il comble, c'est comme on comble un vide. S'il représente et fait image, c'est par le défaut antérieur d'une présence [...], sa place est assignée dans la structure par la marque d'un vide. (208)

Both meanings mediate the relationship between orangutan and humankind. The presence of the orangutan adds to human life—“Le salut jovial de l’orang-outan, le matin, nous donnait des forces pour la journée. Sa vigoureuse poignée de main nous communiquait son fluide, nous nous chargions d’énergie” (129-30)—yet that very enrichment seems to speak to an absence or emptiness inherent in humankind that goes unnoticed until it is too late. Perhaps that lack is humanity’s dislocation from the natural world, its inability to be satisfied with existence, or the compulsion to dominate the world. The orangutans never replaced humanity, but Moindre argues that perhaps they eventually should have, were it not for some sort of cosmic mishap: “Il y a eu erreur [...], c’est évident. Ce cratère s’est ouvert pour nous engloutir, nous, et débarrasser le monde de la menace que représente notre pulsion de mort. Saine réaction des forces naturelles” (52). The orangutan gone, for Moindre all hope is lost:

En tout lieu et à toute heure, ce constat: plus d’orang-outan, ce coup de poignard, cette suée froide, cette stupeur horrifiée, p, l, u, s, d’, o, r, a, n, g, -, o, u, t, a, n, il faut l’épeler pour y croire, pour le concevoir et ralentir en même temps comme on freinera la foudre cette prise de conscience qui dévaste notre intelligence lucide [...]. C’est la complète extinction, traces et vestiges avec. (35-36)

His poetic lament for the extinct primates of course belies Moindre's claim that the orangutan has left no "traces." In Moindre's lament for Bagus and Mina, he attempts to use language, the tool at hand, to capture some of their energy in what Stijn de Smet describes as "une sorte de brachiation littéraire [. . .] [qui] s'écarte des sentiers battus pour s'agripper aux lianes à portée de main" (333). In the passage above, the zookeeper's action of spelling out the words points toward the materiality of language—one of its essential characteristics—and the related notion that the way we say things matters. The creative use of language can spark the imagination, while uninspired language can deaden it. The free, untrammeled energy of the orangutan gives rise to vivid, unusual metaphors, such as the one that Moindre employs to describe the stench of the durian, a tropical fruit much beloved by the late Bagus and Mina:

Jamais un fromage oublié dans un garde-manger depuis trois mois, jamais la pauvre vieille qui s'est rompu les os en tombant du tabouret où elle s'était juchée pour l'en extraire, ce fromage, et jonche le carreau froid de sa cuisine depuis ce jour, n'auront ensemble dégagé une puanteur telle qu'elle fait vibrer l'air alentour, que même les mouches en crèvent et que l'on supplierait à genoux les orteils jaunes du premier venu de nous boucher les narines. (34)

The scent of a malodorous cheese is one of the most hackneyed examples one could choose when searching for something to represent a strong odor, which is precisely why Chevillard employs it in his text. Jordan Stump notes that the ludic appropriation of clichés is central to Chevillard's fiction: "[he] laughingly unleashes the power and the potentialities of an unfettered language. But the language that seems to interest Chevillard most is that of the *already-said*," in a strategy that "involves a wholesale citing of clichés, of received ideas, of the whole vast repertory of stock footage by which we understand our surroundings" ("Ghosts"

821).<sup>3</sup> For Chevillard, the fragrant cheese is but a starting point for a metaphor that immediately swerves into darker territory. The startling transition from an over-determined comparison—a forgotten cheese—to the death and putrefaction of a little old lady over the delirious course of a sentence that spirals from banality to horror to absurdity is a classic move by Chevillard, as Olivier Bessard-Banquy observes:

Chevillard ne se désintéresse pas du monde [ . . . ], mais il préfère se saisir de cette matière pour en faire saillir le cocasse ou l'incongru. Le raccourci, le détournement de la formule toute faite, l'extrapolation délirante, la métaphore tirée par les cheveux, la métonymie abusive sont les figures privilégiées de cette écriture qui, loin de céder à la tentation du jeu de mots gratuit [ . . . ], met un point d'honneur à éclairer d'une lumière neuve le réel boursouflé. (“Moi, je, pas tellement” 36)

As surprising as the metaphor initially is, thematically it reflects the narrative that encapsulates it. The senseless sudden death of the little old lady echoes Moindre's shock at the deaths of Bagus and Mina, and the desperate desire expressed in the metaphor to plug one's sensory organs in order to block out the stench suggests the zookeeper's doomed attempt to block out the reality of his loss. Chevillard himself insists upon the importance of metaphor in his writing in an interview:

La métaphore, voilà une belle figure de la liberté dont nous jouissons, ou plutôt que nous pouvons prendre malgré elle à l'intérieur de la langue. J'aime détourner celle-ci de son usage, la détourner de l'usage, et la métaphore permet justement de créer cet écart maximum entre le mot et son objet qui mesure aussi notre marge de manœuvre dans un monde ordonné par le verbe. [ . . . ] Quand je lis une métaphore

réussie, j'éprouve aussitôt qu'un espace nouveau s'ouvre pour ma conscience, un lieu mental de plus pour elle où se retourner et faire face. (“Écrire pour contre-attaquer” 1)

However, not everyone uses language like Chevillard, and as Moindre knows, words are all too often used thoughtlessly, not to say abusively. Terms can obscure just as easily as they can illuminate. The zookeeper is highly conscious of the sterility of everyday language that lacks imagination, “ces mots crachés comme s'il n'en restait plus que le noyau sec et mort” (33), and he fears that the disappearance of the flesh-and-blood orangutan will be followed shortly by the disappearance of the word:

L'ouragan emporte aussi le nom de l'orang-outan, et voici notre langue orpheline à son tour, car le signe ne survivra pas longtemps au singe, ou si peu, si mal, pour quelques érudits bègues, quelques amateurs de dictionnaires, comme le dronte, embroché jusqu'au dernier à la fin du XVII<sup>e</sup> par les colons de l'île Maurice.

On dit dindon. Quand on veut parler de lui, on dit dindon, on cherche le mot juste, il se dérobe, on dit dindon, le mot nous échappe mieux que la volaille qui le portait, appelée dronte, ou dodo, mais le plus souvent on dit dindon [...].

Dira-t-on dindon aussi un jour pour évoquer l'orang-outan quand nous ne retrouverons plus son nom? Une sorte de dindon, souvenez-vous, pas tout à fait un dindon cependant, du poil et non des plumes, une forte denture et point de bec, arboricole mais dépourvu d'ailes, [...] j'ai le nom sur le bout de la langue, imaginez-vous un dindon, eh bien voilà, c'est ça, un dindon.

Un dindon! Oh je veux inscrire partout le nom de l'orang-outan, le graver sur l'écorce des jeunes arbres afin qu'il grandisse avec eux, dans la pierre des monuments qui bravent les siècles et il les bravera avec eux, car s'il devait sombrer lui aussi dans l'oubli, ce nom, alors la disparition de l'orang-outan serait définitive et sans recours et ses chances de renaître un jour nulles absolument.

(53-55)

I cite this passage at some length in order to convey some of the playfulness and humor that animate Chevillard's writing, even—perhaps especially—when dealing with as serious a topic as the extinction of entire species. Playing on the materiality and the combinatorial nature of language, the punning initial metaphor of the “ouragan” which absorbs or washes away the “orang-outan,” erasing both the “signe” and the “singe,” then sparks a four-page riff on nomenclature, etymology, and language in general. The sonic repetition of the four syllables “on dit dindon” calls to mind the pleasure children take in reciting nursery rhymes, yet as the word “dindon” continues to echo, it begins to lose any sense of meaning through a process of semantic satiation, becoming a nonsense syllable.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the slippage from “dronte”—or “dodo”—to “dindon” is at least somewhat justifiable as both are birds, but the leap from that lazy metonymical use of the word to the description of an orangutan as a sort of hairy turkey with arms and legs rather than feathers and wings is nonsensical, in the strictest sense of the word. Yet funny as the above passage may be, for Chevillard, humor is never innocent. Indeed, he describes it as the essence of:

l'écriture même. [...] Il me semble que toute phrase aspire à se dénouer dans un rire. Les mots sont chargés de trop de significations vieillies, avilis. [...] Il faut ruser pour atteindre nos buts et feindre afin de mieux la dynamiter cette gravité

inhérente à la langue, laquelle fut tout de même conçue pour garantir l'ordre social, pour servir la raison, et pour que rien de ce qui fut une première fois nommé ne bouge jamais plus. Ces usages ne sauraient me convenir. L'humour fait de la phrase une anguille. Son sens échappe d'abord, il faut s'y reprendre à plusieurs fois pour le saisir. La langue se retrempe dans l'humour, comme un linge et comme un fer, pour se laver et se durcir. ("J'admire" 1)

Humor is a seduction technique that encourages re-reading, as well as a tool for subversion. Chevillard's wordplay forces the reader to consider the materiality and the polysemiotic nature of language, and antiphrastically, it criticizes the sloppy, careless use of language. The cavalier use of the word *dindon* to refer to the dodo—a bird made extinct by human intervention—points toward a generalized disdain for or lack of interest in the world. Unlike Moindre, who takes pride in his enumeration of the differences between the orangutan and the gorilla, the chimpanzee and the mangabey (25-26), the careless speaker who would describe the dodo as “a sort of turkey” is a lazy thinker, a blinkered individual disassociated from the richness and diversity of the natural world as well as from the diversity and richness of language. Chevillard strives to reinvigorate language, to make it strange and meaningful and to harness its potential to make us rethink the world.

While the orangutan may be gone, at the very least Moindre seeks to conserve its name, which, as he notes, carries within it the geographical origins of the creature, “on ne plaisante pas avec ça, c'est du malais, [ . . . ] littéralement *homme de la forêt*” (54). Chevillard playfully suggests that the name retains cratyllic resonances in Western languages as well, “Mystérieuse coïncidence, dans nos langues résonne le mot *orange* qui habillait parfaitement le grand singe anéanti, *verg-outan* ou *blang-outan* auraient choqué notre œil autant que notre oreille” (54). The

word *orange* indeed describes the coloration of the orangutan, reflecting a classificatory gaze that characterizes the Western tradition of zoology at least as far back as Aristotle. Interestingly, the Malay nomenclature suggests a rather different relationship with the natural world, seeking less to differentiate, than to note the similarities between man and orangutan. The term “man of the forest,” while still anthropocentric in its use of *man* as defining term, suggests a relationship of supplementarity rather than outright difference, inscribing the orangutan within its own space and according the great ape a degree of dignity and autonomy. Moindre’s desire to carve the name orangutan into the bark of young trees points toward an impossible wish to reinscribe the arboreal orangutan into its natural habitat. At the same time, in a passage dense with metonymical leaps, it is clear that the young trees also refer to books, which in the next leap become solid monuments that Moindre hopes will bear witness to what we have lost.

At first, it seems that the dodo has been introduced as an example of how humanity adds insult to injury, first annihilating the species and then erasing the name. Like the stench of the forgotten cheese, the dodo is an overdetermined comparison, the classic example of an animal species rendered extinct by human greed and carelessness. It emerges, however, that the case of the dodo is far more relevant, for as with the orangutan, the extinction of the dodo leads to unanticipated consequences. Following the extinction of the dodo, humans come to realize that the tambalacoque, a species of tree also indigenous to Mauritius, is threatened with extinction in turn, because it relied on the dodo for its propagation, its seeds germinating only after a trip through the dodo’s digestive system (56). In a last-ditch attempt to save “le magnifique tambalacoque,” humans introduce turkeys onto Mauritius, and just as “on dit le plus souvent dindon pour dronte, [. . .] on en arrive à remplacer celui-ci par celui-là pour de bon, dans les faits” (56). While the tale of the tambalacoque may be a rare success story, as its near-extinction

seems to have been narrowly averted, Chevillard warns us against celebrating too soon, as the chain of connections in the interdependent natural world continues to unfurl. It turns out that the tambalacoque “est du même bois que le palaquium de la forêt indonésienne, son frère dans la famille des sapotacées, et c'est précisément l'exploitation abusive de cette forêt, l'abattage systématique du précieux palaquium, qui ont entraîné la disparition de l'orang-outan. Tout se tient, comme les madriers des nos charpentes: croix et potences” (56-57). Chevillard’s final sentence can be read on at least three levels: as an insistence upon the interconnectedness of nature, as a winking nod to Roland Barthes’s famous assertion in *S/Z* that in a narrative, “tout se tient” (162), and as a bitter reminder that human exploitation of the world’s natural resources leads inexorably toward extinction and death. The cross and the gallows evoke the fate of the orangutan, but it is important to note that they are first and foremost human instruments designed for capital punishment. As humans cut down the forests, exploiting the natural world for our own ends, we come up with no better use for the wood than tools to guarantee social order through the threat of torture and execution.

The individuals whom Moindre describes as “[les] soldats de l’ordre, [le] personnel terre-à-terre du système en vigueur” (157), are one of Chevillard’s most privileged targets, as Stump notes.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the reference to the “système en vigueur” is a direct allusion to one of Chevillard’s earlier novels, *Le Caoutchouc décidément*, in which a character named Furne concludes that “un remaniement s’impose, une réorganisation globale et méthodique du système en vigueur, puisqu’il ne répond pas à nos besoins les plus élémentaires et contrarie nos rêves les plus légitimes” (7). The system in place seeks not only to rein in our behavior; it attempts to dictate the way we think about the world. Furne’s grandiose project to remake the world is doomed to failure, but Chevillard selects a more attainable target:

Le roman est réaliste par nature parce qu'il obéit au principe de réalité. On y raconte une histoire, avec un début (naissance) et un dénouement (mort), on y décrit une trajectoire nette. Tout est verrouillé. [...] Quel que soit son contenu, si sulfureux soit-il, il ne saurait rien remettre en cause puisqu'il est un petit module de l'ensemble, un modèle réduit plus ou moins stylisé mais opérationnel et bien huilé du monde que l'homme s'est inventé (en se plaçant naïvement au centre). [...] Mais c'est intéressant, pourtant. Car si le monde n'offre que peu de prise à ma hargne, le roman oui, en revanche, qui n'en est que la projection, [...] je peux briser. Dans cet espace-là, j'ai les moyens de réagir, de riposter. J'écris donc des romans que je m'ingénie simultanément à démolir de l'intérieur. Je les sabote. [...] Le roman en tant que genre institué, réglementé et presque réglementaire désormais, paye pour le reste. ("Écrire pour contre-attaquer" 2)

Chevillard sabotages the constraints of the realist novel in this case by playing off of his readers' expectations that in novels "everything fits together." As Barthes notes, "ce cercle, où 'tout se tient,' est celui du visible. Le visible, comme on peut s'y attendre, est régi par le principe de non-contradiction, mais [...] en joignant les événements relatés par une sorte de 'colle' logique, le discours pousse ce principe jusqu'à l'obsession" (162). Chevillard stretches associative chains to the breaking point, jumping from hurricanes to orangutans to dodos to turkeys to tambalacoque trees to forests of pallaquium that finally bring the chain full circle by revealing their connection to the orangutan. Like a magician, he diverts the reader's attention with a dizzying torrent of patter only to pull the rabbit out of his hat at the last possible moment, simultaneously fulfilling and mocking the reader's expectations of narrative coherence.

Like Chevillard, who attempts to create a bit of free space within the constraints of the novel, Moindre uses language to pay tribute to Bagus and Mina. Also like Chevillard, his efforts constantly run up against the system in place, namely the cold scientific logic of his society:

Le soleil s'éloigne, on le tenait presque. Dorénavant je regarterai les arbres comme une mère dont l'enfant n'est plus regarde les balançoires. Ces branches énormes, croyez-vous vraiment qu'elles se tendent ainsi pour servir de claires aux poires ou de perchoirs pour fauvettes?

Là, il va falloir me laisser travailler, dit Pelleport en faisant irruption, sa boîte à outils dans une main. (17)

While Moindre watches over the bodies of Bagus and Mina, trying to keep their energy alive, Pelleport, another zoo worker, arrives to dissect their bodies, quite literally eviscerating them in order to study and to preserve their forms. Moindre is explicit about the futility of such a procedure. Bagus and Mina dead, “vieilles écorces, vieux crin, vieux cuir racorni, voilà tout ce qui reste d'eux, ces matières, ces fibres, ces débris” (12). Moindre imagines Bagus and Mina stuffed and mounted for display—“ces épouvantails”—and suggests that the desire to dissect, to collect, and to catalogue that animates the scientific method is necessarily deforming and divested from context: “Et petit à petit nous nous ferons à cette idée que les orangs-outans étaient des singes raides, des primates inflexibles et guindés, [ . . . ] et je serai seul à me souvenir quelque temps encore comme Mina était follette, et Bagus moqueur et grimacier” (14). The zookeeper knows that the form is not the same as the essence, and all the scientific knowledge in the world cannot capture the totality of the orangutans’ existence. Deprived of the orangutan, the earth tilts off its axis, with disastrous results. As Moindre warns,

vous imaginiez sans doute que le monde allait rester le même ainsi décapité, tandis que roulait par-dessus bord le crâne de l'orang-outan, [...] que nous allions continuer à progresser avec le même allant dans la résolution des énigmes, à édifier avec la même sûreté les constructions philosophiques sur quoi se fondent la sagesse des nations et, individuellement, la conduite éclairée d'une vie bien comprise? (59)

In the absence of the orangutan, the natural order is overturned. In the second part of the novel, the reader is plummeted into a post-apocalyptic land, “[un] écosystème gravement lésé et désorganisé,” rocked by “Contrecoups, répercussions en chaîne, [où] chaque créature, chaque chose dans ce monde reçut sa petite secousse” (63). Humanity still exists, if only as a pale shadow of its former self, “Moroses et tôt vieillis, les enfants, désormais, petits êtres blêmes [. . .]. Qu’ils rabougrissent encore un peu sous l’effet du froid et plus rien ne les distingue de nos anciens, vieillards aux mains tremblantes, aux yeux éteints” (64). Plagued by the twin scourges of “ennui” and “nostalgie,” the remaining population wanders through a denuded landscape “frappé d’un deuil irrémédiable” (64). Crops have withered, and along with a bit of yak’s milk, the population nourishes itself on rancor and hard cakes of “ongle,” a hybrid grain “nommée ainsi en raison de l’aspect blanchâtre translucide et de la dureté de ses grains” (65-66). While the first, third, and fourth parts of the book are clearly and explicitly narrated by Albert Moindre, the narrator of the second section of the novel is never explicitly identified. The reader assumes that the narrating voice is still that of Moindre, but the uncertainty that attends that ambiguity reflects the disorientation which afflicts humanity itself in a world cut loose from its moorings. The narrator claims that he keeps a record of his experience primarily for selfish reasons: “Je tiens ici pour mon compte la chronique de nos malheurs parce qu’il me semble que je supporte

mieux la souffrance du deuil en l'objectivant par des descriptions fidèles du désastre consécutif à cette perte que le monde a subi” (66). If the narrator still finds some solace in the written word, he is one of the few who do. As he notes, most others have given up on the small consolations of literature: “Nous n’avons plus guère recours aux mots. Dans le blizzard sifflant, notre littérature peine à faire entendre sa petite voix de malade” (89). Replacing literature, the narrator notes that “la polémique est [ . . . ] devenue la forme dominante sinon exclusive de nos échanges avec les coups, toutefois, mais qui en sont la conséquence” (91-92), but like the exchanges between Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett’s *En attendant Godot*, those conversations serve primarily to while away a few moments of the time that stretches out endlessly before them.

Deprived of the organizing principle of the orangutan (63-64), the world is off-kilter, and its instability makes it precarious for those who remain. The ground, or rather the “sable [ . . . ] traître” on which they stand, shifts constantly beneath the survivors’ feet (73). There is nowhere to flee (69), yet the remaining humans are equally unable to stand still, for fear of freezing to death on the spot, “Première règle: ne jamais demeurer immobile, ce qui se révèle périlleux dans un pays qui nous promet la chute à chaque pas” (88). The narrative itself seems contaminated by the same fundamental instability that characterizes the earth, shifting slowly and almost imperceptibly from a description of icy sandblasted steppes, populated by yaks and the “lion des sables” (80), to a swampy marsh on the edge of a lagoon, home to a population of “morses—ainsi nommés en raison de leur vague ressemblance avec le monstre de nos vieilles encyclopédies” (120). Perhaps that mutability<sup>6</sup> is the most salient point of the “terres abandonnées,” a hellish landscape with everything to hate about it and nothing to love, not even the psychotropic herb “loka,” which although it induces a pleasant stupor, “suscite aussi chez

certains des hallucinations pénibles” (81). The dystopian abandoned lands are the worst of all possible worlds, constantly shifting to crush any hopes that might possibly be raised.

