

## FOREWORD

I had been ghostwriting a memoir for several months, when I decided to pick up extra freelance work to sustain me during the inevitable revisions. After a few slow days of fruitless searching, a helpful colleague directed me to a small Canadian literary magazine that needed an impartial journeyman writer. The editors wanted someone to conduct a series of interviews with a poet who was in the midst of creating a long set of experimental writings. The poet was Mingus Tourette and the series was his doomed experimental novel, *Divinity*. Before accepting, I asked for a short biography and a sample of his writing. The senior editor presented this as an example of both:

### **mt** BIO

writer &

vociferous atheist  
polygamy advocate  
sodomite & womanizer

a hard drinking  
volatile son of a bitch  
who might just do for Canadian poetry  
what jet planes do for skyscrapers

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### **Mingus Tourette**

Emphatic Graphomaniac  
Chronic Neologist  
Thanaphobic Bastard  
Purveyor of Fine Apostasy  
Effervescent Fuckaroo  
&  
Notorious Drunkard, Esquire

Although I had misgivings about the project, the editor invited me to his office to introduce me to Tourette. After no further freelance leads materialized, I consented to meet the writer and consider the project. Two icy January days later, I drove an associate professor's car to the magazine's downtown office. When I arrived, Tourette was already present and he was loudly protesting the editor's rejection of a new story. Although it was early in the afternoon, Tourette appeared to

be drunk. His speech was littered with obscenities, his gestures were overwrought, and he seemed to be on the verge of falling over.

As best I could gather from the conversation, Tourette had written a story that he thought was critical to the reader's understanding of his entire body of work. Tourette believed it should be published immediately, although the editor thought otherwise. He was inclined to believe the magazine did not need anything else from Tourette when it was owed thirty-three installments of *Divinity* in the near future. Once Tourette realized the editor was not going to publish his story, he shrugged. Though we had never been introduced, he turned to me and said, "If you're Gander, let's get the fuck out of this cocksucking bughatch and get a drink." He crumpled the story in his hands and walked out of the office, gesturing grandly to an unseen audience as he left. The editor smirked and returned to his keyboard, making it clear that the decision to play along was all mine.

I followed Tourette out the front door and into the bitter cold. He had smoothed out the crumpled paper and was reading the story to himself. He noted my presence, started walking, and led us down the street to a nearby pub. As we entered, we passed a sign indicating knives were to be left at the door. Once through the metal detector, Tourette pointed to a table and left me waiting as he went to buy drinks from the bartender, whom he seemed to know. He returned with a couple of pints of foul-coloured lager, handed one of them to me, and pushed the wrinkled story into my hands. He leaned back in his seat, cradled his drink, and stared off into the distant regions of the bar. It appeared there would be no conversation until I had finished reading the rejected work, which I found helped me understand Tourette and his writing.

Tourette may be crass and reading his work for the first time may feel like a violation, but the more one reads and understands it, the more his humanity becomes apparent. I believe that a writer's work is his best introduction, and so I would like to present Tourette's story:

Used to drive an '84 Buick Skylark  
and there was one summer  
back before ever meeting America  
when Nat and I were still deeply entrenched  
in each other's flesh

when I'd never thought about dragging myself  
across the country in a drunken haze

and the idea of driving that Skylark  
to Mexico was a real and somewhat  
titillating possibility  
for me and Nat

the car itself was shit brown  
with rust throughout and looked generally  
like hell all over

but that thing had six big valves  
and decent tires  
and it could hit a hundred miles an hour going down hill  
if there was no need to stop quickly

'Cause if there had been  
and there was later  
those dirty old brakes would have never held

Which they didn't

And when the time came for them to work  
and they didn't  
and Nat's belly was crushed by the shitty old seat belt  
that only went around the waist

and she split her forehead on the dash

there wasn't much Mingus could do  
except watch her bleed on the insides  
watch her belly swell

as it was supposed to  
slowly  
over nine months  
but not like that  
not in a matter of minutes

and fill that uterus with blood  
and choke out that unborn Sara, or Sarah, or Sera

however it was to be spelled

until a trucker picked them up on the road  
desperate and broken

and that old trucker drove them away  
from the smashed up Buick  
and up to the hospital  
even though it was too late  
and away from unborn Sarah

and somewhere before the time it would be possible  
for Mingus to afford to drive another car  
and all he would remember  
about driving  
would be that old Skylark

and how it looked as he sat  
in the back of the truck with his young wife  
who was maybe hemorrhaging  
and how it would feel in the near future

when that car was pushed into a car graveyard  
when he and Nat would stand on the edge of a cliff  
to pour a thimble full of ashes into a canyon

she would weep and he would stare stoically  
and only shake on the inside.

