

INTRODUCTION

*'Lacan is not all'*¹

Expressed with the simplicity of her elliptical put-down which we have adopted for our title for this special issue, Marguerite Duras' attitude towards psychoanalysis was ambiguous to say the least.¹ Frequently, when she speaks of psychoanalysis, she leaves us in no doubt of her very great mistrust of it, her acute sense of being a stranger to its discourse. Yet, regarding the event that inspired these invitations to express her opinion on psychoanalysis – Jacques Lacan's "Homage to Marguerite Duras, on *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*," – she is generally positive, at times even enthusiastic.²

Since its first appearance in 1965, Lacan's sibylline essay has provoked a flood of commentaries and further explorations of the topics it alludes to: love, desire, femininity, writing, among many others. Therefore, it seems natural to us to launch this issue with Jean-Michel Rabaté's essay on *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, the pivotal novel in Duras' oeuvre and the text that originally sparked the Lacanian interest in Duras. In his candid contribution, Rabaté raises the issue of *ravissement*, starting from his question, "Why were we all in love with Marguerite Duras?" This 'all,' we discover, may first and foremost include Lacan, whose "Homage" entails an analysis of his own ravishment by Duras or, more precisely, by the unfolding triangles in *Lol V. Stein* that end up encompassing the reader. It is for this reason that, even as he pays careful, 'academic' attention to the ternaries inside, yet transgressing, the confines of the novel, Rabaté also cannot refrain from a 'personal' questioning of the triangle that was constituted by Duras, her work and himself, as he recalls in this intimate memoir recounting the remarkable times that they spent together in Dijon, and later, in Paris in the 1970s and 1980s.

Elaborating on the relation of love from a feminine perspective, in "Acts of Love and Unconscious *Savoir* in Marguerite Duras' Writing," Fernanda Negrete investigates Duras' practice of the letter, taking into account the most successful of Duras' novels, *The Lover*, as well as the aforementioned *Lol V. Stein*. Even if, as Duras once argued, "the meaning [*sens*] of desire eludes us all, including Lacan,"³ Negrete's essay offers an elegant proof of the way a Lacanian approach may all the same

do justice to the negativity of desire and the impossibility inherent to love. While Lacan considers love a supplement to the 'sexual non-relation' and conceptualizes the latter mainly via logics, Negrete maintains that Duras' work writes this non-relation. That is, her work is a writing that paradoxically testifies to a fidelity to what cannot be written, which comes to be exemplified in Lol's 'hole-word,' in the lovers' failed encounter in *The Lover*, or in the emptiness created between 'her' and 'him' in *Hiroshima mon amour*. Negrete stresses how this writing is not without leaving its marks on and in Duras' stories, which often revolve around memory traces unable to cohere into one single story – hence the repetitions of what cannot be repeated – but also on the reader, including Lacan. Through a 'literal' reading of certain passages of Lacan's later work, Negrete uncovers the indelible impression of Lacan's encounter with Duras and *Lol V. Stein*, suggesting an influence that exceeds his *Homage*.

If destruction is one form of negativity, then *Destroy She Said* may be one of its best examples. In "Formal Destruction: the *Art of the Fugue* in *Destroy, She Said*," Joe Hughes discusses Maurice Blanchot's intriguing idea that, in Duras' film, destruction appears *as* music. This refers to the final minutes of the film, a silence-noise-(loud)music-speech sequence, which suggests the destructive power of desire, belonging to the forest, putting an end to any possible story yet suggesting the beginning of another, untold one. Here, Hughes not only pays attention to an often overlooked dimension of Duras' work, music, but goes on to argue that *Destroy* takes on the *form* of music, namely Bach's *Art of the Fugue*. Music's act of formal destruction, that is, resides in revealing the void that both underlies any coherent form and subtracts the story from its narrative patterns, moving it from one form to another.

A writing that promises nothing – this is how Alexi Kukuljevic conceives Duras' story-telling project in the shape of something that yearns, but does not succeed in its attempts, to recount a story. In his analysis of *The Vice-Consul*, Kukuljevic draws the reader's attention to the novel's opening sentence, which stages the young writer, Peter Morgan, aiming to tell a story about the Cambodian beggar woman in Calcutta. This staging includes two different narrative voices, Morgan's and the narrator's whose presence interrupts Morgan's story with a related, yet different story. Just as the miserable life of the beggar woman can be perceived only from a safe distance, her story is told only at the expense of excluding a misery that is too close to entertain: the Vice-Consul's. And this other story, the Vice-Consul's, as Kukuljevic observes, becomes catastrophic to every idea of story as such. His screams silence all sense; his catastrophic existence ends up leading Morgan's attempts at a sensible story astray, not unlike, Kukuljevic argues, Duras' idea of writing as "not making sense" and "screaming without sound."

It is this idea of non-sense that gets picked up and elaborated further by Cindy Zeiher in her account of the object-like quality of a proper name. In her essay, "The Woman and her Name: *Baxter, Véra Baxter*," Zeiher focuses on the sense-absorbing qualities of the name Véra. Despite its obvious connotation of 'truth' and its con-

nection with the surname Baxter, which provides the carrier of the name with a symbolic place, it is the sound of this name that first attracts the attention of the female Unknown. This *Inconnue* is the one who, later on in the film, allows Véra to speak *with* her. All of the stories that Véra recounts may be factually true or untrue, yet, as Zeiher argues, the issue revolves around speaking the truth in a male, symbolic universe in which one can inevitably only ‘lie’ about one’s femininity. Thus Véra’s melancholic quest for truth entails a questioning of the name, ‘Véra’, a questioning of what – or, indeed, *if* – this name would be without its surname and, hence, a questioning of the status of Véra’s existence as a woman beyond her identity as Baxter’s betrayed wife. Here, the forest we encountered in *Destroy She Said*, reappears as the place where a woman may be not ‘one,’ but rather ‘many.’

Released the same year as *Baxter*, *Véra Baxter*, the film *Le camion* (1977) testifies to Duras’ self-professed “murderous” relation to cinema. For rather than rendering an audiovisual, representational illusion of something that ‘is’ or ‘happens,’ *Le camion* instead recounts elements of a story that ‘would have been.’ Taking up Duras’ challenge to traditional logics concerning representation and time, in his essay, “In Duras’ Dark Room,” Dominiek Hoens focuses on Duras’ use of the conditional mood as a formal means for marshalling another model of temporality, specifically, an image of time that “transgresses any precise moment.” In Hoens’ analysis of the world-destroying but also world-opening structure of the past conditional, Gustave Guillaume, Jacques Lacan and Giorgio Agamben are brought into dialogue with one another to shed contemporary insight into Duras’ abysmal statement: “Let the world go to ruin, that is the only politics.”

This issue’s ‘odd one in’ is Sigi Jöttkandt’s non-thematic essay on a short story by Vladimir Nabokov, an author whose antipathy towards psychoanalysis is matched only by his abhorrence of all forms of totalitarianism. In “History’s Hard Sign: Vladimir Nabokov’s ‘The Visit to the Museum,’” Jöttkandt accepts Nabokov’s invitation to take a second look at “history,” this time through a cinematic lens. If certain parallels can be drawn between a Europe on the brink of WWII and Trump’s era of hyper-jouissance, in Jöttkandt’s hands an unexpectedly psychoanalytic Nabokov suggests a path forward in the form of a revised political practice of reading for the letter.

We wish to thank all our contributors and the anonymous reviewers who brought this issue into being.

Notes

1. *Le livre dit. Entretiens de Duras filme*, ed. J. Pagès-Pindon (Paris: Gallimard, 2014), 52.
2. “Je suis dans une méconnaissance et une méfiance très grandes de la psychanalyse. [...] je me sens étrangère à la psychanalyse.” *Marguerite Duras à Montréal*, eds. S. Lamy and A. Roy (Montréal: Les éditions Spirale, 1981), 20.

3. Jacques Lacan, "Homage to Marguerite Duras, on *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein*," trans. P. Connor, in *Marguerite Duras* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1987), 122-129. For Duras' recollections of her meeting with Lacan, soon after the publication of *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, see "On ne peut pas l'atteindre, Lol V. Stein" (interview with Catherine Francblin, 1979), *Le dernier des métiers. Entretiens 1962-1991* (Paris: Seuil, 2016), 217 and *La passion suspendue. Entretiens avec Leopoldina Pallotta della Torre* (Paris: Seuil, 2013), 65f. For a recent and more detailed account of Lacan's fascination with Duras, see Michel David, "Marguerite Duras passeuse de Jacques Lacan", in *Marguerite Duras. Passages, croisements, rencontres*, ed. O. Ammour-Mayeur, F. de Chalonge, Y. Mével and C. Rodgers (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2019), 211-223.
4. Duras, *Le livre dit*, 188.

JEAN-MICHEL RABATÉ

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 ravissement 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 Donnadiu 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.

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 ravisement 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 ravisement 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 analysands 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 Maria 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' *Césaire* in "Duras' *Césaire* 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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JOE HUGHES

FORMAL DESTRUCTION

The Art of the Fugue in Destroy, She Said

On this cat, night has fallen. On me, your form.

Marguerite Duras, Aurélia Steiner Melbourne

Marguerite Duras' *Destroy, She Said* ends with an act of sovereign destruction. In the final pages of the text-play-film, music begins to sound. "Did you hear anything?" asks Max Thor. "Yes," replies Stein. "A sort of crack in the air?" Alissa, who is sleeping, quietly moans. "She's dreaming," says Stein. "Or did she hear it too?" Thor asks.

Silence.

"Someone beating a gong?"

"Sounded rather like"

Silence.

"Or was she dreaming? She can't choose her own dreams?"

"No."

Silence. They smile at each other.

[the film adds: "Nor her own power (*puissance*)?"

"It is very great."

"Yes."]¹

In the film, the 'gong' is a piano. Duras slammed the lid of a grand piano while the sustaining pedal was held down creating a deep, Dionysian noise that resonates across the overtone series, setting the whole sonic spectrum alight. Soon, the sound of the gong is accompanied by the distant sound of violins playing a theme from the final fugue of Bach's *Art of the Fugue*. With "immeasurable strength, sublime

gentleness, it enters the hotel.” It is almost as if, Blanchot remarks, the clarity of its sound emerges from the depths of noise in a way that doesn’t cancel noise, but allows it to trail behind.²

Thor wonders whether the music is coming from a child playing with a radio. Stein insists it is coming from the forest. The music grows in strength as darkness approaches. “Only when the darkness is almost complete can it be heard clearly,” Duras writes, and as the figures on the film set become almost indistinguishable from one another, the music begins to sound “majestically loud (*dans une amplitude souveraine*)” (85/136). The final lines, which somehow have to be read in the shadow of the music, are as follows:

“It’s going to do it, it’s going to get through the forest,” Stein says. “Here it comes.”

They speak in the intervals of the music (*entre la musique et la musique*), softly, so as not to wake Alissa.

“It has to fell trees, knock down walls,” Stein Murmurs. “But here it is.”

“Nothing (*rien*) to worry about any more,” says Max Thor. “Yes, here it is.”

Yes, here it is, felling trees, knocking down walls.

They are bending over Alissa.

In her sleep, Alissa’s childlike mouth widens in pure laughter (*un rire absolu*).

They laugh (*rient*) to see her laugh (*rire*).

“Music to the name of Stein,” she says (*dit-elle*). (85/136f)

How is one to interpret this ending? Alissa’s dream; her power; her desire; the forest; the name of Stein; the end of worry; the silence-noise-music-speech sequence; the mouth of the child; a laughter that is absolute; the arrival of a destruction at once physical, logical, and psychological: how *are* these lines tied together? The aim of this essay is, at a certain level, to unravel this knot. But any reader of Duras will recognise that this is an infinite task. These lines condense the driving concerns of her work during the late sixties and early seventies. To unpick the knot would be to articulate a constellation at the heart of Duras’ work, one that I’m not sure is entirely susceptible to articulation. My aim here then is to take up only one of these threads – the question of the music – and follow the way it implicates some of the others.

Music lies at the heart of this knot in complex ways. In *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras*, two televised interviews with Michelle Porte that aired in 1976, Duras tied some of its major terms together by raising the question of how two of them, the forest and music, were linked:

They’re connected, somehow, the forest and music. When I was afraid of the forest, I was of course afraid of myself, you see, and I was afraid of myself

after puberty. Before puberty, I was not afraid in the forest. Music distresses me as well. I think that in music there is a fulfilment (*accomplissement*), a time that we cannot actually receive. There is a sort of annunciation in music of a time to come, one you can hear.³

As the passage unfolds, its emphasis slowly shifts. By the end, the connection in question is no longer that between music and the forest: music itself has become a link, and what it links together are the separated worlds of the child and the adult. Its specific power lies in the way it recalls a time before the education of desire, before the I was alienated from itself. It is a kind of radio transmission from our past, one that temporarily recalls us to another movement of desire. While it points backward to a state of integrity and wholeness, however, it also points forward, announcing a future where that separation may no longer reign. Music, in this view, is an angel that carries the promise of future redemption. The music of Bach above all has this effect, Duras goes on to say. However absurd it may sound, Bach is a kind of proletariat composer because of the way he works with the concrete of affective life – an idea to which I'll return to below.⁴ Music, then, temporarily rearticulates the history and structures of desire, repositions the I in relation to its sexual history, and from this point of view, many of the major themes in the final lines of *Destroy* begin to align.

The thematics of destruction, however, are curiously missing here. The conclusion of *Destroy* is unequivocal, though: it is ultimately the music that destroys “everything,” as Thor says. It is not the noise of the ‘gong,’ not the speech of the characters, not the silence that subtends them all, but the music which knocks down trees and walls, but also ways of living and loving. In the same movement, music itself is destroyed. “*Destroy*,” Duras remarked in a 1969 interview with Jacques Chancel, “is a film without music” until the very end, when “a piece of music is destroyed, it is Bach.”⁵ Blanchot would echo this dialectic in the final paragraph of his essay on the work. It “is not only music (beauty) that reveals itself as destroyed and yet reborn,” he writes, “it is, more mysteriously, *destruction as music* to which we are present and in which we take part.”⁶ And so I want to look here at the specific relation between destruction and music.