In place of the orangutan, the “hurlant” is the emblematic figure of the new world:

monstre membraneux [. . .], corps mou bourgeonnant de courts tentacules gris et flasques caroncules violacées, qui prospère sur les terres abandonnées comme un chancre. [. . .] [Le] bond lourd et sans ampleur du hurlant est une telle dérision de nos propres efforts et tentatives de décollage, d’ascension, que nous nous vengeons sur lui de nos échecs répétés avec une hargne infatigable. Ainsi adorons-nous notre animal-totem: les bâtons et les pierres sont les instruments du culte. (78)

While the orangutan lived in the trees, attracting the gaze upward toward the sky beyond, “Le hurlant épouse les moindres aspérités du sol, il y adhère, s’y ventouse, se modèle selon, se conforme, s’étale, se tartine” (79). The orangutan offered a vision of escape and transcendence, while in a reversal of the previous order, the “hurlant” adheres to and almost incarnates the corrupted earth from which it seems to have sprung:

Sale bête. On la dirait toujours prête à bondir mais son ventre traîne encore au sol quand elle est au zénith de son saut misérable. Le hurlant se hisse sur ses pattes arrière et se propulse en avant, son saut est une forme dissimulée de reptation qui l’enfonce à chaque fois dans ce sable dont il resurgit ensuite comme si le monde était son œuf et qu’il naissait là, à l’instant, seul habitant légitime des terres abandonnées. C’est une métaphore comme il m’en échappe parfois encore quand ma vigilance se relâche, mais je dois bien avouer que notre science ne s’explique pas mieux son mode de reproduction. (78-79)

Language still attempts to say something new through the creation of metaphors, but the derisory matter at hand provides little inspiration. If literature fails to provide much relief, more prosaic forms of human knowledge—“notre science”—fare little better. The narrator notes, “Nous nous défions [ . . . ] de notre faculté de pensée, impuissante à nous soulever du sol” (81). To be sure, humankind is still animated by the desire to understand and to exploit the natural world, particularly when confronted with such a creature as the “hurlant,” “Nous nous sommes demandé bien sûr comment utiliser à notre avantage un être si bien adapté aux conditions nouvelles de notre séjour sur la terre” (79). The “hurlant,” however, defies all attempts to utilize it, mocking the notion that the natural world places itself at the disposal of humankind: “Sa chair est infecte, fielleuse, mélangée de venin. Sa peau que le sable ne cuit ni ne ronge ne se laisse non plus ni tanner ni coudre” (79). Even play, an activity seemingly free from the rapacious mentality that underlies human desire to exploit the world, is contaminated by contact with the “hurlant”: “Les enfants jouent aux billes avec ses yeux blancs et durs, mais c'est un jeu qui les oppose et se termine toujours par des pleurs et des bagarres. Naissent des haines qui durent toute une vie” (79-80). The breakdown of play is but one aspect of a generalized collapse of human society.

Indeed, human society has devolved to a point where “[la] nostalgie seule justifie le maintien d'un semblant d'organisation sociale dans le groupe haineux” (70). The most common unit of social organization is the ritualized formation of human pyramids. The narrator recounts the past glories of the days when the pyramids assembled as many as two hundred participants, crushing those in the bottom rows, “payant ainsi chèrement la perspective de se jucher un jour [ . . . ] au sommet de la pyramide, [ . . . ] bonheur insigne qui ne nous échoit qu'une fois ou deux dans le cours d'une existence” (72). Those unstable configurations have vanished, however, “Notre idéal s'émousse. On ne se sent bien que dans le ventre de la pyramide, à mi-hauteur, préservés à

la fois de l'enlisement sous trop de poids et de la chute mortelle. Nos pyramides comptent rarement plus de trois rangs désormais. C'est l'idée de civilisation qui vacille" (107). Only three-person pyramids remain, with the positions and the duration of the structure negotiated at knifepoint, an arrangement that allows each participant to experience a few fleeting moments "plus loin du sol, plus près du ciel, dans ce champ libre où tout semble possible encore et même souhaitable" (70). The survivors can only create and recreate endlessly the most basic and parodic of social structures, literally mashing each other into the ground in the hopes of obtaining a better position just for a moment. Children quickly internalize the brutal logic of their society. Excluded from the pyramids constructed by the adults, they build their own. However, "les plus grands exploitant les plus petits et les obligeant par la menace à occuper les rangs de la base tandis qu'ils grimpent tout en haut," the pyramids collapse almost instantly, "Ainsi formons-nous de perpétuels coupables en une seule leçon" (72).

The progressive decline of communal arrangements is mirrored by the breakdown of the most basic unit of social organization, the family:

Les fils n'aiment pas leurs mères qui les ont enfantés; ils n'aiment pas non plus leurs pères qu'ils tiennent pour responsables aussi de ce triste état de fait. Au reste, les parents n'aiment pas leurs enfants qui douloureusement les prolongent, comme si une vie ne suffisait pas. Il ne viendrait plus à l'idée de personne de chercher une ressemblance physique chez le rejeton. Les familles se défont vite, cellules honteuses, groupuscules menaçants où se perpétue la malédiction. (70)

Chevillard plays lustily on the various meanings of "cellules." In the common metaphor of society as a body, families represent the cells, the smallest and most fundamental of building blocks. At the same time, in the degraded post-orangutan world, a joyless realm where "la

hantise de l'engendrement” transforms the pleasures of sexual intercourse into a violent battleground where “les membres se repoussent, les mains giflent, griffent, les corps luttent et se débattent” (107-08); through a metonymical relationship the “cellules honteuses” also refer quite literally to the physical cells containing the genetic makeup of individuals, passed down through the intermingling of the parents’ DNA. As the locus where the curse of human misery is perpetuated through procreation, family relationships become prison cells, bringing new people into existence and then trapping them together for all time.

Issues of heredity and perpetuation recur throughout *Sans l'orang-outan*. In a hallucinatory mirror scene in the first part of the novel, Moindre is unable to recognize himself in a mirror, seeing only the faces of his mother and father as he incarnates their hereditary traits:

mes parents exercent encore sur moi leur autorité abusive, je les sens au-dedans qui s'activent [ . . . ]. Ils s'agitent, ils occupent peu à peu toute la place. [ . . . ] Ils me défigurent, je ne me reconnaïs plus. [ . . . ] N'en finiront-ils jamais de m'engendrer? Ils retravaillent leur créature de l'intérieur, dotés cette fois d'outils plus performants, [ . . . ] dirait-on, des lames donc, des ciseaux, des scalpels, tels Pelleport et Horviller s'acharnant sur le cadavre de Bagus, incisant sa peau, disséquant ses chairs avec leurs becs de vautours. (39-40)

Not only does Moindre feel trapped in his body, unable to escape the influence of his parents, he feels trapped in the movement of human history, which left to itself flows steadily and inexorably toward death, represented here by the vision of Bagus’s dissection. Moindre recounts the banal yet bitter saga of his parents and grandparents, characterized by spite and rancor, and laments the fact that in the absence of the orangutan, his inspiration,<sup>7</sup> his family is all that remains: “Quand l'orang-outan vivait encore, il me restait au moins cette échappée, ce refuge

hors de la prison cellulaire. Je pouvais sortir de mon corps. J'étais à l'aube de toutes les histoires" (42-43). The "prison cellulaire" of the body trapped in history resonates throughout the text, finding its echo in the "cellules honteuses" of the family I mentioned a moment ago. As he contemplates his painful family history, Moindre is stopped by a sudden doubt: "Et si mes parents avaient plutôt mis en moi le pire d'eux-mêmes? [ . . . ] En moi ils se sont débarrassés de tous ce qui les excédait. [ . . . ] Ils ont fourré en moi comme dans un sac tout ce qu'il leur répugnait d'être" (45). Turning conventional narratives about heredity on their head, Moindre evokes a dystopian vision of procreation, one that finds full expression in the second part of the novel, as the narrator muses, "Ou souhaiterions-nous plutôt secrètement que jamais ne prenne fin la malédiction, que d'autres après nous en pâtissent à leur tour? Il me faut un témoin. [ . . . ] [Q]u'il avale lui aussi sa part de sable" (85).

The surviving members of society share a powerful desire to drag one another down, parcelling out their wretchedness equally among all members. That desire derives emphatically not from a conviction of solidarity; it is rather a cruel impulse, based on the miserable logic of a nightmare world. All signs of beauty that could potentially differentiate individuals are systematically and brutally erased: "Les jeunes femmes sont invitées à s'enlaidir le plus possible. [ . . . ] Leurs cheveux sont coupés ras. [ . . . ] Les beaux garçons de même sont soumis dès l'enfance à des tabassages en règle qui finissent par les défigurer suffisamment. [ . . . ] Nul bellâtre n'atteint l'âge de vingt ans sans subir quelques retouches opportunes" (84). That radical egalitarianism pervades every domain. Although no one wishes to possess property, it is nonetheless carefully apportioned out: "il n'est du goût de personne ici de posséder du terrain. Ces jardins du deuil, de la nostalgie et de l'ennui, nous n'en voulons pas. Nous arpentons tristement la portion de terre qui nous échoit pourtant, en vertu du partage des fautes et des responsabilités" (86). All

members of the society shoulder a portion of the blame for the disappearance of the orangutan, yet the communal aspect of that culpability does little to alleviate each individual's burden.

Indeed, although their fate is shared, each member of the society is still motivated by personal gain, or rather, in the distorted logic of their hellish landscape, by the desire to divest themselves of all material ties to their surroundings:

Nous vivons de l'échange de nos compétences et de nos biens, mais davantage par le désir de nous débarrasser que d'acquérir. La propriété est une servitude ici, et de même la possession de la moindre chose un encombrement. Nous pratiquons un troc brutal, haineux, revanchard, l'art de la négociation consiste à se défaire du maximum pour obtenir le minimum. (111-12)

Over the course of the second section, the reader follows the travails of the surviving humans as they eke out a painful existence in an elemental landscape seemingly composed solely of ice, sand, marsh, and sea. With the turn of a page, however, the reader leaves behind the stark post-orangutan dystopia and returns to Moindre's by now familiar lament, "Parce qu'il n'y a plus l'orang-outan. Parce que manque l'orang-outan, le caoutchouc de l'orang-outan. L'orang-outan était comme une huile dans les rouages, à lui seul tous les ressorts de la machine" (129).<sup>8</sup> The word "orang-outan" pops off the page with its prominence, an effect that may cause the reader to go back and confirm a suspicion, namely, that although the unnamed narrator of the second part of the novel speaks of "cette perte" and "les forêts marécageuses de Sumatra et Bornéo" (66), the word "orang-outan" is conspicuously absent from the second section, appearing not once in sixty-two pages, a remarkable lacuna in a text where the word appears one hundred and sixty-nine times in the other one hundred and eleven pages. If the absence of the *singe* speaks to absence of the *singe* in the dystopian second part of the novel, the word returns with a vengeance

in the third section, as Moindre employs ever more desperate measures to fill the gap left behind by the orangutans' death.

At first, the third section seems to pick up where the first section left off, and the reader may breathe a sigh of relief as Moindre and his fellow zoo employees ponder what to do with the stuffed remains of Bagus and Mina. Little by little, however, subtle references to the “terres abandonnées”<sup>9</sup> appear in the zookeeper’s narration (135), and as he continues to make references to “ces pyramides que nous avons coutume d’édifier” and “des coquilles de lambis [ . . . ] ou encore des fétiches grossièrement façonnés dans des os de yacks ou de l’ivoire de morse” (141-42), the reader comes to realize that the worst has indeed come to pass, and the nightmare world of the second section and Moindre’s world are one and the same. Moindre and his colleagues put Bagus and Mina on display in a public square, attracting huge crowds of distraught pilgrims, but as the situation continues to worsen, the people institute “la semaine des tentures, une semaine de rédemption pendant laquelle nous pouvons croire que rien n’a changé” (150). Across the city, people hang huge painted tarpaulins—“des reproductions à l’identique”—over the facades of buildings that are crumbling underneath, “Des quartiers entiers aux façades somptueuses furent ainsi recréés” (150). More importantly, the tarpaulins also depict “de grands orangs-outans débonnaires,” and as the wind gently blows the paintings, they move, “et nous voulions y voir la réalité même” (150). That “illusion délicieuse” fades over time, however, and Moindre comes to realize that “usées, fanées, détruites, les tentures que nous déployions devant le pays maudit ne faisaient plus que redoubler sa laideur incurable. [ . . . ] À l’insupportable réalité, nous n’avons su opposer qu’une illusion qui en est devenue l’exacte réplique!” (152). That pungent remark is clearly uttered on behalf of the author. As I mentioned, the realist novel, and more critically, the worldview it endorses and enforces, are prime targets for Chevillard.

Here, the realist illusion is patently a false pleasure, lulling the populace into a complacent stupor as their world literally crumbles around them.

Reinvigorated by his sudden realization, Moindre envisions a more radical course of action. Assembling a motley group of volunteers, the zookeeper embarks on an ambitious training program that seeks nothing less than to “réintroduire l’orang-outan dans nos contrées, mes amis, voilà la mission qui nous incombe, repeupler les terres abandonnées” (161).<sup>10</sup> With the orangutans gone, only one option remains: to train humans to replace them. As Moindre proclaims, his is a serious project, “Que l’on ne s’y trompe pas: je ne donne pas des cours de théâtre ou de comédie. J’entends bien former de vrais orangs-outans, dotés de réflexes d’orangs-outans et vivant comme tels” (166). For a variety of reasons, however, not least his charges’ inaptitude for brachiation (161), the zookeeper’s project does not go according to plan.<sup>11</sup> His volunteers grow restive after Moindre resolves “pour des raisons évidentes à diriger la manœuvre assis dans un bon fauteuil installé entre les troncs. L’orang-outan ne tient pas longtemps la position debout qui ne lui est pas naturelle. Je ne dois cesser d’être un exemple pour mes braves soldats” (177). The zookeeper works his charges hard, and in single-minded pursuit of his goal, he is unafraid to resort to drastic measures, such as separating a six-month old infant from the “influence néfaste” of his mother (176-77). Noting that the tiger is “l’ennemi héréditaire de l’orang-outan et son plus cruel prédateur,” Moindre releases a tiger into the training compound in the hopes of awakening some long-dormant animal instincts in his volunteers (178). The zookeeper reassures his students that the tiger experiment was at least a partial success, “Or le tigre vous a considérés à l’égal d’un groupe d’orangs-outans. Il n’a point perçu de différence significative. Sa charge meurtrière est aussi un hommage à nos efforts et à nos résultats” (179). All the same, the entire project begins to teeter as their memories become more and more vague:

L'orang-outan coupait-il son vin? Avalait-il la fumée? Combien avait-il d'épouses? Quelles figures inventait son imagination érotique? [...] Portait-il parfois des lunettes?

Voilà que tout se brouille et s'embrouille et que nous ne pouvons plus jurer de rien. [...]

Il nous manque un exemple fiable, un modèle. Tout occupé de ma leçon, j'ai quelque peu abandonné à eux-mêmes Bagus et Mina. [...] Je sens que le bien-fondé même de notre entreprise est en train de nous échapper. (183-84)

In the fourth and final section, a one-page coda, Moindre succumbs to the allure of Western science and encourages Pelleport to perform an *in vitro* fertilization of Bagus and Mina's frozen sperm and ova. An orangutan mother nowhere in sight, he turns to his girlfriend with a messianic gleam in his eye, "Je pris des façons d'archange doucereuses et insinuantes, et Aloïse se laissa convaincre. Vous me voyez à nouveau plein d'espoir et de foi en l'avenir, mes amis. Dans deux cent quarante-cinq jours, j'en tremble d'émotion, lui naîtra un fils qui sera aussi notre père à tous" (187). Moindre's decline through an endless series of self-justifications from a noble—if hapless—soul, to petty tyrant, to Dr. Moreau, evokes the collapse of society at large.

However, despite his many shortcomings, in his last moments of lucidity Moindre proffers a forceful denunciation of humankind's shortsightedness: "Nous n'avons rien vu ou rien compris. Nous avons vu un singe. Un primate non évolué, avons-nous jugé avec condescendance en nous frappant la poitrine, et son exemple fut perdu" (175). Indeed, he claims, "au vu de nos résultats, à simplement regarder comment le monde a tourné sous notre règne et ce que nous en avons fait, par cupidité, gabegie, incurie ou toute autre bonne raison de ce genre que nous alléguons ordinairement pour diminuer nos responsabilités, il se déduit que

l'orang-outan était bien mieux que nous l'homme de la situation” (172). Such statements make *Sans l'orang-outan* Chevillard’s most socially committed novel thus far. While Chevillard mocks humanity’s various follies throughout his works, in this text his sustained and passionate condemnation of humankind’s destruction of the natural world takes things a step further.

The social dimension of his novel cannot be dismissed, yet Chevillard remains hesitant to assert the power of literature to effect change in the world. In a recent interview, he claims:

Je ne sais si l'écrivain a une fonction. Est-ce qu'il ne doit pas être au contraire celui qui ne fonctionne pas? Celui qui dysfonctionne? L'homme s'est donné des dirigeants, des directeurs, des gouvernants. L'écrivain doit continuer à dire que tout cela ne va pas de soi, que notre monde est une invention humaine, que ses règles peuvent être contestées et refusés les destins en série qui sont les nôtres parce que nous manquons d'imagination, que ceux-ci obéissent à un certain nombre d'injonctions dont nous avons oublié qu'elles sont pour la plupart de pures conventions. La langue est aussi prisonnière de ces conventions. Plus grave, elle en devient la propagatrice et même la principale garante. L'écrivain doit la rendre à son innocence première (ou idéale), lui restituer inlassablement ses facultés d'invention, de satire, de fantaisie, afin que nous puissions encore en faire usage pour nous frayer un chemin intelligent dans la masse opaque et stupide du réel.  
 (“L'autre personnage du livre, c'est le lecteur” 1)

Although absent in the flesh, the orangutan reveals itself as the paradoxically omnipresent figure of the linguistic “innocence idéale” to which Chevillard refers. Obeying its own logic, free from human convention, the orangutan swings joyously through the pages of the novel, liberating the imagination through language and pointing the way toward new

possibilities. In the one passage in the novel where the narration seems to slip into the point of view of the orangutan, that voice affirms, “Nous interventions partout où menaçaient l’ennui, la paralysie, [ . . . ] dès que se fixait le récit dans sa forme, dès que se figeait le cadavre, nous surgissions” (155). Animated by the example of the quadrumanous orangutan (60), Chevillard grabs onto language with all four of his hands, remaking the world through his words and challenging us to look with new eyes at the planet we inhabit. He laments the damage done to our ecosystem, but his concerns extend beyond the natural world, for he is also concerned with what we could describe as cultural ecology. In his view, original, thought-provoking novels occupy a tenuous perch in the cultural landscape, and we should not take their existence for granted. He argues that novels, like orangutans, are endangered species, and they require our urgent attention if we wish them to thrive. Chevillard seeks to capture in his writing some of the freedom represented by the orangutan: freedom from rules, freedom from human anxieties and morbid compulsions, freedom from the circumscribed existence that society seeks to impose on us. In his view, novels should expand our horizons, in the largest sense of that expression. He argues that narrow thinking leads to narrow decisions, and he encourages us to look upwards, toward the trees, toward the orangutans, because the books we read—and the books we write—matter, both for our imaginations and for the ways in which we rethink our world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Those novels are *Mourir m'enrhume* (1987), *Le Démarcheur* (1988), *Palafox* (1990), *Le Caoutchouc, décidément* (1992), *La Nébuleuse du crabe* (1993), *Préhistoire* (1994), *Un Fantôme* (1995), *Au plafond* (1997), *L'Œuvre posthume de Thomas Pilaster* (1999), *Les Absences du capitaine Cook* (2001), *Du hérisson* (2002), *Le Vaillant petit tailleur* (2003), *Oreille Rouge* (2005), *Démolir Nisard* (2006), *Sans l'orang-outan* (2007), *Choir* (2010), and *Dino Egger* (2011).

<sup>2</sup> For example, Jordan Stump notes that while Fieke Schoots includes Chevillard in her 1994 study of minimalist writers, Chevillard “might be more properly termed a maximalist” (“Ghosts” 820).

<sup>3</sup> Hippolyte makes a similar argument: “For Chevillard one of the functions of art is precisely to push against the boundaries of good taste, of *idées recues*—in a word, against the tyranny of cultural conformism. To use Michel Leiris’s metaphor, Chevillard’s textuality stands as a *tauromachie*, a cannibalistic revisiting not only of the canon but also of what constitutes normality” (*Fuzzy Fiction* 66).