There was one summer before all that  
when Mingus drove that Skylark  
and dreamed about Mexico  
and smiled

When I finished, Tourette looked at me expectantly, raised a single eyebrow and grinned. He said, “And now that you know, let’s get into it. Let’s talk *Divinity*.” And so we did. And so we would for the next nine months, until Tourette decided to abandon the project and start working on *Nunt*.

*Divinity* was a modified stream-of-consciousness experiment loosely based on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.<sup>1</sup> It was filled with brilliant images but, as far as anyone could tell, there were only a handful of interested readers. During one of our monthly interviews, Tourette and I discussed the project at length, and I listened as he considered abandoning what he thought was becoming an unreadable Joycean nightmare. He feared the work was marginalized by its new form, that it was not telling a story and, most importantly, that he could find no emotional heart in the work. He valued the relationship between the two main characters, but found he was writing what he called “a violent imagist exercise, Jack’s <sup>2</sup> version of the abyss, and nothing else...” Tourette wanted to write more muscular poetry like that of Purdy, Whitman, or Miller, writers who were, in Tourette’s eyes,

[a]ll cock and muscle, men who could work with a pickaxe all day, drink all night, fuck all morning and take that last moment before sleep came crashing in to catch that day and squeeze it down into something beautiful. ‘Cause that’s fucking poetry. I don’t care what anyone says these days. Fuck the intellectual exercises. Poetry is still about cunt, it is still about death, it is still about love, and it is still about fucking with hot Catholic bitches ‘til they squeeze all the God out of you.

#### Divinity Interview #5

We discussed *Divinity*’s style and I suggested shortening the remaining Cuntos to a more manageable format and length. The Cunto was Tourette’s version of a Canto, which has evolved into the Nunto. For centuries, the Canto has been used as a division within a long poem, such as Dante’s *Divine Comedy* or Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*. Tourette’s rationale for developing and using the Cunto was explained in our first *Divinity* interview:

[C]unto is the rhythm of fucking, it’s the break in theme, it’s the division in a poem; ‘cause it all changes within the fuck, it changes with different women, it changes all the time, when you’re just about to come compared to when you first slide it in, it’s about rhythm and breaks and different passages of time. Cunt governs everything, really. We all base our whole lives on it. Quest for it, fight for it, lie for it, break heads for it. So why not have it govern a whole poem? A whole novel? Cunt is life and, of course, life rules poetry. What else would a poem be about, except life? Except cunt?

#### Divinity Interview #1

Tourette contended, however, that it was not just the form that was bothering him. He could not shake the paradoxical fact that he was an atheist writing about a journey through the nine levels of the Catholic Abyss. Hell was something he no longer believed in, and though he stared into the Abyss, nothing stared back. As we had come to know each other quite well by that time, I felt comfortable pressing him to define the material he wanted to write. He was unresponsive at first, so I rephrased the question and asked him to define his own abyss. There was a long silence, and he said,

Nat. And the two years after, (laugh). Fuck, Marvin, that’s all I write about. What else am I writing about? Those two years. That’s what I write when I’m not writing this thing. Drinking and writing and hating God and walking and Dostoevsky. And Nat. Fucking Christ, Nat. Fucking Christ...

#### Divinity Interview #5

<sup>1</sup> In *Divinity*, Mingus Tourette took on the role of Dante, while a black spearman named Kob replaced the poet Virgil, who led Dante through the *Divine Comedy*.

<sup>2</sup> Jack Kerouac, well known for his novel, *On the Road*, but also known to poets as an excellent dharma, haiku and zen writer.

Tourette occasionally spoke to me about the events that led to the disintegration of his marriage. As far as I understand, the accident resulted in a void between Tourette and his wife, which led to depression, drinking, and years of fighting. They tortured each other until their friends and families advised them that the marriage should end. They spent a year divorcing each other, but even when it was finalized, they continued to live together in a purgatory that neither one could seem to escape. Describing his actions as, “the only way [he] could think to end it without killing her or [him]self,” Tourette finally walked out the front door, bought a bus ticket, and fled the country.