Many of Duras' readers have argued that her ongoing preoccupation with music is not only a central thematic concern, but one that animates her most extreme formal experiments. Wendy Everett has gone so far as to argue Duras' cinematic art as a whole might be understood, at a general level, as an art of the fugue on the basis of its proliferation of polyphonic textures.⁷ I want to try to show here the way *Destroy*, *She Said* pushes this tendency to its limit. Duras draws on the forms of Bach's *Art of the Fugue* in surprisingly direct and unexpected ways to radically redistribute the conventions of film and novel form, and to introduce an index of freedom into the creative act.

The sovereignty of musical destruction would lie, then, in the way musical forms silently transform narrative patterns, from the earliest pages of the work. The si-

lent, musical reordering of narrative form will indeed explain part of the “mystery” Blanchot finds in the idea of destruction as music, and it will ultimately explain how beauty, the *idea* of beauty, might be an agent not only of order but of destruction. But the mystery begins in the very concept of destruction Duras seems to be working with. To think about the kind of destruction at work in the final pages of *Destroy* requires a very different concept of destruction than the everyday notion of simple ruin. It is with this other concept of destruction that I will begin, then, before turning to the ways in which the music of Bach operates its destruction.

Registers of Destruction, Concepts of Destruction

Llewellyn Brown has shown that the theme of destruction lies at the heart of Duras’ writing. Tracing a line from the paradoxical metaphor of the *barrage* in 1950 to *Lol V. Stein* (1964) to *India Song* (1973), and a cluster of post-1968 texts, he shows the way it consistently animated her reflections on the act of creation and the functions and dysfunctions of language and image.⁸ At the heart of this trajectory, of course, is *Destroy, She Said* (1969), whose title indicates that it is, in some sense, a sustained reflection on the act of destruction. I want to begin, then, by reconstructing elements of Duras’ reflection, drawing on interviews around the time of the work in which she proliferated the different objects and instances of destruction and briefly indicating the way they echo in the text of *Destroy*. In these texts, destruction is at once historical, political, aesthetic, and ontological.

Duras emphasises, first of all, the historical experience of destruction. The bomb’s devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the hippie movement’s radical indifference to the forms of bourgeois life; the events of May ‘68; the capital destruction enacted in the camps: these were only the most powerful forms of contemporary destruction. For Duras and her circle these last two events in particular were inextricably bound, and, long before the events of the 60s, many in her circle already held that any revolutionary thought would have to be grounded in the memory of the Holocaust.⁹ The connection between the two events shapes the penultimate episode of *Destroy*, too, when Elisa’s husband, Bernard Alione, asks Stein, Thor and Alissa who they are. Alissa replies: “German Jews.” Her response recalls one of the slogans of ‘68 that erupted, Blanchot recalls, in a “spontaneous demonstration,” when, following news that Daniel Cohn-Bendit had been denied entry into France, “thousands of young revolutionaries let forth the cry ‘We are all German Jews’.” “This was to signify,” Blanchot explains, “the relation of solidarity and fraternity with the victims of totalitarian omnipotence, of the political and racist inhumanity represented by Nazism.”¹⁰ Blanchot connects without comment a certain desire for the destruction of the state among the young revolutionaries with a desire for those who were destroyed by the Nazi state, and that connection illuminates the play of desire in *Destroy*. Those two desires echo in very different ratios in characters of *Destroy*. They echo in Alissa’s desire for Thor and Stein, for instance, but also in Elisa’s hesitations between a desire for Stein and another for her husband Bernard Alione, between a revolutionary desire and the inertia of the bourgeois state.

But in both cases the intimacy of personal desire is immediately recoded in terms of a political desire, one that drives *against* historical catastrophe.

Destruction, then, also names the social and political ambitions of the work. One of *Destroy*'s aims is, very clearly, to destroy bourgeois social relations and to generate the experience of another kind of relation, one built around new, and therefore unrecognisable, forms of life. Laura MacMahon and Leslie Hill among others have shown the extent to which, from this point of view, *Destroy* participates in the ideals of The Student-Writers Action Committee, a group of students and writers, including Blanchot, Duras, Mascolo, and Nathalie Sarraute, who began meeting on 20 May 1968. In a series of anonymous essays published in their magazine, *Comité*, they developed a politics of refusal and depersonalisation. Refusal, pushed to its extreme, was not only the refusal of the existing order of exploitation and appropriation, they argued; it was also the refusal of the theoretical demand for a positive politics organised around a collective articulation of a common and determinate end.¹¹ If literature was the highest form of work for a much younger Blanchot, it was because the act of writing alone revealed a negation free of ends in any form; in the pages of *Comité*, the highest form of theory, too, entails the rejection of projects and platforms. Theory, they held, should remain critical and to establish itself in "worklessness."¹² One of the primary objects of this critique, particularly in Duras' texts for the committee, was the form of bourgeois subjectivity, which they tried to rethink under the rubric of "depersonalisation." The "enhancement of depersonalisation," the committee wrote, "seems to us to be the only revolutionary stance."¹³ The characters of *Destroy*, as many readers have noticed, express this ideal: they become increasingly interchangeable, indistinguishable from one another, subjectivities antithetical to – and illegible in – the forms of "bourgeois life." What is destroyed at this level – and I'll return to this at length below – is a certain social relation at the ground of identity.

Destruction, then, also names the aesthetic ambitions of the work. Duras frequently underlined the ways the work was conceived as a destruction of film form and novel form: it subjects the conventions of each to a progressive and radical dismantling. As critics have emphasised, the film rigorously subverts the conventions of continuity, the clear distinction between the objective and subjective camera, and, more generally, any stable position or the function of camera.¹⁴ Duras herself tended to emphasise the break with the conventions of the novel. She opens the interview with the *Cahiers du cinéma*, included in the English translation, by describing *Destroy* as "a fragmented book from the novelistic point of view," (91) and over the course of the interview she indicates the ways it overturns nearly every dimension of novel form. It destroys sentences ("I don't think there are any sentences left in it" (91)); it destroys the position of narration and the conventions of focalisation which regulate the narrator-character relation (95; more on this below); and more fundamentally, and in Blanchotian register, writing itself is an act of destruction. There is a certain annihilation that appears at each of its moments – in the act of writing itself, in publication and reading of the text, the act of throwing it away.¹⁵

If destruction appears at the heart of the work, it is because a work always expresses, however indirectly, a certain *cri*, a “screaming without sound” as she puts in *Écrire*.¹⁶ In the “Note for Performance” at the end of *Destroy*, she explains: “No one actually “cries out,” even when the words are used: the words indicate an inner reaction only” (88/140). That “inner reaction,” though, is the cry that has to be heard behind the relative tranquillity of any given utterance, one which opens every utterance to the movement of a destruction.

If the concept of destruction can encompass all of these registers and objects, it is because, in an important sense, it has no object. The ‘*détruire*’ of *Détruire dit-elle* is not, as the English title might imply, an imperative. It is an infinitive: *To Destroy*. Destroying is an act that is not yet determined by time or tense, one that is not yet attributable to a subject, and one that is not yet set in relation to an object. When it is first announced, then, destroying is an undetermined action, one that belongs to another time and another place. And when Alissa says “destroy” later in the work, she, too, says, “*détruire*.” It is not a command we should hear, but, if anything, a kind of distant, indirect articulation of a desire. The word “*détruire*” is, Blanchot says, “like a light in one’s heart: a sudden secret.”¹⁷ It names, in a certain sense, the desire of desire itself: to be expressed, but not fully. A drive to create, but one whose creations and forms only ever attest to their status as a fragile comprise, like Lol’s living room: its cold, ready-made orderliness is only “the empty stage upon which was performed the soliloquy of some absolute passion whose meaning remained unrevealed,” a stage or a scene awaiting a thaw.¹⁸

But at this level, the question of just what the act of destruction looks like or might mean begins to assert itself. Jean Narboni raised this question toward the end of “Destruction and Language.” Do the thematics of the void not entail a kind of absolute, contentless destruction, he asked, an almost theological repudiation of the world? Does the film not “fall back into a sort of abstract idea of a rejection of every thing that is almost Christian,” he asked. Duras apparently interrupts him to say:

No, it’s not a rejection; it’s a waiting period. Like someone taking his time. Before committing himself to act. That’s the way I see it ... It is very hard to pass from one state to another. Abruptly. It is even abnormal, unhealthy. If you like, the changeover by the popular democracies from 1940 to 1945 was a brutal one, one not freely consented to and ... It is necessary to wait ... You don’t do something unless you *undo* what’s gone before.¹⁹

Destruction here has a curious form and place. It does not designate a rejection, removal or elimination of an object of form. It names a space of transition or transformation. This space of transformation, at once anticipatory (waiting) and retrospective (undoing what had gone before), is the proper location of the void, Duras suggests. In the lines that follow she calls it a “zero point” or a “neutral point” where “sensitivity regroups, if you will and rediscovers itself.”²⁰ It’s not the void, then, that comes after a form, but one that sits beneath every form.

There are two quite different concepts of destruction at play in this brief exchange. Narboni's questions follow from an everyday concept of destruction. This concept is, you could say, caught up in a dialectic of the all and the nothing. When you destroy something – say Heidegger's pitcher – you deprive it of its form and its function, liberate its matter, and erase its relation to its efficient cause, the art or *techne* that created it. To destroy something is not simply to deform it, but to shatter it, render it unrecognisable, and ultimately to abandon it. A dialectic of the all or nothing, then, in the sense that when a pitcher is shattered, you have an apparently formless mass that you sweep up and throw away. You move from pitcher to no pitcher, from formed thing to mess. This is an informal concept of destruction in the sense that it attends only to the un-forming of a previously created thing. It's a sense that is grounded in the etymology of the word, which entered English from the French *destruire* but which ultimately derives from the Latin *destruere*: to un-build that which has been instituted, constituted, or structured.

Duras' concept here seems very different. Destroying does not move from the form to the formless, but from form to form. It doesn't move from something to nothing but from something to something, state to state. There is still a moment of absence at play, but that absence has been relocated. It no longer appears at the end of an act of destruction, but at the origin of any form, a condition of creation. It is a nothing that is no longer indicates the disappearance of a structure, but the condition of any structure and its transformation. Destruction, then, is conceived on this second model as a species of change in which a form begins to take on a new relation to its parts and to transform those parts in turn, where it begins to express a relation to another art or *techne*, and, indeed, to organise itself in relation to another end.

The Art of the Fugue

Duras appended a brief "Note for Performances" to the end of the text of *Destroy*. She writes there that "the music of the finale is from Johann Sebastian Bach. It is, precisely, fugue 15 from the *Art of the Fugue* (numbered 18 or 19 – after Graeser's classification – in different recordings)." (87/139; translation modified) The film further specifies her sources: it credits Milan Munclinger's 1966 recording with *Ars Rediviva*. Duras' precision has unexpectedly broad implications for the interpretation of *Destroy*. The designation of the *Art of the Fugue*, the designation of the fugue 15, and the designation of the Munclinger recording all bear on the sense and form of *Destroy*.

The *Art of the Fugue* is Bach's final work. With the B minor mass and the *Musical Offering* it is widely considered to be one of the fullest expressions of his art. It is the work in which the already acknowledged master of the fugue pushed that mastery to a level that has been unsurpassable ever since. It "stands before us," writes the great Bach scholar Christoph Wolff, "as the most comprehensive summary of the aged Bach's instrumental language."²¹ It is a work of such staggering complexity that one of the questions that has structured its critical reception over the past two

hundred years has been whether it is possible to hear it as music at all or whether it can be approached only as an ideal of technical transcendence.²²

In its final form, the piece will, as Duras indicates, have as many as 19 or 20 pieces, a mixture of canons and fugues. Both are complex forms, and I'll sketch some specific aspects of the fugue form below. But much of the work's reputation for technical transcendence comes from the fact that each of the 19 *contrapuncti* are developed from a single simple theme, the *Hauptthema*, with which the work opens:

The liner notes to the Munclinger recording Duras used, detail the different ways this main theme is taken up across the work as a whole:



The basic theme appears in the different fugues in various guises. Counter voices spring from it; it welcomes elements of voices from the counterpoint; it transforms itself through this vast process, like the human personality ... it lives ... Each fugue brings a different solution [...] from the simple fugues (the first four) to the three fugues in opposite movement [...] to the fugues with several themes, where new themes come to join the main one. In the double fugue, called '*en miroir*,' the second fugue is the reverse image of the first: the basses become the sopranos, the tenor becomes the alto, the ascending melodic line becomes a descending movement with the same size of intervals. In the triple fugues, each theme is first developed independently (in all the voices), most often in reverse, and only after that do the themes combine. The last fugue was probably meant to be a four-theme fugue, since the existing three themes can easily combine with the basic theme of the *Art of the Fugue*, a synthesis that would have been the culmination of the fugue. It remained unfinished.²³

The final fugue, the one which Duras wanted *Destroy* to end on, was probably intended, Munclinger says, as a four-subject fugue. In its current form, it only has three. The third and final theme is built around the name of Bach (B natural was called 'H'; B flat, B):

Music to the name of Bach, you could say. But shortly after the introduction of this third subject on his name, the manuscript stops. While working on the final fugue,



the story goes, Bach had fallen ill from an eye infection which led, ultimately, to his death a few months later. In one of the manuscripts, below the final staves of the interrupted fugue, we read in the handwriting of his son, C. P. E. Bach that "while

working on this fugue, in which the name Bach appears in the countersubject, the composer died" (see Image 1). A description of one of the first performances of Graeser's orchestrated edition puts it this way: after "Bach signs his name in minims," the "composition soon stops short with two unfinished notes on the wind. The best witness to the perfection of the whole was the strength of the shock that one felt."²⁴ At the very limit of Bach's own art, then, at the moment he signed his name, death, the highest form of destruction, adds its countersignature.

