

FERNANDA NEGRETE

ACTS OF LOVE AND UNCONSCIOUS SAVOIR IN
MARGUERITE DURAS' WRITING

*Voi che sapete che cosa e amor
Donne vedete s'io l'ho nel cor
Quello ch'io provo vi ridiro,
E per me nuovo, capir nol so.¹*

Le Nozze di Figaro Act 2

Prelude

Marguerite Duras' unique writing holds a place in the lyrical practice of courtly love, which arose at the turn of the twelfth century in the Languedoc, and gave rise, by the fourteenth century, to the "Consistori del Gay Saber" (*Council of the Gay Science*). Duras belongs in this tradition insofar as her work understands the event of love as inseparable from a work of writing, and insofar as she situates and articulates this love between a desire impossible to satisfy and a jouissance of letters beyond meaning.² The latter emerges at the point where the word becomes music, or where music can be said to speak. It is at such a point that one can speak of a "gai savoir." This is why Duras, who had a keen ear, emphasized Racine's and Mozart's music, looking toward the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. "*C'est la musique qui parle. Ce n'est pas autre chose, on s'y trompe beaucoup; c'est Mozart, Racine aussi, à un point criant*" (It's the music that speaks. It is nothing else, people are often mistaken; it's Mozart, Racine too, to a screaming point) (*La vie*, 92).

In Mozart's opera buffa *The Marriage of Figaro*, whose libretto is by Lorenzo da Ponte, the aria that Cherubino offers to the Contessa – and whose first verses form the present essay's – reveals this young lover's position of suffering the effects of a jouissance in the body that escapes his own understanding, and which, nonetheless, pushes Cherubino into the ladies' intimate quarters to speak, or not merely speak, but even sing (usually in a mezzo-soprano voice *en travesti*). The aria also

clearly states that Cherubino, who at that point in the plot is being forced by the Count to leave town to join the army, supposes women have a specific knowledge (*sapere*) about love. One might associate this with Jacques Lacan's formulation of the analyst as the "subject supposed to know" (*sujet supposé savoir*), as well as with his observation of a longstanding tradition of supposing that women know something about an indescribable experience that has nothing to do with the certainly finite "jouissance of the organ" (in which the Conde is caught up). Approaching this *sapere* or *savoir* of love seems above all inextricable from a work of writing, and this is what, in the twentieth century, led Marguerite Duras to a lifelong practice of writing on love that sustained the disquieting strangeness Cherubino encounters and describes in this aria, although in the comic opera it necessarily ends up settling down in the happy marriage its title promises. Duras' writing of love instead responds to the question about "the thing love" in a tragic tone, yet in the rare mode Racine introduced with *Bérénice*, where the tragedy consists in surviving a separation, as this essay will show.

The lyrics in Cherubino's aria describe the effects of love through Petrarchan antitheses (hot/cold, joy/sadness, living/dying), which are in turn adopted from the troubadours, whose courtly love poetry inspired Lacan's development on *das Ding* in Seminar VII, in the figure of the forbidden *Domna* or Lady.³ In psychoanalysis, the enigmatic place ascribed to the analyst and to women (at least to some) has to do with love in a strange and specific way. Néstor Braunstein has explained that "one loves the Other because one supposes knowledge (*el saber*) to it, the *saber* or *savoir* that lacks, the one that will result from the reading of the symptom" (290). Braunstein's description of this knowledge emphasizes both that the supposition of knowledge in the Other provokes love, and that it is a knowledge of lack that can only be realized in a work of reading the symptoms, which are addressed to the Other. In his aria, Cherubino loves the Contessa (and "the ladies") to whom he very directly addresses his account of uncontrollable attacks of heat and cold, sighs and languor, as if she/they could "see" or read this in his body and offer him the *sapere* he is missing ("*voi che sapete*"), and which he claims not to know at all how to understand ("*capir nol so*"). To what end does he address this enigma to an "other supposed to know"? The analyst, Braunstein points out, "also supposes – and it's an act of charity, something yet to be demonstrated: that there is *saber* in the Other, that the unconscious exists. From this encounter between two supposed knowledges (*saberes*) emerges the spark that allows for speaking 'truly,' for constituting the unconscious and for enjoying its deciphering. It's not easy" (290). This work of enabling true speech engages words in a way that transcends the usual register of meaning, which can be expressed as "going through the word... to get to the letter, to the original codicils of jouissance inscribed in the body, to the forms in which the relationship of the subject to jouissance is inscribed" (291). If we imagined Cherubino as the analysand going through the trajectory described in these terms by Braunstein, it is crucial to keep in mind that the destination will certainly be neither fully appropriating nor finally mastering knowledge about love or its symptoms (just as

the addressed “*donne*,” who listen, and are called to take a look and see if he “has love in his heart” as one might have a visible indication of an illness, do not “own” this *sapere*). Instead, at the end of the analysis, Cherubino’s initial awareness in the aria that he lacks a *savoir* about the jouissance that has overwritten his organism would return, with a crucial shift from impotence to impossibility,⁴ where he would confront the lack in the Other that enables both creation (the “new” (*nuovo*) in his song’s fourth verse would thus be sustained) and the position of analyst. Such a position is, moreover, “situated entirely in the line of femininity” (Verhaeghe and Declercq, 83). Cherubino, starting on this very “line of femininity” would, with an analyst, end up in a very different opera, one unlikely to feature a happy marriage to the young Barbarina as its culminating point, although not simply because he would have to join the army, instead. His alternatives – marriage within his social class or the army – leave little room for the unknown he faces and describes to the Contessa. But perhaps the space for this unknown is outlined by the memorable aria. The separation implicit in the end of analysis (where the analysand and analyst will cease to meet in session) introduces, for Lacan and others after him, a loss of the imaginary object in traversing the castration fantasy. What might the thing love be, at the strange site of this final separation that follows the approach of “the letters” inscribed in the body?

One can address this question to Marguerite Duras’ writing, which is precisely situated in that strange site of separation that marks the empty center of historical scenarios of symbolic life, where others might rush to fill it up with a double marriage as merry *finale*.⁵ In the separation where Duras instead locates love,⁶ the resonance not only of texts by Freud and Lacan, but also of Jean Racine’s tragic music makes love beyond the signifier somehow receivable.

Love to the letter

This essay investigates Duras’ construction of love from a feminine perspective, which is linked to the questions of jouissance, desire, *savoir*, the unsayable, and the register of the letter in Lacanian psychoanalysis. In this investigation I show how Duras’ practice of the letter, including the reading processes it proposes, not only converges with psychoanalysis, as Lacan was the first to realize in his homage to the 1964 novel, *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, a year after its publication, but also leads the way when it comes to love in its link to feminine jouissance and the letter, which Lacan discussed in 1972-3. I will first set forth what I see as the point of writing love for Duras, by briefly distinguishing this effort from the representation of the sexual relation, through the example of *L’amant* (1984) and a few works tied to it. As the epigraph and prelude already insinuate, love in Duras concerns a fundamental gap as site of unconscious *savoir*, which I will address by comparing a crucial fragment from Duras’ *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (1964) and a passage from Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*. These two passages feature something like the musical key in which to read Duras and analytic speech as sites for the emergence of the unconscious. More specifically, such passages enable an analysis of the unique

relationship between love, writing, and reading for Duras, with the concept of the letter as one that psychoanalysis after Lacan situates beyond the signifier, emerging across the registers of the dream, the symptom, and the fantasy in the psychoanalytic clinic. The last part of the essay will further bring into focus a few modes of *voiding*, as distinctive effects of love in Duras' screenplay *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and in the text Duras recites in her short film *Césarée* (1979). The voidings, which occur with proper names, plot and stage, and speech and silence, provide an accurate idea of what love as a radical creation, a making that is grounded on the sexual relation's inexistence and the letters of the body, might involve for Duras.

