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The Website of Jean-Philippe Toussaint, or Highlighting the Creative Environment

Abstract: Jean-Philippe Toussaint’s website (<http://www.jptoussaint.com/>) distinguishes itself from others due to several characteristic features. Notably, it houses an extensive collection of manuscripts while deliberately excluding any form of literary creation. This analysis focuses on Toussaint’s website within his representative work, Marie’s cycle (2002–2013). This cycle, written concurrently with other projects – such as *Autoportrait à l'étranger* (2000) and *Made in China* (2017) – exemplifies his autoreflexive tendencies. The website itself was established in 2009. Marie’s cycle not only exhibits narrative circularity through its textual framework but also underscores Toussaint’s meticulous attention to material and textual forms. Central to this exploration is the prioritization of reader mobility. Similar traits manifest in the structure and functionality of his website. Here, Toussaint embarks on a deliberate quest for digital forms specific to the Internet – an endeavor that resonates with his enduring preoccupation with form. The website employs formal devices intrinsic to the digital realm to perpetuate reading mobility. Moreover, Toussaint’s website serves as an exhibition, and its thematic coherence is centered around the creative process. As an author deeply captivated by backstage processes, he accords significant importance to the creative environment’s material and immaterial aspects.

Keywords: mobility, circularity, horizontality, creative process, creative environment

This article explores in what sense Jean-Philippe Toussaint’s website could be considered a literary creation of its own rather than some extension of his novels or films. Of paramount importance is the recognition that Toussaint’s website is intricately woven into its creative environment. Specifically, it draws inspiration from the unique facets of digital functionality. In other words, his website showcases the substantial impact of the “material” aspects within the creative environment on his work, or it highlights instead the immaterial dimension of the website as a distinctive creation.

Through the looking-glass of Marie: an approach to reading mobility

Jean-Philippe Toussaint is a Belgian-born writer, photographer, filmmaker, and plastic artist. He became a promising writer after publishing his first novel *La Salle de Bain* (The Bathroom) with the influential French publishing house (Les Éditions de Minuit) in 1985. He has published over 20 books, most of which are novels. His books have been translated into more than 30 languages. Among his works, the most well-known may be the cycle of Marie. This tetralogy includes *Making Love* (*Faire l'amour*, 2002), *Running Away* (*Fuir*, 2005), *The Truth about Marie* (*La Vérité sur Marie*, 2009) and *Naked* (*Nue*, 2013). In 2017, the four novels were edited into one thick volume entitled *M.M.M.M.*

Two main characters, a fashion designer named Marie and one unnamed narrator, spend almost their time breaking up or making up with each other in the four novels. Indeed, it is another ordinary love story, but the most enchanting aspect of Toussaint's narrative technique resides in how he blurs the temporality between events. The events described in the story do not always follow the chronological order. Some significant events during the breakup evoke earlier corresponding moments. His narratives are so delicately elaborated that a certain circularity of the story is thus created. Toussaint himself defines the circular structure of Marie's cycle as a "tetrahedron":

[L]e cycle de Marie est constitué de quatre romans autonomes, qui peuvent être lus dans n'importe quel ordre. Le cycle a une structure géométrique qu'on pourrait dire de tétraèdre. On peut entrer par n'importe quel côté, cela fonctionne toujours : quel que soit l'endroit par lequel on accède à l'ensemble, il y aura toujours des échos et des résonances avec les trois autres livres du cycle. (Marie's cycle consists of four stand-alone novels that can be read in any order. The cycle has a geometric structure that could be described as a tetrahedron. You can enter from any side, and it always works: no matter where you access the whole set, there will always be echoes and resonances with the other three books in the cycle).¹

Laurent Demoulin, a prominent specialist in Toussaint's work, meticulously examines the mobility effect within Marie's cycle.² He contends that Marie's cycle distinguishes itself through its narrative fluidity, granting readers genuine

¹ J.-P. Toussaint, "La mayonnaise et la genèse: interview conducted by Laurent Demoulin in Villers-les-Corbières on August 1st, 2014", *NRF* 2014, no. 610, November, p. 116, <http://www.jptoussaint.com/documents/6/63/ENRF.pdf>. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are those of the author of the present article.

² L. Demoulin, "La fragmentation partielle de *M.M.M.M.*", *Roman 20-50* 2021/3, no. 72, pp. 11–25.

autonomy. On the one hand, specific narrative techniques allow for diverse reading orders, striking a delicate balance between fragmentation and continuity. On the other hand, the reader's mobility is further bolstered by the material context of the successive publications of the four novels. Initially published individually between 2002 and 2013 by Minuit, each novel later appeared in pocket format from 2009 to 2017. The remarkable re-edition of the entire cycle as a single volume occurred in 2017.