What, exactly, is the relation of the *Art of the Fugue* to *Destroy*? Over the next few sections of this essay, I want to try to show that *Destroy* is built around the *Art of the Fugue* in complex and subtle ways. But I will begin with a not very subtle observation: *Destroy* does not have chapters. It is built around 19 precisely distinguished blocks of text. While the exact number of *contrapuncti* that make up the *Art of the Fugue* is subject to some debate, Munclinger's recordings admit 19.²⁵ This simple numerical equivalence suggests that Duras' episodes might be *contrapuncti* themselves, and her episodes share further structural similarities with the Bach. The episodes of *Destroy*, like Bach's *contrapuncti*, grow in complexity as they move along. The early episodes are built on a simple theme with only one or two characters speaking; the later episodes give way to more experimental forms, like the tenth, episode X, whose patterns of indentation distinguish two sets of voices, creating a kind of counterpoint effect. Central to my argument are two very specific structural parallels between the two works. Episode XVII of *Destroy*, like *contrapunctus* XVII in Munclinger and Graeser's numbering, is *en miroir*. And, of course, Duras directly links the final episode of *Destroy*, number XIX, with the final fugue of the *Art*, *contrapunctus* XIX. These two episodes reveal the complex ways Duras transformed her writing by transforming Bach's, and in what follows I want to look closely at the ways they redistribute literary forms.

Depersonalisation: From Character to Voice

One of the most spectacular acts of destruction in *Destroy* is the destruction of character, or, more precisely, the entire system of character. One of Duras' only additions to the extremely spare set of the film appears in the penultimate episode, with arrival of Elisa's husband, Bernard Alione, an almost parodic embodiment of bourgeois subjectivity (the owner of a canned food factory, he spends his vacations dreaming of investment opportunities). Just behind Alissa's head is a curious image of four rifles, one on top of the other. At different moments of the scene they appear to be aimed at the heads of different characters (Image 2). With the appearance of the first recognisably 'normal' character, then, there appears an image that stands in for what the film as whole does to character: it silently reconstructs the characters in the image of an extreme limit, the moment of their death.

The field of character and its destruction has different textures depending on whether we're talking about film, theatre, radio or the novel. But across these media and their genres, the destruction of character is operated on at least three dif-

Image 1. MS of *Contrapunctus XIV*

ferent formal levels: (1) that of the individual character and their apparent subjectivity or depth; (2) the structuring of “character space” around a main character who stands out against a background of minor characters; and (3) the relation of the main character to the narrator or to the camera, a relation governed by the conventions of focalisation in which the narrator or camera focuses the story through the eyes of a dominant character.

Duras is more or less explicit in her interviews about the ways she targeted these formal aspects of character – think only of her comments on the camera-narrator relation or on the conventions of Jamesian focalisation in the Mauriac-Sartre debate.²⁶ What I would like to add to this problematic is that musical forms are central to this reconfiguration. The rifles are also musical staves. The four characters are voices, in the musical sense of the term: Alissa, a soprano, Elisa, an alto, Thor, the baritone and Stein, the bass. If the relations between the camera-narrator and the characters are destabilised, and if the subordination of minor and major characters no longer structures character space, it is not because Duras destroyed them in the abstract, but because the system of character is here governed by a new logic.

Perhaps the most obvious feature of the fugue form in general is that a fugue is written in counterpoint. The kind of music we’re used to now is organised around a dominant melody that stands out against an indistinct harmonic ground, maybe the chords of a guitar or an Alberti bass or rolling arpeggios. Counterpoint, however, has no harmonic background whose primary function is to support a melodic line. Counterpoint is built around independent voices – usually three or four – each following its own melodic line. Those lines certainly combine according to the



Image 2: Alissa and Stein in the penultimate scene.

conventions of harmonic progression, but their modes of combination and interaction are also governed by specific conventions of counterpoint which, for instance, demand that independent voices avoid unseemly intervals (the tritone) or, when they move in parallel, they avoid intervals that sound flat (parallel fifths or parallel octaves). Because fugues are built out of the weaving of independent voices, they tend to be designated by the number of voices in each: a fugue in three voices or a fugue in four voices. At this general level, then, to think of the system of character in fugal terms already requires losing the dominance of a main character and, with it, an anchor for the narrator (or, to keep up the optical metaphor of focalisation, a lens through which the story might be focused). But the really interesting effects of *Destroy*'s character system follows from the specific form of relation that counterpoint lends narrative.

In a fugue, the different voices take on a specific relation to one another. Despite wide variation in the form, a fugue usually begins with a clearly announced "subject" in one voice – a theme that runs for maybe five or six measures. When the subject ends, it is immediately taken up by a second voice, and then by a third, and then, if it's a four-voice fugue, a fourth. Hence its name: *fugue* from *fuga* or flight. The subject flies from one voice to another, and in certain fugues it sounds almost as if the voice itself is fleeing the subject. Once all of the voices have taken up the subject, there's usually a transition to an "episode," where the different voices play variations on the subject, fragmenting it, inverting it, reproducing rhythmic patterns, and so on. After the episode, a re-entry of the subject, which again moves across the different voices. Then another episode, then a final entry.²⁷

This flight of the theme from one voice to another is one of the distinctive aspects of the characters' speech in *Destroy*. Sometimes there is a simple, direct repetition of the words of one character by another:

"We knew each other as children," [Elisabeth] says. "Our families were friends."

Alissa repeats softly:

"We knew each other as children. Our families were friends."

Silence. (64/103)

Other times, there is a more diffuse repetition of motifs, little fragments of a theme that skip from one voice to another:

"Your hair," [Stein] says.

He touches it. It has been cut.

"It was so beautiful," says Stein.

"Too beautiful."

He thinks.

"Has he noticed," he says, pointing to Max Thor.

"He hasn't said anything yet. [...]"

"I did exclaim (*j'ai crié*)," Max Thor says.

"I heard him exclaim (*criait*). But he didn't say anything (*il n'a rien dit*). I thought you cried out (*criais*) for some other reason."

Stein takes her in his arms.

"For what reason?" Max Thor asks.

"Impatience," Alissa says.

Silence.

"Come over here, Alissa," Stein says.

"Yes. What will become of us?"

"I've no idea (*Je ne sais rien*)."

"We've no idea (*Nous ne savons rien*)," Max Thor says.

[...]

"She's getting used to us. She said, 'M. Stein's a man who inspires confidence'."

They laugh (*rient*).

“What did she say about him?” Stein says, pointing to Max Thor.

“Nothing (*rien*). She talked about leaving.”

(46/73f)

Here, the motifs that travel across voices also belong to the thematic axis of the work. The conceptual sequence runs from beauty back to the destructive-constructive cry from which it emerged is echoed in a sonic constellation which links the cry (*cri*) to a plural smile (*rient*) to a nothing, in the form of the negation, *rien* (itself an anagram of *nier*). This particular constellation appears in the final lines of the book – as I indicated above and will return to below – but what I want to emphasize here is just that there is a kind of homophonic flight across the different voices of the piece that is fugal in form.

The flight of a figure, whether sonic or conceptual, participates in the broader transformation of character that many readers have seen in the work. Blanchot, for instance, describes the transformation of character as a general fungibility: characters constantly exchange themselves for one another and thus operate a destruction or depersonalisation of the category of identity.²⁸ Kristeva situates it at the level of sexual desire. Max Thor and Stein, as she puts it, “love Alissa and are fascinating by Elisa. Alissa Thor discovers that her husband is happy to meet Elisa, who seduces Stein. Thus she, too, lets herself be loved by the same Stein (the reader is free to compose dyads in this suggestive plot). She is dumbfounded that Max Thor enjoys this kaleidoscopic universe of doubles.”²⁹ Desire, then, is no longer contained in the form of the couple but circulates, if not freely, then with a wider extension than it has previously. In all three cases – the discourse of characters, the form of their personality, the patterns of their sexuality – it is the fugue form plays a determining role in their destruction.

Reflecting on the interchangeability of Elisa and Alissa, Duras remarked that, for “a few seconds, they are one and the same. This can be called love. Or the demand that communism makes.”³⁰ In her script for the trailer she again describes the film as an affirmation that the “communist world of tomorrow will be.” The trailer ties the appearance of that world directly to the destruction of character. To the question, what do you mean by “capital destruction” she answers: “the destruction of someone as a person.”³¹ Capital destruction, then, is *capital*. It is a kind of decapitation: the destruction of memory, judgement, the cognitive faculties, the trailer explains.³² The sense of this statement turns on what one understands by “person,” but also on the sense of the word “destruction.” Destruction in the sense of the Terror, in which heads are little more than cabbages? Or destruction as real becoming, the creation of a qualitative difference articulated in a new from: less a decapitation than a kind of re-capitation in which it is a question of creating a new field of ideas or a new mode of thinking. I think it’s clearly the latter that she is pointing to, and if Bach is, in some sense a musical proletarian, it is partly because he provides, in this work, a different way of thinking about the relations between characters.

The flight of a statement from one voice to another might be formulated in terms of a lack. The speech of Duras' characters seems mechanical, empty, almost inhuman, and the realist character of the nineteenth century novel, whose speech is the window into their soul and whose singularity cultivates the reader's sympathetic imagination, is clearly gone, replaced by characters who seem to lack an inner world. Or, if it is not an inner world that they lack, then you could, perhaps, pathologise them: each character in *Destroy* thinks the others are mad, and Duras clearly expects her readers to think so, too: she often emphasises that the hotel really is a hotel, not code for a hospital. It's certainly not clear how to read these characters – not even for the characters themselves. But this illegibility, I am arguing, is not the sign of an absence, but of another order. It is not a sign of a lack, but of another logic. Is communist love, then, fugal? No. I don't think it is. Nor could it be effectuated, I would argue, through the imposition of an abstract and Baroque form onto an indifferent matter. But it also cannot be constituted on the foundations of bourgeois subjectivity, and that, I think is the object of Duras' destruction here. At this level, *Destroy* is simultaneously an undoing and an anticipation of another mode of subjectivity, one that would be completely illegible from the point of view of the present. The transformation of character into voice opens up a kind of transitional phase, then, in which the traditional forms of subjectivity that animated the system of character in the novel are destroyed and reconfigured – by the most unlikely proletarian, J. S. Bach.

Intimate Forms, en miroir

The transformation of character into voice is a far bigger story than the one I sketched above. Part of its story is continued in a second way Duras takes up and replays the *Art of the Fugue*, this time at the level of a specific encounter.

One of the more astonishing feats of the *Art of the Fugue* is the set of two so-called "mirror fugues," *Contrapunctus XII*, in four voices, and *Contrapunctus XIII*, in three. In these two fugues, the entire fugue is played through once, "*rectus*," and then a second time in inversion, "*inversus*," with the intervals between notes exactly inverted. The *rectus* and its mirror are meant to be played sequentially, almost as though they were two entirely separate fugues – and in the first edition they were printed sequentially, one after the other. But Bach wrote them out on top of each other in his manuscripts, no doubt to aid in the process of composition, and that presentation makes their mirror-like form immediately clear. Consider, for instance, for instance, *Contrapunctus XII* (Image 3). The top four staves belong to the first run through of the piece; the bottom four to the repetition in inversion. It's as if the two were split by the mirror of Bach's equals signs running through the middle.

(You can see, too, how the subject of *Contrapunctus XII* is a variation on the *Haupt-thema*: the intervals are identical – up a fifth, down a third, etc. – and there is only a minor variation on the rhythmic patterns.)



Image 3: MS of Contrapunctus XII

In Munclinger's recording, the two mirror fugues follow the four canons, which means that although they're numbered 12 and 13 in the first edition of the *Art*, they are numbered 16 and 17 for Munclinger, as they are for most critical editions. Section 17 of *Destroy* takes place, as Duras writes in the opening lines of the section, "in the mirrors" (60/95). In the film, the scene begins in front of the mirror: Elisa is in the foreground of the image, Alissa is reflected in the background, although she must be standing directly behind Elisa, out of frame in order to appear in the frame at all (see Image 4). Their heads are gently inclined toward the edge of the frame, so that for a second you might mistake Alissa for Elisa's reflection. In the text, this process of identification is delayed: the section begins outside, with the two sitting in the shade before they move inside and "find themselves," as Duras suggestively writes, "reflected in the mirror:" "*Elles se trouvent toutes les deux prises dans un miroir*" (62/99). They are reflected, but also gripped, taken, held, captured by the mirror. It is at this moment that the two reflect on their nearly identical appearance: "'We look very much alike,' Alissa says. 'How strange.'" (63/101)

This series of convergences linking *Destroy* to the *Art of the Fugue* – at once thematic, formal and quantitative – suggests that the mirror scene of *Destroy* might be constructed in the form of a mirror fugue, but how? Is the episode, perhaps, a symmetrical composition, as Bach's mirror fugues are, in the sense that, halfway through, it might take up the opening themes and play them in reverse? As far as I can tell, it is neither symmetrical nor does suddenly invert the themes in the middle. Is there, then, a fugal subject whose repetition, flight and fragmentation structures this scene? Elisa and Alissa do indeed take up and repeat one another's sentences here, but not in the way you would expect in a fugue, with its clear opening statement of theme and then its flight another voice. If there is a theme, it's at



Image 4: the opening shot of episode 17.

the level of the signified rather than the signifier: the episode, like all of the others, turns around the *Hauptthema* of a death that drives desire. While the relocation of the theme to side of the concept raises interesting questions about the successive transformations of the concept across the speech of characters, this is hardly a revolutionary position with respect to literary composition, as estranging as this particular presentation might be.

