

Dorota Czerkies
Instytut Filologii Romańskiej
Wydział Filologiczny
Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie

Tytuł rozprawy doktorskiej: **La poétique du silence et ses variantes dans la prose de Jean-Philippe Toussaint**

Tytuł w języku angielskim: **The poetics of silence and its variants in the prose by Jean-Philippe Toussaint**

Promotor : prof. dr hab. Wacław Rapak

Promotor pomocniczy : dr Karolina Czerska

Summary

The submitted doctoral dissertation concerns the different variants of poetics of silence in the prose by the contemporary Belgian writer, photographer and film-maker Jean-Philippe Toussaint (born 1957). Our thesis is aimed at proposing an analysis of the modalities of this poetics in the novels and the short prose written by Toussaint in the different periods of his activity which started at the turn of the 70s and 80s. The corpus is composed of twenty literary texts by Toussaint. The author discusses thirteen novels (including all the volumes of the tetralogy *M.M.M.M.* and *Échecs* which was written before the Toussaint's editorial debut in 1985), two intermedial texts (term coined by Andrzej Hejmej), two chosen micro-stories (term by Andreas Gelz) and three books of micro-stories. Our methodological approach draws especially on the tools of the hermeneutics of silence proposed by Christian Nibbrig or Bronisław Dąg, the phenomenology of literary work (Roman Ingarden, Stefania Skwarczyńska), the literary anthropology and the poetics of experience (Ryszard Nycz). The proposed choice of the texts and interpretative perspective allow the author of the thesis to implement an maximalist programme of the research on the manifestations of silence which Jolanta Rokoszowa calls for in her linguistic reflections.

The dissertation consists of an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. The preliminary remarks, apart from the articulation of our assumptions and the aims of the study, are concentrated on the literary creation by Jean-Philippe Toussaint as an integral part of the postmodern tendencies in the contemporary francophone literature. The texts of this author illustrate the terms of literature of exhaustion and literature of replenishment introduced by John Barth. The Toussaint's prose exposes the phenomenon of the return to the category of narrative (fr. *récit*) and the experiences of the contemporary subject. The poetics of silence analysed in this thesis, which the author defines as a system of the literary devices that enables the significant places of indeterminacy (Ingarden, Skwarczyńska) to become apparent in the text, constitutes an example of what Aron Kibédi Varga calls renarrativisation. Besides the valorisation of the narrative act, irony and metatextuality, this poetics is a factor of literary renarrativisation in the time of liquid modernity. In the first chapter, meanwhile, the postmodern prose by Jean-Philippe Toussaint is interpreted as hybrid and minimalist. The Toussaint's creation refers to the different discourses, media and semiotic codes, transforming these references simultaneously. Therefore, Dominique Fisher calls Toussaint's writing practice *bricol(l)age*. The main concept of the minimalism and poetics of silence in this prose is the reticence which allows the significant silence (term by J. Rokoszowa) to reveal itself as a leading rule of respective novels and stories. In the thesis, this concept is to be seen as a figure of style, a literary device of reticence (according to Skwarczyńska), but also an esthetic category.

As it is shown in the second and the third chapter of the present doctoral thesis, the poetics of silence in the prose by Toussaint manifests itself by a set of the devices at the material and narrative level of the texts, as well as in the style and the construction of the characters, the story, the temporality or the setting. The respective phenomena connected with the *silentium* sphere which are visible in the Toussaint's prose have a gradual nature and remain in mutual relation. In the linguistic substance dimension, it is the importance of blank spaces to be stressed. Moreover, the use of the punctuation marks (numbering, parenthesis or dash), quotations and crypto-quotations, notes, italics or borrowings from foreign languages is another manifestation of the poetics of

silence in the analysed texts (*La Salle de bain*, *La Mélancolie de Zidane*, *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)*). Finally, in the intermedial text *Mes bureaux. Luoghi dove scrivo* the verbal code and the pictures are juxtaposed to take advantage of the *punctum* notion by Roland Barthes. These devices highlight the importance of the indeterminacy of the sources and references, but also the tensions between the presence and the absence in the Toussaint's poetics. At the level of style there are the lexical, syntactic and rhetorical means which should be stressed. The vocabulary puts the emphasis on the potentiality of the negative categories like absence, silence, or mystery (*La Clé USB*). The syntax is based mainly on the use of the simple, negative or interrogative sentences, the asyndetons, the coordinating conjunctions or verbal forms that underline the duration at the expense of the succession. In the rhetorical dimension the distinctive feature of the reticence is in turn the presence of the figures of *reticentia*, *praeteritio*, irony, litotes, ellipsis or rhetorical question. The last formal level of the poetics of silence in Toussaint's prose is the narration which is distinguished by the changes in focalization, the tension between the homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrator (*M.M.M.M.*), the digressions (*La Télévision*) or the mechanism of suggestion (*La Disparition du paysage*).

The third chapter of the present thesis is focused on the variants of the poetics of silence in the structure of the represented world of the respective texts by Jean-Philippe Toussaint. At this level, the manifestations of the significant silence are subordinated to the undetermined condition of the characters who concentrate on their perception of the passage of time and their creative activity. In this context, the reticence can manifest itself in the inherent traits of the particular protagonists (name, external appearance, age), as well as in their behavior, decisions, emotions. The reticence visible in the characterization of the protagonists can strengthen the relations between them (*M.M.M.M.*) or, in contrast, prove the alienation or melancholy (*La Salle de bain*). This evolution of the characters conditions the shape of the story. The represented events draw especially on the everyday life (*La Télévision*) or the models of detective literature (*La Réticence*). Also, they have a non-linear arrangement. In some cases, their succession loses in favour of the changes of

the characters' thoughts and states of mind (*La Disparition du paysage*). The story consists principally of these elements that Teresa Cieřlikowska attributes to the *agrafo* domain. Meanwhile, the last aspect of the poetics of silence in the represented world of the Toussaint's texts is connected with the temporality and the setting. At this level, the mention of the time and place of action, like the succession of the events, can be ambivalent. Moreover, the passage of time is *de facto* suspended, divided on the infinitesimal segments. The descriptions of reality highlight its silence, emptiness, desintegration, obscurity or transparency (*Les Émotions*). Therefore, the discussed modality of creation of the represented world has a metatextual nature and lays stress on the key part of the significant silence in the Toussaint's prose.

Rooted in the Ingarden's theory of the places of indeterminacy, the conducted analysis allows us to conclude with a reconstruction of the literary forms of the significant silence in the prose by Jean-Philippe Toussaint. Making an attempt to join in the discussions initiated by such researchers as Ruth Amar and Jean-Louis Hippolyte, the present doctoral thesis perceives the reticence not only as an narrative strategy of the Toussaint's texts. The maximalist programme adopted in our proposal of the study permits rather to observe the function of the poetics of silence at various textual levels. It is, then, visible in the linguistic and typographic aspect, the intersemiotic and intermedial relations, in the style, the narrative dimensions or at the level of setting. The examples introduced in the submitted dissertation enable to see the significant silence as an existential behavior of the human being, a part of the creative process, the literary form and representation. The reticence, as a literary device and a figure of style, becomes in Toussaint's prose above all the quality of the text and the contemporary subject. It does not indicate a silence of any irreparable lack. It turns out to be rather a mean of the postmodern literature of replenishment, a literary material and an origin of the creative method. The poetics of silence conceived in this manner characterizes the entire literary creation by Jean-Philippe Toussaint and can prompt further discussions of his *écriture*.