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Jean-Philippe Toussaint. *Monsieur*. (Dalkey Archive Press, 2008), 102 pp., \$12.95, (paperback), mixed genre

Jean-Philippe Toussaint. *Camera*. ((Dalkey Archive Press, 2008), 120 pp., \$12.95, (from the uncorrected galleys), mixed genre.

Jeff Martin, ed. *The Customer is Always Wrong: The Retail Chronicles*. (Soft Skull Press, 2008), 172 pp., \$12.95, (paperback), nonfiction.

Belgian-born author Jean-Philippe Toussaint has had two earlier appearances in English: *Monsieur* (1991) and *Making Love* (2004). Now Dalkey has taken him up, publishing, for the first time in English, *Television* (2007), *Camera* (2008), and republishing *Monsieur*, with another work being translated as this review is written.

Monsieur and *Camera* easily fit into a jacket pocket, but not into a genre. They present one main character in the present with little background, no character is rounded, there's not much of a plot, nor are they earnestly dire. They feel like short stories or novellas, yet don't possess the tightness or closure of those forms. They aren't novels. They do contain philosophizing, humour, insight, structure, and the style (at least in English) is conversational, but not overly familiar with the unspecified observer. In his essay "Form as fiction," the English linguist Nigel Fabb argued that since "the contents of literary texts are often fictions," then it follows that "literary form [is] not simply a kind of content but more specifically is a kind of fiction." That is, the genre novel is a construct as fictional--as made up--as William Gaddis' *The Recognitions*. So it's fruitful to regard these works as possessing qualities we find in fiction or memoirs while being outside those forms.

Monsieur follows the meandering life of a commercial director with Fiat France, from his various living arrangements (with family, with a fiancée he loses, on his own) to his new girlfriend. Toussaint has *Monsieur* used like an instrument in his workplace and on his own time (a neighbor dictates to him a book on mineralogy), which he doesn't resist, since he prefers to bend like a reed in a river. There are few incidents, though there is movement. Everything is invested with the potential for being a subject of contemplation, and the abundant humour comes out of situations *Monsieur* is placed in combined with his interpretation of them (and the narrator's).

In many ways, *Monsieur* foreshadows the seemingly more mature narrator of *Camera*, who savors things: "...I privately took pleasure in this feeling of letting things follow their course, not planning on even lifting a finger in this affair" encapsulates the momentum of *Camera*. As Gilbert Sorrentino says of Raymond Roussel, "The description of the process of the action is another description of the action." The repeated image of an olive chased around a plate, scored with a fork, the energy of its potential consumption building until it is finally skewered and popped in the mouth of the narrator parallels the slow, semi-Tantric building up of events. A sizable portion comprises mundane details: where Narrator stands in an aisle, how he rubs his feet, and so forth. Recall Nicholson Baker's *A Box of Matches* and its narrator's deep attention to details and you have something of a comparison. In books of such short length that eschew weary conventions, it's with relief and amusement that we watch time stretched to allow thinking to be presented. One example will do for many that occur in the book.

The narrator and Pascale are in a hotel in London, and want to eat out. Specifically, this section begins with the sentence, “The following night, Pascale and I were eating alone at an Indian restaurant.” [60] At first you’re not told they’re in London, and assume they’re in Paris. Then they are in their room, where they lounge in bed watching television. Narrator comments on a pool tournament. “The commentator appeared at times as well, sitting in the second row amongst the crowd, a headset on and various papers in his hand, and, who, each time that he was aware of being on camera, raised his head, right hand keeping his headset in place. We would smile at each other, Pascale and I [...]” They keep watching television, eventually get dressed, and then the narrator looks at the hotel menu. They do get to the restaurant, then leave after looking at its menu because their reservation is not until later. They may never get their Indian meal. But is it important that they do? Our customary reading trains us to think that the topic sentence, “The following night, Pascale and I were eating alone at an Indian restaurant,” is what we ought to focus on. Not here. Instead, we are watching Zeno’s paradox, where the arrow’s flight to the target (the Indian restaurant) is divided endlessly, not landing until passing over three pages that include many small actions of a domestic nature.

There are also poignant observations and intense concentrations of thoughts. “And, that evening in his new apartment, Monsieur remained quite simply in this position for hours, where the absence of pain was a pleasure, and the absence of pleasure a pain, bearable in its presence.” In the second part of *Camera*, where humor is suddenly absent, the narrator muses that “alone and following the course of your thoughts in a state of growing relief, you move progressively from the struggle of living to the despair of being.” We can see how he arrived there, and why Monsieur is inert; nevertheless, the effect of these passages is like a bomb going off. The humanity of Toussaint’s creations suddenly confronts readers, and we realize that the existential plight of these seemingly drab drifters resembles our Odyssey lives in an Iliad world.

Just as Monsieur does battle against those who would take advantage of him, shop clerks, too, struggle to be seen as real people, not just as servants, and part of the battle is with customers, employers, systems, and themselves (“People, really,” is a refrain in *Monsieur*). The 21 writers in *The Customer is Always Wrong* outline the aggravations and small injustices they have felt while working in spas, department or video stores, or conducting hearing tests; from the self-descriptions most of the writers provide, they have been permanently scarred by generally short-lived work experiences for which they were manifestly unsuited, and often unsuitable. “You mean why the fuck does a masters-degreed graduate from a top writing school want to work for twelve an hour?” asks Stewart Lewis, and his question, its self-entitlement proudly on display, winds through many of the pieces. We’ve probably applied for jobs that we’re not fit for because we had to, because we thought it was right for us, or out of desperation. But if you’re one of the people in this book, and you’re going to write about that part of your past, then it ought to be evident you’re a better writer than you were a salesperson. Apart from the excellent contributions by Wendy Spero (knife saleswoman) and Jane Borden (children’s clothing), most of the pieces are only mildly interesting (Wade Rouse, Stewart Lewis, Richard Cox, James Wagner, Gary Mex Glazner). The rest are forgettable, a case of writers making nothing out of very little.

Long-held resentment and bitchiness, as well as a certain performance aspect (e.g., Anita Liberty, Timothy Bracy), unfortunately substitute for humor, insight, or enjoyable writing. The dependable Colson Whitehead, sketching his days as an ice cream salesman, is as inventive as the title, “I Scream,” suggests. If there were a *Reader’s Digest* for the slacker set, many of these banal tales, told in modes that easily mingle fiction, memoir and riffing, would fit snugly in. The

narrators drifted through life until a book of theirs was published. On the surface they look not far removed from Monsieur and the narrator of *Camera*.

“Thought, it appeared to me, is a moving stream that is best left alone so that it can expand...,” says *Camera*’s narrator, and the text matches that. A reader is then watching (selected) thought get transcribed, or so the illusion goes, but is not getting anything like a tidy story. For the 21 writers in *The Customer is Always Wrong*, story arcs and realistic details matter most. They are not writing about their work life in such a way that the individual experience blossoms into the universal. In their goals they stay on the consumer level, if you will, and we can enjoy fleetingly some of the rants and anecdotes. Toussaint aims much higher, has no time for self-pity, and evidently puts much time and thought into writing literary prose, allowing his characters, slimly drawn as they are, to embody some of our most wistful three-in-the-morning moods. In that, Monsieur and the narrator of *Camera* are distinct from the mainly shallow clerks assembled by Jeff Martin.

Look Toussaint up in a bookstore near you, and spare a good thought for the embittered sales clerk.

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