What is reflected here is obviously one character in another. Elisa is the inversion of Alissa, and vice versa. Commenting on the similarity of their names, Kristeva notes that “homonymy notwithstanding, it is nevertheless not an identification that takes place between them.”³³ But one might also say that it is precisely because they are homonyms that they cannot be identified in sense. Their homonymy is grounded in the structure of non-identification that is demanded by Duras’ replaying of Bach’s mirror fugues. The curious specular effect that structures this episode is that these two figures, indistinguishable at the level of sound and image, relate to one another according to a law of antagonism: each takes up what the others says and inverts it, negates it, flips it, opposes it, or inverts its values.

Consider the opening dialogue of the episode in the printed text:

“We may meet again some day. Who knows?” Alissa says. [...]

“We live in an out-of-the-way place. You have to make a special trip.”

“We could make a special trip,” Alissa says. (60/95)

Alissa opens the scene on the theme of loss and the hope or desire it inspires – specifically the loss of Elisa. But her expression of loss, banal and everyday as it is, is not met with the expected banality, “yes, perhaps we will, it’s a small world.” It is met with another banality, but an inversion of the expected: “we live an out-of-the-way place.” And Alissa’s response again inverts the expected: not, “oh then perhaps not,” but, “we could make a special trip.”

This sequence of inversions governs the dialogue that follows, and it becomes more pronounced as the episode progresses. In “Destruction and language” – the interview with Rivette and Narboni referred to above – Duras describes the scene as one in which Alissa and then, for a moment, Elisa, takes the place of the analyst, and it is structured along the patterns of question and response (126). At the heart of the scene is Elisabeth’s description, guided by Alissa’s questions, of the death of her baby, of her possible affair with her doctor, and of a certain letter the doctor wrote which she showed to her husband.

‘It was after the confinement that I showed my husband the letter. And it was when [the doctor] found out I’d done that that he realized ... nothing would come of it, and he tried to kill himself.’

‘How did he find out you showed him the letter?’

‘My husband went to see him. Or wrote. I’ll never know which.

Alissa says nothing. Elisabeth Alione is uneasy.

‘You do believe me?’

‘Yes.’

Elisabeth Alione sits up and looks at Alissa questioningly.

‘You see, I’m the sort of person who’s afraid of everything. My husband’s quite different. I’m lost without him ...’

She comes closer.

‘What have you got against me?’

‘Nothing,’ Alissa says softly. ‘I’m just thinking about what you told me. It was because you showed your husband the letter that you were ill. You’re ill because of what you did.’

She gets up.

‘What’s the matter?’ Elisabeth Alione asks.

‘Disgust,’ says Alissa. ‘Disgust.’

Elisabeth Alione gives a cry.

‘Do you want to make me desperate?’

Alissa smiles at her.

'Yes. Don't say anymore.'

'It's too late,' says Alissa.

'For what?'

'To kill you.' She smiles. 'It's too late.'

Silence. (61f/97f)

This sequence operates a series of progressively extreme inversions: secrecy turns into revelation; suspicion into belief; understanding into accusation; sympathy into disgust; speech into violence. The abstraction of these nouns hides, however, what the experience of reading reveals, namely that these inversions are also and primarily inversions of the intimate forms of what Duras calls "bourgeois life."³⁴ The categories which legislate that sympathy should never convert into disgust or speech to violence are also the patterns of what one feels or doesn't feel, what one says or doesn't say in a given situation. If this passage is, in a certain sense, illegible, if the responses are curious or unexpected, it's because those categories are still the reader's. But this passage submits the patterns of speech to another rule – a quasi-fugal inversion – in which those rules lose their hold, and a new set of categories begin to operate.

This particular structure of mirroring, I think, leads to two different conclusions. First, these "fugal" inversions echo Duras' statements about the socio-political aims of the work around the withering away of the bourgeois subject. Negatively, you could say that the structure of inversion introduces contortions in the field of sense, rendering the speaking subject unfamiliar and strange, thus calling attention to the social forms that structure even the most intimate encounters. Positively, the implication seems to be that one cannot imagine an alternative to bourgeois life by proliferating a series of abstract predicates (bourgeois life is X, Y or Z) that would then be negated, cancelled or dismissed, but by refashioning the field of social relations as such, by rearticulating the *forms* of intimacy that ground those abstractions without being grounded by them. Put differently: it is not possible to build the image of another world out of the concepts of this one. One needs, rather, another form, a form from elsewhere (an elsewhere that we are not yet ready to receive), but would allow you to construct the image of a transitory subject. That form, here, comes from Bach.

But, second, in no way is there a straightforward appropriation and application of a musical form in this episode. Many of the defining elements of the fugue form are absent here. Only two features remain: the reduction of character to voice and an extremely general structure of specular inversion – and even "inversion" is taken in a quite different sense and given a quite different function than it has in Bach. There is clearly not a monochromatic abstraction at play in the movement from Bach to *Destroy*, and the *Art of the Fugue* could not function as a kind of master

text which would allow you to reconstruct the form of *Destroy*. What this episode makes clear is that Bach is present as an element of what Duras calls in “Destruction and Language” the writer’s “freedom” (133). The writer’s freedom is not unrelated to what she had called earlier in the interview the “problem of freedom” (121) in a passing reflection on the determination of the will, the faculty of desire, and the social strictures which do or do not govern it. The articulation of the writer’s problem has a different form, though. In a late work, she puts the problem this way:

I think that what I blame books for, in general, is that they are not free. One can see it in the writing: they are fabricated, organised, regulated; one could say they conform. A function of the revision that the writer often wants to impose on himself. At that moment, the writer becomes his own cop. By being concerned with good form, in other words the most banal form, the clearest and most inoffensive.³⁵

Un-freedom is a question of the already given form: organisation, regulation, policing according to the protocols of politeness, banality, and familiarity. A book that Duras could not blame, then, would not be one without form but one which took a form from elsewhere. And that other form could not merely be imported abstractly from Bach: that would only be another form of conformity. It would have to participate in what Deleuze and Guattari described as the “revolutionary” aspect of the faculty of desire in Kant’s thought: its productivity.³⁶ If, as Duras says, in writing *Destroy* she felt, for the first time “completely free” (133), I suspect it is not because she had no form, but because she had the form that demanded the creation of a new form.

The Singularity of Duras

By way of conclusion, I’d like to briefly turn to a third aspect of the *Art of the Fugue* that is central to the interpretation of *Destroy*. This third aspect is no longer a question of the subject or of the event, but of the empty centre of destruction. It would be tempting to read the abrupt finale to the *Art of the Fugue* as a kind of literalisation of Kojève’s arguments in two of his most influential lectures, printed in full under the title “The Idea of Death in the Philosophy of Hegel.” In the first lecture he constructs an ontological image of death. Christ is the figure who intuitively represents this notion, though Kojève will strenuously insist Hegelianism is the exact antithesis to Christianity. Christ is not only the becoming-finite of God, but, as an agent of a redemption that would qualitatively transform the real, he stands for that point at which time is introduced into being, death into God. In the second lecture, Kojève develops a phenomenological image on this basis. He reads the early works of Hegel to demonstrate the manner in which this death is lived, indeed, becomes, a *maladie* of Man and Nature, and, as such, becomes the condition of freedom, history and individuality.³⁷ A condition of freedom, because, to be free, one must be able to transcend the given and the field of its determinations; a condition of history, because the negation of the given “is only *real* insofar

as it is a *creation*, an accomplished *work*:" history is, fundamentally, the progress of free creation (654-55; original emphases); a condition of individuality, because it is only in risking one's life for purely political/universal/historical ends that one is individuated (661). In order to say 'I', Kojève concludes, one must inhabit and be inhabited by death. At a first glance the *Art of the Fugue* seems, if only at the level of fact, to unite these dimensions: it stands in for the extreme limit of creative freedom; it is a constitutive and unsurpassable event in the history of music; and it ends with the inscription of a proper name, a name moreover which appears at the moment of the work's constitutive incompleteness and which is marked precisely by the appearance of death as such.

But it is worth listening again to the final moments of Duras' film. The film does, as you would expect, accord with Duras' notes for performance. After the 'gong' begins to sound, we hear the first faint whispers of the final fugue, *Contrapunctus XIX* in contemporary editions. But Duras starts the recording in the middle of the *second* subject, not the third on the name of Bach and interrupted by death. As the credits roll, and as we watch a sequence of proper names slowly ascend out of frame until the final sound of the gong, we only ever hear the second subject of the fugue. We never hear the third. Why at the very moment that you would expect music to the name of Bach, do you get music to the name of Stein? Or, because the politics of depersonalisation presents an obvious answer: what is at stake in this final act of depersonalisation, the suppression of the name of Bach and the annulment of the moment of individuality?

One could pose this question in an analytic register as well. In 1975, apparently without any reference to Duras, Serge Leclaire turned briefly to the *Art of the Fugue* in the final case of *A Child is Being Killed*. Spurred on by the characterisation of the *Art of the Fugue* as a living thing in the liner notes to Munclinger's recording quoted above, Leclaire suggests Bach's work might stand in as a kind of allegory for the structure of the subject. Music is perhaps able to designate, more precisely and more "adequately," the nature of the subject and its relation to the letter:

The work of psychoanalysis, as we know, consists entirely in letting the unconscious speak, in somehow having the other story be heard. But it is a singular story composed of erratic fragments: a back, a solitaire, a smell, the space of a breath, a cry; it is arranged like a constellation, impervious to time and events, in the shape of a strange body that could never say 'me,' but articulated 'I' in the interval of each element. To draw that body, write that other story, and have the scansion of the 'I' be heard, notes (named with letters) would be more adequate than words.³⁸

If music in general can do this work, the *Art of the Fugue*, in a way, shows why: in building the entire work out of the *Hauptthema*, Bach repeats the transformational logic of the unconscious. This theme, Leclaire writes, "determines the unity of the work up to its incompleteness. The same notes, the same letters, make up the web and give birth to the fabulous display of fugues and canons." The *Hauptthema* is like an

“unconscious primal phantasy,” at work “in the whole of psychic life.”³⁹ The movement of the *Art of the Fugue*, then, becomes an allegory of the letter, dramatizing in music the way an individual’s sexual history might be heard insisting in the scansion of the I. But Duras, I think, interprets the ending of the *Art of the Fugue* in a quite different way: it is precisely this trajectory that ends in the I that she dismantles in *Destroy*.

Duras’ bracketing of the proper name opens up a field of questions in which her specific difference from the two thinkers with whom her work is traditionally identified – Blanchot and Lacan – is at stake. This is too large a question to answer here – arguably to even open here – but the contours of a schematic response clarify the stakes of this interpretation of *Destroy*. Schematically one could say that in contrast to Blanchot’s emphasis on the neutrality of death, its sublime indifference, in his own response to Kojève’s lectures, for Duras the cry that un-works every work issues from a body, from a material configuration of needs and desires: differences, held in tension. A body that is often animal in nature, cat-like in *Aurelia Steiner*, or dog-like in *La Musica*. It is a cry of the non-neutral. Psychoanalysis would appear to be the discourse that would grasp this most precisely – and no doubt it is, but the analytic situation has demands and concerns that are different from Duras.’ It’s not the scansion of an ‘I’ that is articulated in *Destroy*, even if, for Duras, too, the “cry” of a “strange body” is always audible beneath the relative tranquillity on an utterance, as Leclaire put it.⁴⁰ But in *Destroy*, it is ultimately the scansion of a “you” that finds itself articulated in the intervals of the body. The love that recognises these desires is not the love that appears in the transference. It is the love of equals in the recognition of their desire.

The movement of desire in the final scene of *Destroy* gives texture to this interpretation. The music is first presented as though it were the movement of Alissa’s desire. At different points leading up to the final scene, the work implied that capital destruction would come from Alissa. The theme of this final scene, too, is desire: the characters discuss the erosion of desire, death by desire, and, ultimately, the question of whether Elisa might have yielded to Alissa’s desire had she stayed for a few more days. Finally, at the moment the sound begins to be heard, Stein and Thor are watching Alissa dream. In the final lines it is as if they are watching her desire arrive, become actual; and the closer it gets, the more attentively they watch Alissa, bending over her as the trees in the forest bend. For all of these reasons, then, the music appears to stand in for Alissa’s desire. But when the music arrives and when it is named, it is named as “music to the name of Stein.”

Why music to the name of Stein? Is it that a desire is properly named by its object rather than its subject? Perhaps. But that object, here, is another subject, and that brings other dynamics into play. The music that is kept offstage is music to the name of Bach, in the form of that third “subject.” For Bach, both the highest point of the creative act and the work’s completion (which inscribes it in the movement of history) are linked in an act of aesthetic individuation. For Duras, it is not the name of the subject which is articulated, but the name of the other. For Duras, the

music is certainly associated with Alissa's own desire – and, to recall the schema from *Les Lieux*, its sound, and her childlike smile, somehow indicate a return to her own sexual history and the annunciation of a non-alienating time to come. But at the end of *Destroy* that movement of desire is no longer locatable in a personal trajectory. Not only does Alissa name the desire by its object, but, conversely, it is precisely *her* desire that is desired by Stein and Thor. There is an obvious Kojévian thematic here: Stein, Thor, Alissa, all desire the desire of the other, and, in fact, the desire of each seems to be desired in turn (as Kristeva put it, one can freely construct dyads). And yet the proper name does not stick. The moment of individuality is displaced, and each only speaks the name of the other.