Laurent Demoulin asserts that Toussaint's poetic intent evolves significantly from one publication to the next. The pocket edition of each volume features photographs taken by Toussaint himself, as indicated by the credits on the back cover. Additionally, every novel is accompanied by an extensive authorial paratext absent in the initial edition. Demoulin acknowledges the complex and contradictory roles played by these additional texts but remains convinced that they enhance the autonomy of each volume and contribute to the overall mobility of Marie's cycle. Notably, the cover photograph of the pocket edition extends the circularity to Jean-Philippe Toussaint's entire body of work, particularly its visual aspects.³

In 2017, the re-edition of the four novels into a single volume holds significant literary importance. This unique novel bears a new title, *M.M.M.M.*, and features a global epigraph that encompasses the entire cycle. Although the epigraph is not new to Marie's cycle, it has been relocated from the fourth volume, *Naked*, to encompass the entire tetralogy: "*Dire d'elle ce qui jamais ne fut dit d'aucune*" (Say about her what has never been said by anyone). The prominence of the female protagonist, Marie, is further underscored by another peritextual element. While the cover title of four Ms may initially appear enigmatic, the half-title page reveals that these initials correspond to Marie's full name: "MARIE MADELEINE MARGUERITE DE MONTALTE".⁴ These editorial variations collectively shift the focus, leading Laurent Demoulin to conclude that the tetralogy centers on the heroine, Marie, at the expense of the narrator, who previously held the central role in Toussaint's earlier novels.

³ The critic examines the noticeable case of *Naked*, the fourth volume of Marie's cycle. In this case, the narrator presents in the opening of *Naked* the experimental dress, "*la robe en miel*" (the honey dress), created by Marie, the fashion designer. Later on, the filming of the specific film, *The Honey Dress*, resulted in a book published in the same year as the single-volume edition of the tetralogy: *Made in China* (2017). Thus, the pocket edition maintains an artistic circularity, starting from a scene in the novel (*Naked's* prologue) and leading to a second non-fiction book (*Made in China*), passing through the short film (*The Honey Dress*) and the cover photo of the pocket edition. *Ibidem*, p. 16.

⁴ "*Marie s'appelait de Montalte, Marie de Montalte, Marie Madeleine Marguerite de Montalte (elle aurait pu signer ses collections comme ça, M.M.M.M., en hommage sibyllin à la Maison du docteur Angus Killiecrankie.*" (Marie was called de Montalte, Marie de Montalte, Marie Madeleine Marguerite de Montalte (she could have signed her collections like that, M.M.M.M., as a cryptic homage to the House of Dr. Angus Killiecrankie). J.-P. Toussaint, *M.M.M.M.*, Paris 2017, p. 53.

However, the thick edition's apparent permanence may limit the accessibility of other versions of the tetralogy, which are published as separate volumes. Laurent Demoulin, on the other hand, suggests that the combined edition doesn't replace existing formats; instead, it enhances readers' freedom. Ultimately, readers must determine whether this consolidated version is definitive. Notably, Toussaint has also released Marie's cycle in various formats beyond the three discussed editions. These multiple editions emphasize each volume's autonomy.⁵ Our hypothesis posits that Toussaint intentionally diversifies the physical manifestations of Marie's cycle to enhance reader mobility – a goal already facilitated by his textual framework. Thus, Marie's cycle exemplifies Toussaint's meticulous attention to material and textual forms, prioritizing reader engagement. Similar traits can be observed in the structure and functionality of his website.

The website as a singular exploration of digital forms

Toussaint inaugurated his website in November 2009, a relatively late addition to his literary trajectory. By that time, he had already published the third volume of Marie's cycle (entitled *The Truth about Marie*). His website serves as a comprehensive repository, encompassing not only his entire published oeuvre (including translated works) but also an extensive critical bibliography featuring dissertations and academic theses. Additionally, the site offers access to unpublished writings by Toussaint and a substantial segment of the genetic dossier of select works, notably focusing on the tetralogy of Marie and his fourth novel, *La Réticence*. Furthermore, visual images and videos showcasing his artistic endeavors enrich the online platform.

Before we examine the specificities of Jean-Philippe Toussaint's website, it is pertinent to revisit the profound transformations and disintermediations instigated by digital technologies within the publishing communication circuit. Building upon Robert Darnton's influential model of the book's communication circuit in 18th century France, Padmini Ray Murray and Claire

⁵ According to Laurent Demoulin, there is another edition (only for *Running Away* and *The Truth about Marie*), contemporaneous with the original, published by France Loisirs under the label "Le Grand Livre du Mois" (The Big Book of the Month). The book cover is monochrome, without mentioning the original publishing house (Les Éditions de Minuit). Secondly, there are non-commercial editions, numbered, with uncut pages, produced by Minuit in a slightly larger format than the regular edition. Moreover, all four novels exist in digital versions. Three of them (except for *Running Away*) even exist in audio format with Toussaint's voice, including the reading of several excerpts from *Making Love* (Paris, Des femmes, 2006) and the entire novel *The Truth about Marie* (Audiolib, 2010) and *Naked* (Audiolib, 2014). Finally, the thorough reading of the first novel, *Making Love*, also led to a film co-featuring Pascal Auger and Toussaint (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AoLuEuQl8DE>). L. Demoulin, "La fragmentation partielle de *M.M.M.M.*", note 9, p. 13.