<sup>4</sup> “When a word is repeatedly produced or perceived, many people experience what has become known as the semantic satiation effect, a subjective and temporary loss of the meaning of that word” (Kounios 1366).

<sup>5</sup> Stump calls attention to the attempts of both Crab and Furne to reform the system in place in *La Nébuleuse du crabe* and *Le Caoutchouc, décidément*, respectively (“Ghosts” 827). See also Hippolyte, *Fuzzy Fiction* 67-83.

<sup>6</sup> The mutability of the landscape in the second part of the novel calls to mind Palafox, the creature who defies all attempts at description in Chevillard’s 1993 novel of the same name.

<sup>7</sup> “Du temps de l’orang-outan, j’échappais à cette malédiction, [.] il y avait ce bonhomme ventru, velu, ce rouquin qui d’un grand geste du bras dégageait de vastes perspectives et nous indiquait des directions nouvelles” (45-46).

<sup>8</sup> Although Moindre himself does not appear until several pages later, the phrasing of the incipit of the third section echoes almost exactly his assertion in the first part of the novel that “Tous nos ressorts sont cassés. Toute l’huile grâce à quoi se mouvaient encore parfois nos vieux squelettes vient d’être d’un coup épinglee” (21).

<sup>9</sup> The term “terres abandonnées” recurs throughout the second section. See 77, 78, 95, and 118.

<sup>10</sup> Moindre’s description of his quixotic project calls to mind another project undertaken by a character named “Albert Moindre” in *L’Œuvre posthume de Thomas Pilaster*, namely, “Trois tentatives pour réintroduire le tigre mangeur d’hommes dans nos campagnes” (91). Albert Moindre pops up often in Chevillard’s fiction, although he often changes somewhat from text to text. Chevillard enjoys sprinkling intertextual references to his works throughout his novels. Indeed, in the second section of *Sans l’orang-outan*, the narrator hurls a few well-aimed clumps of mud at “Nyzar” (114), a homonym of Désiré Nisard, the narrator’s *bête noire* in Chevillard’s *Démolir Nisard*.

<sup>11</sup> In his single-mindedness and ambition, Moindre recalls other characters from Chevillard’s works, such as Furne in *Le Caoutchouc décidément* and the narrator in *Démolir Nisard*.

## CHAPTER V

### **Christine Montalbetti's Road Trip**

Christine Montalbetti takes her readers on a heady ride in *Journée américaine* (2009), her seventh book for the Editions POL.<sup>1</sup> Her “American day” recounts the journey of a man named Donovan on his way to visit an old friend, Tom Lee. Along the way, Donovan reflects upon the paths that their lives have taken since the “années chrysalides” that the two men shared at university (18). The notions of transformation and potential evoked by that figure of speech are apt indeed, for the stories that emerge from Donovan’s reflections unfold in unexpected ways, ultimately serving as a springboard for nothing less than a reconsideration of the potential of the novel as a narrative form. An accomplished literary theorist,<sup>2</sup> Montalbetti has published critical works on topics such as narrative digression, the status of readers and characters, and the relations between fiction and reality. Her fiction writing, however, calls our scholarly certainties into question, blurring narratological categories and exploding the boundaries between her fiction and the phenomenal world. While Montalbetti’s novel serves as a laboratory of fiction, it is important to note that she is emphatically not taking part in dry technical experiments, quite the contrary. Her fictions are exemplary of a massive return to storytelling,<sup>3</sup> participating in what has been described as “an avant-garde that seems to welcome its readers with open arms, while still insisting on innovation.”<sup>4</sup> In *Journée américaine*, Montalbetti turns generic conventions on their head, exploiting narrative potential for all it is worth and sketching out a dynamic space for her reader to join in the game.

In her two most recent novels, Montalbetti has appropriated two iconic generic models frequently associated with cinema as well as with literature, namely, the Western and the road novel.<sup>5</sup> In both cases, those models open onto wide vistas, providing foundations from which to

engage and call into question generic conventions and readers' horizons of expectation. A great deal of the narrative tension of her novel *Western* (2005) hinges upon Montalbetti toying with the reader's assumptions about the events that typically occur in canonical examples of the genre. Indeed, in her novel the reader witnesses a cowboy with a lasso, a beautiful woman stepping down from a stagecoach, a picturesque saloon complete with a bare-knuckle brawl out back, and finally, of course, as in any Western worthy of the name, a shootout between the hero and the villain. That duel does not occur, however, until the very last page of the 212-page novel, and as Warren Motte remarks, "by that time, it's almost a footnote" (*Fiction* 177). Motte argues that throughout *Western*, Montalbetti systematically defers story in favor of discourse, crafting "a story almost entirely bereft of event, a dilatory tale wherein narrative digression, amplified to maddening proportions, serves to furnish the text, while action is largely suspended" (*Fiction* 177). As Motte notes, that strategy is all the more surprising as it contrasts sharply with the action-packed nature of the genre that Montalbetti appropriates (*Fiction* 177)—and she makes a similar move with her choice of the road novel as model for *Journée américaine*.

Canonical road novels and road movies, such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), privilege geography, speed, and the unexpected. Tom Conley asserts, "a road movie could generate a desire to get on the road, to travel errantly, and to engage adventure" (157). *Journée américaine* is indeed an exceedingly mobile text, but not in the traditional sense of a road novel. In Montalbetti's novel, generic norms remain present largely in order to be subverted. In Donovan's case, he knows exactly where he is going, and not much happens to him along the way. He does pass by a few iconic backdrops, as if Montalbetti were ticking them off of a list of road novel conventions, "(oh, a pump jack, s'exclame Donovan)" (145), but they generally are not central to the development of the story. Timothy

Corrigan notes that road movies are typically “peopled with male buddies” (144), and while Donovan’s buddy Tom Lee does play a major role in the story, he is not actually on the road with Donovan, and his absence provides a spur for Donovan’s explorations of their shared memories. It soon becomes clear that Montalbetti has a rather different destination in mind for Donovan’s road trip, and her chosen genre serves primarily as a springboard from which her narrator can launch off in various directions.

A common thread that runs through reviews of the novel in the French press is captured in Véronique Rossignol’s assertion “On traverse l’Amérique des lieux communs, celle que tout le monde a dans sa bibliothèque d’images, sans y être même jamais allé *en vrai*” (72). The mention of a personal “bibliothèque d’images” is suggestive, recalling Roland Barthes’s declaration in *S/Z* that “Ce ‘moi’ qui s’approche du texte est déjà lui-même une pluralité d’autres textes, de codes infinis” (16). It is a reminder of how heavily conditioned we are by our previous readings, and how the extent to which a particular book delights, disappoints, or confounds us depends greatly upon our readerly expectations. Montalbetti plays on those presumptions in various ways as she calls our desires into question, at times assuaging them, at times subverting them. Just as Montalbetti must at some point stage a gunfight in her Western, according to the rules of the genre, so must she occasionally include in her American road novel iconic scenes such as a picturesque view through the rear windshield, “lequel nous offre un travelling arrière parfaitement minéral, un beau plan, en cinémascope, où se reconnaissent des paysages de western, mais que nul cavalier ne vient tacheter de sa silhouette intense” (200).<sup>6</sup> Montalbetti delivers such scenes because the genre requires them, yet ultimately she fulfills our readerly expectations mostly for her own purposes.

Another reviewer, Elisabeth Philippe, asserts that “Montalbetti joue à ‘on dirait qu’on serait en Amérique.’ [ . . . ] Toutes les mythologies made in USA sont convoquées. Le campus, les Indiens, le ranch, les *diners* et cette accumulation de clichés composent, pour mieux la déconstruire, l’image de carton-pâte d’une Amérique fantasmée” (1). Several points leap out from her comments, beginning with the importance of the notion of play. Philippe frames Montalbetti’s strategy as lighthearted and almost childlike, but Motte argues that contrary to popular assumption, play can in fact be a very serious activity performed in an articulative relationship between participants (*Playtexts* 25).<sup>7</sup> Montalbetti is indeed proposing a sort of game in her novel, but the space for that play may be much less closely circumscribed than we normally consider it to be, and the rules significantly looser. Philippe’s reference to “les mythologies made in USA” reinforces Rossignol’s claim that readers have a whole set of assumptions about the American West gleaned from books, film, and television, yet it also reminds us that works of art tend to create their own mythologies, as is the case with Kerouac’s *On the Road*. Finally, the allusion to an “image de carton-pâte” calls to mind the process of fabrication, both in the literal sense of the manufacture and manipulation of the material that makes up a movie set, as well as the figurative sense of the word, with the realization that the “Amérique fantasmée” is just that, a construct. *Journée américaine* plays on the tension between those two notions, suggesting that the narratives we create are what make up our world, while constantly reminding us that those narratives are, after all, just stories.

As is the case in *Western*, Montalbetti playfully suggests that logically enough for a novel entitled *Journée américaine*, English is the original language of the events depicted in her text. Brief snippets of dialogue in English occasionally pop up in italics in the narration, as for example when Donovan runs into Jane: “*Don’t worry, Jane, répondent les yeux de Donovan, I*

*ain't waiting for nobody*" (75). For the ostensible benefit of those whose language skills may not be up to snuff, the narrator helpfully reminds French readers of the proper pronunciation of names, such as "Robert (prononcez wobeute)" (66), and elucidates potentially unfamiliar terms, such as an "*Open mic*', *open microphone*, c'est-à-dire à micro ouvert, [...] (vous prononcez bien opeunn' maïk, hein?)" (99). Motte discusses that strategy as it is deployed in *Western*, where the narrator's linguistic glosses serve initially to reinforce narrative authority:

This is a world she knows intimately, she suggests, a world through which she will guide those who are willing to listen to her. But to whom are we in fact listening? Often, the narrator presents herself as an eyewitness, as an individual literally and physically present upon the scene that she describes. [...] At other times, another narrative voice intervenes, one which is clearly intended to be taken as that of the author [...], invoking the image of the writer composing her text [...]. Elsewhere, there are other passages where Montalbetti pretends to speak directly in her own voice. (*Fiction* 183-84)

The blurring of the conventional distinction between author and narrator characterizes all of Montalbetti's fictional writing.<sup>8</sup> Any first-year graduate student quickly learns to distinguish between the real-life author present in the world and the narrator present in the text,<sup>9</sup> yet throughout her works, Montalbetti insistently muddles the theoretical boundaries between those two figures.

In *Journée américaine*, at times the narrator occupies a fairly traditional, if highly discursive role, cajoling and encouraging the narratee in brief asides such as "Keith Hassanbay est un nom que vous devez vraiment retenir" (26), or "Mike (vous avez déjà croisé Mike, au match d'*American football*)" (95). Those instances, which recall the narration of Sterne or

Diderot, perform a variety of functions within the text. Frequently, the narrator's addresses serve to establish a level of complicity between the narrator and the narratee, while at other times they highlight the fictional and constructed nature of the text. At certain moments, however, the narrator suggests that she is more actively engaged in the diegesis, whether in passing remarks such as "il me semble que Jane était là" (91), or more radically, in a description of the locale where Donovan and Tom Lee used to take their romantic partners, when she asserts "Je vous le raconte d'expérience (on ne peut pas dire que je n'aurai pas scrupuleusement mené mon enquête), car j'ai fait partie, moi aussi, des filles qu'on a embrassées là" (58). The immediacy and the intimacy of that unexpected statement surprises us, not least because we have already been exposed to narrative asides that seem to position the narrating instance "je" as the real-world author, as for example when the narrator remarks upon the "moment où j'écris ces lignes (tiens, il neige, une fois n'est pas coutume, derrière ma vitre, sur les trottoirs de Paris)" (46). The narrator's claim that she was one of the "filles qu'on a embrassées là" immediately follows a description of the fictional characters Donovan and Tom Lee kissing their partners, and the reader initially struggles to reconcile the perceived extradiegetic status of the narrator with the logical assumption that the narrative "je" is referring to the act of being kissed by one of the characters.

The reader's possible confusion is somewhat palliated by the narrator's next sentence, "C'était sur le tard, lors d'un voyage récent, mais c'était bien, [ . . . ] sur les terres planes de l'Oklahoma" (58-59), which seems to indicate that since time has passed and Donovan and Tom Lee have moved on, the narrator must have been kissed by someone else in the exact same spot. That episode echoes and is layered on top of the experience of the characters, and in turn becomes material for the novel, as she tells her presumed partner: "*thank you, I won't forget (it's*

*in the book, anyway, now)" (59).* But what is the status of that narrative utterance? At yet another moment, the narrator refers to herself as "moi, Christine" (165), claiming to speak in the name of the author.<sup>10</sup> Episodes such as those, staged as impromptu confidences proffered by the narrator, potentially serve to heighten the intimacy of the developing relationship between narrator and narratee. They also suggestively imply that just as the narrator—and perhaps the author—will let her experiences filter into the novel, so too will the reader, through the mediation of the narratee, perhaps eventually be invited to participate more fully in the process of creation. Those invitations to the narratee/reader also serve to further blur diegetical boundaries, as for example when the narratee is asked at a football game whether he or she would like to try on the players' padding, "Vous voulez essayer pour voir? Endosser leur costume?" (40), which suggests that the narratee is physically present at the football stadium. More provocatively, at one point the narrator dares her reader to perform the sort of alchemy that she handles with aplomb, with the challenge, "Maintenant, si là, tout de suite, vous me sortez de votre poche une photo [...] si vous m'extirpez ainsi de vos affaires cette image de bord de mer avec enfants jouant [...], et que vous parvenez à me convaincre que ce sont là William, Norma et Linda Burn, saisis en pleine enfance, [...] eh bien, franchement, je vous dirai chapeau" (254-55). Although the reader may well be taken aback by such a direct reminder of his or her inability to act within the fictional world, Montalbetti makes up for it in other places. While perusing some of the many items at a thrift store that Donovan visits along the way, she slyly suggests that the narratee/reader may wish to pick out something to bring home, "Est-ce vous n'allez pas vous prendre de tendresse pour l'un d'entre eux, se sucrier, par exemple [...] ? [...] Si vous y fourrez votre nez, il y a là une indicible senteur de vieux placard, c'est vrai, [...] mais il suffira de l'aérer, vous le laverez, tout ça finira par partir, et il ne renfermera plus que l'odeur

de votre appartement à vous” (239-40). That passage deliberately echoes a similar moment in *Western*, where the reader is invited to purchase a souvenir from Harry’s General Store as a reminder of the story (114-15). As the narrator explicitly states, each item in the thrift store “est un roman, une longue histoire d’abandons et de reprises” (*Journée américaine* 241), and thus the invitation to purchase one of those items functions to underscore “the manner in which we tend to appropriate stories and make them our own” (Motte, *Fiction* 204).

In addition to potentially taking home a small memento, the narratee/reader is frequently called upon to compare his or her own experiences with those of the characters and the narrator. After letting the fictional character Tom Lee develop one of his many theories, the narrator briefly turns to the narratee to inquire whether he or she has ever witnessed such an event, “Pour aller dans son sens, je ne sais pas si vous avez remarqué” (112), before going on to provide a purportedly first-hand, real-world account of Tom Lee’s theory in action, “C’est un phénomène qu’il n’est pas si rare d’observer et récemment encore je considérais la plage de Trouville depuis la fenêtre de l’hôtel” (112). Those vertiginous leaps from level to level are a technique that recurs throughout Montalbetti’s fictions, as she notes in a nonfiction piece devoted to her own writing practice, “Tout se passe ainsi comme s’il n’y avait pas de limites strictes entre ces [ . . . ] expériences en jeu, dont le mélange, la circulation, qui fonde le mouvement même de toute lecture, devient la raison même de ces textes” (“Pourvu” 122). Interestingly, while Montalbetti claims in a theoretical text from 1992 entitled *Images du lecteur dans les textes romanesques* that communication between a real author and a real reader through the mediation of a novel could only be “une utopie” (8), many passages in her more recent fiction call such categorical statements into question. Indeed, in an interview from 2009, Montalbetti states, “si je prends la

parole comme romancière, [ . . . ] je peux dire, oui, que je souhaite par-dessus tout que le lecteur réel ait le sentiment qu'il est bien mon interlocuteur. ("Quelques" 483). She goes on to claim:

Quand j'écrivais que la communication entre auteur réel et lecteur réel à travers le texte relevait d'une utopie, j'employais le mot 'utopie' en un sens négatif, je voulais dire qu'elle était de l'ordre de l'illusion. En un sens, je pense toujours qu'elle relève d'une utopie: mais à présent, je valorise cette utopie, c'est elle qui m'intéresse, elle que je trouve belle et émouvante, qui m'attire. C'est cette utopie-là, cette communauté utopique, que je voudrais construire à l'intérieur de chacun de mes textes. ("Quelques" 483)

That utopian space is a seductive notion, yet it remains extremely difficult to theorize. Montalbetti affirms that "le lecteur, [ . . . ] c'est le grand absent du moment où l'on écrit. [ . . . ] Et dans le même temps, même si rien n'est jamais sûr [ . . . ], cette absence est tournée, tendue, orientée vers une présence à venir—même si cette présence, qu'on espère, a lieu ailleurs, dans ces espaces où le lecteur lira ces pages" ("Pourvu" 125). Her desire for the presence of the reader is echoed in the reader's desire to find a place for his or her self in the text, a phenomenon that Montalbetti describes as "sans doute ce qui se passe dans toute lecture, cette quête, chez le lecteur, de la ressemblance, ce désir de se reconnaître" ("Quelques" 482). That exact situation occurs in *Journée américaine* with the publication of Tom Lee's first novel, in which "beaucoup s'étaient reconnus [ . . . ] dans le caractère indolent du personnage principal" (127). That identification occurs precisely as a result of a shared experience or emotion, "parce que les lecteurs [ . . . ] à l'intérieur d'eux-mêmes connaissaient les écorchures que le monde ne cesse d'infliger à votre ego. Et là, dans le secret de leur lecture, ils se rassuraient de trouver en le héros du livre un confrère" (127-28). Among the many reasons why we might read books, the desire

to have someone give voice to what we are thinking or to articulate our feelings is particularly strong. That perceived sense of connection is powerful and intimate, yet because we may desire it so fiercely, it provides a potent tool for the author to use in constructing his or her reader.<sup>11</sup>

Motte sees a similar dynamic at work in reading, as he states in an essay entitled “Reflections on Mirrors”:

though for the most part telling ourselves that we’re engaged in another sort of activity entirely, we look for ourselves in the books we read, narcissists that we are—and there we find ourselves, or some version of ourselves. Reading our way into texts, we are constantly reading our readings, that is, reflecting upon the strategies we bring to texts [ . . . ]. We read, that is, but we also watch ourselves read. In doing so, we construct a version of ourselves, one whom we may sometimes recognize immediately, sometimes by dint of effort, and sometimes not at all. Upon occasion, that phenomenon is doubled and reinforced by certain effects in the text that call out to us, for whatever reason, encouraging us to imagine identity between ourselves and textual constructs. [ . . . ] It is when recognition comes most easily, though, that we should consider it most skeptically. (786).

Indeed, while the reader is invited to play an uncommonly large role in the construction of meaning in Montalbetti’s fiction, Motte asserts that the “insistence on first-person plural forms, the invocation of a commonality of experience, the suggestion that author, character, and reader are somehow linked and have something to share [ . . . ] are seduction techniques, of course,” all of which ultimately serve to reinforce Montalbetti’s narrative authority (“Engaging” 193). We may be invited to share in the process, but Montalbetti remains clearly in charge. If we believe

that a utopian space of communication may be possible, it is because Montalbetti works extremely hard to elaborate a vision of such a domain, deploying an array of narrative techniques to encourage us to abandon ourselves to the space of fiction. The floating use of first-person and second-person pronominal forms is one of the most powerful techniques that she employs.<sup>12</sup> The pronouns “je,” “nous,” “tu,” and “vous” circulate freely throughout the discursive landscape of Montalbetti’s novels, referring variously to characters, the narrator, the narratee, the implied author, and the reader. The resulting uncertainty forces the reader to pay close attention and encourages the identification between narratee and reader that Montalbetti strives to create.

