

THE QUARTERLY CONVERSATION

FOURTEEN QUESTIONS FOR JEAN-PHILIPPE TOUSSAINT

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There are three disclaimers to be made. First, I work for a literary publishing house (Dalkey Archive) that is currently publishing this man, Jean-Philippe Toussaint. We keep reprinting his old books, signing on new ones—we cannot get enough of him. Second, he is also one of my own favorite writers, although as I write this it strikes me less as a disclaimer to an interview than a reason for one. Third, I don't know French, and while Toussaint's English is quite good, he chose to reply to my English-language questions in French. Thus, the responses below were translated from French (by Aude Jeanson).

Toussaint is Belgian-born. His first novel, *La salle de bain*, was published in France by Editions de Minuit in 1985 and appeared in English as *The Bathroom* (E. P. Dutton, 1990; Dalkey Archive, 2008). His other titles translated into English are *Monsieur* (Marion Boyars, 1991; Dalkey Archive, 2008); *Making Love* (New Press, 2004); and *Television* (Dalkey Archive, 2007). The previously untranslated novel *Camera* will come out in November of this year, and his novel *Fuir* ("to run away") is currently being translated. Among his untranslated works is a recent story about the French soccer player Zidane, who famously head-butted Italian defender Marco Materazzi during the 2006 World Cup final. —Martin Riker

Martin Riker: Your books are unmistakably your own. Your narrators may sometimes recall some other literary figure—Bartleby, for example—but there is always something distinct about them, or about how your plots move, and because these qualities are so distinct to you, I am tempted to think about your books as being very similar to one another. And yet when I look at them with the idea of similarity in mind, they each suddenly strike me as dissimilar, really nothing like one another. I'm curious if you approach writing more in

the Flaubert tradition—each book its own unique project, with its own artistic rules—or more in what I’ll call the Hemingway tradition—each book unique but seeming to emerge out of a singular artistic vision?

Jean-Philippe Toussaint: 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. When *The Bathroom’s* narrator throws a dart at Edmondson’s forehead, I understand his gesture and I find it unforgivable, all at once. If I were being provocative, I could say that everything in my books is autobiographical, but not only on the level of real events, or in what pertains to real life, but also on the level of dreams, poetry, and literature. Everything I write is something I’ve experienced.

MR: Do you have a favorite among your own books?

JPT: Each of my books, when taken separately, is my favorite, but for different reasons. I had different priorities in each book. My priority in *Fuir* was the *literary energy*, that invisible thing that burns and is almost electric, and that sometimes emerges from what remains “still” in a book. This energy, exemplified in Faulkner, is a surge that causes your pupils to enlarge when reading, and that’s completely separate from the anecdote or the story of the book itself. So that’s what my priority was in *Fuir*, the energy of the novel, more than a view of the world, the search for beauty, or humor. But that wasn’t always the case. My first books, *The Bathroom* or *Camera*, dealt with an underlying sense of literature as focused on the insignificant, the banal, the mundane, the “not-interesting,” the “not-edifying,” in other words on daily stuff, and I was trying to approach this with humor, and to offer a view of the world. Humor, then, was a priority. It was even how I evaluated how successful a page was. A page was successful if it was funny.

MR: What makes funny fiction funny?

JPT: Work, work, work.

MR: You're Belgian by birth but are published by the French publisher Editions de Minuit. Do you consider yourself a French writer? I mean, in particular, do you see yourself as working out of a literary tradition that is primarily French?

JPT: I feel European. Here's an excerpt from a text entitled, in French, "You Are Leaving the American Sector," which I wrote for a symposium in Hamburg in 2002, for which 30 European writers had been asked to write about what was specifically European in their writings:

Some time ago, a literary magazine asked me to list what I considered to be the best ten literary works in the history of humanity, and without being much aware of it, I picked only books by European writers: I listed Pascal and Montaigne, I could have added Goethe and Shakespeare, I could have remembered Dante and Cervantes, but I mostly chose 20th-century authors, like Proust and Beckett, Musil and Kafka. It seemed as though my personal pantheon excluded African, Indian or Chinese authors, or North American authors and of course Australian ones (these folks don't write, they only surf). Well, no, off the top of my head, the major authors who had influenced me, had helped me build my cultural background and helped me develop my research, from high school to my latest readings, were from Europe. Without being very much aware of it . . . I established myself in a European literary tradition, I could even say a French tradition, which started with Flaubert and ended with the Nouveau Roman, a tradition that paid close attention to style and form.

I was born in Brussels in 1957, attended grade school in Belgium, and high school, then college in Paris. Then I lived in Madrid, Berlin, Corsica, and then Brussels again. I'm originally from the city that best symbolizes Europe and its institutions, and still live there, and I am myself a pretty good synthesis of the European state of mind, which is at the crossroads between the Latin and Germanic cultures, to which could be added, like a pinch of salt, a small dose of Eastern European attitude, due to my Lithuanian origins. For personal reasons, either cultural, familial, or tourism-related, such as a trip to Lithuania, birth country of my grandfather, or to launch the translation of book X in country Y, I've traveled to most European countries. I speak

French (very good French), English (much less well), German (quite poorly), I can get by (with difficulty) in Italian and (with great difficulty) in Spanish. From all points of view, I am a European writer, and just like those Austrian writers who write in German, or those Irish writers who write in English, I come from a small country but write in a major language.