Squires have put forth an analytical framework for understanding 21st-century publishing.⁶ They argue that the conventional value chain, which delineates the path of intellectual property from author to reader and encompasses publishing activities such as editorial, marketing, and design under the aegis of a single publisher, is experiencing disruption and disintermediation at every juncture. Digital technologies not only augment the role of the ‘author-promoter,’ a phenomenon that emerged towards the close of the 20th century, but also reimagine the role of readers, particularly as active and networked reviewers, within the communication circuit. Social media platforms have facilitated direct and unprecedented engagement between authors and readers, enabled by authors’ online pages and feeds and the ensuing interactions and dialogues.

In an era where writers and artists commonly maintain personal websites or blogs, Toussaint poses a thought-provoking question: “*Comment créer des formes nouvelles spécifiques à Internet?*” (How can we forge novel digital forms unique to the Internet?) Far beyond mere book promotion, his commitment lies in ensuring that every initiative on his website serves as catalysts for innovative forms.⁷ Toussaint himself has emphasized the uniqueness of his endeavor on multiple occasions. Enthralled by the potential of the internet, Toussaint aims to explore forms that are uniquely achievable through this medium. To him, the personal website represents a creation in its own right, orbiting a writer’s corpus (“*une création à part entière autour du corpus d’un écrivain*”) and a fusion of information technology with conceptual, graphic, and artistic creation (“*une création informatique, conceptuelle, graphique et artistique*”).⁸

To craft a form tailored to the internet, Toussaint deliberately abstained from featuring his literary creations on the website. He contends that writing, while essential to his art, does not inherently align with the digital medium. Furthermore, he eschews instant interactivity, believing that such interactions often devolve into superficial communication, lacking productivity in terms of form.⁹ As previously noted, the simultaneous interaction between authors and readers constitutes a key characteristic of the digital publishing communication circuit. However, an intriguing question arises: what is left once literary creations are excluded? Are we left with a website primarily comprising raw information, akin to a database?

⁶ P.R. Murray, C. Squires, “The digital publishing communications circuit”, *Book 2.0* 2013, vol. 3, iss. 1, June, pp. 3–23.

⁷ J.-P. Toussaint, “*La Première chose que je n’ai pas voulu faire, c’est écrire* [The first thing I didn’t want to do was to write]: interview conducted by Catherine De Poortere”, *Pointculture*, published on line on December 19th, 2017, <https://www.pointculture.be/article/focus/la-premiere-chose-que-je-nai-pas-voulu-faire-cest-ecrire/>.

⁸ J.-P. Toussaint, “Mettre en ligne ses brouillons”, *Littérature* 2015, vol. 178, no. 2, p. 120. This article is available on line: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-litterature-2015-2-page-117.htm>; J.-P. Toussaint, “*La mayonnaise et la genèse...*”, p. 123.

⁹ J.-P. Toussaint, “Mettre en ligne ses brouillons”, pp. 117–118.

Jean-Philippe Toussaint's website is conceived as more than a mere online presence; it represents a space of creative endeavor. In order to transform the website into "*un lieu de création*" (a place of creation), there exists a necessity to engage in "*une recherche de la forme spécifique à Internet*" (an exploration of forms unique to the internet).¹⁰ In essence, the website is considered a formal creation endowed with what he terms "fictional (romanesque) energy" – an invisible force that animates his work and manifests as a desire for mobility within the digital realm.

Toussaint's exploration of "fictional (romanesque) energy" emerged during a conversation with his Chinese editor, Chen Tong (陳侗), while revisiting the second volume of Marie's cycle, titled *Running Away (Fuir)*. The transcription of the dialogue has been added to its pocket edition in 2009. Within this discourse, Toussaint introduced the concept of "fictional (romanesque) energy" to redefine his creative focus. Previously, humor held primacy in his novels, serving as a critical aesthetic criterion to assess the success of a written passage. However, with the advent of *Running Away*, this priority underwent a profound transformation. The new focal point in his writing has been characterized as "fictional (romanesque) energy." This energy transcends narrative plotlines and thematic content, denoting an intangible, fervent quality that occasionally emanates from the seemingly static lines of a literary work.¹¹

In interviews, Toussaint outlined several textual devices he conceived to engender the effects of mobility within his literary works.¹² Firstly, the fictional (romanesque) energy comes from the dynamic movement described in his novels. In both *Running Away* and *The Truth about Marie*, the narrative unfolds through the traversal of various modes of transportation, encompassing planes, trains, automobiles, ferries, motorcycles, and so forth. Additionally, Toussaint orchestrates a scene at Narita airport in *The Truth about Marie* where a distressed horse, consumed by panic, takes flight under cover of night, galloping across the airport runways. Here, Toussaint employs rapid sentence rhythms to mirror the fleeing horse's urgency.¹³ On the other hand, he generates a ten-

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 120.