In *Journée américaine*, Montalbetti elaborates the space of fiction through the establishment of a specular relationship between Donovan and the reader at the beginning of the novel. Just as Donovan departs for a spatial and a temporal journey, so does the reader embark on a fictional voyage. Donovan is comfortably ensconced in his “break,” as the French call their station wagons (11), but it soon becomes clear that the space into which Donovan is settling is analogous to the virtual space of the novel. While ostensibly describing Donovan, the narrator slips into the use of the third-person pronoun “on,” thereby implicitly inviting the reader to:

s’abandonner au confort de l’habitacle, sentir les dimensions exactes, précises, de sa coque autour de soi. [. . .] [D]ans ce volume fermé et protecteur n’éprouve-t-on pas une continuité entre cet habitacle et soi [. . .]. Et là, à l’insu de tous, on peut tout faire, crier, chanter, pleurer tout son saoul, ou rigoler [. . .]. On a une bonne, une très bonne raison de rester assis, parce que, dans le même temps où l’on ne dépense aucune énergie corporelle, on se déplace pourtant: on fricote avec l’action, par le moyen de l’inaction même, et c’est plaisant, cette inaction

autorisée, ça déleste de tout, ça rend paisible, on est passif et en même temps dans le mouvement, tout seul comme ça dans les paysages de l'Amérique. (13-14)

The act of reading is intimate, and the novel emerges as a private space, set off from the rest of the world, that the reader is free to explore through the mediation of the narrator and characters.

Devin Orgeron notes an analogous approach at work in road films, where “Seduced by motion, the road movie viewer actively agrees to be passive—to be a passenger—and is liberated by his/her identification with the presumably liberated on-screen road traveler” (104).

Furthermore, the above passage calls to mind the coaxing of the garrulous narrator of Montalbetti's *Western*, who in a similar vein encourages the reader to *take a break* and surrender to the flow of her narration, “je voudrais tant que cela vous soit confortable, qu'en ces phrases vous trouvez l'élasticité souhaitée, [...] allons, vous vous laissez aller à ce qui dans la lecture est régressif, et c'est très bien comme ça, [...] vous jetez un œil à droite, à gauche, vers les paysages qu'on vous offre, c'est un temps pour vous” (*Western* 20-21). In both *Western* and *Journée américaine*, the narrator assures us that she has things taken care of and all we need to do is sit back and let her do the work. Montalbetti has written of “le luxe de la phrase longue, et ce qu'elle peut avoir de sensuel [...], ce qu'elle peut avoir de doux et de confortable, presque d'ergonomique, pour le lecteur” (“Quelques” 484), yet it becomes clear that that luxurious narration is yet another of her seduction techniques. The passages I have cited above are clearly disingenuous, and the fact that we are solicited so insistently instantly puts us on guard. The narrator's emphatic encouragement to go to the flow evokes antiphrastically an engaged, critical reading, and if we are willing to make such an effort, we quickly discover that the narrator has quite a different destination in mind for her American travels.

A reader approaching a Montalbetti novel for the first time may be surprised at how long it can take to get from point A to point B. Compared to, say, Kerouac's *On the Road*, on a surface level Donovan's road trip is rather uneventful. He makes a brief stop at a thrift store and runs into an old flame at a roadside diner, and at the end of the novel, some 279 pages after he first sets out, Donovan still has a little more ways to go before he actually makes it to Tom Lee's ranch. Along the way, however, he has delved deeply into his memories, and we have heard a great deal about the stories Donovan and Tom Lee have shared, as well as a few tales about their friends, their former girlfriends, their former girlfriends' friends, and their former girlfriends' families, not to mention a few anecdotes about Ralphie, the mascot of the University of Colorado Buffaloes football team. Incidentally, I use the verb *heard* rather than *read* in the previous sentence quite intentionally, for *telling* stories is one of the principal activities in *Journée américaine*. Everyone—and everything—has his or her or its own tale to tell within the novel, and we hear quite a few of those stories over the course of the day.

Co-author (with Nathalie Piegay-Gros) of a critical text entitled *La Digression dans le récit* (2000), Montalbetti explores the potential of narrative digression throughout her fictional writings.<sup>13</sup> In their theoretical volume, Montalbetti and Piegay-Gros point out that from a traditionalist perspective that values well-constructed linear plots, digression has customarily been seen as a “sortie hors du propos principal,” and a “séquence parasite, qui retarde, qui brouille les pistes” (5). Over the course of their study, however, they elaborate a vision of the productive potential of digression as characterized as “un principe de rupture et de variété, [. . .] féconde et stimulante pour la pensée” (31). In *Journée américaine*, digression plays a similar role, enabling a critique of traditional novels distinguished by linear narratives. Etymologically, digression is rooted in notions of a detour or departure from the straight path (*La Digression* 8),

although ironically, the route Donovan travels from his home in Oklahoma to Tom Lee's ranch in Colorado seems to be a fairly straight shot, with no major detours. As I mentioned before, Donovan's travels are a significant inversion of canonical road novels and movies, which tend to privilege errant wanderings and the pursuit of adventure. In Donovan's case, he knows where he is going and assumes he knows pretty much what will happen when he arrives. While Donovan sticks to the road, however, the narrator is free to wander off in all kinds of directions, and stories proliferate and ramify in unexpected ways.

Motte claims that Montalbetti's fictions are prime examples "of what Ross Chambers has called 'loiterature'" ("Engaging" 203). In Chambers's formulation, "loiterly" texts are characterized by their dilatory, digressive character, yet those narrative techniques function on a variety of levels, and if "digression [...] is loiterature's stock-in-trade," it is "the secret both of its art—a realization of the poetics of pleasure—and of its critical impact" (*Loiterature* 10).

Loiterly texts are difficult to classify, as:

loiterly writing disarms criticism of itself by presenting a moving target, shifting as its own divided attention constantly shifts. [...] It can't be summarized or reduced to a 'gist,' whereas criticism depends, like social order itself, on the possibility of discriminating and hierarchizing, determining what's central and what's peripheral. (*Loiterature* 9)

Indeed, in texts such as *Western* and *Journée américaine*, narrative digression takes up an inordinate amount of textual space, largely displacing the main story. Although Donovan and Tom Lee are clearly the central or at least framing characters of *Journée américaine*, they are only tenuously connected to many of the tales that spring forth within its pages. Yet loiterature goes further, calling into question not merely the content of traditional narratives, but also their

underlying teleological structure. Peter Brooks notes in *Reading for the Plot* that narratives are end-loaded, that is to say, “the end writes the beginning and shapes the middle” (22). According to Chambers, however, “The trick of loiterly narrative is so to question the conventionality of beginnings and endings that the alleged story becomes all middle” (*Loiterature* 21). That is precisely what occurs in *Journée américaine*. The first chapter of the novel is devoted to beginnings,<sup>14</sup> but when it comes to the two main characters, “Difficile à Donovan de dire quelle a été la première rencontre avec Tom Lee” (14). Indeed, according to the narrator, “dans l’amitié, [. . .] les débuts s’évanouissent au profit d’une stratification tranquille de la relation” (16). We hear about quite a bit about the development of that friendship over the course of the day, but what happens at the end? On the final page of the novel, Donovan is still a few kilometers shy of Tom Lee’s ranch, and the final sentence finds him pondering what will happen next as he takes a brief rest break, “avant de remonter dans le véhicule pour rouler vers la suite, oui, la suite” (279).<sup>15</sup> Montalbetti offers what Chambers describes as a defining characteristic of loiterature, “beguiling narration as an alternative to narrative closure” (25), and throughout *Journée américaine*, that exchange plays out in intriguing ways.

The narrator recounts an astounding number of stories about a variety of subjects both animate and inanimate, seemingly following each narrative thread wherever it may lead. In *Western*, that technique functions to systematically defer event while simultaneously whetting the reader’s desire to learn the rest of the story.<sup>16</sup> In *Journée américaine*, the narrator’s digressions perform similarly, heightening the reader’s desire to learn more, while allowing the narrative to pursue other paths, encouraging what Chambers describes as “a form of divided attention, the narratee becoming split between one form of desire (the desire to know [. . .]) and its other (the desire to prolong the pleasure [. . .])” (*Loiterature* 20). As in her other works,

Montalbetti jumps from story to story, at one point interrupting an account of a football game to devote eleven pages to a description of the game from a mosquito's point of view, then digressing from that digression to explore the childhood escapades of Ralphie, the football team's mascot, before finally returning to the "main" story nineteen pages later with a brief "Tout ça pour dire que Donovan et Tom, oui, avaient passé du temps sur ces gradins" (53). If I put the word "main" in quotation marks in the last sentence,<sup>17</sup> it is to underscore the point that one of Montalbetti's central concerns is to challenge our notions of what we expect from a novel. As is the case with *Western*, in *Journée américaine* digression is pushed to its maximal limits, and the principal plot line remains present primarily to provide a foundation from which the narrator is free to digress. Montalbetti's novel is a story about telling stories; it is also a story about the way we use narrative to pass the time, to solidify our relationships, and to make sense of our world.<sup>18</sup> Even inanimate objects have their stories to tell, from Tom Lee's table (68) to a heterogeneous pile of cast-off items in a thrift store jumbled together "dans un méli-mélo qui bruit d'histoires et vous susurre à l'oreille les endroits d'où ils viennent et les mésaventures qui les ont conduits jusque-là" (237). When it comes to characters, even passing ones contain multitudes, such as Chayton, a Native American who walks down the street "emmenant dans sa foulée le sillage d'une histoire douloureuse et légendaire, dont chacun de ses pas vous martelait agressivement le récit" (100). Even more intriguing is "un certain Clayton Craig, au sujet duquel on racontait pas mal d'histoires," but the narrator stops herself, "là, je me dis que ça nous entraînerait trop loin, parce que Clayton Craig, il aurait pu faire le sujet d'un roman à lui tout seul" (206-07).

While at times the narrator seems to go off in her own direction, talking about whatever strikes her fancy, she remains in control and mindful of the power of a good juicy story to snap

the reader back to attention.<sup>19</sup> In marked contrast to earlier works where the narrator is conspicuously reticent to deliver intimate sexual details,<sup>20</sup> in *Journée américaine* the narrator teases the reader a bit more, playing on the narratee's voyeuristic desire to hear the explicit parts and highlighting the narratee's expectations with direct addresses: "Ce qui s'est passé la première fois dans la chambre du jeune homme, eh bien oui, je vais vous le dire" (201). The narrator is careful to focus on the "moment qui vous intéresse," diligently describing the scene, "j'espère que vous vous figurez bien les choses" (201). At other times, the narrator stages those erotic accounts in the tales of other, unnamed narrators, namely "les habitants de la ville proche" (168), who like nothing better than the moments when "ils peuvent profiter de la présence d'un nouveau venu qui, comme eux, s'accoude au bar et s'enfile une petite bière et puis une autre parce qu'il n'y a pas d'autre recours pour oublier comment au-dehors tombe la grande page de la nuit" (166). As with any good story, "il y en a des versions différentes qui circulent" (166), yet the nameless denizens are attentive to include the risqué details, drawing out the pleasure of telling a good story with dilatory descriptions punctuated by asides meant to whet the appetite of their listener, such as "bon, [...] O.K., [...] nous y venons, [...] on y vient, [...] voici la scène" (170-72). The townspeople take a great deal of pleasure in recounting the exploits of Tom Lee, Linda Burn, and friends; and they encourage their listener<sup>21</sup> to join in the fun by filling in a few salacious details: "L'hypothèse n'engage que vous. Qui pourrait vous empêcher de vous représenter, si ça vous plaît, quelques gestes plus audacieux [...]? Certains soirs, les habitants de la ville proche baissent la voix et [...] aiguillent l'imagination du voyageur dans cette direction, sans en prendre plus avant la responsabilité" (194). Those lascivious tales are narratives that the townspeople have made their own, and the narrator suggests that we in turn are free to do the same, because stories are created so that they can be told and retold.

Narratives are meant to be shared, and Montalbetti insists upon what Motte describes as “stories in situation, that is, in a discursive context that embraces both production and reception” (*Fiction* 202). Indeed, Montalbetti presents one of those situations in the very first chapter of *Journée américaine*, describing how first encounters that lead to romantic relationships are immediately turned into narrative by the couple, as they repeat over and over

la légende, la scène fondatrice (édulcorée? simplifiée? exagérée?) où, dans l’évidence d’un croisement de regards, toute la possibilité du futur a jailli. De la version amoureusement peaufinée à deux dans les débuts, vous tirez une version officielle [ . . . ] que vous donnez en pâture à vos interlocuteurs curieux du petit roman de vos amours. (15)

The parenthetical mention of editorial revision points to the constructed nature of such narratives, which can end up replacing the lived experiences that they are supposed to represent. For those couples, love provokes the crafting of narrative as a key to understanding experience, perhaps especially in the case of less than remarkable first encounters, “ne décrypte-t-on pas alors avec ravissement tous les signes qu’on aurait dû reconnaître [ . . . ], tout ce qui couvait et qui donnerait la suite qu’on sait ?” (16). The beginning of the story becomes important precisely because it leads to a “suite,” that is to say, the teleology of the story makes us reconsider the beginning. Furthermore, the process of elaboration of those romantic narratives changes the way in which we remember—or forget—the original moment: “on l’oublie d’autant moins qu’on la ressasse, qu’on la répète, en soi-même (n’est-il pas doux d’en rêver [ . . . ]), à l’autre (surtout dans les débuts, vous vous interrogez mutuellement [ . . . ] – c’est bien à partir de cette base commune, élaborée à deux voix, qu’on pourra inventer la suite de l’histoire), comme enfin aux autres” (15).

Montalbetti stages just such a moment in *Journée américaine*. Two pages after the narrator describes the moment when Linda Burn meets her lover Rick, the two characters recount their own versions of the story of their relationship so far, especially “cette scène de leur rencontre, [...] que Rick voulait toujours lui faire répéter, le genre de scène que dans les débuts on aime à ressasser, [...] tout le contrechamp du beau roman qu’on s’est fait” (202-03). The transformation of life into narrative is an essential activity for characters throughout the novel, and indeed that activity becomes Tom Lee’s profession. Tom Lee’s first published novel, *The Summer of Buridan’s Donkey* (125), is largely autobiographical and based on his own inability to choose between two appealing romantic possibilities. In fact, neither of the two prospects leads to anything further, “mais il en avait tiré un roman” (125), and Montalbetti insists upon the transitive character of the novel he produces, which appeals to readers precisely because it provides a point of comparison with their own experiences. Ironically, by the time he completes his novel, the intensity of the process of composition causes Tom Lee to feel as if he had exhausted the potential of either relationship, and the fictional narrative emerges as a much more enduring event in his life than the two non-relationships.

Over the course of the novel, Tom Lee works on several other books, including a road novel of his own, which recounts “l’histoire d’un type qui partait de chez lui sans raison véritable, sans grief ni projet, et qui [...] se sentait comme un Ulysse qui n’aurait rien à raconter au retour” (104). The title of that work is *Nothing to Write Home About* (104), but for Tom Lee, tous les livres qu’on pourrait écrire pourraient s’intituler tantôt *Time is of the Essence*, tantôt *Nothing to Write Home About*, parce que ce sont les deux pôles qui nous structurent: la question du temps, bien sûr, et la fable de l’enfant

prodigue, qui le hante depuis toujours, avec toutes les variantes qu'elle peut revêtir, jusqu'à celle du père et du mari prodigue, en la figure d'Ulysse. (105-06)

Ulysses, protagonist of what could loosely be described as the original road novel,<sup>22</sup> is one of the very few literary references in Montalbetti's novel, and he appears three times. In addition to the passages cited above, at one point an Oklahoma City McDonald's is suddenly transformed by the musings of Linda Burn's lover, Rick, who imagines himself playing the role of Cyclops, Circe, or Calypso, with "son Ulysse à lui, qui a nom Linda, sans doute en train de réparer son radeau à cette heure, sans doute préparant pour les jours à venir son départ, comment pourrait-il la retenir" (210). The gender inversion of the imagined roles and the insertion of epic theme into the prosaic setting of a fast-food restaurant mirrors the subversion of generic norms that characterizes *Western* and *Journée américaine*. In addition, among his many other traits, Ulysses is "the great teller of tales" (*Odyssey* 211), constantly relating his past adventures to those he encounters, an evident thematic parallel to Montalbetti's novel.

For Tom Lee, the poles of space and time structure all novels, and indeed, the title *Journée américaine* encapsulates those two notions, comprising as it does both spatial and temporal denotations.<sup>23</sup> While Ulysses's seminal journey provides a privileged reference for the theme of journey, the works of a more recent author are conjured by the other title Tom Lee favors, *Time is of the Essence*, which calls to mind Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. The most explicit reference to the *Recherche* pierces through Montalbetti's description of a landscape Donovan traverses, in which "le ciel qui couvre un même endroit peut parfois, selon que l'on regarde sur sa droite ou sur sa gauche, offrir de lui-même deux tableaux presque incompatibles" (86). That passage echoes the moment when Proust's young narrator, on his first journey to Balbec, is amazed by the different views his train windows offer, and passes his time "à courir

d'une fênetre à l'autre pour rapprocher, pour rentoiler les fragments intermittents et opposites de [s]on beau matin écarlate et versatile et en avoir une vue totale et un tableau continu.” (*A la recherche du temps perdu* II:16). More broadly, the excavation of layers of memories and the transformation of life into narrative characterize both works, and just as the *Recherche* builds up to the ultimate revelation of the narrator’s “vocation” (IV: 478), so does *Journée américaine* finally disclose an important fact about Donovan.

While Tom Lee’s novels are frequently alluded to over the course of the novel, it is only in the penultimate chapter that we learn that “À l’époque des années campus, Donovan aussi avait un roman en cours” (256). The extended description that follows that disclosure reveals that Donovan’s novel, *The Missing Memory* (257), is a thematic *mise-en-abyme* of *Journée américaine*. *The Missing Memory* recounts the thoughts, memories, and emotions of a young woman on a journey to rejoin a young man whom she had met one year before. Tom Lee and Donovan discuss various narrative strategies and explore different possibilities before Donovan comes to a conclusion: “il fallait que tout le roman [ . . . ] ne raconte que ça, le trajet qu’elle faisait en avion pour rejoindre Ben, et où elle se souvenait des moments qu’ils avaient passés ensemble” (260). As is the case with *Journée américaine*, Donovan’s entire novel takes place in a liminal space on a voyage from one place to another, yet the real journey takes the form of an excavation of the past:

Il s’agissait seulement de ressaisir, derrière les couches de temps qui avaient sédimé dans l’intervalle et toutes les images étrangères à leur relation qu’elles avaient produites, qu’elle drainaient dans leurs alluvions, [ . . . ] les éléments qui participaient de leur histoire à eux, de les en extraire, des les collationner de nouveau. [ . . . ]

Ces fossiles, englués dans ces strates de temps intermédiaire [. . .], non seulement resurgissaient, remontaient à la surface, mais ils revenaient à la vie, ils redevenaient, de souvenirs morts et enfouis, des traces vivantes. (268-69)

Images of sedimentation and accretion recur throughout *Journée américaine*, and indeed, throughout many of Montalbetti's works. Sedimentation emerges as a privileged metaphor for the experience of time, both in terms of the multiplicity of any single instant as well as in the perception of successive moments that eventually accrete into the formations of our past.

Montalbetti affirms her fascination with

des moments microscopiques sur lesquels je m'attarde pour essayer de montrer toutes les émotions en jeu dans de tous petits instants. C'est cette complexité-là de l'instant qui m'intéresse, comme si mon travail, au fond, était (ou était aussi) d'essayer de révéler au lecteur ce qu'il a déjà ressenti sans avoir le temps de l'identifier, de l'analyser dans toutes ses strates et ses contradictions. ("Quelques" 482)

The complexity of the moment opens out into a space to communicate with the reader, taking advantage of one of the novel's most potent capabilities. For Montalbetti, "it is without a doubt the luxury par excellence of the novel [. . .] to be able to employ all sorts of temporal distortions" ("From Western to novel" 106), and the frequent pauses<sup>24</sup> that she employs allow the narrator to explore the intricacy of the moment while allowing the reader a moment for reflection. That moment of reflection very well may be a luxury in today's society, which valorizes speed, results, and efficiency. Motte notes that we are "prompted [. . .] to renounce the temptations of the dilatory and to get to the point quickly in the stories we tell" (*Fiction* 206), and Chambers asserts that among other things, loiterly writing "casts serious doubts on the values good citizens

hold dear—values like discipline, method, organization, rationality, productivity, and, above all, work” (*Loiterature* 9). That moment of pause, where the reader is invited to compare his or her experiences with those portrayed in the novel, is thus not a distraction or digression from the story, rather, it is one of the central objectives of Montalbetti’s fiction.