It is the collective dimension of this desire, I would like to suggest, that grounds the absolute extension Duras gives pain and pleasure it in these final lines. The rhetoric of infinity is located at the two poles of a dialectic here, which itself takes two forms, one sonic, one affective. The sonic space oscillates between the noise of the gong and the clarity of the Bach, its “sovereign amplitude,” “immeasurable strength” and a “sublime gentleness.” At the same time, the music carries with it an affective charge – as it did in *Les Lieux*: the characters oscillate between “infinite pain” (“with infinite pain the music stops, begins again, stops, repeats, starts again. Stops”; “What pain. What immense pain”) and an “absolute laugh” (“In her sleep Alissa's childlike mouth widens in pure laughter [*un rire absolu*]. They laugh to see her laugh.” (85/137) This dialectic is a familiar one to readers of Duras: from body to speech, pain to beauty, suffering to joy. It is the movement of the cry as it drives toward expression. Cixous puts it this way in a luminous gloss on Duras' work:

what fascinates her, as we gradually discover – and, I think she herself discovers, has us discover – is a mixture of eroticism bound up with female flesh (it really functions through what can be so overwhelming and beautiful in something indefinable in woman) and death. And it all blends into one. And so it gets lost once again. As if death enveloped life, beauty, with the terrible tenderness of love. As if death *loved* life.⁴¹

This assemblage (death, desire :: beauty, life) appears throughout *destroy*, I tried to show above. It circulated in the homophonic gliding of *cri-rien-rient* noted above – a gliding which you can hear, again, in the final lines of the work, just when the music itself traces this arc from a lived pain to its joyful expression in a beautiful form. In the final lines of the work, however, the joy is collective, grounded in an act of recognition, even love: it is by affirming the desire of the other, the text suggests, that pain, lack or need is converted into joy.

What, though, makes the absolute laugh absolute? One interpretation would follow from the nature of the affirmation and its object: to affirm the desire of the other is also to affirm what animates that desire, the lack the pain or the absence which pulses in it. Immediately before Thor and Stein “laugh” with Alissa's absolute laugh, they are witness to an infinite pain. That pain is located in a body or a personal trajectory no more than the desire it gives rise to or its recognition is:

not only is it not clearly Alissa's, at times Duras implies it is the music itself that is pained. What we share is what we lack, as Mascolo put it in *Le Communisme*, and for that reason the first and guiding definition of communism itself was "the movement of the material satisfaction of needs."⁴² I suspect this is one sense of Duras' persistent identification of communism and love: a care for the needs of the other that is universal.⁴³ From this point of view, then, it is the collective dimension of pain, our status as *homo necessitudinis*, that renders Alissa's laugh absolute – but also Bach-like, in its annunciation of a time to come in which freedom has been wrested from necessity.

This is, at least, one element in the interpretation of the remarkable, curious lines in *Écrire* and which seem to return to the animating ideas of *Destroy*. Even if she had become a concert pianist, Duras says, she would have continued to write. "Unreadable books, but whole nonetheless. As distant from words as the unknown object of an objectless love. Like the love of Christ or of J. S. Bach – the two of them breathtakingly equivalent."⁴⁴

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Notes

1. Marguerite Duras, *Destroy, She Said*, trans. B. Bray (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 83. Further references are indicated by page numbers included in the text, followed by the corresponding page number(s) from Marguerite Duras, *Détruire dit-elle* (Paris: Minuit, 1969); here 133.
2. See Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, trans. E. Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 116.
3. Marguerite Duras and Michelle Porte, *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), 28-29.
4. *Ibid.*, 30.
5. See Marguerite Duras, *Le dernier des métiers. Entretiens 1962-1991* (Paris: Seuil, 2016), 177.
6. Blanchot, *Friendship*, 116; original emphasis.
7. See Wendy Everett, 'An Art of Fugue? The Polyphonic Cinema of Marguerite Duras' in *Revisioning Duras: Film, Race, Sex*, ed. J. S. Williams (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2000), 21 and 26. See also Wendy Everett's "Director as Composer: Marguerite Duras and the Music Analogy," in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 26.2 (1998), 124-29. For an argument that runs paral-

lel to mine, see John Phillip's "The Mathematics of Meaning: Marguerite Duras' *Moderato Cantabile*" in *Nottingham French Studies* 34.2 (1995), 41.45. For a comprehensive study of Duras' relation to music, see Midori Ogawa's *La Musique dans l'œuvre littéraire de Marguerite Duras* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002).

8. Llewellyn Brown, *Marguerite Duras, écrire et détruire. Un paradoxe de la création* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2018).

9. See Leslie Hill, *Marguerite Duras: Apocalyptic Desires* (London: Routledge, 1993), 132-35; see also Martin Crowley, *Duras, Writing and the Ethical* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 125f.

10. Blanchot, *Friendship*, 110.

11. See the texts in "Mai-Juin 1968: Tracts du Comité d'Action Étudiants-Écrivains (Sorbonne-Censier)" in *Lignes* 33 (1998): 122-26 and Dionys Mascolo, *A la recherche d'un communisme de pensée* (Paris: Fourbis, 1993), 299-364.

12. See Hill, *Marguerite Duras*, 8.

13. Duras, *Green Eyes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 62.

14. See Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact* (New York: Legenda, 2012), chapter 3 and Hill, *Marguerite Duras*, 91-94.

15. See "Writing," in *Writing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011): 1-45. See Brown, *Marguerite Duras*, 240ff, for a different interpretation of this destruction.

16. "Writing," 17.

17. Blanchot, *Friendship*, 114.

18. Duras, *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, trans. R. Seaver (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966), 24.

19. *Destroy*, 120.

20. *Destroy*, 120-21; original emphasis.

21. Wolff, Christoph, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York: Norton, 2001), 437.

22. For a historical survey of this debate, see Michael Markham's "The Usefulness of Such Artworks: Expression, Analysis, and Nationalism in The Art of Fugue" in *Repercussions* 9.1 (2001): 33-75.

23. Quoted in Serge Leclaire, *A Child is Being Killed*, trans. M.-Cl. Hays (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 48. More on Leclaire below.

24. M. Isobel Munro, "A Bach Resurrection," *The Musical Times* 71.1045 (Mar 1 1930): 223-224, 223.

25. For a brief overview of the issues here, see Wolff, *Bach* (341ff).

26. *Destroy*, 95.

27. For a brilliant performative explanation of fugue form, see Glenn Gould's 1963 "So you Want to Write a Fugue." There are a shocking number of versions available on youtube.

28. Blanchot, *Friendship*, 114.
29. Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, trans. L. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 251f.
30. *Destroy*, 127.
31. *Destroy*, 108.
32. *Destroy*, 108-09.
33. Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 253.
34. *Destroy*, 130.
- 35.. Duras, "Writing," 23.
36. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem and H. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 25.
37. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 651. On death as a malady, see 649-651. For an overview of the importance of this particular lecture to Blanchot and an account of the way it inflects some of his most fundamental positions, see Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1977), 104.
38. Leclaire, *A Child Is Being Killed*, 47.
39. Leclaire, *A Child Is Being Killed*, 48f.
40. There is a robust literature on this question, mostly around the question of Duras' complex relation to écriture féminine, and it appears in every major critical account of her work. See Anne Tomiche, "Writing the Body: The Rhetoric of Mutilation in Marguerite Duras' 'L'amante anglaise'" in *Thinking Bodies*, ed. Juliet Flower MacCannell and Laura Zakarin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 120-130. Tomiche foregrounds the problem of figure and disfiguration in this field that resonates strongly with the argument I am developing here.
41. Hélène Cixous, *White Ink*, ed. Susan Sellars (London: Routledge, 2014), 160; original emphasis.
42. See Dionys Mascolo, *Le Communisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), 5.
43. In addition to the lined quoted above from the interview (127), see, in particular her interview with Michelle Porte following *Le camion* in *Le camion, suivi de entretien avec Michelle Porte* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), p. 119-20. See Leslie Hill, Duras, pp. 48f for an account of the relation between Duras and Mascolo on this point.
44. Duras, *Writing*, p. 7.

ALEXI KUKULJEVIC

SCREAMING WITHOUT SOUND

Writing isn't just telling stories. It's exactly the opposite. It's telling everything at once. It's the telling of a story, and the absence of a story. It's telling a story through its absence.¹

Marguerite Duras

One expects water to freeze at 0° Celsius. Just as one might expect misery to be miserable, a scream to be audible, or a communist to believe in communism.² One expects a woman to suffer if betrayed by her fiancé (*The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*) or a disgraced diplomatic official to tender his resignation (*The Vice-Consul*).³ If a family cannot pay their water bills, *ought* they not to expect that the water will be cut off? “An oak in every acorn.”⁴ Such is the case... *for the most part*.

When expectations are met, when the affairs of life unfold in accordance with “that celebrated ‘thread of the story,’” to quote Robert Musil’s *The Man without Qualities*, one utters a sigh of relief.⁵ “Lucky the man who can say ‘when,’ ‘before,’ and ‘after!’” Lucky the man, in other words, that can appeal to a “narrative order,” for “the basic law of this life, the law one longs for” is that of a sequence *that makes sense*, that allows one to plot out a course of action, which is to say, represent “the overwhelmingly manifold nature of things” within a “unidimensional order.” This is the metaphysical function of the “thread of the story.” It guarantees a sense of direction, a promise of completion, in short, a sense of wholeness.

Most people relate to themselves as storytellers. They usually have no use for poems, and although the occasional “because” or “in order that” gets knotted into the thread of life, they generally detest any brooding that goes beyond that; they love the orderly sequence of facts because it has the look of necessity, and the impression that their life has a “course” is somehow their refuge from chaos.

Having a likely, or better, a necessary story to tell allows one to forget life’s elementary uncertainty “as an actor who forgets the scenery and his makeup, and believes that he is really living his part.”⁶

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle defines the story (*muthos*), which he claims is the ground (*archê*) and soul of poetic art, as “the composition of the things done.”⁷ Events that “seem to have happened as if by design,” he claims, make for better, more wondrous and “more beautiful” stories.⁸ The foundational function of the story guarantees that what happens does not happen by “chance or luck” but in accordance with an end. This end is guaranteed if and only if the story accords with what is natural, which is to say, what happens for the most part.⁹ Unlike the historian who speaks of “things that have happened,” the “work of the poet” is to speak of things that “might happen and the possibilities that come from what is likely or necessary [*tò eikòs è tò anankaion*].”¹⁰ The story is not merely a sequence of actions, but a composition that makes out of them a whole.¹¹ The meaning of this whole may indeed be obscure and difficult to comprehend, but it is not itself in question.

Yet, literature, or what Marguerite Duras often prefers to simply call *writing*, begins when the *part* leveraged to determine the *most* gives way. It no longer holds. The story comes unhinged. It becomes unbearable. One can no longer make sense of things, because one’s sense of expectation must forgo an expected sense. One finds oneself like Musil’s Ulrich bereft of “this elementary, narrative mode of thought.” Ice does not form at 0° Celsius.

To write, for Duras, is a matter of pitting oneself at the heart of this calamity, reaching that point when misery is no longer miserable:

The wonderful misery is perhaps that torture, that entreaty which allows no respite, that uprooting of self which leaves you forsaken and lost when it ends with the book. You know too. To be the object of one’s own madness and not to go mad, that could be it, the wonderful misery. All the rest is beside the point.¹²



Duras likens the loss of the feeling of being whole to watching a poorly dubbed film that lacks even the semblance of a plot.

You never know, in life, when things are there. You can’t grasp them. You were saying the other day that life often seems as if it were dubbed. That’s exactly what I feel: my life is a film that’s been dubbed – badly cut, badly acted, badly put together. In short, a mistake. A whodunnit without either murders or cops or victims; without a subject, pointless. It could have been a real film, but no, it’s a sham. But who’s to say what one would have had to do for it to be otherwise? I suppose I should have just stood there in front of the camera without saying or doing anything; just being looked at, without thinking about anything in particular. Yes, that’s it.¹³

Life without a story to make of it a whole falls mute. Duras posits something like a fundamental lack of synchronization at the heart of being.¹⁴ Words and things

are fatally partnered but mismatched. Life is thus hopelessly awkward, lopsided. It limps. “A reality that’s ragged and hollowed out.”¹⁵

Duras might occasionally fantasize about such literal muteness. Just as she dreams of a book that would have no *raison d’être* other than the meandering drift that she calls the motorway of the word: “I’d like to write a book the way I’m writing at this moment, the way I’m talking to you at this moment. I’m scarcely conscious of the words coming out of me. Nothing seems to be being said but the almost nothing there is in all words.”¹⁶ However, Duras recognizes that such a book is strictly speaking “impossible.”¹⁷ A book about nothing,¹⁸ without a story or direction, a book that like a motorway goes “in all directions at once” is no book at all. “The only alternative is to say nothing. But that can’t be written down.”¹⁹ So the writer’s conundrum is how to *write* down nothing, the nothing that cannot be said.

Duras attends to this problem by listening to what remains unsaid or to that which is said but not heard: moments in which language loses its fluency and writing its polish. Born Marguerite Donnadiou, her decision to adopt the pen name Duras – the name of the village in Lot-et-Garonne where her father was born – with its pronunciation of a regionally specific “sibilant s,” as Rachel Kushner reminds us, acts as an insistent reminder of the importance of this positive lack of refinement.²⁰ Duras makes us hear the “s’s” silence. Her writing resonates with awkward silence, socially awkward presences...the kind of silences that social etiquette seeks to dispel or at least to smooth out. Duras’ “aesthetics of awkwardness,” as Julia Kristeva aptly formulates, consists in the manner in which she sheds the presumption that writing ought to minimize abnormality. As Kristeva stresses, this is not a result of Duras’ interest in formal concerns. “If there is a formal search,” she writes, “it is subordinate to confrontation with the silence of horror in oneself and in the world.”²¹ Duras’ singular distaste for polished writing is more visceral than intellectual, an almost physical disgust with the effort to eliminate imperfection and regulate life’s crippled cadence. Her writing preserves a certain untidiness that can make one question the veracity of a memory: is it Indiana Song or India Song, S. Thala or S. Tahla, Richard or Richardson?²² Her sentences are frequently mere syntactical fragments as if an incumbent meaning has been aborted. The overall effect is that of the carefully indefinite. Things are messy but not careless. The reader is thus in doubt as to *what* is being said, left with nothing but a residue, the remains, of a story.²³ “The longing for a story.”²⁴



Not a story but not not a story, Duras’ books are tasked with the contradiction of not *just* telling a story, but its opposite. The opposite of the story is not just life but life devoid of sense. What she terms “the fundamental futility of life.”²⁵ Writing that is equal to life’s futility proceeds without the assurance of a sheltering sky. The sky, rather, is “unwholesome-looking,”²⁶ as Duras describes the sky of Calcutta in *The Vice-Consul*. The lack of such assurance lends writing, like the “white residents”

of Calcutta, a liverish hue. It is sickly intelligent. Without a story to assure it, writing is dispossessed of an identity, haunted by an indigency just as the story of *The Vice-Consul* is haunted by the beggar woman from the village of Battambang.