MR: Who are your favorite writers?

JPT: Kafka, Proust, Faulkner, Nabokov, Beckett.

MR: Who are your favorite non-writers?

JPT: Chess players: Fischer, Kasparov. Or the soccer player Zidane—although in a literary sense. What does Freud do in *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*? He makes Leonardo da Vinci his own, he builds him, invents him. I did something like that with Zidane. This has more to do with my own fantasies than with the real Zidane. A writer's duty is to observe the world. I wrote about Zidane because of the place that soccer has recently acquired in contemporary society. Choosing Zidane as a literary subject is also a conceptual idea. Like Andy Warhol with Marilyn Monroe, I approached Zidane as a modern icon. In so doing, I made him my own. Such is the power of literature. Just as much as Flaubert could say "Madame Bovary, c'est moi," I can say: Zidane, c'est moi.

The Belgian

MR: What makes a literary work of its time? What makes it contemporary in an interesting or meaningful way? Do you care about being contemporary?

JPT: Literature has no real political or social role to play. Its role is primarily aesthetic. It's an art. But it must absolutely offer a view of the world. I think writers should necessarily talk about the contemporary world; they should read it, decipher it, and reconstitute it. My choice of having *Fuir* take place in China, quite independently from my trip there in 2001, brought to light a desire to focus on the present, on the contemporary world as it is being built today, a world that is forever alive, moving on and transforming itself. China

represents what is contemporary, in my mind. At some point in *Fuir*, we're both in Paris and in China, it's both daytime and nighttime, and the characters, connected by a cellphone, are both in a night train in China and standing in the sun outside of the Musée du Louvre in Paris. In the past, it would not have been possible to write that scene, for the obvious reason that cellphones did not exist 15 years ago. Starting from a new object of daily life, one discovers a new use of the novel.

MR: One of the reasons your work strikes me so forcefully is that it creates a highly unusual sort of "mood." I would describe this mood as a combination of deadpan (Chaplinesque?) humor, lightness (in Calvino's use of that word), anarchic moments of unsettling and uncompromising chaos, and an overriding sense of what I will call meaningful inconsequence. This isn't a question, just something I wanted to state.

JPT: One day, in a lift in Beijing, I thought: *Humor is like spying, you'd better not say how you proceed or it ruins the efficiency of your operation.*

MR: Critics comment on your interest in the minutiae of daily experience. Do you feel that you have a particular interest in minutiae?

JPT: What really matters is to pay attention to what is both infinitely small (the most pathetic, trivial things, the most insignificant details of daily life) and infinitely large (the essential questions we have, the meaning of life, the place of human beings in the universe). A book must contain both darts and philosophy, bowling and metaphysics.

MR: Why do you write fiction?

JPT: I write novels because of the times we live in. The novel evolved in such a way that it has become a very free genre, which allows for all kinds of variations and forms. Nowadays, the novel is the only literary genre that is visible, available to the public. If I'd lived a century earlier, I probably would have written poetry.

MR: Do you follow politics? Do you think that educated people ought

to follow politics? Should artists (who are also often educated people) follow politics?

JPT: I studied political science. I pursued advanced studies in the sociology of elections and had an interest in subjects as evanescent and poetic as the sociological communist vote in the Essone region of France (I was young back then, and the Communist party was still going in France).

MR: What is the role of the artist in society?

JPT: To run away.

MR: Are you at all interested in the United States of America, either as a concept or as a reality?

JPT: Let's not get into touchy subjects, if you please.

MR: Your writing is subtle in significant ways, and as with any work involving subtleties, it presents some complicated translation problems (despite how simple the writing may at times seem). What are your thoughts about the translation of your work? Do you work with your translators?

JPT: I had the opportunity to work with my translators three times, in Seneffe, Belgium, at the Collège Européen des traducteurs de Seneffe. I'll say that I cannot judge languages other than French, even though I could give an opinion on English, German, or Italian languages. On the other hand, it's a mistake even to think I could give an opinion because, in the end, I can't really judge a language other than French. But I do have a lot to say to a translator about a French text, I can explain my intentions, I can go into detail about certain specific things, about the meaning of a sentence, of a word, about a particular difficult thing that we're looking at, about the understatements and allusions, the double meanings and everything I put into a text; I can bring a lot to this discussion. Then the translator has to figure out the other problems. I could compare this to music. The writer writes the score and the translator interprets it with his instrument. The ideal situation is when you have an outstanding score and the conductor is exceptionally good. However, a concert can still be good even if the score isn't. A very good translator can make a mediocre text better, and, conversely, an exceptional book can still be good even though the translation isn't.