¹¹ "*La priorité, pour Fuir, est très différente, c'est ce que j'appellerais l'énergie romanesque, ce quelque chose d'invisible, de brûlant et quasiment électrique, qui surgit parfois des lignes immobiles d'un livre*" (The priority, for *Fuir*, is very different, it is what I would call *fictional (romanesque) energy*, this something invisible, burning and almost electric, which sometimes emerges from the static lines of a book). J.-P. Toussaint, "*Ecrire, c'est fuir* (a conversation in Canton between Chen Tong and Jean-Philippe Toussaint, March 30 and 31, 2009)", in: idem, *Fuir*, Paris 2009, p. 183.

¹² J.-P. Toussaint, "*Jean-Philippe Toussaint: éloge de l'amour*: interview conducted by Minh Tran Huy", *Madame Figaro*, published on line on October 5th, 2013, <https://madame.lefigaro.fr/art-de-vivre/jean-philippe-toussaint-eloge-de-lamour-051013-599342>.

¹³ The horse scene is described as followed: "*Le pur-sang, s'était échappé, il s'était enfui dans la nuit, d'abord freiné, arrêté, dans son élan, empêtré par un des Japonais [...] Zabir fuyait au galop dans la nuit, libre et furieux, déjà loin et à peine visible. [...] Il n'y*

sion between fiction and reality by interjecting passages depicting physically implausible occurrences into otherwise realistic settings, such as “Zahir” the horse vomiting within an airplane or the perplexing “honey dress” (a dress composed of honey) designed by Marie.¹⁴ Following this line of inquiry, we endeavor to elucidate how Toussaint’s website might be construed as a formal creation, eliciting effects of mobility or “fictional (romanesque) energy,” in his parlance.

The structure and functioning of the site

The current state of Jean-Philippe Toussaint’s website represents a dynamic reimagining and recontextualization of his existing oeuvre. The endeavor undertaken aims to engender digital forms derived from the preexisting material of his works, encompassing both verbal and non-verbal modalities. While the website remains continuously updated, it is foreseeable that, over time, Toussaint will directly harness the digital medium for novel creative ventures.

The website’s presentation is fundamentally rooted in the concept of an exhibition, as articulated by Toussaint himself during a public discourse introducing the site. Two fundamental principles govern the organization of this virtual exhibition: horizontality and circularity.

Upon entering the website’s main page, visitors encounter a world map adorned with numerous cities, many of which connect significantly to Toussaint’s literary output. By selecting a specific city – let us consider the example of Canton, China – the user is promptly transported to the Mandarin section of Toussaint’s work.¹⁵ Here, Mandarin translations of his novels are prominently displayed, accompanied by a succinct overview of Toussaint’s literary contributions in Mandarin. The Mandarin section further includes glimpses into exhibitions, a curated collection of photographs, video recordings from film shoots, and relevant press articles. Further navigation within the Mandarin section may entail selecting the Mandarin translation of *The Truth about Marie* (瑪麗的真相), which in turn guides visitors to an individual page

avait plus trace de Zahir sur le parking, il s'était dissous dans la nuit, il s'était évaporé, il s'était fondu, noir sur noir, dans les ténébres.” (The thoroughbred had escaped; it fled into the night, initially slowed, halted, in its momentum, entangled by one of the Japanese men. [...] Zahir galloped away through the night, unbridled and furious, already distant and barely visible. [...] There was no longer any trace of Zahir in the parking lot; he had dissolved into the night, evaporated, melted away, black against black, within the shadows), J.-P. Toussaint, *M.M.M.M.*, pp. 435–447.

¹⁴ For the magical horse scene, see J.-P. Toussaint, *M.M.M.M.*, pp. 467–469; as to Marie’s unconventional honey dress, see the prologue of the fourth volume, *M.M.M.M.*, pp. 539–553.

¹⁵ <http://www.jptoussaint.com/chine.html>

dedicated exclusively to this novel. Within this page, multiple sections unfold, some housing a genetic dossier related to the work.¹⁶

We will study the website's manuscript component in subsequent discussions. For now, our emphasis remains on the captivating circular dynamics that underpin this digital exhibition. Each element within the website is hyperlinked, facilitating seamless navigation to other pages or items. This infinite circularity is pivotal in shaping the website's overall mobility. While hyperlinks are undoubtedly a defining feature of all websites, Toussaint demonstrates a deliberate commitment to maximizing their referential potential. Consequently, Toussaint opts to contribute minimal original content to the website and to multiply referential interplay between preexisting artistic materials. However, the crux of this circular strategy appears to reside within another facet of website architecture – the website's horizontal structure.