Faced with the complexity of the instant, digression suddenly appears not simply as a ludic tactic, nor as a swerve away from story, but rather, as a step toward representing the way people experience individual moments. Montalbetti claims that digression:

permet de rendre compte de toutes les énergies qui traversent une situation (et donc aussi ses suites possibles), des sensations contradictoires qui agissent un même moment. Qu’elle coïncide finalement avec une perception très détaillée de l’instant lui-même. Sans compter que la distraction aussi participe de l’expérience. La digression, en ce sens, me paraît être au cœur de notre expérience du monde. (“Quelques” 485)

If we accept for a moment Montalbetti’s assertion that contradictory sentiments, distraction, and digression are integral to our experience of the world, it is quite logical that narratives that seek to make sense of the world would try to suppress precisely those characteristics. Brooks asserts that “Narrative is one of the large categories or systems of understanding that we use in our negotiations with reality, specifically, [. . .] with the problem of temporality: man’s time-boundedness, his consciousness of existence within the limits of mortality” (xi). From a perspective that assumes that “only the end can finally determine meaning” (Brooks 22), digression can indeed be seen as wasting time along the way. But what if that sense of meaning derived from narrative closure is illusory, and “along the way” is all there is? In that case, perhaps we should learn to appreciate the meanders of the journey, and to see them in all their

fullness and depth. From that perspective, Montalbetti is restoring digression to its rightful place as an essential component of the manner in which we take pleasure in and the way we understand the world. Digression is both a “*jouissance*” and “a critical act” (Chambers, *Loiterature* 15; emphasis in original), and Montalbetti uses it to convey the wonder and richness and potentiality of the world.

The complexity of the instant comes to the fore during a passage when Donovan runs into his old friend Jane at a diner. A variety of emotions battle for supremacy inside of Donovan, and while the narrator does not relate a single line of dialogue; we receive a detailed description of the effects of their conversation:

Donovan écoute tout ce que la voix de Jane charrie, [ . . . ] qui emmène  
avec elle tant d'alluvions qu'on ne saura jamais démêler.

Il a l'impression d'être le sol du lit sur quoi cette rivière passe, la parole de Jane court sur lui, elle emporte avec elle quelque chose de lui qui est à la surface et qu'elle arrache dans son flux, et elle laisse à la place une couche fine et fragile de dépôts qu'elle a transportés jusque-là. (81)

We leave traces on one another as we interact, and Donovan experiences that phenomenon through an image of sedimentation. That metaphor continues throughout the novel as the narrator speaks of the accretion of memory, of experience, and especially, of love, “si bien que, tout en aimant un objet nouveau, on continue d'aimer les précédents, dans une sorte de stratification du cœur où chacun a laissé des sédiments qui constituent désormais des couches solidifiées et impérissables” (126). The brief encounter between Rick and Linda Burn is described in just such terms:

Cette aventure avec Rick laisserait une trace harmonieuse et tendre dans l'esprit de Linda Burn.

Elle n'annulerait pas le regret de ne pas avoir revu Tom Lee, elle ne substituerait pas une histoire à une autre, mais elle pèserait d'un poids nouveau et heureux qui l'accompagnerait un temps. (211)

Experiences accumulate organically, yet the stories we tell about those experiences add further to that accretion. That process occurs figuratively, as we repeat over and over again the stories that make up our lives, and Montalbetti suggests that it also occurs more literally, through the materiality of language:

La phrase longue porte avec elle l'idée du flot, de ce qui s'écoule et emmène avec soi des alluvions, elle draine toutes sortes de petits éléments qui forment finalement le limon du texte, qui l'enrichissent et le stratifient. Et comme la phrase ainsi prend son temps, le récit aussi, qui procède par détours et gros plans, amplification de l'instant, affabulation du détail. Pour moi, c'est le lieu exact du plaisir d'écrire, là où quelque chose se joue de dynamique, qui fait que la phrase semble se continuer d'elle-même, et le récit continuer d'engendrer du récit.  
("Quelques" 484)

Writing participates in an unusual dynamic; it is both fixed and mobile. The process of writing entails fixing words in a particular order, yet those structures retain an underlying energy through the dynamism of language. Words recall other words, words conjure worlds, and stories lead to still other stories.

A process of accretion occurs throughout Montalbetti's works, connecting them in subtle ways. Thematically, the images of sedimentation and excavation in *Journée américaine*

immediately call to mind the exertions of Jacques Boucher de Crèvecœur de Perthes in *L'Origine de l'homme* (2002).<sup>25</sup> At other moments, little echoes from other works pierce through, such as the “épicerie qui vous avait vraiment la dégaine d'un *General Store* de western” (*Journée américaine* 152), which conjures the memory of Harry's “General Store” in her novel *Western* (111).<sup>26</sup> When Donovan encounters Jane in the diner, his conflicting emotions rather literally battle it out inside of him, as he experiences “en lui une de ces petites guerres dont on a l'habitude [. . .]: faisons l'appel, Désir, présent, Timidité, toujours là, et tiens, Amour-propre, traînant comme un boulet sous son bras la Crainte du rejet” (77-78). That brief passage condenses an interior struggle which stretches to fill an entire short story in *Nouvelles sur le sentiment amoureux* (2007), in which the narrator asks the reader to “Imaginez un peu le combat obstiné et farouche d'Allégresse et de Désagrément, superbement casqués, armés de lances, et s'affrontant bille en tête dans l'obscurité pariétale de notre homme” (13). Finally, the most developed intertextual echo occurs in closely related passages in *Nouvelles sur le sentiment amoureux* and *Journée américaine* where the narrator, speaking as “Christine,” describes her habit of looking animals in the eye in the attempt to spark a connection.<sup>27</sup> In *Nouvelles sur le sentiment amoureux*, she describes a day spent at the zoo, and asks,

Comment comprendre en vous ce vague côté François d'Assise qu'il y a en vous  
et dont vous sentez naître lentement le complexe? [. . .] À cette fauverie, un  
certain nombre de souvenirs sont associés, dont certain que je peux conter en mon  
nom propre, comme par exemple celui du jour où, [. . .] j'y essayais [. . .] d'écrire  
quelques paragraphes de *Western* (70-71).

In *Journée américaine*, the narrator remarks,

je me méfie de moi sur ce sujet, je connais ce travers léger que j'ai, mon complexe de saint François d'Assise, le trouble exquis (excusez-moi) que je ressens à croiser le regard d'un animal, a fortiori quand il n'est pas domestique. [. . .] Je voudrais que son petit être interloqué mais brave s'intéresse à saisir quelque chose de ma personnalité [. . .]. Qu'il me regarde pour ce que je suis, que son œil s'adresse vraiment à moi, Christine, dont il ne connaît pas le prénom, bien sûr, mais dont il devine la capacité particulière à l'envisager lui, pour ce qu'il est.

(164-65)

At first glance, those two instances seem to be remarkably intimate, as if the real author, Christine Montalbetti, is pulling aside the curtain for a moment to share a personal anecdote. In *Petits déjeuners avec quelques écrivains célèbres* (2008), however, she claims that “Ce ‘je’ est peut-être le lieu du texte où je suis le moins” (82). Just as Motte cautions us to be wary of those moments when texts seem to solicit us directly as readers, Montalbetti warns against identifying the narrative instance “je” directly with the author, even when that “je” claims to speak in her name. Rather, she proposes:

ce ne sont pas par les quelques formulations directes que vous me connaîtrez, mais—si vous désirez me connaître—par les formulations indirectes. Par ce que vous accueillez sans que cela passe par des énoncés frontaux, explicites, mais par l’intermédiaire de mots qui, dans le détour de leur choix, de leur consonance comme des objets dont ils portent le signe, vous tiennent un discours sur qui je suis. (*Petits* 82-83)

Reading through the lines, then, the two passages cited above put on stage an impossible, but nevertheless strongly desired communication. Try as she might, the narrator inhabits a different

plane of existence than the lizard that she regards in both passages. Similarly, no matter how strongly the author may wish to communicate with her reader, at the moment of composition, the reader is “l’absent par excellence” (“Quelques” 481) and thus incommunicado. No matter how many times the narrator calls herself “Christine” or tells us “regardez-moi dans les yeux” (*Journée* 124), we cannot physically look into her eyes.

And yet, although we may not be able to look *into* her eyes, through her works we can perhaps begin to see things *through* her eyes, most particularly in the case of her book *En écrivant Journée américaine* (2009), a companion piece to her novel, published jointly by POL and Biro éditeur. In that text, Montalbetti relates some of the circumstances surrounding the writing of her novel and shares a number of photographs that she took during a writing residency in Oklahoma. Montalbetti is never directly pictured in any of the photographs, yet her presence circulates throughout many of the images as a shadow or reflection. She is at once there and not there, at times filling the frame with her silhouette, but never fully visible. She describes the transformation of certain memories and certain people into fiction, focusing on the little details and “le ressouvenir d’une foule de moments qui forment un matériau douillet, précieux et riche.” (39). The cover photo of her book is emblematic of the dynamic of *Journée américaine*, picturing two overlapping human shadows standing in front of a sign for Route 66, the most iconic of American highways, with the road stretching out and up toward the wide horizon. It is an image that looks to the past as well as to the future, capturing a moment of human connection that has found its place in the layers of memory, yet it also contains the energy and potential of the open road, and to my mind the photo conveys precisely that “énergie qui est sous-jacente au geste d’écrire et qui, je crois, se communique” (“Pourvu” 127). It is that energy that Montalbetti

seeks to share, crafting narratives that make us wonder, help us to remember, and encourage us to reflect upon the potential of the novel to reshape our world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Montalbetti's other publications at POL are *Sa fable achevée, Simon sort dans la bruine* (2001), *L'Origine de l'homme* (2002), *Expérience de la campagne* (2005), *Western* (2005), *Nouvelles sur le sentiment amoureux* (2007), *Petits déjeuners avec quelques écrivains célèbres* (2008), *En écrivant Journée américaine* (2009) [a joint publication with Biro éditeur], and *Le Cas Jekyll* (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Montalbetti is a *Maître de conférences* at the Université Paris VIII, specializing in narratology. Her principal critical works are listed in my bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> In *French Fiction in the Mitterand Years: Memory, Narrative, Desire*, Colin Davis and Elizabeth Fallaize propose the “return of storytelling” as one of the central features of the contemporary French novel (14). They note that “In the heady days when fiction was radically subverting our deepest convictions, frustrating our expectations and desires, and restructuring the way we perceive the world around us, it was sometimes easy to forget that reading and writing were also supposed to be sources of pleasure” (14).

<sup>4</sup> For more on the notion of “the avant-garde with a human face,” see Warren Motte, *Fables of the Novel: French Fiction since 1990* (4).

<sup>5</sup> Or the road movie or the film Western, as the case may be.

<sup>6</sup> That particular example alludes to the power of cinema to inform our visual representations as well as to the close relationship between road novels and road movies. In addition, it contains a subtle wink to the final sentence of *Western*, in which, after shooting down the villain, the hero of the novel “s'éloigne vers le couchant, contre le fond chamarré duquel, comment faire autrement, sa silhouette s'amenuise, en un tranquille respect des lois de la perspective” (212).

<sup>7</sup> See Motte *Playtexts* 20-27 for a detailed discussion of play in literature. In addition to highlighting the seriousness of some forms of play and the articulative relationship of “player to player, or, more specifically, writer and reader” (26), I am interested in Motte’s assertion that “the notions of freedom and play overlap,” rooted as they both are “in the idea of motion” (22). Montalbetti employs a highly mobile strategy in her fiction writing, exploiting the freedom of her narrative authority on a variety of levels.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed description of that phenomenon, see Motte, “Christine Montalbetti’s Engaging Narrations” 189-213.

<sup>9</sup> As Antoine Compagnon puts it in *Literature, Theory, and Common Sense*, “A candidate who cannot say whether the bit of text in front of him is ‘homo’ or ‘heterodiegetic [sic],’ ‘singulative’ or ‘iterative,’ or is in ‘internal’ or ‘external focalization,’ will not pass” (3).

<sup>10</sup> The same phenomenon occurs in *Western* when the narrator refers to herself as “Christine Montalbetti” (140).

<sup>11</sup> Umberto Eco devotes a chapter of his “Postscript” to *The Name of the Rose* to the techniques he used to “construct” his “model reader” (48).

<sup>12</sup> See Montalbetti, “Narrataire et lecteur: Deux instances autonomes” 9; “Pourvu qu’il y ait un petit coin de vue avec arbres” 121-22; and Motte, “Engaging” 194-98 for a fuller description of that technique.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of Montalbetti’s critical writing on digression and the principle of narrative digression that animates *Western*, see Motte *Fiction* 177-206.

<sup>14</sup> More specifically, to the beginnings of friendships and romantic relationships.

<sup>15</sup> *Journée américaine*’s final page recalls the ending of André Gide’s *Les Faux-monnayeurs*, which puts into action the novelist Édouard’s musings upon narrative closure: “je

considère que la vie ne nous propose jamais rien qui, tout autant qu'un aboutissement, ne puisse être considéré comme un nouveau point de départ. ‘Pourrait être continué...’ c'est sur ces mots que je voudrais terminer mes *Faux-Monnayeurs*” (322).

<sup>16</sup> Motte notes that “Montalbetti suspends narrative truth excruciatingly in *Western*, deferring it at every turn, but suggesting at each such moment that it lies just around the corner” (*Fiction* 188).

<sup>17</sup> “(on lève ses deux mains de part et d'autre de sa tête et on fait gigoter ses index et majeurs dans l'air pour signifier les guillemets)” (*Journée américaine* 92).

<sup>18</sup> Montalbetti does remark that sometimes, telling stories can hinder our understanding of the world. The transformation of lived experience into narrative, which can lead to the eventual displacement of those original experiences, contains a potential downside: “dans l'obscur plaisir de parler des relations qu'on a eues, [...] au moment même où l'interprétation effrénée prétend éclaircir les choses, on les opacifie, s'interdisant définitivement [...] de comprendre ce qu'un mouvement plus intérieur [...] aurait peut-être un peu mieux éclairé” (*Journée* 184). Linda Burn experiences just such an occurrence, “son histoire avec Tom Lee tellement passée à la moulinette des confidences à son amie qu'elle en est devenue méconnaissable, [...] sa relation avec Tom Lee mise en pièces, épargnée en mille morceaux par la parole” (*Journée* 189).

<sup>19</sup> Montalbetti and Piegay-Gros are careful to note that digression is a conscious narrative strategy, “Si le narrateur s'égare, l'auteur, sans doute, sait où il va” (11).

<sup>20</sup> See Motte “Engaging” 207 for examples of the narrator's extreme discretion when faced with scenes of a sexual nature in *Sa fable achevée*, *Simon sort dans la bruine* and *Western*.

<sup>21</sup> And by extension, the reader, through the mediation of the floating pronoun “vous.”

<sup>22</sup> David Laderman notes that “In many ways Homer’s *Odyssey* lays out the basic narrative formula of the many later classic works of journey literature” (6), while Timothy Corrigan claims that “road movies might have their precursors as far back as Homer’s *Odyssey*” (144).

<sup>23</sup> While “journée” is most commonly used in the temporal sense of the “Espace du temps qui s’écoule du lever au coucher du soleil,” it also carries the spatial meaning of a “Chemin effectué (ou qu’on peut effectuer) en une journée” (*Petit Robert* 1432).

<sup>24</sup> For more on the narratological category of “pause” that occurs in Montalbetti’s writings, see Motte *Fiction* 189-90.

<sup>25</sup> *L’Origine de l’homme* recounts Jacques’s quite literal archeological excavations as he digs down into the earth in the hopes of learning more about humankind’s past.

<sup>26</sup> Incidentally, the litany of “objets hétéroclites” (*Western* 111) found in Harry’s General Store is echoed in the “bazar d’objets” that Donovan peruses in the thrift store in *Journée américaine* (237).

<sup>27</sup> Lizards particularly intrigue her, more specifically (*Nouvelles* 70, *Journée* 164).

## CHAPTER VI

### **What Comes Next? Xabi Molia's Life After Death**

Of the authors studied here, Xabi Molia is both the youngest and the least well known for his fiction writing. That may soon change, however, for although he is only in his early thirties, he has already established an intriguing and varied body of work in a variety of different narrative genres. In addition to teaching cinema studies as a *maître de conférence* at the Université de Poitiers, Molia has published three novels, a book of poetry, and a graphic novel.<sup>1</sup> He is also a filmmaker, with three short films and one feature-length film to his credit.<sup>2</sup> The appropriation and reutilization of a wide range of literary and cultural influences is a common thread that runs throughout his fiction. His first novel, *Fourbi* (2000), is an epistolary hall of mirrors strongly influenced by the Oulipo,<sup>3</sup> while the second, *Supplément aux mondes inhabités* (2004), is a chronicle of personal alienation that can be read as “une sorte de variation sur *Taxi Driver*.<sup>4</sup> Molia’s third novel, *Reprise des hostilités* (2007), to which I will devote most of my attention here, develops and deepens the themes that characterize his first two novels, combining formal innovation, social critique, and a sustained meditation on the uses and potential of the novel as a cultural form in twenty-first century France.

*Reprise des hostilités* tells the story of the life and the death of Marin, a young writer struggling with his frustrated desires and an ill-conceived plan to avenge the death of his father. His own unexpected death, however, far from giving closure and a sense of meaning to his life, opens up a new horizon. The so-called Paradise where Marin awakes, modeled on a Club Med beach resort, reveals itself to be a carceral space filled with microphones and cameras that record every action of its inhabitants. The reader must navigate a formally complex text, reconstructing the nonlinear narrative segments of Marin’s life in order to understand his fate and his desperate

attempts to escape it. Molia paints the portrait of a France teetering on the edge of the third millennium, afflicted by “decomposition,” where everything rings hollow: feelings, language, political discourse, and even the afterlife. At the same time, another narrative grows in the interstices, nourished by quotations from the great writers of the twentieth century, and writing emerges as the last form of resistance and recognition for those left behind by the movement of History.

In *Le Dénouement*, Lionel Ruffel describes a recurring theme in the contemporary French novel, namely, the depiction of liminal or transitional states that call into question conventional notions of beginnings and endings. He claims that such scenes can be read as “[une] problématisation de la fin [qui] sert de cadre narratif et diégétique aux livres” (46-47). Ruffel sees that phenomenon as an attempt to resituate the novel within a literary and historical context unsettled by the events of the late twentieth century. He argues, “Grossièrement, dès la fin des années soixante-dix et durant les vingt années qui vont suivre, on commence à évoquer quatre types de fins, qui sont proches, sans s’équivaloir: la fin des avant-gardes, la fin des idéologies, la fin de l’histoire, la fin de la modernité sous le nom de postmodernité” (83). Ruffel argues that as writers begin to question those notions in their fiction, they tend to employ narrative forms that undermine the underlying teleological assumptions that structure such arguments about “the end.” In particular, he takes notice of “la récurrence [. . .] des positions terminales initiales, de ces fins qui ouvrent l’histoire” (88). Just such an “ending” opens *Reprise des hostilités*, as on the very first page of the novel, Marin wakes up dead. More specifically, he awakens in a strange bed, in what appears to be a nondescript hotel room, and his evident confusion is played against the reader’s uncertainty as both parties attempt to make sense of Marin’s situation.

Peter Brooks claims that “Narrative is one of the large categories or systems of understandings that we use in our negotiations with reality, specifically, in the case of narrative, with the problem of temporality: man’s time-boundedness, his consciousness of existence within the limits of mortality” (*Reading for the Plot* xi). From the conventional notion that it is “death that writes *finis* to the life and therefore confers on it its meaning,” it logically follows that in narrative, “only the end can finally determine meaning, close the sentence as a signifying totality” (*Reading* 22). Indeed, as Marin is informed, one of the most popular activities in the afterlife is the composition of “les récits de vie [ . . . ]. On aide les gens à remettre en forme leur itinéraire, pour qu’ils puissent donner du sens à ce qu’ils ont fait” (*Reprise* 52). Marin’s death, however, rather than providing a sense of closure, opens the door onto a new realm of narrative possibility. His death serves as a hinge, both endpoint and beginning for the two narrative strands that compose Marin’s story.

The novel that begins with Marin’s death can be envisioned as a sort of double helix, with the story of Marin’s life and the story of his afterlife wrapping around each other as the non-sequential text leaps chronologically—and ontologically—from one narrative thread to the other. The text is divided into sixty-five short chapters, most just a few pages long, each one identified by a number and a date.<sup>5</sup> As the narrative segments begin to coalesce, the reader is drawn into not one, but two interwoven story lines that resonate in intriguing fashion both with each other, as well as with a number of shorter micronarratives interspersed throughout the text. The intertwining of the two narratives also serves to defer the resolution of both threads, as Molia plays heartily on what Roland Barthes refers to as the hermeneutic code.<sup>6</sup> The reader discovers early on, for example, that Marin is in a section of Paradise reserved for those who died a violent death (27), and Marin notes in passing one day that “Sa blessure au torse avait cicatrisé et

presque disparu” (29). We do not know, however, how Marin died, nor do we know the circumstances that led to that violent death. As the novel progresses, the desire to discover what ended his brief life is initially deferred and then heightened by the equally captivating question of what will happen next in his afterlife, for Marin, increasingly desperate, resolves to escape from Paradise.