In a session of Seminar XX called "L'amour et le signifiant," Lacan famously stated that love "makes up for (*supplée*) the sexual relation insofar as the latter is inexistent" (59). As other readers of this work have already explained,⁷ what Lacan means by "no sexual relation" is not that sexual intercourse does not exist, but rather that wholeness, as an absolute correspondence of two bodies, or of the two sexes, for instance, is impossible. How does love make up for the impossible sexual relation, then? The myth of love's origin evoked by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*, and recalled by both Freud and Lacan,⁸ posits a previous state of things in which humans had spherical bodies with two heads and two sets of limbs (although already sexed male, female, or androgynous). Since the gods found them threatening, these spherical creatures were cut in half and left longing for their other half, with their bodies marked by this wound at the navel and genitals. This account deserves attention for its content just as much as for its mythical status. Like all myths, it is a construction, and in Plato's works, especially, myths show their supplementary function, there where *logos* reaches its limit,⁹ leaving an enduring urge to speak truly. That supplementary function brings myth and love structurally close together. So while the Platonic myth of love has, to this day, nurtured the fantasy of "finding the one" and of recovering, through "one's other half," a lost state of wholeness, the truth of the myth lies elsewhere, as psychoanalysis emphasizes. Throughout his Seminar XX Lacan insists on making evident the ways in which the fantasy of sexual relation continues to operate, for instance in the discourse of modern science. However, the point, regarding love, is certainly not to simply promote disillusionment from the ideal of the couple and the abandonment of any search for a partner. Instead, the displacement that the myth allows, from the fantasy of the whole to the construction around a navel, or hole, opens up a very different perspective on how love may move us.

Saying jouissance sans forme

It is evident that love was a life-long investigation in Marguerite Duras' writing. From her first widely-read novel from 1950, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, to the late *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* in 1991, the work of writing – although concerning the same event from her adolescence in the previous two examples, in fact – is not about autobiography or memory, but instead about an unsayable, whose force the event of love makes present for those enduring it, and this includes Duras' read-

ers. After writing *L'Amant* in 1984, Duras tried to collaborate on an adaptation of the film directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud and produced by Claude Berri, but she ended up rejecting this project¹⁰ that was still released and must have contributed to making the novel known beyond France.¹¹ Fundamentally, the problem with this film's approach to a text by Duras is that it misses the crucial point of the unsayable. The certainty that "that's not it" pushes Duras, who by that time had directed several films herself, to rewrite the novel and publish *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (with guidelines for its execution as a film or play). This story of rewritings and adaptations may, quite literally, bring to mind Lacan's formulation of love in Seminar XX, as the displacement from contingency to necessity, from "that which stops not being written" to "that which does not stop being written" (184). The crucial point when Lacan makes this statement lies in the negative construction of these formulas, insofar as these negations outline the limits of language and a *jouissance* to which language is inadequate. Indeed, to Lacan's ear it is exactly a "ce n'est pas ça" "that's not it" that formulates "the cry through which the obtained *jouissance* is distinguished from the one awaited. It is where (*où*) what can be said in language becomes specified. Negation by all appearances (*a toute semblance de*) comes from there (*là*). But nothing more" (142). These sentences insist on a location (through the French words "où" and "là") that cannot fully be inhabited by language, a breaking point that prompts the final words "nothing more." As Duras writes on, her orientation is closely related to Lacan's concern for negation and for revealing and upholding the precise location of a gap that Annaud instead misses, seeming to want to cover it up. The crucial moment in *L'Amant* is thus the lovers' mutual confession, once they are together in his bedroom, of a fundamental loneliness: "*Il dit qu'il est seul, atrocement seul avec cet amour qu'il a pour elle. Elle lui dit qu'elle aussi elle est seule. Elle ne dit pas avec quoi.*" ["He says he is alone, atrociously alone with this love he has for her. She says she also is alone. She does not say with what"] (48). This passage shows that Duras' writing has to do with what Lucie Cantin describes as "no longer refer[ring] to a signification, but [...] rather, the means of approximating an inaccessible real. Writing becomes the instrument for calculating the real" (12).

What is most interesting about Duras' insistence on writing love lies in its very effects on her writing style, and on the act of reading for which it makes space. Continuing to write, she reduces the amount of words, the phrases' length, the details of the plot and characters, as though clearing the text to allow the essential elements of love's specificity to emerge. One can describe the transformation across, for instance, the three previously-mentioned novels dealing with the same story, and more broadly across more than four decades of writing (featuring novels, theater, screenplays, and an abrupt halt to writing novels to plunge into film direction instead, during the 1970s) in terms of a reduction of narrative and content to a minimum, to give full force, instead, to the stage and the gestures related to the love event. I find that this transformation in Duras' writing style through unique voiding procedures aims at nothing less than giving access to a nonimaginary experience of love, whereas Annaud's film aims, in his own words, at the spectator's

“identifying with the characters” and building excitement about what he calls “la prise de plaisir” “taking of pleasure,” that is, the sex scenes, so that pleasure can be shown in the erotic encounters between the story’s two lovers.¹² Conversely, what seems relevant about sex in *L’amant* involves the unusual figure of a man in tears with a young girl who, asking to be treated like any other woman this lover would bring to his bed, discovers a transformation of pain into enjoyment, or a coupling of these two sensations, which prompts an image of formlessness:

Et pleurant il le fait. D’abord il y a la douleur. Et puis après cette douleur est prise à son tour, elle est changée, lentement arrachée, emportée vers la jouissance, embrassée à elle.

La mer, sans forme, simplement incomparable. (50)

[And crying he does it. Initially there is pain. And then this pain is taken in turn, it is changed, slowly torn off, swept toward enjoyment, adhered to it.

The sea, formless, simply incomparable.]

But why, one might ask, a nonimaginary experience of “love-making” (commensurate with her *jouissance*, evoked here via the liminal image of the formless sea)? And how does this compulsion to rewrite the same love story, or to repeat what I am calling a voiding in Duras’ creations bear witness to it? As the idiomatic phrase puts it (in various languages, at least in English and French), love is something one *makes* –at once due to, and out of the impossibility of sexual relation, or the fundamental solitude of speaking beings. If, as Lacan’s statements indicate, love is a matter of *making*, insofar as the sexual relation fails, it logically follows that any pre-established idea, image, and word of love are inadequate to the task. Marguerite Duras’ entire oeuvre develops from her own discovery of this very position. Like Aristophanes’ myth and the other speeches about *Eros* in the *Symposium*, the world’s concurrent abundance of platitudes and excellent poetry about love only confirms language’s inadequacy to it. Words are never enough, never just right. Why not? To begin, because, when one is moved to speak, words are already there, ready-made, exchangeable for each other, so they fail to capture love’s uniqueness or singularity. The language of speaking beings is necessarily the Other’s language, as Lacan importantly pointed out, and as Duras is highly aware (and this awareness makes it necessary for Duras to escape platitudes on love in her writing). So how can there be such a thing as love’s singularity, which in the cited passage is liquid and formless (his tears, the formless sea)? Can love be something other than an ideal of civilization that therefore merely contributes to the repression of unconscious desire?

Duras certainly seemed to think so. It should be noted that if it is through writing literature that, as I propose, Duras aims at giving access to a nonimaginary experience of love, literature can have nothing to do with the representation of feelings that would only actually emerge in another plane, such as what is commonly understood by “reality.”¹³ Yet the point is not simply to show that literature,

in this case Durasian, makes up feelings, but rather to explore love as an effect of literature situated beyond the realm of feelings, or in Freudian terms, beyond pleasure. “Making love, as the locution indicates, is poetry,” Lacan states (*Encore*, 92); through this definition, (making) love is removed from the register of pleasure to become a rare, challenging task of creating something with the constraints of language.¹⁴ It is crucial to take into account that this “act of love” involves very different things in a man and a woman, not as gender identities but rather as two positions for speaking subjects.¹⁵ The previously cited passage from *L’amant*, where he is alone “with his love” and “she does not say what she is also alone with” reflects this fundamental difference. In Seminar XX Lacan is curious about a love, *amour*, that would be something different from the approach of an object-cause-of-desire (in a woman), or objet *a*, as narcissistic support (for a man), for which he proposes the spelling *amûr* – a love where “*a-wall*” is in play.