She is a figure of absolute abandonment. A human living without the assurance of humanity. Destitute beyond anything one might expect. Nameless because she has forgotten her own name. A stranger amongst strangers, a Cambodian amongst the Calcutta lepers, sleeping along the banks of the Ganges river.²⁷ “She grows more and more confused, until at last, suddenly, all confusion ceases, because she no longer seeks to understand anything.”²⁸ She has become a cipher of life’s futility, of its scattered remains: “‘Meaningless utterances and profound silence,’ says Michael Richard.” All that is left of her in Calcutta is her laugh, “drained of all color” and the song, “the word ‘Battambang’ that she repeats incessantly.”²⁹ Prompted to speak of this “odd creature” by Charles Rossett, the Vice-Consul says: “Death in the midst of life...death following but never catching up.”³⁰ What is not *just* life but its opposite is not death, but, perhaps, death in the midst of life.

The character of Peter Morgan, a “young” writer – “Twenty-four years of age. On his first visit to India”³¹ – is the one whose ambition is to tell her story. “[D]runk on the sufferings of India,” he believes it is his task, the task of the writer, to become one with her suffering and to *explain* why the reader ought to be interested in her. To the question – “Why her in particular?” – he answers, “Because nothing more can happen to her, not even leprosy.”³² *The Vice-Consul* begins with his effort to *free and indirectly* enter the beggar woman’s story:

She walks on, writes Peter Morgan.

How to avoid going back? Get lost. I don’t know how. You’ll learn. I need some signpost to lead me astray. Make your mind a blank. Refuse to recognize familiar landmarks. Turn your steps towards the most hostile point on the horizon, towards the vast marshlands, bewilderingly crisscrossed by a thousand causeways.³³

Yet, to be precise, the novel does not begin with his effort. It begins, rather, inelegantly by marking a disjunction between two narrative positions, ensuring that the reader *read* his writing, position its story in relation to another writing, a different narrative voice. The story thus begins with a disidentification.

Peter Morgan wants to tell the *story* of her madness. He does not allow madness to *truly* enter into the *writing* of her story. His writing may speak about the hostile point of the horizon, but it fails to evoke it. And as he announces much later in the novel in a discussion with George Crawn, Michael Richard, and Charles Rossett, he seems careful to avoid such a slippage: “I shall abandon her before madness overtakes her...that’s for sure; but all the same I need to understand the nature of her madness.”³⁴ I do not believe that Duras thinks that we should read him derisively. But we misunderstand what is at stake in the novel if we do not think the gap that

she institutes at the *book's* beginning. Duras' book thus has a delayed beginning. It begins with the interruption of Morgan's efforts.

It is this interruption that enables Duras to pose the problem of the novel, which touches on writing as such, namely the relation between the song of Battambang and the Vice-Consul's screams. We must attend to the inscription of the difference between what Peter Morgan knows – "This is what he knows." – and how he imagines. By establishing this gap within the narrative, the reader is shown what he fails to grasp or take interest in: the relation between the Embassy and its outside, the Vice-Consul and the beggar woman. "Peter Morgan has followed her through the streets of Calcutta," but he fails to see what is written, which only we readers are in a position to see: "There she is, opposite the residence of the former Vice-Consul of France in Lahore. In the shade of an overhanging bush, her dress of coarse sack-ing still sopping wet, she lies asleep."³⁵ Whereas Peter Morgan is absorbed in India's miseries – "misery and yet more misery, he thinks" – Duras' novel poses the problem that only appears when this gaze is interrupted and the beggar woman is placed opposite the Vice-Consul.

It is this interruption that makes it possible for Duras to shift the problem of the book from the ambition to tell a story (the story of India) to the task of writing about a figure – Jean-Marc de H., the French Vice-Consul of Lahore – who has no story to tell. Peter Morgan talks *about* India and its suffering, about "the mad beggar-woman," but he maintains a safe distance from his object, between himself and the immensity of India's suffering. The difference between the Embassy grounds and city of Calcutta is preserved despite spending his night following her through the streets. His interest in "the mad beggar-woman" blinds him to the conundrum of the Vice-Consul, his embarrassing and disturbing presence, to the "truth" that will "hit" Charles Rossett "blindingly": "it's impossible, it's absolutely impossible to dwell on. . . the fact of his existence. . . . How can one possibly feel human affection of any kind for the Vice-Consul of Lahore?"³⁶ For a storyteller like Peter Morgan, the Vice-Consul is, no doubt, too close to home, too disruptive to all and any *peace of mind*. To grasp the truth of the Vice-Consul is to grasp an I that has annihilated all distance from the suffering that surrounds it and within which it is immersed. This truth has to be blotted out in order for Peter Morgan to maintain his fictitious transgression, his fictitious journey outside the compound. Peter Morgan's declaration "That's enough of him!" is a bit too insistent.³⁷

The difference between writing and storytelling becomes the object of the novel only once Peter Morgan's fictional gaze is itself positioned as an object. We then glimpse that the "young" writer's desire "to shoulder the misery of Calcutta," "plunge into its depths...to get it over, so that wisdom may start to grow out of bitter experience"³⁸ is itself fictitious and radically opposed to the Vice-Consul's altogether fundamental incapacity to shoulder the misery of Lahore. His inability *to get used* to Lahore finds outlet through an *unfathomable violence*: randomly shooting from his Embassy balcony into the Shalimar gardens. The Vice-Consul's screams are the screams of the writing of literature.

That which screams in writing is the silencing of sense. These silences mark a break-down in cohesion, in synchrony, a collapse of “the correlation between cause and effect”³⁹ that makes one question the story as such and as a whole. In all of Duras’ writing, the story turns around a resistant kernel.⁴⁰ Cause is absent: that essentially awkward man – “a man at a distance from other men”⁴¹ – the French Vice-consul of Lahore shoots at the lepers in the Shalimar gardens. The beggar woman from Tonle Sap emerges from a lagoon near The Prince of Wales Hotel with a live fish and bites its head off. “Laughing more than ever, she chews the fish head. The decapitated fish jerks in her hands.”⁴² In *L’Amante Anglaise*, Claire Lannes kills and dismembers her deaf-mute cousin, Marie-Thérèse. Where the head is hidden will remain a mystery. André Berthaud commits suicides. “Now as then, when the events took place, I see Berthaud’s gesture not as his only way out but as a refusal to take part in the deadly comedy staged by the police. In this instance his mental incapacity served him well: he chose his own death.”⁴³ Lol V. Stein at the ball in *S. Thala* forgets to follow the thread of her own story: “so carried away by the sight of her fiancé and the stranger in black,” as Duras puts it, “that she forgets to suffer.”⁴⁴ She forgets what we expect from the story of a girl in love. “She had forgotten the age-old equation governing the sorrows of love.”⁴⁵ Lol incarnates a gap between the story and its absence and “her whole life will unfold around that very loss, that very void.”⁴⁶ She is unable to forget this moment of forgetting. By forgetting her storyline, she forgets herself.⁴⁷

Duras’ stories are not stories, but stories born of their interruption, of the suspense of an expected sense:

Like a phenomenon related to the freezing of water. Water turns to ice at zero degrees, but sometimes, when the weather’s very cold, the air is so still that the water *forgets* to freeze. It can descend to minus five degrees and freeze only then.⁴⁸

Water too, like stories, can deviate from its script.



One begins to write, not when one begins to tell a story, but when one’s *sense* of expectation is absent. When water *forgets* to freeze. Such a deviation has its scientific explanations. It may be caused by the impact of an increase in barometric pressure on water’s molecular structure or may be the result of water being very pure and still. In such cases, ice crystals cannot form since there is nothing for them to bind to: no flecks of dust, no tiny vibrations, no impurities to catalyze the change. Yet, such explanations aid the cause of meaning. They explain the reason why water does not conform to our expectation. The form of expectation itself is thus not in peril. The explanation allows a sense of reality to be preserved. Yet, the event itself, water’s failure to conform to expectation, shows that reality is untenable. It is this untenability that fiction must respect. The suspense of water’s sense must become interminable.

Duras' metaphor, "water forgets...", is not an explanation. It fails to explain. The failed form of an explanation is substituted for the form of expectation. Water's forgetfulness forces us to ascribe an identity to water that it lacks. Water is itself absent minded. It forgets itself; it loses its sense. It forgets just as Lol V. Stein forgets to suffer. The metaphor seeks a language in the face of language's inadequacy to determine the loss of water's identity, of its relation to an expected sense.

Something unbecoming comes to pass. Water's awkward beauty. Water retains its form when it ought not to have. Perhaps, we can say that it is a form that has shed its identity. Forgetful of itself, it does not live up to expectation. For a brief spell water fails to register the fact that it *ought* to be ice. But it is not. And having lost the limits defining the stability of its form, water loses the assurance of its identity, haunted by the anomaly of this not. Within this suspended interval, as water dips below 0° without freezing, it encounters the loss of its sense. Shorn of its *sens* (sense and direction) and the end to which its story ought to conform, it must suddenly confront itself as nothing but a relation to this absence, as nothing but this forgetting. Water parts way with itself. "In a solitary confrontation with change."⁴⁹

Water remains water but has shed the expectation of its form. It occupies the hollow place of an absent sense. Having lost a relation to its signification, it becomes nothing but a shell of a word. A block of signifying material: w-a-t-e-r. The metaphor here directs the mind to an absent sense. Water can only *forget to freeze* in language. But the metaphor prompts language to say nothing: "Nothing seems to be being said but the almost nothing there is in all words."⁵⁰ Duras' metaphor stresses that the event that could indeed so easily go unnoticed befalls language, specifically the sense that accrues to the word water. Its signification is held in suspense. It is presently absent. The word's non-sensical place is substituted for the word's signification. Water is not water by retaining its form when it ought not to. When it no longer aligns with what we expect from its physical properties, the word persists without sense. In forgetting to freeze, water for a brief stint forgets what it is: a word that has a meaning. It becomes a mere thing in relation to a word whose sense can no longer seize it. Such a seizure is after all what we expect from language. It ought to mean something,⁵¹ but language here fails to act as it ought. And Duras suggests as much through a violation of its meaning: water is too cold to freeze. A proposition whose truth does not make sense.

In *The Lover*, Duras describes a scene while sitting with her mother in which she suddenly loses her sense:

I looked at my mother, I could hardly recognize her. And then, in a kind of sudden vanishing, a sudden fall, I all at once couldn't recognize her at all. There, suddenly, close to me, was someone sitting in my mother's place who wasn't my mother, who looked like her but who'd never been her. She looked rather blank, she was gazing at the garden, a certain point in the garden, it looked as if she was watching for something just about to happen, of which I could see nothing. There was a youthfulness about her features, her expres-

sion, a happiness which she was repressing out of what must have been habitual reticence. She was beautiful. Dô was beside her. Dô seemed not have noticed anything. My terror didn't come from what I've just said about her, her face, her look of happiness, her beauty, it came from the fact that she was sitting just where my mother had been sitting when the substitution took place, but that that identity irreplaceable by any other had disappeared and I was powerless to make it come back, make it start to come back. There was no longer anything there to inhabit her image. I went mad in full possession of my senses. Just long enough to cry out. I did cry out. A faint cry, a cry for help, to crack the ice in which the whole scene was fatally freezing. My mother turned her head.⁵²

Just as the event of water's failure to conform to what we expect of its sense is not a concern of water as such but the language tasked with its signification, here it is Duras, the I of the narrator, who "goes mad in full possession of her senses." Speech fails her and the only response to her mother's substitution is a cry. To write this cry is to substitute its silence, the muteness of the word, for its demand to be heard. A silent cry cannot be heard, but only read.

"Screaming without sound."⁵³ This is one of Duras' formulas for writing. The anomalous event of water's forgetting to freeze demands that its relation to lack, the void of its identity, be exhibited. Language's sense falls silent. The writer has to exhibit water that has forgotten to freeze. But to do so, he or she must produce a silent scream.



"A writer is an odd thing," Duras writes. "He's a contradiction, and he makes no sense. Writing also means not speaking. Keeping silent. Screaming without sound."⁵⁴

Writing positions the voice as absent. Written words do not speak but are spoken. When one speaks words are animated by a voice which always lends whatever has been articulated a singular inflection. Aristotle defines the voice (*phônê*) as "a sound belonging to something with a soul." Yet, sound need not be meaningful. Speech itself, which is to say, speech about something, can always be obliterated by the voice when it, for example, is screamed. To describe writing's contradictory relation to sense and speech, to *logos*, as screaming without sound suggests that writing is overloaded by the voice's absence, by this absence's amplification. Speech can always be upset by the voice: in screams, cries, or laughter. One might think here of the Vice-Consul's "curiously toneless delivery, the voice pitched a fraction too high, as though he were with difficulty restraining himself from shouting."⁵⁵

A certain kind of writing, which reaches its fulfillment in bureaucratic writing, the writing of officialdom, opposes the written not simply to the voice but its absence. It does not want us to hear what has been evacuated. It believes that writing can be

the compliment of a perfectly measured voice, geared toward frictionless communication. This is to confuse writing, according to Duras, with “good form, in other words the most banal form, the clearest and most inoffensive.” “Good form,” for Duras, can only result in “prim books...charming books, without extension, without darkness. Without silence. In other words, without a true author.”⁵⁶

Duras insists on writing’s abnormality. Not only the writer but writing itself is “odd.” Writing is abnormal. This is something that everybody who has *learned to write* knows, but promptly forgets. A forgotten knowledge that returns insistently, however, each time one must confront its beastly difficulty.⁵⁷ Such forgetting is requisite for learning how to write *tout court*, let alone to write *well*. “Well” meaning the kind of writing that makes it possible to believe that one can indeed make oneself understood, that missives and other communiqués can meet their mark. Such “writing” strives toward a conformity between the object represented (what one wants to say) and its means of expression (how it is said).

