

FALLING IN LOVE WITH MARGUERITE DURAS¹

Marguerite Duras – why were we all in love with Marguerite Duras? Was this a mirage, a collective infatuation due to a fashionable *Schwärmeri*, or a durable response to the power of a new writing? By all, I mean more than myself and friends; a whole French generation fell under the spell of Duras, old and young, male and female, students and teachers, all obsessed with her books, films, interviews, plays and *obiter dicta* in the press. It started with the publication of *Lol V. Stein*, at first a success for the Parisian intelligentsia only, and the films. After her success as a screenwriter with *Hiroshima, mon amour*, and some well reviewed plays, Duras wanted to direct: here was the proof that she was on to something exciting.

It was with trepidation that in the winter of 1975, I went to a double invitation. Duras' film, *India Song*, was screened in Dijon, the city where I was living and teaching. Thanks to the friendship of my older colleague Max Milner, then in charge of an excellent graduate program in French literature, I was not only allowed to come to the *cinéma d'art et d'essai* near the campus to catch a special evening reserved to students and faculty, but also to have dinner with the author herself in Milner's apartment. I have not forgotten the impact of the film's opening: a red sun going down very slowly. Voices heard speaking first in Bengali, then in French; then snatches of a story, they are talking about Michael Richardson and Anne-Marie Stretter.

I had done my home-work, read *Le ravisement de Lol V. Stein* and the following instalment in the Indian sequence, *Le Vice-consul*. The texts barely made sense to me at first. The huge audience had the feeling of being at some kind of "event." At the end, questions fused. Duras answered calmly and simply, with a neat diction that sculpted her words. It was close to midnight when we sat at a long table. We were six or seven. The dinner went on until dawn. Max Milner was not only a professor of French literature interested in psychoanalysis (his wife, Christiane, the daughter of the famous tenor praised by Roland Barthes, Panzera, was a psychoanalyst), he also had been mayor of the village of Fixin in the Côte des Nuits, much better than the Côte de Duras, from which Marguerite Donnadiou had taken her pen-name. This meant that Milner had a fantastic *cave*. I am sure that this is how he convinced Duras to come to Dijon. In the past, she had to undergo cures for her alcohol ad-

diction; at that time, she had decided to drink only excellent wines to help her curb her consumption. And drink she did – a quasi-endless sequence of bottles, the best Burgundy wines. Meanwhile, we ate and drank while she talked. At that first meeting, she was the only one to speak. She must have talked for five or six hours straight. That's when we fell in love with her.

Mind you, Duras was not a beauty: she was 61 years old, alcoholism had ravaged her face, she had thick round glasses and unkempt hair, from a distance you could have taken her for a *ménagère* going for errands. But as soon as she spoke, the magic worked. It created something akin to what I have seen in the testimonies of guests to Mallarmé's "Tuesdays." Important poets, critics, literati, artists and luminaries would hear Mallarmé talk in his house. Witnesses have left memoirs and essays describing the poet's diction, his invention of words, combinations of images he used, but none of them could remember what he said. The details I remember of her inspired monologue would sound trivial – she had a long riff of one hour about her Portuguese handyman, who working on the floor of her country house at Neauphle-le-Château had destroyed beautiful *tomettes* (terrocotta tiles). She loved the grain Jeanne Moreau's voice, as Moreau was going to record "India Song" for her. When we had to take leave, she skipped the offer of a nap and went straight to the station, taking the first train back to Paris.

This ritual was repeated five years. Each time, Duras would bring a film, there would be a *ciné-club* discussion with the audience, then late dinner until the morning, fantastic wines opened and a one-sided conversation that scintillated through the night. We saw films she had done earlier (*Nathalie Granger*, from 1972, *Détruire, dit-elle*, from 1969, *La Femme du Gange*, from 1974), and then *Le Camion* (1977). Each time, the combination of voice and vision generated this strange feeling: we loved her, we had fallen in love with her.