This other, feminine *amour* with its hollow letter “o” restored at the center, as *something real* that resists the signifier – perhaps ravages it, like the Pacific Ocean that destroys the sea wall built to protect the rice fields in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* – is what concerns Duras’ writing. This is where the perspectival shift to what we might figure as the unique mark of a “navel” becomes crucial, so let us now attempt an approach of such a navel.

Irma’s oral cavity and Lol’s hole-word: A reading lesson

The Platonic love myth’s navel as scar or even wound lingering in the body places us on the trail of another “navel” (*Nabel*) and a “hole” (*trou*); these two are key figures in Freud’s *Die Traumdeutung* and Duras’ *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein* respectively. In both cases, the figure emerges where a male reading subject (Jacques Hold and the dreaming Doctor Freud) asks the question “what might have happened?” (*que se serait-il passé?*), considering a woman’s speech and silence (Duras’ Lol, and Freud’s hysteric patient Irma).¹⁶ The “navel of the dream” first appears in a footnote to Freud’s analysis of a part of his own dream of examining Irma’s throat, where he acknowledges that his replacement in the dream of his patient Irma, who he had been unable to fully cure, for her friend, contains the idea that this friend “would have *opened her mouth properly*, and have told [him] more than Irma” (*SE IV*, 111, emphasis in original). In the footnote to this phrase, considering that his analysis of this part of the dream remains incomplete, Freud makes this decisive statement for the practice of psychoanalysis:

There is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable – a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown. (*SE IV*, 111)

The open mouth revealing the oral cavity in Freud’s dream provides not an answer to Irma’s symptoms, but another cavity, the uninterpretable navel of every dream that makes the interpretation of dreams “the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious” (*Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis*). This famous expression opens up, through its double genitive, the possibility of reorienting the relationship to

knowledge, where it is no longer only a matter of the researcher conquering knowledge and making everything known to consciousness, but rather of the researcher undergoing a transformation in the approach of a knowledge proper to the unconscious, or unconscious *savoir*. Lacan speaks to this very displacement of knowledge and of the work of the analyst in the 1970 interview “Radiophonie,” responding to a question on the “discovery of the unconscious” and its effects on epistemology. He states:

The unconscious, one sees, is only a metaphorical term to designate the knowledge (*savoir*) that can only support itself by presenting itself as impossible, so that from there/it (*de ça*), it confirms itself to be real (hear real discourse). (*AE* 425)

Thus, the unconscious is unlike any other place to which a path or “royal road” may lead, and so the “navel” is that impossible and crucial point of support of the unconscious as a knowledge of its own. The analyst taking this royal road is then confronted by something impossible to interpret or bring into signifiers; still, this confrontation is not merely an obstacle to this road’s destination, insofar as it supposes a work of approaching what defies signifiers as something precise that can be confirmed or verified without being betrayed (thus missed) by an interpretation. The context of Lacan’s sentence, a radio interview that takes the title “Radiophonie,” prompts one to notice in the cited phrase Lacan’s emphasis on seeing and hearing (and his final parenthesis even instructs the reader to “hear/understand” “*entendez*”): he punctuates his definition of the unconscious by the parenthetical interjection “on le voit,” which fits in as an idiomatic, rhetorical “one can see.” But, taken literally, the beginning of this phrase reads “the unconscious, one sees it.” If one is to see (although in radio, precisely, one does not see) and also hear, two homophonies of “voit” also become audible, namely “voix” and “voie,” which would invite one to consider that the resonances of “voice” (*voix* – a partial object or mode of *objet petit a*) and “road” (*voie* – for instance “*la voie royale vers l’inconscient*” “the royal road to the unconscious” or the radio as a kind of medicine administered by “*voie auriculaire*” “otic route”) indirectly tell us more about how one might “see” this unconscious. And this would be the difference between the unconscious merely not appearing or being irrelevant to knowledge, and, quite differently, as these displacements help us “see,” its distinct presentation as impossible, in the precise location of “ça” we had previously encountered in the complaint “*ce n’est pas ça*,” since Lacan writes “*pour que de ça il se confirme d’être réel*,” where the pronoun *ça* grammatically refers to the unconscious knowledge “presenting itself as impossible,” and this location is, literally, *ça*, that is to say, the *id*.¹⁷

With these questions, of roads, voices, and the location of the real, let now us turn to Duras’ *Ravissement*. Jacques Hold (the narrator who will reveal his name and part in Lol’s story midway through the novel) gives the following hypothetical account of the traumatic scene that marked Lol and by which he is moved to write:

*Lol ne va pas loin dans l'inconnu sur lequel s'ouvre cet instant. Elle ne dispose d'aucun souvenir même imaginaire, elle n'a aucune idée sur cet inconnu. Mais ce qu'elle croit, c'est qu'elle devait y pénétrer, que c'était ce qu'il lui fallait faire, que ç'aurait été pour toujours, pour sa tête et pour son corps, leur plus grande douleur et leur plus grande joie confondues jusque dans leur définition devenue unique mais innommable faute d'un mot. J'aime à croire, comme je l'aime, que si Lol est silencieuse dans la vie c'est qu'elle a cru, l'espace d'un éclair, que ce mot pouvait exister. Faute de son existence, elle se tait. Ç'aurait été un mot-absence, un mot-trou, creusé en son centre d'un trou où tous les autres mots auraient été enterrés. On n'aurait pas pu le dire mais on aurait pu le faire résonner. Immense, sans fin, un gong vide...*¹⁸ (*Le ravissement*, 47-48)

[Lol does not go far in the unknown this instant opens onto. She does not have any memory available, not even imaginary, she has no idea about this unknown. But what she believes, is that she had to penetrate it, that was what she had to do, it would have been forever, for her mind and body, the greatest pain and the greatest joy confounded to their very definition, turned unique but unnamable for lack of a word. I love to believe, like I love her, that if Lol is silent in life it's that she believed, in the space of a lightning bolt, that this word could exist. For lack of its existence, she is silent. It would have been an absence-word, a hole-word, pierced at its center by a hole, of this hole where all the other words would have been buried. It wouldn't have been possible to say it, but it would have been made to resonate. Immense, without end, an empty gong...]

The “hole-word” in Duras’ novel emerges as its narrator, the man whose words on an event he never witnessed are all we have to read, tries to approach an experience of Lol V. Stein, the protagonist who had witnessed a “ravishing” love scene that disrupted her life profoundly and will (ten years later) have disruptive consequences in others’ lives too. But what is this scene? Truth is thus deliberately destabilized to an extreme, on every level of the text – from the event’s nature (love itself?) to the man taking on the role of witness (who was not there), to the account’s place (within a novel authored by Duras). It is crucial to note that “this instant” at the beginning of the passage is not only something Jacques Hold missed, but imagines or hears that Lol saw; rather, it is an instant Lol herself never saw and that would have followed the scene of her fiancé, Michael Richardson, forgetting about her while dancing with Anne Marie Stretter until the Casino’s closing time at dawn.¹⁹ She has no memory available for this instant; Duras’ point is that no one does, and yet, it is concerned with “the greatest pain and the greatest joy confounded to their very definition,” a very close description of feminine jouissance to the one found in *L’amant* twenty years later. Above all, this impossible instant that escapes any conventional means of verification, has consequences.