Viewing each hyperlink as a fragment, the sequencing of these fragments emerges as a paramount concern. It is not an overstatement to assert that a substantial segment of contemporary French literature subscribes to the aesthetics of fragmentation, a characteristic evident in Toussaint's oeuvre, as articulated by Laurent Demoulin's analyses.¹⁷ Roland Barthes, a writer deeply engaged with fragmentary forms, cautions that mere fragments do not inherently resist semantic totality; instead, the arrangement of fragments is of utmost importance. The goal is establishing a deliberately disorienting sequence, ensuring semantic mobility within the work. Barthes's deliberate choice of an alphabetic order for fragments in several texts aligns with this principle.¹⁸

Returning to Jean-Philippe Toussaint's website, we delve into its distinctive horizontal architecture, which fosters intricate connections among diverse hyperlinks. Toussaint deliberately emphasizes this lateral orientation, diverging from the predominant vertical structure characterizing most websites.¹⁹ Our exploration commences at the main page, where the user's virtual itinerary branches out upon encountering the first city entrance. At the top of the website, an array of 13 icons beckons, each signifying a distinct project or display. These icons stand side by side, devoid of hierarchical arrangement. Notably, the "home" icon redirects users to a central "Meta Site" page.²⁰ Here, amidst a constellation of neon signs – comprising Chinese and French titles from

¹⁶ <http://www.jptoussaint.com/la-verite-sur-marie.html>

¹⁷ L. Demoulin, "La fragmentation partielle de *M.M.M.M.*", pp. 11–25.

¹⁸ Roland Barthes adopts the alphabetic order to organize the writing fragments in numerous texts, for example, *Le Plaisir du texte, Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes, Fragments d'un discours amoureux, Comment vivre ensemble, Le Neutre*. As for his metadiscourse concerning the fragment and its order, see, for example, R. Barthes, "Les sorties du texte", in: idem, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. IV, Paris 2002, pp. 366–376; "Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes", in: idem, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. IV, pp. 575–771.

¹⁹ J.-P. Toussaint, "*La mayonnaise et la genèse...*", pp. 114–125.

²⁰ <http://www.jptoussaint.com/maison.html>

Toussaint's novels – the term “meta site” occupies an undeniable focal point. Each neon sign automatically links to another page, yet the horizontal interconnections impose no predetermined reading order. Conversely, the term “meta site” occupies a prominent central position on this page. Clicking on this term leads to another page housing a concise definition of the prefix “meta,” accompanied by an introductory video and various interview links, presented in both audio and transcription formats.²¹

The integration of metadiscourse within the website warrants examination. Numerous pages or projects feature interview links where Toussaint provides commentary on his works. On the “home” page of the “Meta Site,” even the creation process of the website is showcased. However, as Franz Johansson astutely observes in his study, while the embedded hyperlinks to metadiscourse do play a role on the website, this role is narrowly circumscribed and, to some extent, peripheral (*“ce rôle est étroitement circonscrit et, dans une certaine mesure, périphérique”*). While these links contribute to the website's multifaceted tapestry, they do not prominently feature in the initial presentation or preamble page.²² In essence, we find that the significance of these explanatory discourses is largely diminished due to their structural marginalization on the website.

An intriguing exception emerges within Jean-Philippe Toussaint's website – the “meta site” page – occupying a central position on the “home” page. We contend that this strategic placement imbues the “meta site” with a pivotal role, fostering reflexivity and self-awareness within the digital landscape. Notably, this choice resonates with the author's poetic intention, as encapsulated in the following definition:

Méta est un préfixe qui provient du grec μετά (après, au-delà de). Il exprime le fait d'aller au-delà, à côté de, entre ou avec. Méta est souvent utilisé dans le vocabulaire scientifique pour indiquer l'auto-référence et la réflexivité (métalivre : un livre à propos d'un livre). (The prefix 'meta' originates from the Greek word μετά (meaning 'after' or 'beyond'). It conveys the idea of going beyond, alongside, between, or with. In scientific vocabulary, 'meta' often denotes self-reference and reflexivity (e.g., 'metabook': a book about another book).²³

The “Meta Site” home page transcends mere exposition; it delves into the behind-the-scenes “making-of” process – an act of self-reflection that underscores the website's dynamic evolution. Here, the succinct definition of the

²¹ <http://www.jptoussaint.com/meta-site.html>

²² F. Johansson, “Le site jptoussaint.com: création informatique et discours génétique”, *L'entre-deux* 2021, no. 9, juin: Proceedings of the international conference “Jean-Philippe Toussaint en coulisses: making of, expérimentations, décalages” (Jean-Philippe Toussaint behind the scenes: making of, experimentations, shifts), p. 5, <https://lentre-deux.com/index.php?b=166>.

²³ <http://www.jptoussaint.com/meta-site.html>

prefix “meta” aligns harmoniously with Toussaint’s aspiration for an ever-evolving work in progress.

In summary, it is evident that a horizontal structure predominates among the principal projects, represented by icons on the top of the website’s main page. The hierarchy between different sections on the secondary referral page appears embodied in their positioning, such as the highlighted prominence afforded to the “meta site.” Conversely, the metadiscourse assumes a marginalized status due to its placement on the page, situated far beyond the manuscripts and translations of a novel.