After that, for a while, by a series of coincidences, I kept meeting her in Paris. I lived in Dijon but was in analysis in Paris where I also taught. I was often in the Latin quarter, and at my alma mater at the Ecole Normale Supérieure where I saw her twice. When we were just having a drink, she would listen more; she even asked for stories of Dijon. I told her about the little owl carved in one of the pillars of Notre-Dame, a superb church in the center of Dijon just round the corner from where I lived. This owl, supposed to increase fertility, had been rubbed by innumerable hands since the end of the thirteenth century. Of course, I would never forget to rub it myself, as if I to hasten its total erosion. The church has rows of fantastic gargoyles in the front façade. I told her the legend that once, in the middle ages, the fall of the gargoyle killed a usurer who was to enter the church; the stone that killed him represented a usurer. I explained to her that Dijon, a city in which I still felt foreign, was a fortress of stone, a citadel of pink granite and hard limestone. The ancient house in which I lived at the time dated from 1732, each slab of the spiral staircase numbered in an antique hand visible on the ledges, and its vaulted basement dated from the second century AD. Duras visualized the stones, their

coldness and color, but never managed to find the time to visit again – the issue for her was whether she would get the Nobel prize, which sounded possible. However, she died before this could happen.

It was during one of our dinners at Max Milner's, what the French call a *medianoche*, a dinner starting after midnight, that I asked about the ending of *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*. We were having endless discussions about it during the meetings of an informal writers' group with friends like the philosopher Alain David and the psychoanalyst François Baveray. I later realized that the American presentation in the current paperback distorts its plot. Here is what the cover says:

"The Ravishing of Lol Stein is a haunting early novel [NB. Duras had published more than ten novels, and as many plays; her career began in 1943] by the author of *The Lover*. Lol Stein is a beautiful young woman, securely married, settled in a comfortable life – and a voyeur. Returning with her husband and children to the town where, years before, her fiancé had abandoned her for another woman, she is drawn inexorably to recreate that long-past tragedy. She arranges a rendez-vous for her friend Tatiana and Tatiana's lover. [NB. In fact she happens on the scene]. She arranges to spy on them. And then she goes one step further..."²

It stops here and one expects a gory ending, closer to *Psycho* than a tale of bereavement. What this does not say is that there is no progressive revelation of the past. The text opens with the scene of the "ravishing" and then repeats it. The initial scandal is disclosed from the start: at her engagement ball, Lola sees her fiancé Michael Richardson inexplicably attracted by Anne-Marie Stretter. Richardson falls under the spell of this older woman, they dance all the night forgetting the rest. The *femme fatale* is Anne-Marie Stretter, the wife of a vice-consul, who steals Michael from Lol. She is the main character of *India Song*.

The shock leaves Lol prostrate, half-demented, until one day she meets a man whom on a sudden impulse she marries. They move to another town, have children, they live an orderly life. Her husband, a famous violinist, believes that she is not completely cured. Ten years later, they go back to the city of the ravishing. Lol meets Jacques Hold, the lover of her old school-friend Tatiana Karl, who is also married. Lol keeps spying from a field of rye on the lovers as they meet for their trysts in a hotel. Hold, bored with Tatiana, falls in love with Lol, but she insists that the lovers keep meeting. At the end, Lol begins remembering her ravishment. She and Jacques go together to the Casino and reenact this primal scene. Lol experiences pain and talks about the past. However, the last scene shows her back in the field again, spying on the lovers. The novel finishes inconclusively: "Lol had arrived there ahead of us. She was asleep in the field of rye, worn out, worn out by our trip." (RLS, 181)

Here is why I committed the unpardonable sin of asking Duras what she meant by this ending. Very simply, Duras said that Lol had become psychotic. There was no happy ending, no cathartic reenactment, no replay of the trauma curing her. I asked stupidly: "But why?" Duras answered without blinking: "Because I saw it." For a

minute, I thought naively that the plot was autobiographical, having read about her complicated love life, her affair with Denys Mascolo, her second main partner when her husband, the writer Robert Antelme, had returned from the death camps, and so on. But later I saw her film *Le Camion*, and cannot forget how she repeatedly asks the famous actor Depardieu: “Do you see it?” Each time he answers: “I see it.” What he sees is a blue truck, but the issue is the same: the power of art is to make you see something that remains a pure fiction.