For Duras, however, this has nothing to do with writing, true writing, “the writing of literature.”⁵⁸ Strictly speaking, one never learns to *write*. As soon as one learns *it*, something else is substituted in its place which domesticates it, turning an altogether “savage” practice into the most normal thing in the world.⁵⁹ Writing is something that can only be unlearned. It makes of the written a thing that always will have been abnormal.

Writing, then, restores to the written its oddness, that all too material reminder that language is not one with the sense of what is uttered. Something that is so palpable in those who write poorly, those who feel betrayed by language, who do not, as Duras puts it, have a way with words. Lack of facility always makes one feel in the wrong, “the typical, incurable attitude of the poor.”⁶⁰ This feeling is most acute when one is summoned to explain oneself, to give an account. Duras is interested in those who refuse to explain themselves. Figures like André Berthaud or Claire Lannes, as already mentioned, but also figures like Simone Deschamps who “has nothing to say, because the court forces her to say it in its language.”⁶¹ Like Christine Villemin⁶² or the nameless, “backward” women described in “The Cutter-off of Water” who decides with her husband after their water has been shut off by some bureaucrat to take their two children and lie down on the tracks of the high-speed train line.

They all died together. Just a hundred yards to go. Lie down. Keep the children quiet. Sing them to sleep perhaps.

People say the train stopped.

Well, that’s the story.⁶³

The journalists that report on this story attend to the functionary’s actions and statements, the family’s sensational response, even the fact that the woman in the interim went into the village with her two children and into café. But they pass over what does not make sense to tell, because the woman herself left it unsaid.

They focus on just the story and fail to mention what Duras calls “the incident.” “By incident I mean what happened when she went out with the two children after she decided the whole family must die. When she went off for some reason we don’t know, to do or say something she had to do or say before she died.”⁶⁴ In this interval, a second story unfolds populated by words that nobody remembers and nobody cares to remember, because they are deemed irrelevant to what is to come: “the implementation of death.” These are words consigned to silence. Yet, Duras claims: “Whatever she said to the owner of the café,” – even if only a remark about the heat – “her words said everything.”⁶⁵ These banal words become the equivalent of the silence to which her life had been consigned.

To attend to these words is to hear a scream that cannot be heard: a scream that would have warned those who heard them of the “unfathomable violence” to come. These words, screamed silently, even though uttered by a woman “who everyone said was retarded” contain the whole intelligence of literature: what Duras calls the “illness of intelligence.”⁶⁶ She grasps with extreme lucidity her own utter and complete abandonment:

she knew she couldn’t count, now any more than ever, on anyone’s helping her and her family out. She knew she was abandoned by everyone, by the whole of society, and that the only thing left for her to do was to die. She knew that. It’s a terrible, fundamental, awful knowledge. So the question of her backwardness ought to be reconsidered, if anyone ever talked about her again. Which they won’t.⁶⁷



Jean-Marc de H., the French Vice-Consul in Lahore, is the embodiment of such a “terrible, fundamental, awful knowledge.”

“What sort of a man is he?”

“Oh! A dead man.”⁶⁸

In his “written statement regarding the *incidents* in Lahore” (my italics) he too refuses to explain himself:

I cannot go into the reasons for my conduct at Lahore, nor explain why I feel obliged to remain silent on this subject. I do not believe that anything I could say would be of interest either to the Department or to any outside agency. I trust that my refusal to speak will not be misunderstood. I suspect no one. I condemn no one. I can do no more at this stage than simply assert that I find it impossible to give an account, in terms that would be understood, of what took place in Lahore.⁶⁹

He neither explains nor resigns. The Ambassador, the husband of Anne-Marie Stretter, does not know what to do with him, with this “unhappy business,” with his awkward, ungainly presence, nor does anybody else. What to do with a man

who nobody can stand: "It's a terrible thing to say, but I just can't stand him."⁷⁰ His mere presence destroys everybody's peace of mind.⁷¹ Like the death of a fly, he is death unhinged from any significance.⁷²

In the essay, "Writing," Duras claims: "The Vice-Consul is the one I believe in. The Vice-Consul's scream, 'the only true politics.'"⁷³ With this qualification of his scream, she links this scream to *Le Camion* and the woman's declaration: "Let the world go to ruin. It is the only politics." It is a statement that in my view attempts to unhinge what we expect from an expected sense. Ruin here is unhinged from ruination, happy from happiness. Despair loses its sense just as misery is not miserable. Duras speaks thus of *the path of joyful despair*. The Vice-Consul himself links his utter despair to hope.⁷⁴ As he tells Anne Marie Stretter as they dance: "Lahore was also, in a sense, hope."⁷⁵ Yet, the Vice-Consul's hope appears *unexpectedly*. She writes,

As one might pray each day, he screamed. It's all true: he yelled very loud, and in the Lahore night he would fire on the Shalimar Gardens in order to kill. Kill anyone, but kill. He killed simply to kill. So long as "anyone" was all of India in a state of decomposition. He screamed in his home, his Residence, and when he was alone in the dark night of deserted Calcutta. He's mad, the Vice-Consul, mad with intelligence. Every night he kills Lahore.⁷⁶

The Vice-Consul's struggle is at once naïve and revolutionary.⁷⁷

The Vice-Consul is declaring the end of the world with the shots which he directs at the lepers, at leprosy, at himself, at his mirror image. With these shots he wants to, above all, kill killing, to kill that difference between those who kill and those killed, those who have the power to kill and those who can be killed indifferently without consequence. He kills because he quite simply cannot bear the world's very existence. He is thus trying to kill in himself the demand that the world itself have a meaning and the belief that we can make sense of the difference between life that is killable and life that ought not to be killed. "We've been taught from childhood on," according to Duras, "that all our efforts ought to go toward finding the meaning of life we lead, of the one offered to us. We must find a way out. And it should be joyful."⁷⁸

The Vice-Consul is a catastrophe to the story as a whole, to stories as such. As Anne-Marie Stretter answers Charles Rossett's query after her dance with Marc de H.:

"Is he the catastrophe?"

"Yes. Admittedly, it's the central concept of classical drama, but none the less true for that. No need to look any further."⁷⁹

The Vice-Consul is a catastrophe, as he suggests during their dance, not simply because "there is nothing that he can say about Lahore, nothing," but that it is of *necessity* that there is nothing to say, because his actions had to take an unforesee-

able course. He could no longer do what was expected of him, namely adjust to misery. *Get used to it.* In Lahore, the Vice-Consul finds himself trapped within the confines of his own story with the expectation that he would adjust himself to the circumstances, to the climate, to the poverty, to the Colonial context, that he would do his job like the cutter-off-of-water. It is this plot that he destroys.

He finds himself in a situation not unlike the situation of the old woman that Duras describes in her treatment of Charles Laughton's *Night of the Hunter*. Tasked with having to defend the group of orphaned children from the murderous figure of the father (played by Robert Mitchum) with insufficient means, whilst beset with a character whose typology bars her from killing; "classed with goodness and love in the American myth," as Duras suggests, she is forced to *improvise*. "The old woman improvises by singing 'Moses'."⁸⁰ She sings the tune that the "killer-father" so ominously whistles. And as he begins to sing along, he sheds, if only for the duration of the Night, his murderous identity. He forgets himself. He forgets that he is there to kill the children, to commit a crime. So the *crime forgets to kill*, just like water forgets to freeze. Unhinged by the song, which erects "an insurmountable barrier for the crime," he is dis-identified, and the crime begins to drift from its expected place: "it will be distracted, forgetting to kill, and relieving the criminal for a moment of the weight of his insanity. So that he will leave it alone for the time of a night."⁸¹ Duras describes this as a "miracle" that serves to derail the story from its expected sense:

What is suddenly established among these people is a connection which up to then is impossible to predict and which escapes all classification, all analysis. First it's a question of a way of behaving that the old woman invents and the criminal then repeats. These people, so different, suddenly agree to take the film in hand and decide its fate, as if an author were finally getting into the act and, liberating the movie, carrying it off, free. Suddenly, we don't know anymore what we are seeing, what we have seen. So accustomed are we to seeing in the same way. Suddenly there's a switch. All the narrative elements of the movie appear to have put us on the wrong track. Where are we? Where is the good, the bad? Where is the crime? The movie progresses with no morality. It ceases to be the classic fiction of fifty years of American cinema. It has no predetermined outcome, we have no indication of the way it's going to go. We no longer know what we are supposed to think of what we are seeing...⁸²

This is writing's promise which promises nothing. One gets nothing in return for one's losses. Nothing in return is not something, but is not nothing. It is the almost nothing in all words. If the despair of the Vice-Consul is also hope, it is not because he has something to hope for. It is only when he has nothing to hope for, in the pit of despair, that he can hope without being hopeful. He finds love without either being lovable or demanding that he be loved. Writing's silent scream touches upon song: sound without sense. Such an account is not blind to the hell in which we

live, but we ought not to think of it as tragic. As Jean-Marc de H. tells Anne-Marie Stretter: “It may help you to see the man who is waking up as a clown.”⁸³

Notes

1. Marguerite Duras, *Practicalities*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Grove Weidenfeld Press, 1990), 27.
2. In a late interview, Duras states, “I’m still a communist who doesn’t recognize herself in communism. To join a party, you have to be more or less autistic, neurotic, deaf and blind. For years, I stayed in the party as a branch secretary, without realizing what was happening, without seeing that the working class was a victim of its own weakness, that even the proletariat was doing nothing to overcome the limitations of its own condition.” Marguerite Duras, *Suspended Passions: Interviews with Leopoldina Pallotta della Torre*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Seagull Books, 2016), 28.
3. “‘I was expecting he would tender his resignation,’ says the Ambassador, ‘but he hasn’t done so.’” Marguerite Duras, *The Vice-Consul*, trans. Eileen Ellenbogen (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968, 27).
4. Marguerite Duras, *L’Amante Anglaise*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), 110.
5. Duras cites this passage from Musil’s novel in a conversation with Leopoldina Pallotta della Torre to illustrate her following claim: “In my films I don’t gloss over or suppress those things that are not functional or organic to the expressive unity of the fiction – they are made up of a material that’s lacerated, superimposed, offset in time; there are gaps and breaks – that whole imaginary that is meant to render the heterogeneity and irreducibility of life” (*Suspended Passion*, 100).
6. Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike (London: Picador, 1995), 709.
7. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2006), 1450a 2-3.
8. Aristotle gives the following example in the *Poetics*: “An instance is the way the statue of Mityls in Argos laid out flat the person responsible for Mityls’s death, when it fell on him as he contemplated it, for it seems that such things have not happened randomly; and so necessarily stories of this sort are more beautiful” (1452a 8-15).
9. Aristotle defines what occurs for the most part as what is likely (*to eikos*). In a note to chapter 7 of his translation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Joe Sachs writes, “what is likely (*to eikos*) is explained above, in the account of beginnings, middles, and ends, as what happens naturally, when it does so not by invariable necessity but for the most part. In the *Physics* (198b 34-36), Aristotle treats the latter criterion as sufficient evidence that nature is at work. Likely sequence in the story, then, is an image of some aspect of nature working itself out in human action.” See Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2006), note 20, 31.
10. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451a 38-40.
11. Aristotle also claims that unlike history which speaks “of things that are particular,” poetry “aims at” what is “universal”: “the sorts of things that a certain sort of person

turns out to say or do as a result of what is likely or necessary [*tò eikòs è tò anankaïon*]” (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451b 8-10). Poetry grasps the causes of actions and the effects they produce. Jacques Rancière argues that Aristotle’s distinction between poetry and history is fundamental for grasping his conception of *mimêsis*: “Aristotle asserted the superiority of invented logical sequences over the unfolding of empirical events.” *The Politics of Literature*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011), 174.

12. *Green Eyes*, 129.

13. *Practicalities*, 125. For the new edition of *Green Eyes*, published in 1987, Duras chose this passage from *La vie matérielle* (*Practicalities*) as the epigraph.

14. This is certainly akin to Friedrich Hölderlin’s notion of a “categorical reversal,” in *Notes on Oedipus*, where “the beginning and the end by no means rhyme.” In “The Caesura of the Speculative,” Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe interprets Hölderlin’s notion of caesura and of categorical reversal as an interruption of the dominance of Aristotle’s treatment of *catharsis* within the tradition. *Catharsis* is what allows for the resolution of the story. It is important in this regard to also mention Julia Kristeva’s suggestion that Duras’ writing leads to a “*noncathartic* literature.” “Lacking recovery or God, having neither value or beauty other than illness itself seized at the essential place of its rupture, never has art had so little cathartic potential...We are in the presence of the nothing of meaning and feelings as lucidity accompanies them to their dying out, and we bear witness to the neutralization of our own distress, with neither tragedy nor enthusiasms, with clarity, in the frigid insignificance of a psychic numbness, both the minimal and also ultimate sign of grief and ravishment.” *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 228.

15. This how Duras describes the reality captured in *Le Camion* and *Son Nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert*. See *Suspended Passions*, 102.

16. *Practicalities*, 125.

17. *Practicalities*, 8.

18. In Jacqueline Risset’s obituary, she suggests: “Perhaps Marguerite Duras was the one to fulfill, better than other writers of the twentieth century, Flaubert’s desire to “write a book about nothing,” to submit the possibility of the act of writing to the utmost scrutiny, to define what might be called the primary cell, the atom of literature.” *Suspended Passions*, n. 3, 161.

19. *Practicalities*, 8.