Freud’s text may at first seem very different in its position with regard to truth. The idea of a “navel of every dream” emerges in the context of Freud’s efforts to demonstrate the technique of dream-interpretation, and of his wish to establish the valid-

ity of psychoanalysis in the medical field at the time of Irma's treatment, which the dream of finding something in Irma's throat reveals. Yet, as psychoanalysis implies, and as explicitly stated in Freud's chapter on his dream of Irma, the peculiar clinical context that concerns Freud certainly places sexuality and desire at its center. Moreover, Freud is dealing with dreams, in other words, with accounts of events that only "happen" to the dreamer, or the most personal and least verifiable of stories (in order to establish that dreams fulfill the dreamer's inadmissible wish). Just as Jacques Hold is only trying to approach something unknown but distinctly present in *Lol*, Freud does not know what makes Irma suffer (even if he supposes that Irma's being a young widow plays an important part), as he can acknowledge when analyzing the dream in his book, that is, after the treatment, which, he admits, occurred at a time when he was worried about his reputation. As both men, moved by a desire to know about the other's (a woman's) unconscious desire, interrogate the cause of a rebellious jouissance in these women's bodies, they approach a mysterious, hollow unknown, a cavity that transforms their own search and even, one might say, their own being. Freud leaves the position of wanting success and his peer's recognition to embrace his commitment to the unconscious, which is indifferent to ideals of success. For his part, Hold – one might also write "Holed" and even "Loled" – follows *Lol* back to the stage and staging of this love event that has the status of a primal scene, losing any sense of mastery along the way.²⁰

Since "it wouldn't have been possible to say" this "hole-word," and the "spot" discerned by Freud in every dream is "unplumbable" or uninterpretable, "hole" and "navel"²¹ indicate the necessity of a different speech. Furthermore, there is something not only hollow and mysterious, but also endless about these hollow figures, since, "pierced at its center by a hole," the "word-hole" discloses a *mise-en-abyme*, exactly, which is why its gong-like resonance would be "immense, without end," and since the "navel" Irma's oral cavity reveals is not simply an opaque spot, but instead an opening onto "the unknown" both texts underscore, as the limit of the verifiable where something limitless begins. The navel or hole-word thus shows and exceeds the limits of the signifier, there where the drives attest to the other, non-phallic jouissance Lacan discusses in the seminar for which he chose the title *Encore*, a word to suggest exactly this infinite excess beyond meaning ("still," "again," "more"). Duras and Freud underscore here a force of the unsayable, resistant to any translation and resonating *ad infinitum*, a force presented as distinctly feminine in Lacan's Seminar XX.

The Lacanian concept of "the letter" is highly relevant to discern the operations of the different speech required by the perspective of the navel or hole, in relation to literature as much as to feminine jouissance. The letter in Lacan's writing and teaching repeatedly features a link of the unconscious to literary productions (e.g., Poe, Provençal courtly poetry, Duras, Joyce and, less extensively, Beckett²²). In his 1965 "Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras, du ravissement de *Lol* V. Stein," a year after the novel's publication, Lacan writes that in paying homage to Duras he is bearing witness to the fact that "the practice of the letter converges with the use of

the unconscious" (193). He also recalls Freud's claim, from *Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's Gradiva*, that the artist precedes the psychoanalyst and paves the way for the latter, who would be wrong to "play the psychologist" (*faire le psychologue*) in speaking about an artist. This important point emphasizes the dimension of writing, reading, and the letter that Lacan works to foreground at the beginning of his homage, by contemplating different possible readings of the name, or "cipher," as he calls it, "Lol V. Stein," the double genitive in the title, and by interrogating the relationships, not only between characters in the novel, but also between the author and her readers. He explicitly takes the position of reader, for instance, when he proposes that Duras ravishes "us" with her text (191).²³ His proposition raises a question, first of all, about Lacan as reader. What effects does Duras' ravishing have over his notion of the letter?

One might say an effect appears as the homage itself, the production of this writing. In light of this question, one should also bear in mind that writing and the letter logically imply a temporal lag, between the time of the inscription and the time of reading, and that what becomes inscribed can remain dormant for a long time. This is in fact a key to the powerful "ravishing" that takes place in the novel, since, as previously mentioned, Lol's experience of "ravishing," or of the hole-word, paves the way (or rather *unpaves* the way) for the encounter of its resonance by those around her, not so much immediately, but rather, ten years later. Analogously, the specific effects on Lacan of the hole-word in *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein* are, I find, confirmed almost ten years later (again!), in the striking resonance between the cited passage from Duras' 1964 novel, where "for lack of [this word's] existence, [Lol] is silent" and Lacan's stress, in 1973, on "mot" "word" as the negation of words, "motus" "not a word," that is to say, on word as silence, or uncanny word that names its absence: hole-word. Furthermore, this aspect of "mot" comes up in the seminar when Lacan speaks of feminine *jouissance*, about which, to the psychoanalyst's frustration (as featured in Freud's dream of Irma's throat), women who may experience it remain silent: "not a word! We've never been able to get anything out of them" (*Encore* 96). The subsequent seminar session in *Encore* specifies the place of this "no answer, not a word" (*pas de réponse, motus*) (79) as marking the limit and failure of meaning, remarkably close to the "empty gong" Jacques Hold (Lacan's uncanny namesake²⁴) proposes to think the hole-word in the novel.

While the letter brings Lacan close to literature *qua* practice of the letter, the concept of the letter also plays a crucial role in the clinical context itself, where the analysand's speech, rather than written text, is the sole resource.²⁵ The approach to love that literature facilitates for Lacan in fact reveals the central role of letters and reading in analytic work. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the analysand's demand to the analyst as "subject supposed to know," combined with the analyst's desire which supposes a *savoir* to the analysand's unconscious, is the condition to initiate an analysis and what sustains its work of deciphering and construction. Lacan even makes an equation between "transference" and love.²⁶ This is what enables the analyst to slip out of the position of frustration at the lack

of a word from the hysteric's mouth, interpreted as resistance, in order to embrace the emergence of the uninterpretable hole-word, as Jacques Hold does.²⁷ Love, understood as the address of something unsayable to someone supposed to know what this Thing is about, along with the analyst's love of the unsayable Thing, can then be a cornerstone of the analytic experience. This configuration is remarkably close to what Duras sets up in *Le ravissement*, insofar as the core of Lol's experience resides in this unknown Thing that is not the scene per se of her fiancé stripping Anne Marie Stretter's dress off, but rather what this scene opens onto and what it opens up for the man who insists on confronting this Thing in Lol, and for the reader as well. Millot considers it "a laying bare" of the subject (as *objet a*); Lacan, as Millot recalls, indicates that this laying bare is about removing "the dress" of the narcissistic image. Love would then emerge in this work, between two, of laying bare the subject's unsayable Thing. Obviously neither the reader, nor Hold, nor Lol, nor Duras are demanding an analysis; but one can say that Lol's letter or hole-word commands, from the unconscious, the linkage of this articulation's different elements.

It is worth considering that, in the chapter on the dream of Irma's throat, Freud writes and transcribes the dream word by word, in order to read it closely. This technical detail, of following the dream to the letter, is crucial. For, if dream interpretation is "the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious," the treatment of the dream as an original writing to be read, a writing organized around an uninterpretable navel that connects to the unknown, is fundamental to the position of the analyst. Indeed, Lacan presents the analyst's task before speaking beings as one of reading, specifically, "the troubling effects of a saying (*dire*)" (*Encore* 60). This certainly includes the dreams analysts bring to their analysis, along with symptoms, slips of the tongue, and acting-outs. He also points out that something speaking beings make from this troubling saying is "this feeling called/said (*dit*) of love," and that, while cultivating this feeling – or "making it last" ("que ça dure encore") in the body ("en corps") – is known to result in "the reproduction of bodies," it may also produce a different effect, and that is writing (*l'écrit*) (60). Duras, it seems, would exemplify the latter path, beyond the clinical frame. Let us take Lacan's condensed claims apart to consider their implications and gain a closer look at the link it proposes between love and writing. First, the analyst is there to read the troubling effects of a saying. If there were no trouble, there would be nothing to read. In another part of the seminar Lacan states that what calls to be read is "the letter" (*Encore* 37-38). The letter can thus be considered a troubling effect of a saying, insofar as it inscribes itself in the body, speech, and life of the subject. Lacan proposes that the analyst reads these letters in an other's saying; this entails that the analysand enduring these letters inscribed in him/her addresses them to his/her partner (where they may result in the reproduction of bodies) and/or to the analyst, where the consequences are very different, insofar as the work with the letters of the body is here put through the constraints of speech, the analyst's reception of these letters takes into account this excess, beyond the semblance where

Lacan situates meaning (underscored by Lacan in the expression “this feeling said of/called love” that suggests the clichés and ready-made feelings to which love is susceptible). In the clinical context, writing as another possible result of love would be about finding a nonimaginary way with these letters, a formula aimed at the construction of an *objet a*. Lacan situates such a process at the end of an analysis. This work of isolating and transmitting the letters and space of love beyond imaginary formations is also central to Duras’ writing, and it seems to require, especially, the emptying out of stage, name, plot, and even the subject’s speech, all of which has a unique effect in its reader. For this reason, the production of a scene gains increasing importance for Duras, emerging in screenplays, films and stage plays, as the novel form becomes extremely sparse.²⁸

Losing the Name, Clearing the Stage

To focus on such a transmission of letters, I will now turn to some of the voidings, or, one might say, to productions of the hole-word’s resonance, through which Duras insists on love as a fundamental creation beyond pleasure and centered on the unsayable.