In 1965, Lacan followed a similar progression when he interviewed Duras for his essay on *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*. Duras describes their meeting rather sarcastically: “He gave me an appointment one day, at midnight, in a bar. He scared me. In a basement it was. To talk about *Lol V. Stein*. He told me that it was a *clinically* perfect delirium. He started questioning me. For two hours. I was reeling when I left.”³ This encounter has been glossed by several commentators and given rise to legends. Jean Allouch sums up the gist in his collection of anecdotes:

“*Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* had just been published. It is well-known that Marguerite Duras, who had operated a radical change of style with this novel, was afraid that it might not find any readers. It was in the subjective position of a solitude she had accepted but found difficult that she received one day a telephone call from Lacan. He was suggesting a meeting that same day, at a very late hour, in a bar. // She accepts and arrives first. Soon after, she sees Lacan threading his way through the tables toward her. In a warm and affectionate tone, as he is now very close to her now, he blurts out: “You don’t know what you are saying!”⁴

Lacan did not republish his essay and left Michèle Montrelay, a feminist disciple, to use the novel for a first account of feminine writing coming from the Lacanian school, *L’Ombre et le Nom* (Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1977). As she told me, Duras had not been seduced or amused by Lacan. She felt that his wonder at her insight was patronizing. Lacan followed Freud’s cliché: artists and women guess without words the important truths that only male psychoanalysts will formulate in a consistent discourse, a point cogently made by Pierre Bayard in *How to Apply Literature to Psychoanalysis*.⁵

However, I believe that Lacan’s astonishment was genuine. He found in Marguerite Duras, who makes no allusion to psychoanalysis and never read him or Freud, the evocation of a ravaging passion bringing a woman close to psychosis in terms that are strikingly similar to those he deployed. Indeed, Lacan mentions Freud’s homage to artists preceding him. He alludes to the fact that he wanted the author’s approval, but would not have minded had she refused:

I think that even if I were to hear it from Marguerite Duras herself that, in her entire *oeuvre*, she doesn’t know where *Lol* has come from, and even if I could glean this from the next sentence she says to me, the only advantage that the psychoanalyst has the right to draw from his position, were this then to be recognized as such, is to recall with Freud that in his work the

artist always precedes him, and that he does not have to play the psychologist where the artist paves the way for him.

This is precisely what I acknowledge to be the case in the ravishing of Lol V. Stein, where it turns out that Marguerite Duras knows, without me, what I teach.⁶

Elisabeth Roudinesco took a stern attitude when documenting the infatuation for Duras that Lacan experienced in the mid-sixties. For her, Lacan's essay is mistaken and not in good taste.⁷ Roudinesco insists on the rhetorical aspect of Lacan's essay: self-consciously, he signals that his text is a ploy to seduce the author. Nevertheless, Lacan's essay on Duras is key, for it documents how he approaches feminine *jouissance* in writing. Lacan tried to tackle too many themes at once, the Borromean knot, artistic sublimation, the grammar of the subject inherent in fantasy, the gaze vs. the eye, and links between Duras' work and Marguerite de Navarre's early modern *Heptameron*, all this in eight dense pages. The novel becomes a case in point to reject psychoanalysis applied to literature, as he states:

A subject is a scientific *term*, something perfectly calculable, and this reminder of its status should terminate what can only be called by its name, boorishness: let us say the pedantry of a certain kind of psychoanalysis. This frivolous aspect of psychoanalysis, to remain sensitive, one hopes, to those who immerse themselves in it, ought to indicate to them that they are sliding towards stupidity; for example, by attributing an author's avowed technique to some neurosis: boorishness. Or again, by showing it to be an explicit adoption of certain mechanisms which would thereby make an unconscious edifice of it: stupidity. (HMD, 122)

Lacan had heard that the ending of the novel was not a cathartic reenactment helping Lol to forget trauma, listening to Duras, as I did:

"And it is because the "thought" of Jacques Hold comes to haunt Lol too insistently at the end of the novel, when he accompanies her on a pilgrimage to the scene of the event, that Lol goes mad. // The episode in fact contains signs of this, but I would point out that I heard this from Marguerite Duras. // The last sentence of the novel, which brings Lol back to the rye field, seems to me to bring about a much less decisive end than my remark would suggest. One suspects from it a caution against the pathos of understanding. Lol is not to be understood, she is not to be saved from her ravishment." (HMD, 127)

In fact, Lacan is more cautious than Duras herself, who evinced no qualms in her assertion. Lacan surmises that any interpretation is rendered dubious by the novel. The main point of view is that of Jacques Hold, who we discover is the intra-diegetic narrator. But Hold states that any attempt at getting closer to Lol will pervert the truth: "Now, I alone of these perverters of the truth know this: that I know nothing. That was my initial discovery about her: to know nothing about Lol Stein was already to know her." (RLS, 72)

Lacan's homage is addressed to Duras *and* her novel via a curious syntax. His title ("Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras du *Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*") literally states: "Homage to Marguerite Duras of *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*," giving back to Duras her own novel in a gesture of homage, and then highlights the ambiguity of by the title:

"*Le ravissement* – this word is enigmatic. Does it have an objective or a subjective dimension – is it a ravishing or a being ravished – as determined by Lol V. Stein? // Ravished. We think of the soul, and of the effect wrought by beauty. But we shall free ourselves, as best as we can, from this readily available meaning, by means of a symbol. // A woman who ravishes is also the image imposed on us by this wounded figure, exiled from things, whom you dare not touch, but who makes you her prey. // The two movements, however, are knotted together in a cipher that is revealed in a name skillfully crafted in the contour of writing: Lol V. Stein. (...) Such artistry suggests that the ravisher is Marguerite Duras, and we are the ravished. But if, to quicken our steps behind Lol's steps, which resonate through the novel, we were to hear them behind us without having run into anyone, it is then that her creature moves within a space which is doubled; or it is rather that one of us has passed through the other, and which of us, in that case, has let himself be traversed? // Or do we now realize that the cipher is to be calculated in some other way: for to figure it out, one must count *oneself* three." (HMD, 122)

Lacan starts from Lola's decision to call herself "Lol V. Stein" and not "Lola Valérie Stein" after she has been abandoned. The amputation of her name embodies the theft, clipped wings castration underpinning a catatonic and depressive position. The scansion of three names carries weight, since every subject in this novel is not only de-doubled by pain of loss or love (Lacan puns on the old French expression "*Je me deux*," meaning "I am in pain," echoing something like "I am two for myself") but also mediated by the detour of a third person. Reading the novel becomes a "counting oneself first two, then three," which presupposes that we know who ravishes whom.

In fact, the novel's plot is less predicated on the idea of the repetition of a traumatic event than in making a knot of its elements: "Thinking along the lines of some cliché, we might say she is repeating the event. But we should look more closely than this. (...) This is not the event, but a knot retying itself here. And it is what this knot ties up that actually ravishes – but then again, whom?" (HMD, 123). We count to three because there are three triangles in the novel, as if Duras were repeating the logic of Poe's "Purloined Letter."

The first triangle posits Lol in the top angle as the fascinated observer unable to fathom the enormity of her loss. At the bottom, Michael Richardson and Anne-Marie Stretter exchange a ravished gaze. They forget the world in their erotic trance. Such a trance transfixes Lol's gaze, turning her into an unseeing subject. She is not seen any longer by her lover, thus cannot see anything in the scene.

The second triangle repeats the first while subtly disrupting the parallelism. Lol watches in the field while Jacques and Tatiana make love in the room. But she cannot see anything of their love-making where she is, only bodies emerging at intervals when they come to the window. Jacques knows that she is there for it is the presence of Lol that makes him postpone a break-up with a boring mistress. The words of love he whispers in Tatiana's ear are meant for Lol. Thus, in both triangles, one corner is defined by an excessive *jouissance* that conjoins pain and desire. Lol occupies this place in the first triangle, Jacques Hold in the second. Tatiana, who does not know what really takes place, has replaced Lol, which is why she falls more and more in love with Jacques.