Highlighting the creative process and creative environment

Toussaint’s website stands apart from others due to several distinctive features. Foremost among these is its extensive collection of accessible manuscripts. Notably, the availability of these drafts varies across different works. While the novels predating Marie’s cycle offer only a limited number of genesis documents, a notable exception exists for *La Réticence* (1991). As for the renowned love tetralogy, Toussaint does not provide complete drafts. Nevertheless, the curated selection of Marie’s cycle drafts constitutes a rich genetic dossier meticulously prepared by the author.

Toussaint has emphasized that his transition to digital writing occurred slightly before Marie’s cycle, following more than two decades of typewriter use (specifically, after *La Télévision* in 1997). Contrary to the prevailing notion that the advent of computers erodes traces of writers’ work, Toussaint contends that digital technology multiplies these traces. His assertion underscores the role of digital platforms in simplifying archival preservation, thereby saving both time and storage space.²⁴

Beyond accessibility, the website reveals a deliberate auctorial intent in curating and presenting drafts related to Marie’s series. Franz Johansson thus coined the term or quasi-genre of “the auctorial avant-texte” to categorize Toussaint’s

²⁴ “*Je m’inscris donc en faux contre l’idée généralement répandue qui voudrait que, depuis l’avènement de l’ordinateur, nous serions en train de perdre les traces du travail des écrivains. Au contraire, pour ce qui me concerne, cela aurait plutôt tendance à les multiplier. Je dirais même que l’arrivée du numérique simplifie la conservation des archives, en faisant gagner du temps pour les établir et de l’espace pour les stocker*” (I strongly disagree with the commonly held notion that, since the advent of computers, we are losing the traces of writers’ work. On the contrary, in my view, digital technology tends to multiply these traces. I would even argue that the arrival of the digital era simplifies archival preservation, saving time in their establishment and space in their storage). J.-P. Toussaint, “*La mayonnaise et la genèse...*”, pp. 117–118.

initiative, akin to the approach adopted by the French poet Francis Ponge, who meticulously published the genetic dossier of two of his poems.²⁵

Specifically, three to four sections are dedicated to each book of Marie's cycle. The initial section, titled "États du manuscrit" (States of the Manuscript), delineates the intermediary stages of the book's composition process (comprising three to eight such stages). Subsequent sections encompass "Plans, Variants, Débris" and specifically "Brouillons, Manuscrits" (Drafts, Manuscripts), featuring scanned pages displaying handwritten annotations, revisions, and copious corrections. For *Running Away* and *The Truth about Marie*, an additional section details "Correction of copies" or supplementary notes. The curated drafts from Marie's cycle, systematically arranged, constitute a distinctive genetic dossier that embodies the author's conception of the work in progress or hints at alternate potentialities within his oeuvre.

In stark contrast, Toussaint's fourth novel, *La Réticence*, provides unfettered access to its genetic dossier.²⁶ By clicking on the main icon – a stylized cat – we enter the expansive project dedicated exclusively to this novel. Here, more than 2500 typewritten pages of drafts unfold, accompanied by ancillary documents related to its publication. Toussaint entrusted his original typescript to Brigitte Ferrato-Combe, a professor at the University of Grenoble. Under her guidance, the drafts underwent digitization and meticulous transcription. The resulting platform, aptly named the "Projet Réticence," comprises interdependent components that seamlessly blend research and creative expression. Beyond mere digitization, the project culminated in an exhibition, an evocative sound composition, and a succinct yet impactful short film – all inspired by the rich textual heritage of *La Réticence*. While Toussaint exercises complete auctorial control over the drafts of Marie's cycle, the presentation of *La Réticence's* genetic dossier diverges significantly. Here, the control is handed over to others – specifically, to the collaborative endeavors of scholars, students, and creators. The distinct presentation of these two genetic ensembles once again underscores Toussaint's scrupulous consideration of diverse forms.²⁷

²⁵ F. Johansson, *The Auctorial Avant-Texte: From Print to Digital Space*, Genesis Taipei 2023 Conference, 28–29.09.2023. As for work discussed of the poet, see F. Ponge, *La Fabrique du pré* (1971), *Les sentiers de la création* (1971), *Comment une figure de parole et pourquoi* (1977).

²⁶ <http://www.jptoussaint.com/projet-reticence.html>

²⁷ The alteration in presentation may imply the novel's distinctive position within Jean-Philippe Toussaint's body of work. Indeed, Toussaint has candidly recounted the arduous experience of writing *La Réticence*, which he considers to be his sole significant creative impasse. Refer to J.-P. Toussaint, *L'Urgence et la patience*, Paris 2015, pp. 21–24. During the concluding discussion following a four-day international conference dedicated to Toussaint's oeuvre, titled "Lire, voir, penser l'oeuvre de Jean-Philippe Toussaint," the author also acknowledged that this particular book eludes him the most. While he typically expresses opinions about all the books he has authored, *La Réticence* leaves him somewhat perplexed. See J.-M. Devésá (ed.), *Lire, voir, penser l'oeuvre de Jean-Philippe Toussaint*, Bruxelles 2020, p. 366.