Titles such as *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and *L’amant* (1984) may well convey the importance of love in Duras’ work to any reader, before even entering into what love might involve. Yet the fact that her works are also repeatedly named after places in the world – Hiroshima, North China, India, Venice, and Caesarea, for example²⁹ – is no minor detail: beyond providing contexts for love’s emergence, in Duras’ writing these proper names linked to specific political regimes undergo a literary operation that confronts the symbolic from a distinctly feminine perspective. Let us consider, in the titles *Hiroshima mon amour* and *Césaire* the voidings of name and place through which Duras offers encounters of this rare experience of love.

Duras’ screenplay for Alain Resnais’ film released in 1960 begins with a synopsis that brings a woman into focus as the protagonist of a story in Hiroshima in 1957, whereas in the film our first impression is of a dialogue taking place between a woman and a man whose faces we do not immediately see. In the script’s synopsis it is immediately stated that the woman is French, that she is an actress abroad, participating in a film about peace after the Hiroshima bomb, and, importantly, that the woman will never be named in the film:

C’est la veille de son retour en France que cette Française, qui ne sera jamais nommée dans le film – cette femme anonyme – rencontrera un Japonais (ingénieur, ou architecte), et qu’ils auront ensemble une histoire d’amour très courte.
(9)

[It is on the day before her return from France that this Frenchwoman, who will never be named in the film –this anonymous woman – will meet a

Japanese man (engineer, or architect), and that they will have together a very short love story.]

The only capitalized names the original French text grants to these characters in the synopsis, then, are “Frenchwoman” and “Japanese (man),” cast in an anonymous light related to the fact that in the plot they are strangers to one another and can logically only remain thus, given the tight time constraints of her stay in Hiroshima for the making of the film. The woman’s profession, “actress,” and condition in the site of the events, “foreigner,” only contribute to the anonymity Duras in the script highlights in the woman, even though he is not named either. In fact, the specification of anonymity and the indication that the woman never be named in the film go much further, both in terms of their significance and of Duras’ writing strategies beyond this particular screenplay. We can better grasp the stakes of Duras’ insistence on the woman’s namelessness through the example of her 1979 short film *Césarée*,³⁰ which receives its title from the Palestine city of Caesarea. The text Duras recites in the film is her construction of the consequences of the end of Jean Racine’s 1670 tragedy, the controversial *Bérénice*, which tells the love story between two historical characters, the Palestinian queen of Caesarea, Bérénice, whose name gives the play its title, and Titus, heir to the Roman Empire. The play evokes the beginning of this love relationship during Titus’ excursion in Jerusalem, in 70 ACE, where he met and fell in love with Bérénice. Duras’ film importantly recalls the violence this historical event involved by referring to him only as “Lui. Le criminel,/ Celui qui avait détruit le Temple de Jérusalem” (97) “Him. The criminal,/ The one who had destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem.” Duras’ film title has a metonymical function, but why, one might ask, does she replace Bérénice’s name with that of her city, which plays a very minor role in Racine’s tragedy, as does the fact that Titus destroyed the Second Temple? “Césarée” is only mentioned once in Racine’s play, by the melancholic Antiochus, a friend of Titus and Roman soldier who has always been silently in love with Bérénice and saw her follow Titus to Rome. After five years of enjoying their love in Rome, the death of Vespasian comes between Titus and Bérénice, since Roman law forbids the marriage of an emperor to a foreigner. As in *Hiroshima mon amour*, in *Césarée*’s poetic text this woman is never named; instead, the name of her abandoned city initiates Duras’ account and is repeated intermittently across the whole text in French and Latin. “Césarée, Césarée” is the refrain Duras recites emphatically, stating that it is a name, a word: “the place is called thus: Césarée, Césarée.” As an inevitable endpoint to anything the voice starts describing, the function of this refrain is to introduce a cut, a fall into silence.³¹ Duras’ punctuation of the great tragedy *Bérénice*, which is exemplary of all her writing, aims exactly at what Juliet Flower MacCannell has discerned on the importance of emptiness with regard to creation for Lacan:

Marking the emptiness left by the untouchability of the Thing is, for Lacan, the essence of all art, all making. Re-marking this emptiness, *noticing* that it has constantly to be renewed because it always tends to come under the sway of the signifier and lose its value as sign, is a marking-out of another

foundation, a different set of directions, paths, limits, coordinates for the subject and its drives. (251)

Together with the repetitions of “Césarée,” Duras’ strategy of never naming Berenice in a work that would situate itself after the end of the tragedy where, as Racine and his critics were well aware, no one dies and nothing happens (this is what the 17th-century critics find controversial for Classicist theater), except the separation of the play’s three main characters who must continue to love alone when Bérénice decides to leave Rome, aims at making evident the creation of this gap, one that cannot be filled by any person’s name, together with the name of a place that in Racine’s text evokes emptiness, when Antiochus says, confessing his love to Bérénice:

Rome vous vit, Madame, arriver avec lui. / Dans l’Orient désert quel devient mon ennui !/ Je demeurai longtemps errant dans Césarée, / Lieux charmants où mon cœur vous avait adorée. (Act I, scene IV)

[Rome saw you, Madam, arrive with him. / In the deserted Orient how great my ennui grew! / For a long time I remained drifting in Caesarea, / The charming whereabouts where my heart had adored you.]

This empty place (“*l’Orient désert*”) is described by Duras as also completely destroyed, its columns by the sea fallen, so it recalls the ravages of the Roman intervention, whose highlight is the Temple’s destruction that set the Jewish people adrift; she thus stresses this “adrift,” listless condition in which separation from their beloved leaves the three characters, with Bérénice’s loss of her proper name or the name her lover would have called her, replaced by a name that evokes ruins, as proof of the ravages of love –as the very pain of separation.³²

Such a production of the gap is also at stake in the title *Hiroshima mon amour*, a title that constructs a strange phrase suggesting an equation between “Hiroshima” and “my love,” as if Hiroshima were the name of a speaker’s love, or beloved, which, given the first affirmations in the synopsis, indicates that this first person speaking in the title would have to be the nameless Frenchwoman.³³ But “Hiroshima” is already a metonym for the first nuclear bombing in history, so it cannot help calling up destruction and annihilation in a continuum and on equal footing with what a speaking being can call “my love.”³⁴ What blatantly disappears in the title’s odd locution, then, is the usual “a-mur” in which the addressee of the designation “my love” has the role of an object propping up the subject’s specular image, in a relation Lacan identified on the male side of his formulas of sexuation in Seminar XX. This cannot possibly mean that the fall of the “a-wall” separating the subject from *das Ding* gives way to a full encounter with the Other, or the realization of the fantasy of finding and forming “the One.” The love she, who says “Hiroshima mon amour,” names cannot possibly signify a cultural ideal; much like Racine’s Bérénice, she loves and addresses the lack in the Other, the unrepresentable gap in the symbolic.