The overlapping of two triangles that are not identical generates some narratological uncertainty. Early in the novel, a male character appears seen through the eyes of Lol. He turns out to be Jacques Hold, the narrator of the novel. One has to assume that he mentions his own presence in the story without saying who he is. When he finally admits that he is present, we shift from the third to the first person: "Arm in arm, they ascend the terrace steps. Tatiana introduces Peter Beugner, her husband, to Lol, and Jack Hold, a friend of theirs – the distance is covered – me" (RLS, 65). In other scenes, the narrative hesitates between a first and a second person narration:

"He tells Lol Stein: "Tatiana removes her clothes, and Jack Hold watches her, stares with interest at this woman who is not the woman he loves..." (...) But Tatiana is speaking:

"But Tatiana is saying something," Lol Stein murmurs. // To make her happy, I would invent God if I had to. // "She utters your name" // I did not invent that." (RLS, 123)

Thus, Lacan did not reduce the ambiguity in the narrative when pointing to its duplications. He notices that Jacques Hold is not "what he appears to be when I say: the narrative voice. He is, rather, its anguish. Once again, the ambiguity returns: it is his anguish, or that of the narrative?" (HMD, 123). The "anguish" is a trick performed by Duras to keep readers both away and inside this narrative. Of Jacques Hold, Lacan writes:

He does not, in any case, simply display the machinery, but in fact one of its mainsprings, and he does not know how taken up in it he is. // This allows me to introduce Marguerite Duras here, having moreover her consent to do so, as the third ternary, of which one of the terms remains the ravishment of Lol V. Stein caught as an object in her own knot, and in which I myself am the third to propose a ravishment, in my case, a decidedly subjective one. (HMD, 123)

Once more, Lacan asked Duras – I wish I had done that myself. Critics avoid asking the author for confirmation of their readings; Lacan does not hesitate. He follows Duras when she includes herself in the repeated narrative. Her "I see" recurs throughout the narrative: "I see this..." (RLS, 45), "This I invent, I see..." (RLS, 46),

“I invent:..” (RLS, 46). If Jacques Hold might be accountable for these sentences, for we understand at the end that he, out of love for Lol, is reconstructing her story, a number of other characters point out the limits of Jacques’s reconstruction. Tatiana does this when trying to fathom what Lol meant when she said that “her happiness was close to her;” Lol meant, of course, that Jacques Hold was close by. Tatiana, enraged at not understanding, exclaims:

“But what about this happiness, tell me about this happiness, please, just a word or two about it!”// I say:// “Lol Stein probably had it within her when she encountered it.” // With the same slow movement as before, Tatiana turns again to me. I pale. The curtain has just risen on the pain Tatiana is suffering. But strangely, her suspicions are not immediately directed at Lol. // “How do you know such things about Lol?” // She means: how do you know such things when a woman doesn’t?” (RLS, 139-40)

Lacan echoes that question. His position appears when we draw a third triangle, in which Lacan is the fascinated voyeur ravished by Duras. Duras represents the agency by which the third angle is constructed – the novel itself. This third triangle linking Lacan, Duras and the text follows a hermeneutic necessity. Such triangles help us calculate the way subjects face their determination from the Other. Lol has been swallowed by the Other (her Unconscious) because of the circuit of her *jouissance*. The void into which she falls at the end is encircled by a letter, the love letter that the novel not only describes but is:

... What she does believe is that she must enter (this unknown), that that was what she had to do, that it would always have meant, for her mind as well as her body, both their greatest pain and their greatest joy, so commingled as to be undefinable, a single entity but unnamable for lack of a word. (...) It would have been an absence-word, a hole-word, whose center would have been hollowed out in a hole, the kind of hole in which all other words would have been buried. (...) By its absence, this word ruins all the others, it contaminates them, it is also the dead dog on the beach at high noon, this hole of flesh. (RLS, 38)

Such a hole-word condenses the catastrophe experienced in one second during the ball: an absolute dereliction has shattered imaginary certainty; here is, to quote Blanchot, “writing of the disaster” or a word impossible to utter, to write or to read. Lol becomes a psychotic when she identifies, as Virginia Woolf did, with this writing from the outside.