As elucidated earlier, the website's architecture reflects a deliberate hierarchy on pages dedicated to Toussaint's novels, which consistently prioritize manuscripts. Within these pages, the manuscripts of Marie's cycle are further classified into three or four subdivisions. Following the manuscripts, we encounter translations of the novel into various languages. Finally, a curated selection of press articles and related interview hyperlinks – available in verbal transcriptions, audio recordings, or videos – rounds out the contextual landscape. In the case of *La Réticence*, the exhibition of its complete genetic dossier is incarnated on the cat icon, in parallel with other artistic projects represented by other icons on the main page. Franz Johansson aptly characterizes Toussaint's website as developing a discourse with genetic content. However, this discourse transcends mere textual representation; it resides less in words or texts, and more in the very structure of the website itself.²⁸ The digital medium becomes a canvas for exploring the intricate layers of literary creation, inviting readers to engage with the author's writing process beyond the printed page.

Interrogated about the foundational principles of his website, Toussaint succinctly encapsulated them as follows: Genesis for the content, mayonnaise for the method (“*La genèse pour le contenu, la mayonnaise pour la méthode*”²⁹). By granting free access to all of his drafts on the website, he provides insight into the genesis of his books. This deliberate choice undoubtedly shifts the focus from the achieved work to its creative process.

Indeed, in numerous interviews, Toussaint has openly expressed his fascination with the behind-the-scenes aspects of creation. However, what is even more noteworthy is that several of his works explicitly explore the theme of the creative process itself. For instance, his early feature film, *La Patinoire* (The Ice Rink, 1998), already delved into the filmmaking process. Additionally, he dedicated an entire section of his artist's book, *La Main et le Regard* (The Hand and the Gaze), to the concept of ‘coulisses’ (Backstage). This book accompanied Toussaint's exhibition at the Louvre in the spring of 2012, aiming to represent the act of reading through various visual media. Similarly, his collection of essays, *L'Urgence et la patience* (Urgency and Patience), published in 2012, invites readers into his literary workshop – exploring the triggering books, encounters with publishers, interactions with other authors (including Samuel Beckett), and the emotional landscape of daily writing. Furthermore, his novel *Made in China*, published in 2017, revolves around the filming of a short film titled *Honey Dress*, directly inspired by a sequence from his previous novel, *Naked* (the final volume of Marie's cycle).

Toussaint does not perceive the revelation of backstage processes as demystifying the ineffable mystery of creation; rather, it serves to demystify

²⁸ F. Johansson, “Le site jptoussaint.com: création informatique et discours génétique”, p. 3.

²⁹ J.-P. Toussaint, “*La mayonnaise et la genèse...*”, p. 117.

without desacralizing.³⁰ In addition to textual genesis, three significant projects are dedicated to his plastic (visual) creations: the “Livre/Louvre” exhibition in 2012 and the “Madd” exhibition in 2019 (held at The Museum of Decorative Arts and Design), and the “MMMM” spectacle in 2017. A thematic thread runs through these endeavors: the theme of ‘making-of.’

Examining each artistic project on his website reveals this thematic coherence. On the Livre/Louvre page, from the first section aptly titled “The Making of,” viewers gain access to behind-the-scenes videos capturing the exhibition’s creation process.³¹ Similarly, Madd’s page juxtaposes two videos: the upper one, silent, delves into the genesis of the exhibition title, while the lower one explores the genesis of the broader exhibition project.³² The MMMM project, on the other hand, adapts Toussaint’s romanesque cycle about Marie.³³ This hybrid production integrates literature, music, cinema, and theater. Notably, the MMMM page includes an audio recording of Toussaint’s interpretation and a concise video detailing the adaptation project’s making-of process.

Toussaint’s website functions as an exhibition space, meticulously reorganizing existing materials from his work. The spatial layout and thematic emphasis converge on the overarching theme of creation. The digital format proves essential, given the vast quantity of archives associated with backstage processes – whether textual, visual, or audio. Jean-Philippe Toussaint’s website thus stands as a unique creation, shaped by the very archives that illuminate the intricate art of “making of”.

In addition to his meticulous focus on the creative “public” milieu, which encompasses the various editions of Marie’s cycle and unique projects presented on his website in response to its digital nature, Jean-Philippe Toussaint demonstrates a parallel concern for the private physical spaces where writing unfolds. In a recent essay, he expounds on the significance of the “bureau” (which encompasses both desk and home office in French) as a sacred space. Toussaint acknowledges that it is uncommon for writers to attach such importance to the material aspects of their craft.³⁴

His dedication to this thematic exploration is evident in his 2005 book, *Mes bureaux. Luoghi dove scrivo* (translated as *My Bureaux: Places Where I Write*).

³⁰ “*J’aime que ce soit ouvert, un peu comme les cuisines japonaises. Pour autant, je ne pense pas qu’en montrant les coulisses, je dévoile le mystère de la création, qui de toute façon demeure indicible. Ça démythifie sans désacraliser*” (I like it to be open, somewhat like Japanese kitchens. However, I don’t think that by revealing the backstage, I unveil the mystery of creation, which remains ineffable anyway. It demystifies without desacralizing). Refer to “Toussaint, l’ouverture: interview conducted by Élisabeth Philippe on March 7th, 2012”, *Les Inrockuptibles*, <http://www.jptoussaint.com/documents/f/f8/Urgence-presse.pdf>.