The situation in Racine's play, on the one hand, impossible love between a woman and a man (or two), and, on the other, a political regime built on death and destruction (although Racine does not highlight this dark underside³⁵), closely resembles that in *Hiroshima mon amour*, where Duras presents her female character as an "anonymous woman." While the couple are strangers to one another, she is, like Berenice in Rome, the stranger in Hiroshima, and as it turns out, a stranger to herself as well. Paradoxically, and this is crucial to the implications of love and writing for Duras, the two strangers do not merely engage in a carnal form of shared intimacy, but also in another intimacy, of a traumatic sort. The Frenchwoman reveals to her Japanese lover that, fourteen years before their meeting she has experienced madness, upon the death of her German boyfriend, a soldier in Nevers, her hometown, during the occupation. This relationship, she recalls, led to public shaming – her hair was shorn in public as punishment³⁶ – and to a period of solitary confinement, a suspension from the social order which she and the Japanese man identify as "eternity" (*l'éternité*) (94, 97). Hiroshima, the city where the casual encounter takes place, the man's hometown, has, in turn, been destroyed by the atomic bomb in the same war. The synopsis shows that Duras knows exactly what she is doing when she decides to tell a brief, adulterous love story against the backdrop of Second World War catastrophes, instead of working on a commissioned documentary about the Hiroshima horrors. Duras clearly states that the point, for her, is

en finir avec la description de l'horreur par l'horreur... mais faire renaître cette horreur de ces cendres en la faisant s'inscrire en un amour qui sera forcément particulier et "émerveillant." Et auquel on croira davantage que s'il était produit partout ailleurs dans le monde, dans un endroit que la mort n'a pas conservé. (11)

[to be done with the description of horror by horror... but to reawaken this horror from these ashes by making it inscribe itself in a love that will be necessarily particular and "dazzling" (*émerveillant*). And in which one will believe more than if it were produced anywhere else in the world, in a place that death did not *preserve*.]

The passage moves from general "horror" "*l'horreur*" to "this horror" "*cette horreur*" (Hiroshima) that becomes *inscribed* in an also specific love, "*un amour*" with the implication that this inscription of horror, or the trauma, is key to its "dazzling" kind of beauty. This set of precisions, through definite and indefinite articles for horror and love, consistent with a register of anonymity, is immediately followed by a consideration on the conditions for believing in love, after the Second World War's unthinkable destruction of humanity and the social order, of course, but also after a certain awareness of illusion, of "make-believe" things, and the problem this awareness raises when it comes to love. Had the plot's love affair taken place anywhere else, somewhere far away from the site of these traumas, a place not specifically wiped clear by destruction, the affair would easily fall into the old ideals of completion, unity, harmony of two bodies finding their other half.³⁷ The love affair would have then evoked the couples that, as Freud remarks in "Delusion and Dream in Jensen's *Gradiva*," triggered so much disdain in the outcast protagonist,

the archeologist Norbert Hanold, namely, the many “Edwins and Angelinas” on their honeymoon in Italy (*SE IX*, 15).

Duras sets forth a very different outcome of the love affair in *Hiroshima*, through the intersections of proper names, of persons and places. If the woman and man in the synopsis are “the Frenchwoman” and “the Japanese (man),” once the script’s dialogues begin, the characters’ speech is distinguished by the words “elle” “her” and “lui” “him.” This is already a reduction from proper names to anonymity and to two pronouns marking sexual difference between speakers, to be read as the mark of “the horror’s ashes inscribed” in these two bodies. The synopsis prepares us to face this dialogue with a final, important, note, which is that the encounter leads the characters (far from a honeymoon or the monotony of marriage) to an impasse that silences them (“*Il s’agit bien d’amour. Ils ne peuvent plus que se taire.*” “It is in fact love. They can no longer but be silent.” 17), and, paradoxically, that the lovers’ final exchanges are reduced to still calling each other:

Pas d’aveux échangés. Plus un geste.

Simplement, ils s’appelleront encore. Quoi? NEVERS, HIROSHIMA. Ils ne sont en effet personne à leurs yeux respectifs. Ils sont des noms de lieu, des noms qui n’en sont pas. C’est, comme si le désastre d’une femme tondu à NEVERS et le désastre de HIROSHIMA se répondaient EXACTEMENT.

Elle lui dira: «Hiroshima, c’est ton nom.» (17)

[No exchange of confessions. Not another gesture.

Simply, they will call each other still. What? NEVERS, HIROSHIMA. They are no longer in fact anyone to each other’s eyes. They are place names, names that aren’t. It is, as if the disaster of a woman shorn in NEVERS and the disaster of HIROSHIMA responded to each other EXACTLY.

She will say to him: “Hiroshima, it’s your name.”]

Thus, Duras is concerned with this “dazzling” love leading to a different way of seeing the beloved. They have become “no one” to each other’s eyes, or toponyms. To become “the name of a place,” as both this text and *Césarée* indicate, is very far from the imaginary stakes captured in the locution “to make a name for oneself,” to the point of a place being named in honor of that “self” (in the way that, for instance, the state and capital city named “Washington” or the airport “Charles de Gaulle” uphold the image and personae of the political characters they commemorate). It entails, instead, the voiding of a specular identity, and the exposure or revelation of a fundamental wound. Instead of the dream of a man and a woman matching each other perfectly, filling each other’s lack, the place names are metonymies of wounds that “correspond exactly” without covering each other up (with the woman whose hair is shaved off as a well-known image of castration).

The dazzling beauty of this love resides in this revelation, and in a different way of seeing that emerges at the end of the love affair, which also casts a different light

on the social order, or the regimes those places ordinarily name. In love's beauty, a glimpse at their unassimilable core, or horror, becomes possible. Why, one might ask, would this horror be at the core of Hiroshima, and of any other city? Obviously, the 1945 nuclear bomb in Hiroshima is not the whole story of this place, as it is also not the story of every place; but the bomb and the event are privileged, unsettling manifestations of what is inherent, though denied, to the very project of civilization, namely, the death drive in its most annihilating power. The "forbidden" love Duras and Resnais stage in the film is there to remind us, readers, viewers, that the death drive at work both in the lovers and the world disaster is beyond pleasure and the law, if by the latter we understand submission to the rules of an authority.³⁸ In this way love is set forth as a nonimaginary experience.

In bringing passion between a man and a woman and historical trauma together in this screenplay, Duras' text supports itself on the fact that, beyond the context she puts into play in this story, the relation between the carnal and traumatic modes of intimacy is no accident from a psychoanalytic standpoint, even if the dimension of trauma does not always make its way to the surface in the form of word exchanges between lovers carried to the point of exhaustion, as it does in *Hiroshima mon amour*. What, after all, makes carnal intimacy possible in a human being, if not that its organism has suffered the traumatic intrusion of something impossible yet powerful, which takes hold of the drives and pushes them beyond the pleasure principle as the one responsible for homeostasis? This structural trauma that carves out a body in the psychoanalytic sense (also in the sense of the fragmented bodies of Aristophanes' myth in the *Symposium*) and that logically precedes the being's entrance into language is evoked (and disguised) by the unconscious primal fantasy that supposes an encounter with the Other's jouissance. The fact that this trauma is impossible, that it finds no correspondence in anything in language or the world, or in Willy Apollon's terms that it is "a pure mental representation, a power of thought" whose distinctive mark is "the capacity to represent to oneself that which has never taken place and does not exist"³⁹ sets in motion another kind of sensibility in the body, at odds with that strictly related to organic functions. *Hiroshima mon amour* evokes this logic in the initial dialogues between "lui" and "elle," where they argue, while making love, about her visions of the destruction of Hiroshima, which he insists she could not have possibly seen.