We understand why Lol after the primal scene of the ball has focused her energy on one wish: the desire to see Anne-Marie Stretter undressed by Michael Richardson. This defines the grammar of fantasy glossed by Lacan.

But what exactly is this vacuity? It begins to take on a meaning: you were, yes, for one night until dawn, when something in that place gave way, the center of attention. (...) Every gaze will be yours, Lol, as the fascinated

Jacques Hold will say to himself, for himself, ready to love “all of Lol.” //
There is in fact a grammar of the subject which has taken note of this stroke
of genius. (HMD, 125)

Following Freud’s “A child is being beaten,” Lacan reconstructs the grammar of a subject that turns into an object, an active verb that becomes passive (“I am beaten” becoming “I am beating”) thanks to his theory of the gaze opposed to the eye as presented in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*: “You can verify it, this gaze is everywhere in the novel. And the woman of the event is easy to recognize, since Marguerite Duras has depicted her as non-gaze.” (HMD, 125-26) Lacan glosses a central episode, the voyeuristic scenes linking Lol, Jacques and Tatiana, via his theory of the eye and the gaze. Lol “elevates the gaze to the status of a pure object for Jacques Hold.” Lol does not realize a perverse fantasy that repeats a fixation to another body fondled by a lover; she sublimates in the Lacanian manner, raising her own gaze to the dignity of the Thing.

In such a structure, Lol bypasses any sexual rapport, which suggests a pattern identical to courtly love. There, the Lady is raised to the dignity of the Thing by the lover who pays homage to her beauty through songs of praise. One understands the elaborate rhetorical flourishes offered by Lacan to Marguerite Duras: he inscribes her in the tradition of courtly love, exploiting the coincidence of the name “Marguerite” shared by Marguerite de Navarre, the author of the *Heptaméron*, and Duras. Her novel harks back to a lost world of impossible passion and unsublimated desire.

Here, Lacan addresses Duras directly: “... you have situated (your characters) in a world familiar to us in order to show that the noble women and gentlemen of ancient pageantry are everywhere, and they are just as valiant in their quests; and should they be caught in the thorns of uncontrollable love, towards that stain, celestial nocturne, of a being offered up to the mercy of all..., at half past ten on a summer’s evening.” (HMD, 129) Lacan may have been disappointed by Duras’ refusal to disclose a biographical basis confirming his hypothesis, but he had been seduced by Duras’ tale of psychosis, as I had been. Duras taught him to use a literary text to calculate a feminine subject’s position. She helped Lacan overcome his fascination for the feminine as pure Other, for “ravishing” is another name for fascination. Here is why Lacan gave back to Duras her own text in a calculated rhetorical homage, playing the role of the analyst who allows her own message to be sent back to the author. As for me, what did I give Duras? A few nights of my life spent listening to her in rapt adoration, the proof that she could make anyone fall in love with her.

Notes

1. Parts of this essay condense pages from a chapter in *Jacques Lacan, Psychoanalysis and the Subject of Literature* (London: Palgrave, 2001), 115-134.

2. Marguerite Duras, *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*, trans. Richard Seaver (New York, Pantheon, 1966). Hereafter RLS and page.
3. I have modified the translation of the quote given by Leslie Hill in “Lacan with Duras,” in *Writing and Psychoanalysis: A Reader*, ed. John Lechte (London: Arnold, 1996), 145.
4. Jean Allouch, *132 Bons Mots avec Jacques Lacan* (Paris: Eres, 1988), 166.
5. I discuss this untranslated book and its strong theses in *Introduction to Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3-6.
6. Jacques Lacan, “Homage to Marguerite Duras, on *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*”, trans. Peter Connor, in *Duras by Duras* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1987), 124. Hereafter HMD and page.
7. Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co.*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 522.