Marin’s resolution immediately raises a number of questions. Why would one want to leave heaven? Perhaps even more important, where would one go? At first glance, “Paradise” seems to live up to its name, with palm trees, pools, bikini-clad women, and a host of leisure activities from golf to kayaking to a “ciné-club” (11-13). A bit generic, perhaps, but in principle Paradise offers something for everyone, and a veritable army of therapists, guides, trainers, and miscellaneous staff is on hand to provide for the needs of the “pensionnaires” (27). The seemingly anodyne presence of the staff—a psychologist reassures Marin that “Vous traversez une épreuve délicate, vous pouvez avoir besoin d’un soutien. Et je suis là pour ça” (12)—starts to discomfit Marin as he begins to suspect that the main job of the “moniteurs” is to keep an eye on things (131). Marin is even more disconcerted by his discovery of a nine-foot fence encircling the complex, manned by armed guards (70), but after he makes the acquaintance of Caroline, one of the nubile young women often found lounging poolside, her complaisance and her charms help Marin unwind and lull him into a state of acceptance.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, for a while, in between sexual encounters with Caroline, “Marin fit du quad et du rafting, il se joignit aux assemblées masculines pour regarder la Formule 1 et les matches de football, se découvrit une passion pour le cerf-volant et quelques aptitudes au beach-volley. [. . .] Il connaissait beaucoup de monde, il avait des amis. [. . .] Il vivait de délices et il en profitait” (94).<sup>8</sup> Marin’s acceptance

of his gilded cage echoes a similar development from his life on earth, when he succumbs to the material comforts of life with Joseph Bel, which I will address in more detail a bit later.

The brief idyll with Caroline comes to an end, and Marin confronts the reality of his situation—Paradise is not what it seems. In fact, it seems to be slowly breaking down: the water is cut off for several hours each day, and Maisnel, an acquaintance, assures Marin that a proposition to have the residents perform some of the gardening and general upkeep of the facilities is “une mascarade [ . . . ]. Ils veulent nous faire travailler parce qu’ils n’ont plus assez de personnel” (69).<sup>9</sup> The carceral atmosphere becomes increasingly menacing, “Or ses paroles et ses gestes pouvaient être épiés par des micros, des caméras, des oreilles, même bienveillantes en apparence, et les agents surveillaient couloirs, halls, piscines, [ . . . ] lui, Marin, ne voulait pas rester” (130). After an amateurish and abortive escape attempt, Marin and his friend Gaspard come into contact with Danrémont, a shadowy figure who dwells quite literally in the underworld of Paradise. Marin has already glimpsed small portions of the enormous infrastructure that lies behind-the-scenes of his complex, but his journey to the underworld sparks a series of shocking revelations. He is well aware of the existence of other areas of Paradise, as he is informed on the first day that “pas très loin d’ici, il y a Céline, dans un complexe comme le nôtre, mais avec d’autres écrivains célèbres. Et Picasso” (13).<sup>10</sup> The path to meet Danrémont, however, leads Marin and Gaspard to a cavernous subterranean space where they discover “une ville jamais finie, de grands blocs espacés, [ . . . ] percés de mille fenêtres aux carreaux cassés, des commencements de ponts, [ . . . ] des immeubles effondrés, [ . . . ] des gueules de tunnels descendant plus bas encore, et des avenues trop larges, [ . . . ] apparemment sans fin” (139).<sup>11</sup> Marin wants to leave, and Danrémont offers him a way out. “Avec la logistique et le réseau,” it is possible to return to earth, for a considerable fee (142). What is more, Marin is

warned to stay away from the women in Paradise, who are not what they seem. The exact nature of the women is unknown, in point of fact, but they are manifestly not human, and their presence serves to enforce the control of the “administration” (144).<sup>12</sup> Unable to afford the proposed fee and put on the spot, Marin and Gaspard accept another offer from Danrémont, and agree to kill one of their fellow residents in exchange for repatriation back to earth. Unwilling to follow through with the murder, threatened by Danrémont’s men, Marin and Gaspard finally throw caution to the wind and hijack a delivery truck, escaping from their complex into the night (203-04).

The narrative tension of Marin’s afterlife is heightened and deferred by events back on earth, for the novel simultaneously reveals the events of Marin’s life, leading up to his untimely death. Following the loss of his job at a business bought out and liquidated by Joseph Bel, an unscrupulous businessman and politician, Marin’s father drives his car into a tree, dying instantly. Obsessed by his father’s death, for which he holds Bel responsible, Marin vows to avenge his father and slowly infiltrates Bel’s inner circle. Bel’s rise as a politician takes place against the backdrop of a clearly identified France at the turn of a new millennium.<sup>13</sup> Marin, like many of the other characters, considers the moment a historical turning point, and wonders what will come next, following what Jean-François Lyotard referred to as the end of “grand narratives”:

Il s’imaginait les époques passées comme des temps épiques: violents peut-être, incertains et inconfortables, mais exaltants (des luttes, des utopies, des raisons d’être, la Résistance, Mai 68). Souvent, il rêvait de rendre la part de la liberté que d’autres avaient gagnée pour lui, afin de la reconquérir. [. . .]

Lui pensait être né juste après la dernière révolte, dans un de ces conglomérats occidentaux paisibles où l'histoire semble finie, écrivit-il sur un nouveau cahier. (124)

As he walks through the streets of Paris one night, he speaks to himself out loud, trying to situate himself in history and to bring his project into being by giving voice to it, “Je marche dans Paris. Je suis à la fin du vingtième siècle. La fin du vingtième siècle. La suite de la fin. Je m’appelle Marin. Je vais venger mon père” (74). His extraordinary self-consciousness reveals an unpleasant truth about his ambitions: to put it bluntly, Marin feels like a bit of a loser, and his project of vengeance gives him something to do and provides a *raison d’être* that has been sorely lacking in his life. Marin is constantly telling himself stories about himself, and throughout his abbreviated existence, the gap between his desires and his reality vexes him as he attempts to find a role to inhabit. His girlfriend, Chloé, has left him, and

Parmi toutes les hypothèses que Marin rencontrait, il en était une, la plus blessante, qu’il essayait d’éviter: c’est qu’il se trouvait ordinaire, [ . . . ] et il n’aurait pas su démontrer pour quelle raison Chloé devait rester avec lui plutôt qu’avec un autre. Il [ . . . ] savait qu’il n’était jamais devenu un de ces êtres exubérants qui n’obéissent à rien, vivent comme personne, [ . . . ] et qu’il lui arrivait d’apercevoir, près d’un comptoir, dans des soirées. (33)

Simply put, his plans for vengeance give him a spectacular project to accomplish, allowing Marin to experience an intense “exaltation [ . . . ] à s’imaginer en exécuteur d’une justice clandestine” (55). Marin savors his project, and although he keeps delaying the actual accomplishment of his plans, that deferral heightens his excitement as he imagines the various ways his vengeance could play out: “Il savait exactement ce qu’il voulait obtenir. Il imaginait le

décor, et le visage de l'ennemi vaincu. Ce serait comme le dénouement d'une de ces destinées américaines de gangsters, d'anciens boxeurs, de stars oubliées [ . . ]. Certains politiciens, qu'on ne voyait plus, avaient fini comme ça. Marin se souvenait d'un reportage" (97-98). As he comes to realize that he is simply not a man of action—"sans doute était-il vain d'espérer malgré tout qu'un jour, plus tard, il trouverait la force de s'armer de cette violence [ . . ] qu'il était encore trop tendre, ou trop réfléchi [ . . ] pour oser manier" (164)—Marin concocts ever more elaborate and subtle plans to justify his dithering.

Indeed, a great deal of self-justification is called for, as the trappings of success that attend Marin's infiltration into Bel's inner circle prove quite alluring. Traveling around the country with Bel, "Il tirait fierté de ce qu'il pouvait appeler ses 'déplacements,' d'être un jour à Nantes, un autre à Montpellier, et de pouvoir l'apprendre aux gens surpris qui le joignaient sur son portable. Il finissait même par trouver normal ce train de vie digne de l'auteur à succès qu'il aurait pu être, et du justicier qu'il allait devenir" (196). Although he is appalled by Bel's rhetoric and ashamed by their association, Marin quickly comes to appreciate the perks and the affluence that accompany his new lifestyle, moving into a new apartment in a trendy neighborhood. As time goes on and as Marin grows more comfortable, however, his plans to avenge his father lose their urgency: "Une vie nouvelle commençait. En bas, dans la rue Montorgueil, il achetait de bon pain, des entrecôtes, des fromages fermiers et des vins étrangers. [ . . ] Peu à peu, son projet de vengeance s'était éloigné de lui. [ . . ] Il pensait aussi à tomber amoureux. Il pensait à gagner correctement sa vie" (205-06). As Marin's circle of friends begins to expand, a budding friendship with the writer Valéry Mouscron offers the promise of full social acceptance, not to mention literary success.

Although Marin has already published two science fiction novels, he hungers for recognition of his literary potential. While he is ashamed to admit it, he takes pleasure in writing for Bel. The experience lends him a certain “statut d’écrivain, auquel, quoi qu’il en dise, il n’était pas indifférent. [ . . . ] Considérant le rythme de la phrase, la saveur des sonorités, l’éclat de son vocabulaire, Marin s’était trouvé du style” (150). Hearing Bel speak his words aloud, however, is excruciating. Marin’s encounter with Mouscron offers a more attractive creative outlet, and he is flattered by Mouscron’s attentions. Out of Marin’s entire circle of new bourgeois-bohemian friends, Mouscron is “celui qui réussissait le mieux” (209). Media-savvy, adept at sniffing out trends, he is an exemplar of a certain type of contemporary French author, his reputation far overshadowing the merit of his works.<sup>14</sup> The dust jacket of his first novel—bearing the words, “Ecstasy, sexe et métaphysique”—is designed to maximize media impact (209), and if his novel seems a bit calculated, “Mouscron ne se leurrait pas. Il en avait eu l’idée comme d’un remarquable complément à son curriculum vitæ, rien d’autre. Il savait qu’il l’avait trop vite écrit, d’ailleurs, en un été. Mais l’éditeur lui déconseilla de revenir sur les passages bâclés, qui faisaient la fraîcheur du livre. On avait par la suite vanté son style à la hussarde” (209-10). Mouscron is interested in Marin as a fellow writer, “Il rêvait confusément d’une amitié littéraire, il lui manquait cela pour se sentir un plus écrivain” (209). He proposes collaborating on a film, a Hollywood-style blockbuster mixed with a bit of French rigor: “une superproduction tournée par un Jean-Luc Godard” (237).<sup>15</sup> Alas, just as Marin’s brief idyll in Paradise abruptly comes to an end, his collaboration with Mouscron—and along with it, his newfound popularity—disappears when Mouscron and his friends sniff out Marin’s association with Joseph Bel.

Not only is there something wrong with Marin, something is rotten in the state of France itself. In addition to the pervasive sense of moral decay that runs throughout the pages of the novel, the country is afflicted by a quite literal “décomposition,” a mysterious sort of fungus that attacks whatever it touches, from buildings to people (177).<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Antoine, Marin’s older brother, is one of its victims, and we see him for the last time dying in a hospital, his body covered with splotches and his hand eaten away (291). If I alluded to Shakespeare’s famous line from *Hamlet* a moment ago, Shakespeare’s tale of a son who must avenge his father’s death resonates throughout the novel. Marin perpetually defers his plans for revenge, and during their last encounter, Antoine berates Marin for his failure to act, calling him “Monsieur Hamlet” (292). Earlier in the novel, Marin evokes a scene from the play, noting that “Jamais il n’avait eu devant lui le spectre de son père, qui lui disait d’une voix caverneuse: ‘*Si jamais tu aimais ton tendre père, venge son meurtre horrible et monstreux*’” (122).<sup>17</sup> Most importantly, just as Shakespeare employs the device of a play within a play, Marin comes up with the idea of writing a book within a book.

After Bel asks Marin to ghostwrite his autobiography (163), Marin concocts the most baroque of his various revenge schemes, one that has the dual advantages of destroying Bel’s reputation while simultaneously proving Marin’s literary genius: “Ce serait une vengeance infaillible et raffinée, dont on ferait dans longtemps des contes” (182-83). Marin hits upon the idea of composing the entirety of Bel’s autobiography from unattributed citations from a host of famous twentieth-century French writers, changing only dates and proper names, as needed:

il aurait parfois [ . . . ] le sentiment de réussir un puzzle, et non de l’inventer: il rassemblerait les fragments vertébrés d’une histoire suivie, il travaillerait à la restauration d’un livre caché tout au long du siècle, [ . . . ] récit d’une formation

désenchantée qui aurait eu ceci d'extraordinaire que tous les grands noms du roman français y auraient collaborés, un manuscrit secret transmis sous le manteau, et dans lequel les écrivains se seraient efforcés de rajouter des phrases, développer des paragraphes, [...] avant de recycler ces contributions anonymes quelque part dans un livre à leur nom, plagiaires impunis. (184)

In Marin's fantasy, the particularity of Bel's autobiography goes unnoticed at first, but as time goes by and readers start to recognize familiar passages, he imagines the eruption of a media scandal, with newspapers proclaiming "*Pas une seule ligne n'était de lui! Il pillait nos bibliothèques! LE PLAGIAT DU SIÈCLE!*" (184). Following the outrage, Bel's career collapses. Yet Marin's story continues, and he imagines that many years later, a curious writer—"Appelons-le B, ce sera plus commode" (185)—decides to investigate the intriguing tale. As B researches Bel's history, he comes to realize that the politician could never have pulled off such an audacious feat; therefore someone else must have accomplished the entire scheme. Once B discovers Marin's name in the archives, and more importantly, his career as a writer, things begin to fall into place:

aussitôt il aurait envie que ce soit Marin le faussaire, un homme de l'ombre qui acceptait sans mot dire les tâches ingrates qu'on lui proposait, mais préparait en sous-main un formidable sabotage. Ce serait très romanesque, exactement ce que chercherait B, lui-même écrivain, à ses heures, de polars cérébraux. Pris au jeu [...], il poursuivrait l'enquête, précédant en quelque sorte son détective attitré, qui reconstituerait lui aussi, dans le prochain tome de la série dont B était l'auteur, la chronologie secrète du crime. (186)

This dizzying mise-en-abyme allows Marin to become the unsung hero of an epic tale of good versus evil. Indeed, in his fantasy, “Marin avait contribué, modestement mais tout de même, au sauvetage de la République. Marin avait bousculé le cours de l’Histoire. [ . . ] Et c’est ainsi, après cet implacable enchaînement de circonstances, que Marin retrouverait son rang” (187).

Marin’s flight of fancy hides an importunate concern, however, and he also ponders another possibility, for Bel is nothing if not adaptable, “Ou bien on trouverait la supercherie formidablement érudite, on acclamerait l’auteur pour un plagiat si amusant, et Joseph Bel, invité d’une émission littéraire, expliquerait qu’il avait eu parfois le sentiment de réussir un puzzle, et non de l’inventer [ . . ]. Ensuite, il parlerait de ses autres projets” (187).

Saddened by his brother’s death and cut loose from Mouscron’s circle, an increasingly desperate Marin finally decides to have Bel killed, at that point less for his father’s memory than because of his own humiliation and self-loathing. *Reprise des hostilités* abounds with deception and trickery, and Marin’s assassination plot is one of many such instances. Marin proposes a faked assassination as political stunt to Bel, who is plunging in the polls. Bel takes the bait, but unknown to him; Marin instructs the killers to go through with the shooting. Ironically, just as Marin fears that his elaborate literary intrigue may somehow backfire and ultimately benefit Bel, the assassination plot is botched, and Marin takes a nine-millimeter bullet to the chest while Bel survives and goes on to enjoy an ascendant political career.<sup>18</sup> Marin’s death in the final pages of the novel finally answers the question of how he ended up in Paradise, yet another narrative thread remains.

Throughout the novel, scenes from Marin’s afterlife are intercut with his tale of revenge, and while the tale of his life leads necessarily and inevitably toward his death, the story of his afterlife leads toward a much more unpredictable end. The disclosure of Marin’s violent death in

the first chapter is analogous to Chekhov's gun on the wall: the reader assumes that at some point in the story, he or she will see the gun go off. That assumption shapes the reader's horizon of expectations, and the knowledge of Marin's death also alters the reader's experience of the novel, creating a degree of complicity between reader and narrator. Throughout the account of Marin's life, the reader knows more than he does, which lends both poignancy and comic effect to certain events in his life, such as a moment when he contemplates the significance of

December 31, 1999:

Marin se prit à croire qu'il était extraordinaire en effet de basculer dans un siècle nouveau, et qui serait sans doute davantage le sien que celui qui venait de finir. Il avait pensé jusque-là qu'il était du vingtième siècle, que c'était là qu'il serait rangé dans la grande suite des époques, mais il lui restait cinquante ou soixante ans à vivre, et s'il devait accomplir des choses importantes, [ . . . ] ce serait maintenant, dans ce siècle commençant, qui était sa juste place et auquel il était promis. (154)

Interestingly, Marin has a different epistemological status in the two narrative strands. During his life, the reader knows a crucial bit of information that Marin lacks, while in his afterlife, he knows much more than the reader, as he recently lived through—and still remembers—the events of his life that the reader must reconstruct from the fragmented, non-linear segments of narration.

Marin and Gaspard's escape from Paradise quickly turns into a disaster as they become separated and are pursued through a densely wooded forest by a contingent of heavily armed men. In Marin's final scene in the novel, he discovers a vertiginous truth. Running at a full sprint, he comes to a halt at the edge of Paradise: "C'était une précipice qui tombait dans le ciel.

Loin en dessous, au milieu de l'espace étoilé, se détachait un cercle bleu taché d'ocre, veiné de traînées blanches. Marin ne put pas nier qu'il y reconnaissait la Terre. Il éclata de rire et faillit s'évanouir" (338). He can see another complex, floating nearby "dans le vide [ . . ]. On devinait de la musique brésilienne, des rires, un peu d'anglais, des corps plongeant dans l'eau d'une piscine. De son côté du précipice, les restes calcinés d'une passerelle en bois s'avançaient dans la nuit. L'île était maintenant inaccessible" (338). Hemmed in by soldiers, with no way to escape, Marin steps over the edge of the precipice onto the crumbling bridge, "Il arrivait au bout et savait de moins en moins ce qu'il ferait ensuite" (339). As the bridge falls to pieces under his feet, he grabs onto a cord, and Marin's story ends with him dangling over the void, sliding down the last few meters, "Ensuite, on verrait bien" (340). Marin's death in the botched assassination brings the first narrative thread full circle, answering the question implicitly posed in the first chapter. The unresolved—and perhaps irresolvable—final scene of his afterlife, however, raises a host of unanswerable questions. How could Marin die, if he is already dead? What could come next in his story? An after-afterlife?

Ruffel notes a preponderance of similar moments in French novels published around the turn of the millennium. Opening his book with an almost identical scene that takes place in Antoine Volodine's novel *Dondog* (2002), Ruffel asks:

Que peut alors dire cette figure qui se présente "au bord du rien", les jambes ballant "dans le vide", réfléchissant "à ce qui allait suivre"? Et que peut dire sa répétition? Évidemment elle évoque une fin de partie. [ . . . ] Mais cette représentation est plus complexe. [ . . . ] Il se développe une histoire, *après la fin*, qui la prolonge ou la renouvelle. (9)

For Ruffel, such scenes open up a space for what he terms “le dénouement”: “Ni début ni fin, limité et transitoire [. . .], il déploie une temporalité complexe, tout à la fois tourné vers le passé qu’il transforme et le futur qu’il autorise. Le dénouement ouvre à l’inconnu, au ‘vide,’ à ‘ce qu’il allait suivre,’ sur les ruines et les restes du passé” (11). *Reprise des hostilités* explores those notions in a variety of ways, examining a specific instance of personal history, namely Marin’s life, death, and afterlife—with its uncertain resolution—in order to evoke a host of larger societal and literary issues.