If speaking is the effect of a fundamental trauma in a human being, this sensibility beyond the organism, and always inadequate to language, is precisely what the body addresses to a partner. This is what is at stake in the intimacy between "elle" and "lui" in *Hiroshima mon amour*, and also between "elle" and her German lover in Nevers. In fact, I would say that the point of Duras' inclusion of a previous story of the woman's "first love" in the love affair with the Japanese man, more than a decade later, is to punctuate the specificity of the trauma in the woman's body, that is to say, that the inscription it makes, giving rise to that body's sensibility beyond instinct and pleasure, does not reside in this Japanese man or that German one, but rather in a real whose correspondence in the world is strictly impossible.⁴⁰ Further-

more, the woman in Hiroshima confronts this quite directly, which is why telling her youth's tragic love story to this man for the first time (103) results in a state of solitary errancy in the void, reminiscent of Antiochus' previously cited verse about being lost in Césarée. Duras' screenplay for *Hiroshima* evokes this through descriptions of the night in Hiroshima, especially the image of the river that follows the woman's account of her first love. The subsequent scene begins with an image of the river in Hiroshima filling up and emptying itself out at different hours, the different possible views of this body of water, and of the river's mouth: "*C'est là que finit Hiroshima et commence le Pacifique*," "It is there that Hiroshima ends and the Pacific begins" (85). This image of emptiness, of the city without its lovers, of literal emptying out and filling up of the river, and of the shore that outlines the difference between city and sea evokes, in turn, Lacan's birds-eye view on the desolate Siberian plane with the river coursing through it in his 1970 "Lituraterre," written on a flight returning to France from Japan, in fact. This unusual view allows him to consider the rain runoff (*ruissellement*) on the surface, which prompts a meditation on the constitution of the subject from the conjunction of "the first trait and what erases it" (16). Writing, at stake in this process that calls for a trait that bars the subject, allows the separation or shore (*littoral*) "in between center and absence, between *savoir* and *jouissance*... [to] turn toward the litteral" (16), that is, to somehow leave a trace. While all subjects are barred, writing as the work of the letter is defined as "that which in the real presents itself as an erosion (*ravinement*)" (17) of the body and of meaning by *jouissance*. What Lacan calls "literature," with the work of analytic reading and the shifts or turns it seeks in the subject in mind as well, consists in an original bringing forth of this erosion. The insertion of these views of the river's mouth and the shore between the city and the Pacific in *Hiroshima mon amour* has to do with bringing forth the real of love, beyond all memory.

It is important to recall here that the definition of love at the end of Lacan's *Encore*, as a slippage from what stops not being written to what does not stop being written, introduces the inscription of traces in the body (184), but as Paul Verhaeghe states, these traces "cannot be written in the sense of the signifier," which makes them "not understandable or knowable for the Other of the signifier" (127). Lacan states that "it is about love being impossible, and about the sexual relation's wreckage in nonsense, which does not at all decrease the interest we must have for the Other" (*Encore* 110). Thus, something of the impossible, as that which does not stop not being written, remains, and its transmission is essential to love in Duras' writing.

I previously mentioned that in *Césarée*, this toponym replaces the person name Bérénice because of her separation from the beloved who would have called her by her name; it indicates this specific loss at the end of the tragedy. I also pointed out the repetitiveness of the name "Césarée," its role of opening a kind of gap within the account Duras voices, and the explicit reference to its being a word, a name that echoes *after* the dialogues and the story Racine's verses tell have come to an end. *Bérénice* was described by Roland Barthes as Racine's "aphasic play"; indeed, the whole play involves the difficulty of speaking, about the impending separation

for Titus and Bérénice, and about unrequited love for Antiochus. But this “aphasia” extends beyond the specific circumstances of *Bérénice*, or rather, it is something the play exemplifies beyond itself about love as such. I had suggested at the beginning of this essay that speaking truly about love as something other than a set of internalized ideals presents a paradox, due to the fact that language comes from the Other. Barthes’ observation about Racine’s tragedy is highly relevant to what Duras stresses in her *Césarée* (“rien que l’endroit et le mot” “nothing but the place and the name” 95) as much as in *Hiroshima mon amour*, with the titles and these indications that the lovers no longer speak to each other after coming up against the impasse of love without a signifier, figured in *Hiroshima* as the unbearable juxtaposition of love and death. In an appendix, Duras writes about “*l’absolu de la douleur*,” “the absoluteness of pain” endured by the woman, played by Emmanuelle Riva, when, in her account to the Japanese man and the film’s viewers, she gets to the moment of watching her German lover die.

Riva a cessé de nous parler. Elle a cessé, tout simplement. ... Nous ne pouvons rien faire pour elle. Qu’attendre. Attendre que la douleur prenne en elle une forme reconnaissable et décente. (133)

[Riva has ceased to speak to us. She has ceased, simply. ... We can’t do anything for her. But wait. Wait for the pain in her to acquire a recognizable and decent form.]

The formlessness of this pain in this description certainly recalls the formless sea of *jouissance* in *L’amant*, where we found pain and enjoyment adhered to each other. Like the effect of silence, formlessness is certainly important to discern the love Duras’ writing sets forth beyond ready-made feelings. Most interestingly in this passage, the phrases’ inclusion of the spectators/readers, and Duras’ collapsing of registers to distinguish actress from character, brings this “we” to the very plane of the woman’s Japanese lover, who can listen to her account and to her silence in a way that welcomes something that exceeds memory and the possibility of any proof, and that also exceeds “recognition and decency.” To welcome this excess of her “ceasing” in “the absolute of pain” which is unsayable and also impossible to see as such, is also to be moved. Duras’ staging targets this interpellation, which, as Lucie Cantin explains, concerns “what was inscribed in the body in the form of unnamed, censored, and repressed experiences” in a way that “opens up a space in the body for the return of a real *jouissance*” (24). In this mode of reading or listening to what cannot be recognized, without rushing to fill the void it produces and transmits, one may also locate the act of love that would distinguish itself from “a-mur.”

Notes

1. “You, who know the thing love is,/ Ladies, see if I have it in my heart./ I will tell you what I am experiencing,/ It is new for me, I know nothing about it.” All translations in this essay are mine except otherwise noted.

2. That courtly love was understood as a form of desire is manifest in the following lines from the well-known Castilian poet Jorge Manrique's *Diziendo qué cosa es amor* (*Saying the thing love is*), whose title the aria in this essay's epigraph closely echoes: "una ravia deseosa/que no sabe qué es la cosa/que desea tanto ver" (*a desirous fury/that does not know what the thing is/that is so desires to see*).
3. She is the addressee of the troubadours' song, and of the trouvères', at least of Na Bieiris de Roman. See her "Na María pretç e fina valors..." (in Roubaud, *Les troubadours*).
4. Braunstein writes of "the neurotic condition of existence" as marked by an impotence to name the object of desire, whereas traversing the analytic experience opens up "an area of impossibility beyond the signifier" (302).
5. *The Marriage of Figaro* in Mozart's version as well as in Beaumarchais' comedy ends with the marriages of Figaro to Susana, and, as mentioned, of Cherubino to Barbarina. Both couples are commoners and the Conde, who is cheating on the Contessa, spends his time chasing after all the women and attempting to thwart Figaro's and Cherubino's approach to women (Figaro wants to marry Susana, and Cherubino, who has a special infatuation for the Contessa, chases after several women). This plot reflects the ideals of the French Revolution insofar as the authority's interest in keeping happiness all to himself (in the form of enjoying all the women) is degraded and defeated, while the commoners ultimately obtain a right to happiness (in the official mode of marriage to one woman within their own social standing).
6. Kristyn Gorton has commented on the importance of this separation or lack in Duras' work, presenting it as an alternative to psychoanalytic and feminist theories, both of which she considers as attempts to resolve the lack. My essay stresses the way in which psychoanalysis embraces the creative and aesthetic possibilities to which lack gives rise when it is not "solved." Like Gorton, I find Duras' work with lack especially forceful.
7. See, for instance, Bruce Fink, "Knowledge and Jouissance," and more recently Alenka Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*
8. See, for instance, Freud's *Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's Gradiva* and Lacan's "Position of the Unconscious" and "Lituraterre."
9. Jacques Derrida's "La Pharmacie de Platon" remains an important analysis of this complex problem in Plato's philosophy. For an account of the role of myths in Plato in relation to previous uses in Greek texts, see Caitlin Partenie's introduction to *Plato's Myths*.
10. See <https://www.marguerite-duras.com/L-amant.php>.
11. According to the website [marguerite-duras.com](https://www.marguerite-duras.com), it has been translated into 43 languages.
12. *Jean-Jacques Annaud Tourne L'amant*. Renn Productions. Available at <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xiuvq>
13. Leslie Hill has explored the impossible status of desire and love in Duras in a comprehensive study that highlights the different forms that impossibility takes, through prohibitions and taboos, in Duras' plots across the decades. See his *Marguerite Duras: Apocalyptic Desires*.
14. On "enabling constraints" in literature see Tracy McNulty, "Constraint Degree Zero: The Literal Practice of the Oulipo" in *Wrestling with the Angel*.