³¹ <http://www.jptoussaint.com/livre-louvre.html>

³² <http://www.jptoussaint.com/madd.html>

³³ <http://www.jptoussaint.com/m-m-m-m.html>

³⁴ J.-P. Toussaint, *C’est vous l’écrivain*, Paris 2022, pp. 12–13.

The book attentively describes every locale where the author has engaged in writing. It commences with a succinct announcement that the author is embarking on an inventory of these writing spaces, and concludes with an exhaustive compilation of every location that has borne witness to his creative endeavors throughout his lifetime. Furthermore, despite the standardization of digital devices, Toussaint even carefully photographs and sketches his successive computers, recognizing in them a silent testimony to the creative act – an enduring imprint.³⁵ It is unsurprising that Toussaint, as an author captivated by the intricacies of the creative process, has accorded significant significance to both the material and immaterial dimensions of creation.

Beyond the tangible realm, Toussaint's website employs formal devices designed to foster the perpetuation of reading mobility – an effect already evoked by his textual framework. These mechanisms encompass the horizontal and circular operational structure of the website, the thematic emphasis placed on the creative process, the diverse linguistic landscape, and the amalgamation of genres and media. Each instance of user engagement engenders a unique and unpredictable outcome, whether we consider the artistic creations inspired by his digital work – such as works influenced by the genetic dossier of *La Réticence*, or the intriguing “Borges project” of writing.³⁶ Echoing the ethos of his character Marie at the outset of *The Naked*, Toussaint wholeheartedly embraces the serendipitous potentiality engendered by online users³⁷.

“*La forme coûte cher*” (The form is costly), says Paul Valéry. With his website, Jean-Philippe Toussaint seeks to uncover novel forms that resonate uniquely within the digital realm – an endeavor that aligns with his abiding concern with form:

³⁵ J.-P. Toussaint, *Mes bureaux. Luoghi dove scrivo*, transl. into Italian by R. Ferrucci, Venice 2005. Additionally, this book occupies an exceptional status. It exists solely in Italian, conspicuously absent from Toussaint's oeuvre within the Minuit publishing house and the French page dedicated to his work on the website. Instead, it finds its unique place in the Italian section of his website. For further insights, refer to A. Albright, “Inside the writer's studio: Jean-Philippe Toussaint's *Mes bureaux: Luoghi dove scrivo*”, *Romance Notes*, January 2008, <http://www.jptoussaint.com/documents/ff/ff/Inside.pdf>.

³⁶ <http://www.jptoussaint.com/borges-projet.html>

³⁷ “*Car, refusant de se laisser vaincre par la réalité, Marie avait assumé le hasard et elle avait revendiqué l'image, au point de jeter un doute dans l'esprit des spectateurs, comme si la scène entière qu'ils découvriraient sous leurs yeux avait été préméditée par Marie. Mais peu importe que la scène ait été préméditée ou non, l'image avait surgi, dans la réalité ou dans l'imagination de Marie, et elle se l'était appropriée : en se présentant sur scène, elle avait signé le tableau, elle avait apposé sa signature sur la vie même, ses accidents, ses hasards et ses imperfections*” (Refusing to be defeated by reality, Marie embraced chance and claimed the image, casting doubt in the minds of spectators. It was as if the entire scene unfolding before their eyes had been premeditated by Marie. Yet, whether the scene was planned or not, the image emerged – whether in reality or within Marie's imagination – and she made it her own. Stepping onto the stage, she signed the tableau, leaving her mark on life itself, with all its accidents, chances, and imperfections.). J.-P. Toussaint, *MMMM*, p. 551.

Toute ma recherche s'inscrit dans une réflexion sur la forme. Comment, après le Nouveau Roman, après de très grands auteurs comme Proust ou Faulkner, peut-on proposer une oeuvre en adéquation complète avec l'époque et qui porte une attention de chaque instant à la forme ? (My entire research is rooted in a contemplation of form. How, after the Nouveau Roman movement and following the works of towering authors like Proust or Faulkner, can one propose a work that resonates harmoniously with the contemporary era, while maintaining an unwavering commitment to form?)³⁸

Toussaint has transformed his website into a distinctive creation based on the archives. Jean-Philippe Toussaint's website serves as a testament to his artistic vision – one that places paramount importance on the creative process and the creative environment in which it unfolds, whether material or immaterial.

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³⁸ J.-P. Toussaint, "Toussaint: dans les coulisses de son travail d'écriture: interview conducted by Elisabeth Philippe on March 11th, 2012", *Les Inrockuptibles*, <https://www.lesinrocks.com/livres/toussaint-dans-les-coulisses-de-son-travail-decrivain-28214-11-03-2012/>.

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