As I mentioned before, the question of what will follow the turn of the millennium is a recurring concern for many of the characters.<sup>19</sup> A moment in time is ending, and the decomposition afflicting France is but the most visible sign of an underlying crisis. In her study on *fin de millénaire* French fiction, Ruth Cruickshank calls attention to a perceived crisis of “*l’exception française*, a nexus of identity narratives—economic, political, diplomatic, cultural, and indeed, literary—felt to be under increasingly severe threat from global market economics” (*Fin* 2). It is precisely that anxiety that Joseph Bel seeks to exploit in his grasp for political relevance. In a pivotal scene, Bel organizes a grand celebration to commemorate the turning of the millennium. He declares, “si j’ai choisi ce lieu symbole pour entrer avec vous dans le nouveau millénaire, c’est parce que je crois en l’avenir [. . .]. Notre civilisation française est merveilleuse, [. . .] et nous sommes le témoignage vivant d’une glorieuse histoire” (149). Bel’s evocation of French exceptionalism is calculated for maximum political impact, but the hollowness of his discourse is revealed later in the novel, when he decides that his traditionalist rhetoric has become politically ineffective and he abruptly decides to change course:

On ne serait plus contre l’avortement. On ne parlerait plus de culture chrétienne et de passé grandiose. On allait se recentrer sur la pauvreté et la justice sociale, la

corruption des élus, la violence des banlieues, les dangers de l'immigration et de la mondialisation. On serait du vingt et unième siècle. [ . . . ] Autour de nous, ça bouge, c'est le millénaire, il faut qu'on soit dedans. (245-46)

Molia proffers a pungent commentary on the political landscape through Bel's discourse. Bel is ruthless with his political rivals, media-savvy, and good on camera.<sup>20</sup> A reporter named Louise Delauney writes about one of Bel's appearances on a television talk show named *Fauteuil indiscret*, "Il passe à la télévision. Et il passe bien. [ . . . ] Mais il y a une nouveauté. Dans les semaines précédentes, une enquête montre qu'il souffre très nettement de ce qu'on appelle un *déficit d'image* auprès des personnes âgées. [ . . . ] Après une séance de travail avec ses conseillers en communication, un passage sur le *Fauteuil* va régler le problème" (278-79). Molia demonstrates the centrality of the media in the construction of Bel's image through the elaboration of a tightly woven web of references to television appearances, magazine profiles, and books written both by and about Bel.<sup>21</sup>

Bel is hardly the only snake in the garden, however. Throughout the novel, Molia calls our attention to the consumer mentality that pervades contemporary society. As soon as Marin starts earning a bit of money, he immediately upgrades his lifestyle, furnishing his apartment with "des matières rares, de l'acier brossé, des zelliges marocains [ . . . ], du bois exotique [ . . . ], un tapis de Boukhara, un canapé italien [ . . . ]. Les frais étaient importants, sans doute trop [ . . . ], mais Marin tenait à ces aménagements, qui lui procuraient d'heureux soucis de propriétaire" (205). Most importantly for Marin, his new affluence offers him an immediate sense of belonging, predicated upon a shared sense of cultural taste: "Il buvait du thé fumé à la terrasse des cafés, pour regarder distraitemment tous ces gens qui lisraient les mêmes journaux que lui, rêvaient eux aussi de Cuba et du périple indien, parlaient aussi de tout quitter un jour pour la

campagne, et aussi d'aller voir le prochain film iranien” (206). That consumer mentality is not limited to earth, however, as even in the afterlife, the imperative to “profiter au maximum” remains (Molia, “Interview” 1).<sup>22</sup> Paradise is not a place for leisurely contemplation—there are hardly any novels to be found in the library (132)—rather, there is a bustling casino, not to mention kayaking, beach volleyball, and bikini contests. The vision of Paradise as stereotypical male fantasy responds to the expectations of consumers conditioned by a lifetime of exposure to media representations of such images. Caroline, Marin’s sexual partner in Paradise, briefly assuages the feelings of sexual inadequacy that plague Marin on earth. That sense of inadequacy is exacerbated by his internalization of the expectations and aesthetics of contemporary pornography. As Marin thinks back to his relationship with Chloé, “Il s’irritait au souvenir de la façon qu’ils avaient eue de faire l’amour. Il s’y serait mieux pris, aujourd’hui, et il imaginait ça à peu près comme dans un film porno [ . . . ]. Il se croyait apte, maintenant” (306). The false inhabitants of Paradise incarnate a fantasy of women as indistinguishable and interchangeable objects designed for sexual pleasure.<sup>23</sup>

The theme of deceptive appearances subtends much *Reprise des hostilités*, often manifesting itself in unexpected ways. Molia saves some of his largest surprises for the metaliterary realm. The question of how to come to terms with the literary heritage of the twentieth century runs throughout Molia’s works, and in this novel, he proposes an intriguing answer. Ruffel argues that that question is central to the practice of writing at the end of the millennium: “Une idée de la modernité s’est achevée qui portait des valeurs esthétiques et politiques. Et cette mort pose [ . . . ] la question de l’héritage. Face au deuil, plusieurs voies sont possibles. Les héritiers peuvent nier, conjurer une époque, ou au contraire vivre avec ses fantômes, être (au sens propre) hantés par elle; la transformer et la porter dans l’avenir” (88-89).

One of the primary ways in which Molia “lives with the phantoms” of his predecessors in *Reprise des hostilités* is through the incorporation of citations from various authors into his text.

In a postscript on the final page of the book, the following notice appears:

(Ce livre comprend des citations, et parfois des réécritures, de: Louis Aragon, Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Butor, Albert Camus, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Marguerite Duras, Romain Gary, André Gide, Jean Giono, Julien Gracq, André Malraux, François Mauriac, Robert Merle, Henri Michaux, Roger Nimier, Georges Perec, Marcel Proust, Raymond Queneau, Raymond Radiguet, Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Françoise Sagan, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Jean-Paul Sartre, Claude Simon, Marguerite Yourcenar.) (353).

Like Marin, who dreams of clandestinely composing a text from the assembled works of classic twentieth-century French writers, Molia smuggles quotations from twenty-six illustrious predecessors into his own novel. Molia’s postscript is in fact a double citation of sorts, for while it calls attention to all of the authors whom it names, one writer in particular stands out from that list: Georges Perec. Indeed, Molia notes, “Perec est, d’une certaine manière, omniprésent dans ce roman. Mais, dans une mise en abyme qui n’amuse sans doute que moi, j’avais choisi de citer... sa manière de citer ses emprunts à d’autres textes à la fin de *La Vie mode d’emploi*” (“Personal interview” 1).<sup>24</sup>

While contemplating the assemblage of the combinatorial masterpiece of plagiarism that he imagines destroying Bel’s career, Marin envisions that process as resembling the creation of a puzzle, a metaphor that finds suggestive echoes in Perec’s work. In the preamble to *La Vie mode d’emploi*, Perec devotes several pages to that very notion, using “l’art du puzzle” as a metaphor

to describe a highly articulative ludic relationship—characterized by “la ruse, le piège, l’illusion”—between puzzle-maker and puzzle-solver, and by extension between writer and reader (15-17):

On en déduira quelque chose qui est sans doute l’ultime vérité du puzzle: en dépit des apparences, ce n’est pas un jeu solitaire: chaque geste que fait le poseur de puzzle, le faiseur du puzzle l’a fait avant lui; chaque pièce qu’il prend et reprend, qu’il examine, qu’il caresse, chaque combinaison qu’il essaye et essaye encore, chaque tâtonnement, chaque intuition, chaque espoir, chaque découragement, ont été décidés, calculés, étudiés par l’autre. (18)

Marin imagines himself as a master puzzle-maker, constructing a hidden trap concealed within Bel’s autobiography. In order for Marin’s scenario to be realized fully, however, he needs a puzzle-solver to follow his tracks, therefore he imagines the author B, an ideal reader capable of finding all the hidden clues and teasing out the deep structures—the “true” story—that lies beneath. B, Marin’s model reader, is a crucial figure in the text, his interpretive prowess in the cat-and-mouse game set up by Marin pointing toward the importance of careful, inquisitive reading in a situation where things are not what they seem.

Molia’s text requires an active effort from its reader on multiple levels. Formally, on a surface level the reader must reconstruct the fragments of Marin’s life and afterlife in order to make sense of the story. Then, the final revelation that Marin’s imagined novel of citations is a *mise-en-abyme* for Molia’s actual novel encourages the reader to go back and search out the quotations and textual elements covertly incorporated from other writers’ works. Some of those citations are relatively easy to pick out. When Marin and Gaspard descend into the underworld of Paradise, a few lines taken directly from Proust serve as their password (140). At another moment, Ninipotch, a member of Bel’s entourage, delivers a lecture on the etymology of Breton

place names that recalls Brichot's interminable etymological discussions in Proust's *Recherche*, while the name "Ninipotch" itself is an allusion to Perec.<sup>25</sup> Other citations may be harder to find, however, and in fact, they may not exist at all, as Molia admits: "Je dois [...] avouer que, par souci de produire un "clinamen," certains auteurs mentionnés dans la dernière page (étaient-ce Jean Giono? Marguerite Yourcenar? Je ne sais plus précisément) ne sont ni cités ni réécrits dans le roman. Mais j'étais persuadé qu'on les y trouverait quand même..." ("Personal letter" 1). As Warren Motte notes, "clinamen" is a term coined by Lucretius to describe a "swerve" in what is otherwise an immutable organization of elements ("Clinamen Redux" 264). Motte asserts that the clinamen is a suggestive figure that animates many of Perec's rigourously constructed works, in particular *La Vie mode d'emploi*, as "he came to feel that the textual system must be intentionally flawed, the flaw scrupulously cultivated, in turn, as the real locus of poetic creativity" ("Clinamen Redux" 276).

Like Perec in *La Vie mode d'emploi*, Molia establishes a system and then subverts it for his own ends. The cat-and-mouse game takes on another level, as the hunt for citations becomes more complex. The reader may well start second-guessing the accuracy of his or her conclusions: are certain passages truly citations from other writers, or does the expectation of finding something lead us to erroneous identifications?<sup>26</sup> What is more, who would be the ideal reader with the adequate knowledge to find all of those citations? As Pierre Bayard reminds us, "Our relation to books is a shadowy space haunted by the ghosts of memory" (xix). Bayard claims that that is so for a variety of reasons. In the first place, "even a prodigious reader never has access to more than an infinitesimal fraction of the books that exist" (3). Perhaps even more significantly, even the books we do read escape little by little from our memories. As Bayard puts it, "When we talk about books, then, [...] it would be more accurate to say that we are

talking about our approximate recollections of books, rearranged as a function of current circumstances" (48). If I cited earlier the full list of authors to whom Molia alludes, I did so to call attention to the immensity of the task that lays before the reader. It would be staggeringly difficult for a reader to discover all of the citations buried within the text. At the same time, Molia is not simply trying to create a puzzle for the reader, for his use of citation is also a strategy to come to terms with the literary heritage of the twentieth century.

Significantly, Molia incorporates citations from canonical authors, a group that Marin describes as "les grands noms du roman français" (184). Whether or not we have actually read all those authors, we know that they are supposed to be important, we know that they form part of the French cultural patrimony. Bayard suggests, "Most statements about a book are not about the book itself, [...] but about the larger set of books on which our culture depends at that moment. It is that set, [...] the *collective library*, that truly matters" (12). Molia engages with his literary predecessors on multiple levels, considering their works in terms of the position they occupy in the cultural landscape, but also engaging them as a writer, in terms of their actual language. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom also invokes the figure of the clinamen, embracing it as the animating principle of what he describes as "the central working concept of the theory of Poetic Influence, [...] an instance of creative revisionism" (42). In Bloom's view, the clinamen represents a "poetic misreading" which allows strong poets to swerve away from their literary antecedents and to assert their own position (14). For Bloom, that process is an essential component of the ways in which authors come to terms with those who came before them, and he claims, "Like Lucretius himself, they opt for *clinamen* as freedom" (44). I believe that Molia employs just such a strategy in *Reprise des hostilités*. Through the citation and rewriting of his literary predecessors, Molia inserts their words into a new context, making them

mean something new. That process can be read as an acknowledgement that no writer emerges from a void, yet each writer must depart in some way from his or her precursors in order to create a new world.

In an interview, Molia discusses the importance of intertextual references in his works:

Il n'a été possible d'écrire pour moi qu'à partir du moment où j'ai vu qu'il était possible de réécrire, de faire une œuvre singulière à partir des textes des autres. C'est la thématique de mon roman *Fourbi*, qui est celle de la reprise, du pastiche. Exposer la dimension littéraire d'un texte c'est aussi signaler que ce livre est constitué de références. Je trouve intéressant de les reprendre consciemment et de m'en démarquer plus consciemment aussi. Et même si je ne suis pas le seul à faire de tels emprunts, au final, la combinaison que j'en fais demeure singulière.

("Interview" 1)

The process of citation allows Molia to engage with his predecessors, transforming their words into *une deuxième création*. His interventionist approach is a dynamic process, creating a virtual space within *Reprise des hostilités* where the words of different canonical writers come together in a collaboration their authors had never imagined. Italo Calvino remarks that while all literature is inherently combinatorial, it continually attempts to make something new out of its combinations.<sup>27</sup> By resituating citations from other authors within his own work, Molia calls attention to the fact that although the literary heritage of the twentieth century looms large for contemporary authors, that heritage can be envisioned not as a burden, but rather as a catalyst to spark further innovation.

And yet, those hidden citations are not the only phantoms that haunt *Reprise des hostilités*. Just as Marin's intertextual creation stealthily infiltrates Molia's novel, another

literary project also appears within its pages, one conceived by Ninipotch, a member of Bel's circle:

Ninipotch aimait bien Kim Philby, comme d'autres d'ailleurs, dont il consignait les fragments de biographie dans un grand cahier à spirale. Il avait caressé le projet d'un livre qui retracerait le cours du vingtième siècle à travers ces figures inscrites dans les marges du temps, ces êtres qui n'avaient jamais, semblait-il, été portés par le mouvement majeur de l'Histoire, ces êtres mineurs, ou plutôt mis en minorité par la suite des événements [ . . . ]. Dans cette contre-histoire, [ . . . ] le visiteur ne reconnaîtrait aucun des portraits présentés, mais il y apercevrait peut-être, [ . . . ] la peinture d'un siècle insensé. (221-23)

Ninipotch's proposed book would provide a sort of negative image of the twentieth century. If it is a commonplace that history is written by the winners—the second section of *Reprise des hostilités* is entitled “Histoire des vainqueurs” (169)—then Ninipotch's project would tell the stories of those who came in second, “[les] hommes secondaires, comme lui” (62). Sections from Ninipotch's imagined book are inserted between the chapters of Marin's story, and in them a variety of intriguing individuals come to light, such as Robert Falcon Scott, the second man to reach the South Pole (222), and Michael Collins, the astronaut who stayed behind to pilot the spacecraft while Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin strode into history as the first men to walk on the moon (171). Other figures are more obscure, however, and although a bit of research confirms the existence of forgotten individuals such as Wilhelm Steinitz and Peace Pilgrim, others such as “Constantin Puyance” and “Traveling Wolf” seem to have left absolutely no traces, a phenomenon that may raise the reader's eyebrows (222). Indeed, in an interview Molia

confirms that, in another swerve, some of Ninipotch's "hommes secondaires" are completely fictitious:

Certaines anecdotes sont totalement vraies et d'autres non. Mais tout est écrit avec le même degré de fiabilité. C'est donc au lecteur d'adopter une attitude de méfiance. Pour moi un roman n'est pas un livre de vérité. Cette capacité à produire du faux sous les apparences du vrai est quelque chose que j'ai trouvé chez Georges Perec. C'est une façon de signifier ce qu'est la littérature par rapport à d'autres discours. Contrairement au discours des sectes ou des politiques, qui recourent au langage de la certitude, le romancier est dans le questionnement permanent. Ce qui requiert de la part du lecteur une distance, un état de vigilance. Un livre doit être suspect d'inutilité. ("Interview" 1)

Nathalie Sarraute's "ère du soupçon" is alive and well (63), and the "capacité à produire du faux sous les apparences du vrai" of which Molia speaks is thematized throughout the book in a variety of ways. Marin presents a false front to almost everyone within the novel, and as a result, he is perpetually anxious about being found out.<sup>28</sup> In Marin's science fiction novels, the hero, Astor Grubio, is a detective who specializes in tracking human clones.<sup>29</sup> Marin's idea for the third volume of the series is "Astor confronté à son propre clone, dont il ignorait l'existence, et qui persuadait tout le monde qu'il était le seul et authentique Astor Grubio" (43). Throughout the novel the reader is warned, like Astor Grubio, to stay on his or her toes and to look closely in order to distinguish the real from the fake. While some of Ninipotch's anecdotes are completely true and some completely false, several of them initially seem to be rooted in reality only to spin off into the realm of fiction.<sup>30</sup> The most vertiginous of those anecdotes captures the spirit of Molia's novel in another mise-en-abyme.

The story of the forger “Lezcano” recounts his arrest for the theft and forgery of “*Le Marchand d’eau*,” a real painting by Velázquez housed, in real life as in the novel, at the Wellington Museum in London (293). Lezcano is pursued by his own personal Javert, the famous art expert “Carlos Vallecás,” who years earlier had uncovered another forgery by Lezcano, sending him off to prison (293). Vallecás declares that the Velázquez painting recovered at Lezcano’s home, following its disappearance from the Wellington Museum, is in fact a brilliant forgery, “le plus remarquable faux qu’il lui avait été donné de contempler, le chef-d’œuvre absolu de Sebastián Lezcano” (294). To great fanfare, Vallecás claims to have discovered a devious plot:

Ce que les complices de Lezcano avaient extrait de leur camionnette [ . . . ] n’était pas la toile dérobée à Londres, mais sa reproduction. Lezcano avait laissé à dessein la police l’intercepter, au cours d’un simulacre de livraison. Sans l’œil expert de Vallecás, le tableau reproduit allait rejoindre le Wellington Museum, où il aurait trôné, sous le regard des visiteurs, comme la plus parfaite réalisation de Lezcano, le signe inaperçu mais enfin exhibé de son génie du faux. (294-95)

If Vallecás is able to tell true from false, it is only because Lezcano could not resist adding one tiny personal touch to his painting, a signature of sorts: “On imagina que Lezcano voulait prendre sa revanche sur Carlos Vallecás, et qu’il n’ignorait pas que l’expert [ . . . ] se mêlerait de cette affaire. Ainsi, de la copie, la faussaire avait fait, à l’intention de l’homme haï qui l’avait envoyé en prison, un défi secret. Vallecás l’avait relevé” (295). The painting is destroyed and Lezcano is sent to prison. Vallecás, for his part, eventually falls into obscurity and one day commits suicide, after he realizes that it was he who had been tricked and the real Velázquez was destroyed on his orders, for Lezcano’s ruse had gone one step further than he had imagined.

Lezcano's personal touch, the secret signature, was indeed intended for Vallecas's eye, as all along the forger had anticipated the art expert's conclusions. However, rather than passing off his own work for that of Velázquez, Lezcano passed off the original as his own, taking his revenge on Vallecas by turning the real into a "fake": "pour l'unique geste créateur qu'il devait jamais exécuter, [ . . . ] Lezcano, se retenant de rire, toucha l'original et la faussa" (296). The cat-and-mouse game of Lezcano and Vallecas recalls the interplay of Perec's puzzle-maker and puzzle-solver, yet Molia is also playing a game of his own with the reader, blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction. While one could indeed contemplate the *Marchand d'eau* at the Wellington Museum, "Lezcano" and "Vallecas" can only be found at the Museo del Prado in Madrid, where they, or rather, he, since he is one and the same person, forever resides in another of Velásquez's paintings, *Francisco Lezcano (El Niño de Vallecas)*. The combinatorial play of elements gives rise to a hall of mirrors, where the closer one looks, the more complex things become.