15. In spite of the well-known feminist and queer criticism against sexuation, Lacan's statements are very nuanced in this seminar's presentation of the formulas of sexuation; he repeats that "man" and "woman" are signifiers and positions in which subjects situate themselves. He considers, for instance, the mystic Saint John of the Cross on the feminine side of his formulas of sexuation. Other commentators of Lacan have addressed this issue. See, for instance, *Reading Seminar XX*, Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*, and more recently Shanna de la Torre in *Sex for Structuralists*.
16. Emma Wilson compellingly proposes a female reader position in this novel, through the character Tatiana in *Le ravissement*. See her *Sexuality and the Reading Encounter*. My analysis coincides with Wilson's in stressing the destabilization of the reader and reconfiguration of the quest for knowledge the novel undertakes.
17. In a related gesture, Lacan refers to the Provençal *Gai sçavoir* poetry contests to bring forth the approach of the letter as a *ça voir*, a knowledge that is an "id-seeing" in *Télévision*, 40.
18. Duras, Marguerite. *Le ravissement de Lol. V. Stein*. Paris: Gallimard, 1964. 54. Serge André quotes this Durasian concept from her novel to explain feminine castration in psychoanalysis. See his *Que veut-une femme?*, 186-87.
19. Catherine Millot has developed a reading of this instant as primal scene. She states that this passage where the "hole-word" appears "calls to mind a sort of primary repression" (69), and she considers Lol's engagement with it as "equivalent to the construction of the fantasy in the psychoanalytic cure" (72). "Why Writers?," 65-75.
20. In his reading of *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, Dominiek Hoens convincingly proposes the novel as tragic, and wonders whether its tragic figure is Hold, rather than Lol. "When Love is the Law: On *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*" *UMBR(a)* (2005), 105-116. p. 106.
21. The "navel of the dream" remains the crucial element of the clinic of the dream in the teaching of *GIFRIC (Groupe interdisciplinaire freudien de recherches et d'interventions cliniques et culturelles)* in Québec.
22. Beckett appears in Lacan's speech and writing by way of the signifier "poubelle" (*waste-baskets*), for instance in "Lituraterre," on which more later. See also Santanu Biswas "A Literary Introduction to 'Lituraterre,'" in *The Literary Lacan* (ed.) Santanu Biswas (Seagull Books: London, New York, Calcutta, 2012), 173-95.
23. Millot in the cited article explores the ternary structures at work in Lacan's homage to Duras.
24. Lacan draws attention to proper names as a writing of the subject's destiny where the real can come forth. In the écrit "L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient," he states that the subject "if he can seem to be a servant to language, is more so the servant of a discourse, in whose universal moment his place is already inscribed at birth, if only under the form of his proper name." *Ecrits I*, 492. Lacan developed wordplay on his own name, exploring the unconscious work of these meanings on his life. Dany Nobus in a lecture on psychoanalysis as poetry remarks on a poem by Lacan where the signature "Lacan" becomes "là... quand?" "there... when?" and observes that "meaning is balanced against a hole/gap." ("The Poetic Wisdom of Psychoanalysis: On the Trail of Lacan's New Signifier.") In her article, Millot suggests that one of the text's ternaries is "composed of Jacques Lacan (provoked, in a way, by the Jacques of Jacques Hold)" (70). In his analysis of Lacan's

response to Duras' novel, Jean-Michel Rabaté highlights the name "Lol V. Stein" as a kind of "anagram of LOVE" "Ravishing Duras or the Gift of Love" (134).

25. Colette Soler highlights the fact that psychoanalysis is "a practice that has no other instrument than speech," which forces her to interrogate Lacan's insistence that through "analytic saying, something writes itself." *Lacan: The Unconscious Reinvented*, 19.

26. In *Encore* he states "I believed I had to support the transference, insofar as it does not distinguish itself from love, with the formula *the subject supposed to know*" (87). In Seminar VIII, *Le transfert (The Transference)*, he echoes Genesis (to distinguish its mode of beginning from that of psychoanalysis) in stating that "In the beginning of the psychoanalytic experience, let us remember it, there was love" (11).

27. Bracha L. Ettinger's reads Hold's position as an ethical act of impossible witnessing with Lol. See "Fascinace and the Girl-to-m/Other Matrixial Feminine Difference."

28. In the last novel before a decade-long turn to film, *L'amour* (1971), writing has been reduced to rendering a bare stage, precisely, on which its barely defined characters roam, noticing the change of light and sound around them. Duras brings this to the screen in *La femme du Gange* (1974).

29. The places on this list name, in addition to the texts already mentioned, Duras' films *India Song* and *Son nom de Venise à Calcutta désert*.

30. The following analysis is restricted to the question of the name and the end of the tragedy. I have developed an analysis of the visual and aural aspects of Duras' *Césarée* in "Duras' *Césarée* and the Subject of Love."

31. This operation brings to mind the phonetically close "caesura," the Latin word for "cut," also related to "fall," which in music serves as a pause, a spacing of the melody's sounds. In the French verse of the 17th century practiced by Racine in his tragedies, the caesura articulates the alexandrine verse's hemistiches.

32. Véronique Voruz recalls Lacan's mention of the "ravages of love" in relation to women in Seminar XXIII: *Le sinthome*. See "Psychoanalysis at the Time of the Post-human: Insisting on the Outside-Sense" (n. 18). See also her preface with Bogdan Wolf to *The Later Lacan* (xv).

33. On "Hiroshima" as a name of love see Ettinger and Gardiner "Affectuous Encounters: Feminine Matrixial Encounters in Duras/Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour*."

34. My sense is that the historical catastrophe is not merely played down in favor of the love story, and that Duras' synopsis in the screenplay clearly makes this argument. The effect of this is a different understanding of love and its stakes.

35. Racine instead uses the name "Rome" as a metonymy for its social link, its laws, its ideals. It is often declined in the feminine and characterized as a jealous woman who requires all of Titus' attention, putting Bérénice in the place of her rival. One can notice these features in the previous citation "Rome vous vit, Madame, arriver avec lui" "Rome saw you, Madam, arrive with him."

36. Duras selects this common practice in France during the Liberation for the screenplay, in a sexualized and gendered practice of marking bodies. The historian Fabrice Virgili studied this phenomenon in *La France "virile": Des femmes tondues à la Libération*.

37. MacCannell's interesting reading of the film suggests that the woman is unable to break out of the confines of territoriality that have been laid out for her gender within the paradigm of the nation-state, and that the thought of staying in Hiroshima with the man has to do with not overcoming this model that in fact prevents love and makes the city into a representation of the ego's isolation. See *The Regime of the Brother* (116-123). In contrast, Kristyn Gorton believes the French woman in *Hiroshima* to be "redeemed or liberated," unlike other, melancholic female characters Duras created. See "Desire, Duras, and Melancholia: Theorizing Desire after the Affective Turn." Gorton sees melancholia as productive of desire. My reading focuses instead on the way in which Duras' writing re-marks the empty space this affair between "elle" and "lui" creates, as a space of love, where an encounter on the level of the unconscious can take place.

38. See McNulty's distinction between the imaginary law and the experimental symbolic as constraints in "Enabling Constraints: Toward an Aesthetics of Symbolic Life."

39. Willy Apollon, "The Originary Fantasy" schema presented at GIFRIC Training Seminar, *The Clinic of the Fantasy*, 2018.

40. On the problem of loving and "first love" with regard to the primal fantasy, see Sigi Jötkandt's "Signifier and Letter in Kierkegaard and Lacan" (105 and n. 5).

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