After leaving, Tourette travelled alone across the States for almost two years, making occasional sojourns back to Canada. During his travels, he scribbled poems and anecdotes on napkins or bus tickets. Most of the segments were written in roadside diners after drunken brawls, and many of them he cannot remember writing. He kept little else from that period besides those scraps of paper and, after he abandoned *Divinity*, he returned to them as a basis for this book.

In essence, *Nunt* begins on the day Tourette left Nat for the last time and “drank, smoked, cussed, and fucked”<sup>3</sup> his way across America, trying desperately to discover a way to forget his wife.

[I find myself]  
finally driven to ask  
an Egyptian druggist  
rumoured to be an atheist  
or an alchemist

confiding in him one night  
lost deep in the opium dens of Chinatown  
asking, with sleepless eyes

what do I take  
for hallucinations

or better yet

what the fuck do I take to stop seeing ghosts

**Nunto Thirty-four**

*Nunt* is commentary on the people Mingus drank with, slept with, and fought with as he dragged himself from city to city. *Nunt* is criti-

<sup>3</sup> nunto one, line 7.

cism of the American people and their government, though it is often through them that he sees himself. Incidents in the book can be bitter and forthright,<sup>4</sup> but many of the stories are subtly damning, portraying Americans as he encountered them.<sup>5</sup> *Nunt* is condemnation of the xenophobia, stupidity, fear, violence, and religion that he observed, which forced him to ask the question,

whatever does it mean to be American?  
besides  
a jihad against one's self?

**Nunto Fifty**

Tourette's undisguised loathing for religion spills into his writing with the undeniable rancour of a violently reformed Christian. Tourette often refers to people as “shaved apes wearing ties”<sup>6</sup> and gives the impression that he would like to see all religions abandoned in the same manner that he abandoned *Divinity*. He abhors evangelists,<sup>7</sup> detests fundamentalists,<sup>8</sup> and delights in finding new ways to infuriate the religious rank and file.<sup>9</sup> But no matter how much vitriol he spews at Americans and organized religion, he reserves the worst criticism for Nat and himself.

She was a cock fiend  
cock hungry  
cock drunk is more like it  
and I mean that as a compliment

**Nunto Nineteen**

I say, it is easy to see  
how that man could beat  
his ex-wife and her lover  
to death  
with a piece of timber  
in a park  
in clear daylight  
in front of a horrified crowd

simply said,  
I empathize with everyone these days

fistfighting, indeed  
we got to be at the murdering age by now

**Nunto Thirty-nine**

<sup>4</sup> nunto two, lines 53-59.

<sup>5</sup> nunto twelve, lines 9-22.

<sup>6</sup> nunto sixty-three, lines 8-14.

<sup>7</sup> nunto twenty-one, lines 7-18.

<sup>8</sup> nunto four, lines 12-37; nunto eight, lines 8-12.

<sup>9</sup> nunto sixteen, lines 9-25.

During the two years Tourette was travelling, he returned home on a few desperate occasions in an effort to reconcile with Nat. Each attempt left the situation worse than before, and every time the marriage dissolved, he left town determined to do whatever it would take to finally rid her from his system.

[A]nd me with a real fucking death wish  
to get there  
get away from you  
been staring off bridges and taunting oncoming trucks  
been out all night walking the streets  
fast  
under the green haze

looking for a huge Iranian whore  
who goes by the name Therese

I wanted her to crush me  
to lie on me like a dead animal  
and force the air from my lungs

she'd do it, too.  
she's into shit like that  
she would respect a man's wish  
to die beneath her

**Nunto Sixty-two**

After two years of living in cheap hotels, walking the streets, and pushing the drink as close to the edge as he could, he returned home exhausted and somewhat purged. Today, Nat and Tourette are properly estranged and they do not keep in touch. He still talks about her on occasion, but it is sad and wistful and angry when he does.

*Nunt* is about Nat. It is about Mingus Tourette. It is about the two of them, together and apart. It is about how one can find something beautiful and disgusting, and aspire to recreate it truthfully for others to share. It is about sex, drugs, prostitutes, buggery, fist fighting, murder, apostasy, God, death, literature, jazz, rock and roll, scat, zen, and madness. It is about losing one's self in the ocean and letting one wash up on whatever shore that will call one home. And sometimes,

whether you would admit it or not, Mingus, it is even about love, no matter how malformed and destructive and mercurial it may seem.

[S]he won't ever say it  
but there is a disgusting beauty  
to our soiled love sheets  
in the afternoon sun

**Nunto Sixty-three**

**Marvin Gander**  
February 1, 2004