Underneath a thin veneer of real-world referentiality, fiction is at play, a situation that recalls another tale of artistic forgery, Perec's *Un Cabinet d'amateur* (1979). Perec's novella describes an art exhibition featuring some of the works from the collection of Hermann Raffke. One painting in particular, *Un Cabinet d'amateur*, by the painter Heinrich Kürz, causes quite a stir, as it portrays Raffke's entire collection in a dazzling mise-en-abyme:

car le peintre a mis son tableau dans le tableau, et le collectionneur assis dans son cabinet voit sur le mur [ . . . ] le tableau qui le représente en train de regarder sa collection de tableaux, et tous ces tableaux à nouveau reproduits, et ainsi de suite sans rien perdre de leur précision [ . . . ]: *Un cabinet d'amateur* n'est pas seulement la représentation anecdotique d'un

musée particulier; par le jeu de ces reflets successifs, par le charme quasi magique qu'opèrent ces répétitions de plus en plus minuscules, c'est une œuvre qui bascule dans un univers proprement onirique où son pouvoir de séduction s'amplifie jusqu'à l'infini. (19-20)

The spectators' astonishment grows as they realize that Kürz did not limit himself to the simple reproduction of the more than one hundred paintings that appear within his own masterpiece. Quite to the contrary, “il semblait avoir pris un malin plaisir à y introduire à chaque fois une variation minuscule” (22). Kürz's painting gives rise to a host of scholarly articles and publications analyzing its importance, and Perec himself catalogues in astonishing detail the various paintings found in Raffke's collection as they are eventually auctioned off to the highest bidder. It is only years later that those buyers—and along with them, the reader—discovers the truth, namely, that Kürz, who was in fact Raffke's son, forged the entire collection and then painted *Un Cabinet d'amateur* as an ultimate guarantee of their authenticity: “Des vérifications entreprises avec diligence ne tardèrent pas à démontrer qu'en effet la plupart des tableaux de la collection Raffke étaient faux, comme sont faux la plupart des détails de ce récit fictif, conçu pour le seul plaisir, et le seul frisson, du faire-semblant” (85). One of the key elements of Perec's illusion is the proliferation of numerous texts that seem to corroborate Raffke and Kürz's story within the novella.<sup>31</sup> As I mentioned before, Molia similarly incorporates a variety of fictional corroborating texts into *Reprise des hostilités*. In addition to the unnamed television show on which Bel appears in the first chapter of the section “Annexes,” there are articles from two different magazines, *Présents* and *Dynamique Centre*, as well as excerpts from a book by Louise Delauney, *La Bel Affaire: Portrait d'un imposteur*, in which she cites both Bel's autobiography *La Gagne* and another book written by one of Bel's assistants, Gwenaëlle

Puech.<sup>32</sup> That elaborate framework of references serves a variety of purposes, allowing the reader to form a fuller picture of Bel and rounding out the depth of the fragmented and incomplete fictional world.<sup>33</sup>

True to its theme of false appearances, at first glance *Reprise des hostilités* appears almost free of intertextual references. Besides the fictional works devoted to Bel, the only books explicitly mentioned are Marin's science fiction novels, Mouscron's media-anointed mediocrity, and André Malraux's *L'Espoir*, one of the only novels available to read in Paradise.<sup>34</sup> Just beneath the surface, however, a quite different story emerges, for Molia's novel can be read as a sustained attempt to come to terms with and to create something new from the literary heritage of the twentieth-century novel. Molia signs the individuality of the work with his own style, and he also leaves a small calling card, an anagram of his last name, "ALIOM," which can be found on a door one floor up from Mouscron's apartment (299). That little clue is but one of many that points the way in the cat-and-mouse game of interpretation that Molia establishes within the novel. That game is not gratuitous, however, for it serves as a model for the back-and-forth interpretive processes that underlie the relationship between reader and writer in every serious novel. The question of interpretation comes to the forefront as the reader navigates through the dense web of references to the real world and to the realm of literature. Molia's novel engages the reader on a variety of levels, and it encourages us, like Marin, to look back to the past as well as to the future, as we contemplate what might come next.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> His novels *Fourbi* (2000) and *Supplément aux mondes inhabités* (2004) appeared in the “Collection blanche” at Gallimard, while his third novel, *Reprise des hostilités* (2007) was published by Éditions du Seuil. Molia’s collection of poetry, *Le Contraire du lieu* (2005), also appeared at Gallimard, while his graphic novel *Vers le nord* (2009), illustrated by Élodie Jarret, was published by Éditions Sarbacane.

<sup>2</sup> Molia’s *court-métrages* are *Avec Vautours* (2003), *L’Invention du demi-tour* (2006), et *S’éloigner du rivage* (2007). His feature-length film, *Huit Fois debout* (2010), saw a wide release in France and appeared at film festivals in Montreal, New York, San Sebastian, Tokyo, and Tübingen-Stuttgart.

<sup>3</sup> See William Cloonan’s review of *Fourbi* in *French Review* 76.1 (2002): 154-55.

<sup>4</sup> See the interview, “Xabi Molia: Reprise des échanges en milieu tempéré” 1.

<sup>5</sup> With the exception of the intercalated narratives, which are set off from the two main narrative threads by their heterogeneous titles. Some of the intercalated narratives are excerpts from fictional magazines or books, in which case they bear the title of their source, for example, “*Dynamique Centre* (mensuel de la région Centre, n° 99)” (249). Other micronarratives bear the name of the person whose story they recount, for example, “COLLINS” (171).

<sup>6</sup> “Décidons d’appeler *code herméneutique* [ . . . ] l’ensemble des unités qui ont pour fonction d’articuler, de diverses manières, une question, sa réponse et les accidents variés qui peuvent ou préparer la question ou retarder la réponse; ou encore: de formuler une énigme et d’amener son déchiffrement” (*S/Z* 24).

<sup>7</sup> Marin’s sex life is one of his principal frustrations during his lifetime. His encounter with Caroline seems to make Paradise live up to its billing as “une deuxième période [en]

récompense de [ses] efforts, de cette première période sur Terre, rudement difficile” (12).

<sup>8</sup> If Paradise—which abounds with sexually available young women and pursuits such as golf, televised sports, and gambling—sounds like a stereotypical male fantasy, that is entirely by design.

<sup>9</sup> The progressive degradation of Paradise echoes the “décomposition” afflicting France during Marin’s lifetime (177).

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, if one considers that Marin’s complex is host to a population of only three hundred “morts violentes et des gens peu croyants, principalement des catholiques et uniquement des francophones,” the total number of complexes must be staggering.

<sup>11</sup> Such spaces recur throughout Molia’s novels. The blasé justification proffered for that particular space—“C’était en cas d’attaque, un immense abri” (139), an explanation that raises far more questions than it answers—finds an echo in one of the micro-narratives interspersed throughout *Reprise des hostilités*. A cabdriver named Yacine imagines “un monde où les dieux seraient en bas, un domaine souterrain plutôt qu’un paradis céleste” (165). Driven by an insatiable desire to reach the gods, the humans in Yacine’s daydream devote all the resources of their society toward the excavation of immense tunnels, chasing the desperate gods who dig ever deeper in the attempt to escape their pursuers, finally provoking an apocalypse when they accidentally reach “le noyau brûlant du monde” (167). Similarly, in *Supplément aux mondes inhabités*, Victor, the protagonist, recalls his childhood fantasies of “Kalebb,” an immense “complexe souterrain” where “les habitants avaient dû s’abriter [. . .] pour échapper à une catastrophe” (42). Despite the best efforts of Kalebb’s creators to make the space “meilleur à bien des égards que le monde connu” (42), Victor’s fantasy turns darker, and he comes to fear hat eventually, “il n’y eût là dans les ténèbres qu’un charnier, qu’ils fussent tous morts sans

exception” (89).

<sup>12</sup> Danrémont argues that the women are “Des succubes [...] [qui] pompent l’énergie des hommes,” while Jean-Luc, Marin’s psychologist, claims with some hesitation that they are “Des... créatures [...]. On ne sait pas très bien, en fait. Des sortes d’anges” (144).

<sup>13</sup> The bulk of the main story takes place in 1999 and 2000.

<sup>14</sup> “Il tenait une chronique de cinéma pour un magazine féminin et s’était spécialisé dans les réquisitoires contre certains réalisateurs en vue, ce qui lui valait un nom. Il poursuivait avec sérieux une thèse de philosophie et projetait un reportage sur la guerre au Cachemire. Son coup d’éclat, surtout, c’était un roman publié, puis salué par quelques plumes respectables” (209).

The inscription on the dust jacket of Mouscron’s novel recalls Frédéric Beigbeder’s *Nouvelles sous ecstasy* (2000), while Mouscron’s assertion that his next novel will be “une liquidation des idéaux de 68” calls to mind the works of Michel Houellebecq (254).

<sup>15</sup> The banter between the two writers as they brainstorm a script that tries to combine Mouscron’s commercial instincts with Marin’s desire to make a cerebral film, “un film qui parle de lui-même” (253), is one of the comic high points of this very funny novel. See 236-38 and 252-53.

<sup>16</sup> The decomposition seems to be afflicting Paradise as well, as I noted earlier. Maisnel, Marin’s acquaintance, mentions, “il paraît qu’il y a un complexe qui a dû être évacué. Quelqu’un a remonté une cochonnerie, une espèce de champignon corrosif qui bousille tout” (28).

<sup>17</sup> See *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene V.

<sup>18</sup> A short text, entitled “Le Livre d’un jeune homme,” appears as one of the two “Annexes” that close Molia’s novel. In that text, Bel appears on a literary television show, and

although the host harangues Bel for his right-wing political views, it is clear that as Marin feared, both his autobiography and the assassination attempt have served to burnish Bel's reputation and boost his approval ratings.

<sup>19</sup> See 124, 148-150, and 154.

<sup>20</sup> See 116-17 and 268 for examples of how Bel provokes his political opponents into physical confrontations on camera.

<sup>21</sup> For a televised interview with Bel, see 343. Magazine articles discussing Bel appear on 173-74, 258-259, and 249-51. An excerpt from Delauney's book, which quotes Bel's autobiography as well as a book written by his employee Gwenaëlle Puech, can be found on 37-39.

<sup>22</sup> Indeed, one of Marin's first thoughts in Paradise is to complain about the lack of a television in his room (11).

<sup>23</sup> As Marin watches one of the bikini contests, "il bandait douloureusement devant ces créatures, il avait envie d'en attraper une par les cheveux, une des cinq, n'importe [. . .]. La jeune fille qui se tenait à côté de lui avait les bras nus, les yeux fermés, et Marin s'imagina sur elle. [. . .] Il entendit, très loin, le prénom de Marianne, proclamée Miss Piscine, les applaudissements. La jeune fille le regarda. Elle ressemblait à Marianne. Elles ressemblaient toutes à Marianne" (70-71).

<sup>24</sup> Perec lists the names of thirty authors in a "Post-scriptum" at the end of *La Vie mode d'emploi* that serves as a model for Molia. Perec's postscript reads: "(Ce livre comprend des citations, parfois légèrement modifiées de: Rene Belletto, [. . .] Théodore Sturgeon, Jules Verne, Unica Zürn.)" (653).

<sup>25</sup> For Ninipotch's etymology of "Ploumanac'h," see *Reprise* 78. For Brichot's

etymologies, see Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* III, 280-84. For the name “Ninipotch,” see David Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words* 292.

<sup>26</sup> As is the case for the art expert, Vallecás, in one of the intercalated micronarratives in *Reprise des hostilités* (295).

<sup>27</sup> “I believe that all of literature is implicit in language and that literature itself is merely the permutation of a finite set of elements and functions. But surely literature is constantly straining to escape from the bonds of this finite quantity, surely literature is constantly struggling to say something that it does not know how to say, something that cannot be said, something it does not know, something that cannot be known? [ . . . ] The whole struggle of literature is in fact an effort to escape from the confines of language.” See Calvino, “Myth in the Narrative” 76.

<sup>28</sup> He lies to Bel and associates about his true motives, he lies to Mouscron and friends about his association with Bel, and finally, he realizes that he’s lying to himself as he becomes more and more comfortable living the good life on Bel’s tab.

<sup>29</sup> In another intertextual echo, the plot of Marin’s science fiction trilogy calls to mind Philip K. Dick’s novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, as well as its film adaptation, Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Collins, for example, was indeed a real-life member of the Apollo 11 mission to the moon. However, he was not—as far as we know—a disgruntled man approached by the French secret service with a plan to plant surreptitiously the French flag on the surface of the moon (171-72).

<sup>31</sup> Those texts in fact form the majority of the novella, as Perec “quotes” a variety of newspaper articles, museum catalogues, and multiple books—some of which are integral parts of the conspiracy—in *Un Cabinet d’amateur*. See 13-20, 24-28, 30-32, 38-56, and 56-70.

<sup>32</sup> Bel's interview is transcribed on 343. *Présents* appears on 258-259 and *Dynamique Centre* on 173-74 and 249-51. Excerpts from Delauney's book (which quotes Bel and Puech) can be found on 37-39, 95-96, and 278-79.

<sup>33</sup> Delauney's exposé of Bel is published in 2008, some eight years after Marin's death.

<sup>34</sup> One wonders whether Malraux's novel appears in Paradise because twentieth-century-style literary engagement as practiced by Malraux and Sartre is "dead"?

## CHAPTER VII

### Conclusion

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, French authors face a great deal of competition for their readers' attention. In an era when people spend more and more time in front of various screens, they read fewer and fewer books. While film, television, and the Internet all come to occupy ever more space in the cultural landscape, authors continue to craft innovative, yet approachable novels. Those two characteristics—innovation and accessibility—were often considered to be incompatible from the 1950s through the 1970s, as critics and theorists divided the literary field into “readerly” and “writerly” texts, to borrow a formulation from Roland Barthes (*S/Z* 4). To this day, the notion of “serious” fiction still carries for many readers the connotation of rebarbative, plot-less textual experiments, while “accessible” novels might at best serve to distract one for a few hours on an airplane flight. I have argued that the opposition of “readerly” and “writerly” literature is a false one, since much of the most intriguing fiction being written today combines a desire to innovate with a desire to tell stories “qui se dévorent à plat ventre sur son lit,” in Georges Perec’s memorable formulation (“Notes” 28). The novel, traditionally the most protean of genres, continues to evolve in intriguing ways.

I have sought to shed light on some of the avenues that French writers have pursued in that quest to renew the novel for the twenty-first century. It is important to mention that while the five authors whom I have selected are exemplary of important trends in current French fiction, the field of the extreme contemporary is both extremely wide and ever-changing. Indeed, a sense of mobility is one of the defining characteristics of the French novel today, and as we have seen in the works of Jean-Philippe Toussaint and Marie Redonnet, many authors evince a great deal of mobility in their writings over the course of their careers. As Warren

Motte points out, “Living authors, in their infinite perversity, may invalidate commentaries brought to bear on their mid-career work, well after the fact” (*Fables* 6). This study, then, should be read not as a definitive statement upon a fixed and unchanging corpus of material, but as an attempt to illustrate certain concerns that interest contemporary French writers in a given moment, and some of the strategies they employ to address those concerns.

In order to situate French novels in the extreme contemporary period, it is essential to consider the literary context from which they emerge. The desire to engage with the literary tradition they have inherited plays a role in the production of all of the authors whom I study. One way of considering the literary history of the twentieth-century novel is through the lens of the conflict between tradition and innovation. As writers seek to challenge the conventions of the realist novel, a variety of polemics and debates spring up over questions of form and content. Contemporary authors engage with that heritage in a variety of ways, whether by appropriating other literary genres in order to subvert them for their own ends, as is the case with Christine Montalbetti’s use of the road novel and Western genres, or by incorporating direct citations from earlier authors into new contexts, such as in Xabi Molia’s *Reprise des hostilités*. While many critics argue that postmodern literature is marked by “its ironic use of citation and illusion” (Van Den Abbeele 91), I agree with Jordan Stump that that is not always the case in French novels today. Discussing Toussaint’s use of techniques commonly associated with both modernist and postmodernist fiction, Stump declares:

these novels are not really a playful manipulation or quotation of those notions or techniques, but simply a *use* of them, however loose and indirect. Reading these novels, [...] nothing [...] suggests I am in the presence of a parody or a pastiche; rather, it seems [...] that Toussaint has simply taken up a number of tools that

have over the years found their way into the novelist's toolbox, and that he has chosen to put them to use, little caring where they came from, less interested in showing us that he is using them than in what they might allow him to do. ("Unfinished" 111)

Toussaint displays an intriguing evolution in his novelistic output over the last twenty-six years. While his early narratives of immobility call attention to their subversions of traditional conceptions of narrative structure and coherence, his more recent works seek to recapture "une énergie romanesque" that earlier avant-garde writers had derided as reactionary (Kaprièlan 1). While Toussaint brings emotion and passion to the forefront of his trilogy *Faire l'amour*, *Fuir*, and *La Vérité sur Marie*, he also constructs an intricate network of iterative stylistic, thematic, and formal structures that demand and reward repeated readings. Toussaint's renown as one of the standard-bearers of contemporary French fiction continues to grow, and it seems likely that his synthesis of timeless narrative strategies and rigorous formal experimentation will continue to attract readers.

Although she considers herself to have followed a more marginal path than some of her fellow writers who came to prominence at the Éditions de Minuit, Marie Redonnet has also made a significant place for herself in the landscape of contemporary French literature. As is the case with Toussaint, her novels reflect a striking progression over the course of her career to date. Her early novels are populated by marginalized figures who inhabit hard-to-situate, indeterminate settings. After an extended encounter with the works of Jean Genet, however, she comes to reconsider the potential of the *roman engagé* in the twenty-first century, crafting a novel, *Diego*, which explores the healing power of art in the face of social and sexual marginalization. At the same time, *Diego* is also a full-throated critique of France's historical

relationships with its former colonies, and an indictment of the way France treats its immigrants today.

Éric Chevillard also addresses human shortcomings, namely the wholesale destruction of the natural world due to humanity's shortsightedness. Through savage humor and dazzling linguistic pyrotechnics, in *Sans l'orang-outan* he takes aim at nothing less than the foundations of Western thought, demonstrating how its anthropocentric orientation leads to a funereal logic that encourages humankind to subjugate the natural world. Chevillard pushes back, following his own chain of logic as it leads to a terrifying conclusion, a post-apocalyptic landscape where the dazed survivors have just enough presence of mind to recall all they have lost. Chevillard's cautionary tale extends well beyond the realm of the natural world, however, for he is also deeply concerned with cultural ecology, and he encourages us to take care of our writers as well as our orangutans, for both may be endangered species.

In *Journée américaine*, Christine Montalbetti turns generic conventions on their head, displacing the traditional elements of the road novel genre with a playful exploration of the potential of narrative digression. In her works, digression serves a variety of purposes, subverting our expectations about narrative structure, and allowing the narrator to sketch out a provisional space for the reader to share in the production of meaning. What is more, in *Journée américaine* digression also emerges as a technique to explore and convey the richness and depth of our lived experience, and Montalbetti's take on the road novel reveals itself to be a thoughtful, sustained meditation on time, friendship, and how we use narrative to make sense of the different paths that our lives can take.

Xabi Molia's *Reprise des hostilités* also examines how we use narrative structures to make sense of life as Marin, a young writer, attempts to come to terms with his existence after

dying and waking up in Paradise. While the reader reconstructs the story of Marin's life and uncertain afterlife, *Reprise des hostilités* considers the questions of personal, cultural, and literary heritage in a France left teetering on the edge of a new millennium. Molia weaves a dense web of fiction and reality where nothing is what it seems to be, and the reader must engage in a highly active, careful reading in order to make full sense of the complex, formally inventive narrative. A host of other voices infiltrate Marin's story, and we discover that Molia incorporates citations from a variety of his literary predecessors into the novel, transforming their words by resituating them into a new context, thereby demonstrating that the literary inheritance of the twentieth century is not a burden to be born, but rather a catalyst to fire the imagination.

These five authors offer intriguing visions for how the novel can adapt to the twenty-first century, yet the story does not end there. Granted that the novel is in competition with other cultural forms, how do contemporary writers view those competitors? Significantly, many of the authors whom I examine have branched out to explore other venues for their writing. Various forms of cinema influence Montalbetti's works, and she has written several pieces for the stage, most recently adapting Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Both Chevillard and Toussaint have also turned their attentions to the Internet. Chevillard is a devoted blogger, exploring the possibilities of the fragment and the aphorism on his own website, free from the necessities of plot. Toussaint maintains a sophisticated multimedia website, posting video clips, photos, interviews, and a variety of textual artifacts from manuscripts to personal letters. Perhaps not coincidentally, Molia, the youngest of the authors studied here, has a wide interest in other narrative forms. In addition to a book of poetry and three novels, he has collaborated with an artist on a *bande dessinée*, or graphic novel, and he is also deeply committed to film. He is a professor of film studies in Poitiers as well as a filmmaker, with

several short films and a recent feature-length film to his credit. In a recent interview, he remarks that in his view, “chaque histoire réclame une forme qui lui est propre” (Pedrola 1).

Different stories seem to call for different narrative forms—some ideas simply work better as novels, some better as films, while some stories may need new narrative forms altogether. As French society—and indeed, societies around the world—continue to change, whatever other narrative forms might emerge, it seems likely that the novel, true to its name, will continue to renew itself, adapting to the demands of new cultural horizons. The space of fiction gives authors the opportunity to create worlds out of words. Those fictional spaces provide a critical distance that allows us to look at our own world with different eyes. As Montalbetti, among many others, notes, the novel is a privileged space that allows us to do anything we want (*Journée* 13)—we can look for ourselves or we can be other people, we can laugh, or cry, or love, or die. That extraordinary freedom—that extraordinary mobility—is perhaps the novel’s greatest asset, granting authors and readers alike the freedom to construct entire worlds out of small black marks on a page.

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