20. In her introduction to a collection of Duras books, Rachel Kushner writes, “The language of Gascon, from which this practice of a spoken ‘s’ derives, is not considered chic. More educated French people not from the region might be tempted to opt for a silent ‘s’ with a proper name. In English, one hears a lot of Duraaaah – especially from Francophiles. Duras herself said Durasss, and that’s the correct, if unrefined, way to say it.” *The Lover, Wartime Notebooks, Practicalities* (New York: Everyman’s Library, Alfred A. Knopf, 2018), vii.

21. Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 225.

22. In *The Vice-Consul*, the song that Jean-Marc de H. whistles and whose sheets of music are on his piano is called Indiana’s Song. In the film and the play *India Song*, this is forgot-

ten or altered. In *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, one read S. Tahla and the name of Lol's lover is Michael Richardson. In *India Song* the "son" is preserved. However, in the novel *L'Amour* S. Tahla is spelled S. Thala and in *The Vice-Consul*, Michael Richardson becomes "Michael Richard."

23. This is taken to its extreme in *L'Amour*. The characters in the novel do not have proper names. All we have to work with are the impersonal pronouns "he" and "she." However, one can infer through cross-referencing of her work that the three "characters" are Lol V. Stein, Michael Richardson, and Anne-Marie Stretter. In the "Afterword" to the English translation of the novel, Sharon Willis writes, "Reducing characters to figures as residues, remnants, fragments, this book produces a textual relay that becomes its own internal memory and dissolves its narrative frame, substituting its memory of the previous texts for the reader's own, implanting memories in us. But like the dead dog on the beach to which *L'Amour* returns with unsettling frequency – as if this corpse structures the narrative space – these are figures in the course of deterioration." Marguerite Duras, *L'Amour*, trans. Kazim Ali and Libby Murphy (Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2013), 101-102.

24. *Suspended Passions*, 53.

25. In an interview with Jacques Grant and Jacques Frenais about *Le Camion*, she says: "Cinema has never been equal to the fundamental futility of life. The viewer wants someone to tell him a story about this life in such a way that the inanity on which the story is based is never apparent. It has to be far away, camouflaged, inaccessible, separate. But progress has come, terrible and terrifying: the whole Earth is more and more apparent. We know its shape, its dizzying spin. We have seen it from the moon. It's in everyone's imaginary. That Earth, that new Earth and its fundamental futility across the dead planets. I have the impression that I showed in *Le Camion* that there is no more sky above the land we see, just interstellar space, the new sky." "An Act Against All Power" in *Duras by Duras*, trans. Edith Cohen and Peter Connor, San Francisco: City Light Books, 1987, 112.

26. "An unwholesome-looking sky in the morning ensures that white residents, unused to the climate of Calcutta, will wake up looking liverish. He himself [the Vice-Consul] does, he notices, as he examines his reflection in the mirror." *The Vice-Consul*, 20.

27. "She sleeps among the lepers, and wakes every morning among them, untainted, still not one of them." *The Vice-Consul*, 124.

28. *The Vice-Consul*, 53.

29. *The Vice-Consul*, 146.

30. *The Vice-Consul*, 139.

31. *The Vice-Consul*, 122.

32. With allusion, perhaps, to Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*, Duras writes, "Peter Morgan laughs:

'I am drunk with the sufferings of India. Aren't we all, more or less? It's impossible to talk about such suffering unless one has made it as much a part of oneself as breathing. That woman stirs my imagination. I note down my thoughts about her.'

'Why her in particular?'

‘Because nothing more can happen to her, not even leprosy.’” *The Vice-Consul*, 124-125.

33. *The Vice-Consul*, 1.

34. *The Vice-Consul*, 147.

35. *The Vice-Consul*, 18.

36. *The Vice-Consul*, 155.

37. *The Vice-Consul*, 123. Interestingly Peter Morgan’s desire to shift the conversation from the Vice-Consul comes as a response to Anne-Marie Stretter’s description of him as a person “who does not know where he’s going, or what he’s looking for” (122). In other words, the very thing, given how Morgan starts his tale about the beggar woman, that one would imagine would pique his interest.

38. *The Vice-Consul*, 18.

39. *The Vice-Consul*, 154.

40. “It’s true, all my books are born and move around a just such a point that’s always evoked yet always missing.” (*Suspended Passion*, 53).

41. *The Vice-Consul*, 102.

42. *The Vice-Consul*, 163.

43. *Outside: Selected Writings*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 79.

44. *Practicalities*, 27.

45. *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, 9.

46. *Suspended Passion*, 52.

47. Duras suggests “that all the women in my books, whatever their age, derive from Lol V. Stein. Derive, that is, from a kind of self-forgetting. They all see quite clearly and lucidly. But they’re imprudent, improvident. They all ruin their own lives. They’re very timid, they’re afraid of streets and public places, they don’t expect to be happy.” *Practicalities*, 27-28.

48. Marguerite Duras, *Practicalities*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Grove Weidenfeld Press, 1990), 27.

49. Marguerite Duras, *Green Eyes*, trans. Carol Barko (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 16.

50. *Practicalities*, 125.

51. As the Eleatic Stranger remarks in Plato’s dialogue the *Sophist*: “Whenever there is speech, it’s necessary that it be speech about something [*légein ti*], and impossible for it not to be about anything.” *Sophist or The Professor of Wisdom*, trans. Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, Eric Salem (Newburyport, MA: Focus Philosophical Library, 1996), 262e.

52. Marguerite Duras, *The Lover*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Alfred A. Knopf (Everyman Library), 2018, 61-62.

53. Marguerite Duras, *Writing*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 17.
54. *Writing*, 17.
55. *The Vice-Consul*, 97.
56. *Writing*, 23-24.
57. In *Green Eyes*, Duras speaks thus of the singular torment of writing: "Writings that seem the most polished are but very distant faces of what has been glimpsed, that inaccessible totality which escapes all understanding, which yields to nothing but madness, to what destroys it. But to give, give *yourself* – it's probably that too – this effort worked out in a dark room you do not enter but whose existence you have sensed, if only once, through the transports and ebbing of desire. The wonderful misery is perhaps that torture, that entreaty which allows no respite, that uprooting of self which leaves you forsaken and lost when it ends with the book. You know too. To be the object of one's own madness and not to mad, that could be it, the wonderful misery. All the rest is beside the point" (142).
58. "The writing of literature is what poses a problem to every book, to every writer, to every writer's every book. And without that writing there is no writer, no book, nothing. From there, it seems one can also tell oneself that because of this fact, there is perhaps nothing more." *Writing*, 75.
59. "Writing has always been done without references, or else it is...It is still as it was on the first day. Savage. Different." *Writing*, 20.
60. *Practicalities*, 103.
61. "Horror at Choisy-le-Roi" in *Outside*, 94.
62. Duras says, "I'm passionately interested in Christine Villemin because she can't put two sentences together; because like the other woman she is full of unfathomable violence. There's an instinctive behaviour in their two cases that one can try to explore, that one can give back to silence." *Practicalities*, 92.
63. *Practicalities*, 91.
64. *Practicalities*, 92.
65. *Practicalities*, 93.
66. *Green Eyes*, 143.
67. *Practicalities*, 93-94.
68. *The Vice-Consul*, 100-101.
69. *The Vice-Consul*, 26.
70. *The Vice-Consul*, 101.
71. *The Vice-Consul*, 155.
72. In *Writing*, Duras recalls a story of the death of a fly that she had told to Michelle Porte, the director of *Les Lieux du Marguerite Duras* (1976), and to which she compares writing: "When Michelle Porte arrived, I showed her the spot and I told her a fly had died there at

three twenty. Michelle Porte started to laugh. She couldn't stop laughing. She was right. I smiled at her to put an end to the story. But no: she kept on laughing. And when I tell you this story, plainly, in all truth, in my truth, it's what I just told you: what took place between the fly and me, which is not yet fit to be laughed at ... It's also good if writing leads to that, to that fly – in its death agony, I mean: to write the horror of writing" (30-31). It is also worth noting, as Dominiek Hoens reminded me, that Robert Musil opens the collection, *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, with a story titled, "Flypaper" in which he describes the final agonies of a fly caught in "[t]angle-foot flypaper" from Canada. See *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, trans. Peter Wortsman (Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago Books, 2006), 3.

73. *Writing*, 9.

74. "I've never gotten over the despair of politics. It's through this naïveté that I became a writer. For Sartre and the others, there was too little activism, you had to get there by teaching. To spread an idea, that's what works best because people are hungry for justifications. That's what naïveté is. Happiness is being aware of the fundamental dissatisfaction we exist in and also its unsolvability. It's a non-problem." Marguerite Duras, *Me & Other Writings*, trans. Olivia Baes & Emma Ramadan (Dorothy, a Publishing Project, 2019), 46.

75. *The Vice-Consul*, 99.

76. *Writing*, 9.

77. *Writing*, 42.

78. "The Path of Joyful Despair: An interview with Marguerite Duras by Claire Devarieux," in *Duras by Duras*, 105-106.

79. *The Vice-Consul*, 101.

80. *Green Eyes*, 93.

81. *Green Eyes*, 94.

82. *Green Eyes*, 91.

83. *The Vice-Consul*, 99.

CINDY ZEIHNER

THE ~~WOMAN~~ AND HER NAME: BAXTER, VÉRA
BAXTER

*I don't know how to approach, why not say it, the truth – no more than woman.
I have said that the one and the other are the same thing, at least to man.
They constitute the same hindrance [embarras].
As it turns out, I relish the one and the other, despite what people say.*

Jacques Lacan, Seminar XX, 1972-73

N'importe quelle femme est plus mystérieuse qu'un homme.

Marguerite Duras, Le Parleuses, 1974

It is the speaking of her name, 'Baxter, Véra Baxter' which initially attracts the attention of the stranger, *l'Inconnue*¹, because it appears to be an enigmatic name, a word-object of sorts. She repeats it to savour its sound, as if the name itself might reveal something. Its flowing sound harbours implicit dignity when spoken out loud, perhaps even inviting knowledge of a life. When Michel, Véra's ex-lover, asks *l'Inconnue*, "The name Baxter, means nothing to you?" "No, nothing...", she replies wistfully. The intended reference here is to Véra's husband, Jean Baxter, but this is not captured because it is primarily the name, 'Véra,' which intrigues *l'Inconnue*. Like much of what is said and seen in Marguerite Duras' film, *Baxter, Véra Baxter*, nothing can be taken at face value because this film is about ambiguity and ambivalence; it does not seek to answer urgent life questions, but instead stays with the anxiety of their deferral. Moreover, this is a film which reveals the very presence of a woman, Véra, by creating a space for her voice and silent *jouissance* beyond the banality of her love affairs and subsequent subjective destitution. This space facilitates a transference relationship between Véra and the mysterious *l'Inconnue*, a relation which is essentially that of an analytic couple through which, over time and a disjunctive split between what is seen and what is



Image 1: *l'Inconnue*, played by Delphine Seyrig

heard, the enigma of woman is revealed via three interweaving modalities: name, truth and time.

Although one can never know everything about even one's own life, one can catch a glimpse of another's life through shared words, even just a name, which in the case of Véra Baxter ultimately saves her psychic life. Why is the name Véra Baxter enigmatic and intriguing? In the final scene *l'Inconnue* imagines a group of women, "...L'une d'entre elles s'appelait Véra Baxter..." who, living in the forest one thousand years ago and abandoned by their men who have left for the Crusades, are rescued by talking to the natural world, with the sea, the forest and its animals, but are in the end destroyed by a forest fire. Thus it is through language they are saved, and it is from the simple enunciation, "Baxter, Véra Baxter" that Duras' film about a woman on the verge of suicide and who shares her libidinal anguish with a curious but sympathetic stranger, begins.

When we first meet Véra, she is a woman who is clearly experiencing melancholic anguish; she is in such excruciating distress she can barely speak, choosing instead to isolate herself in a partially furnished, uninhabited villa. Living is something she is ambivalent about; how to live is another question which it seems has haunted her for some time. Véra speaks about her past life in terms of day to day existence, raising children, watching television and going out with her husband Jean Baxter, all in such a disaffected way, it is difficult to imagine she once carried out these tasks. Interestingly, Jean Baxter is nearly always referred to by his full name, a formality implying the distance which separates them, and whose signification lies in the conjoining of both words. Véra, whose name is spoken only in the singular un-



Image 2: Véra, played by Claudine Gabay, in her sparsely furnished villa

til the appearance of *l'Inconnue*, is in existential crisis, but for the most part copes because she is a woman who is trying to confront her fear, despair and alienation. Nevertheless, she cannot help but long for the destitution melancholy promises, and is self-destructive regarding two men: her husband whom she obviously still loves and her ex-lover Michel, with whom she has shared passion and the glimpse of a different life.

As a way of doing something, anything, to ease Véra's anguish while he is busy making money and pursuing other lovers, Jean Baxter instigates a liaison between his wife and Michel through a bizarre business arrangement with him. But in simply replacing himself with Michel and thinking that this would be enough to satisfy Véra, Jean Baxter wrongly assumes complete, if any, knowledge of her *jouissance*. This becomes increasingly apparent as Jean Baxter realises that he is not enough for Véra, neither in the end, is Michel. The deal between Jean Baxter and Michel is compromised when Michel, realising that he has fallen in love with Véra and knowing that this transgresses the agreed deal, feels ashamed and sad in having to walk away from her. For Michel, Véra has become a woman who cannot be fully known because she is now the forbidden, erotic presence in his life.²



Image 3: Michel Cayre, played by Gérard Depardieu

However, Duras' film is more than simply about a woman whose husband, in an attempt to ease her anguish, 'offers' her to another man for a million francs. It is about capturing the essence of an enigma which cannot altogether be enclosed by the voice which makes the feminine the centre. Lacan's commentary on *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein* echoes this: "it turns out that Marguerite Duras knows, without me, what I teach" (1965, 124). In fact, blindly trusting narrative alone is a method both Duras and Lacan warn against.³ Here the question arises, why should we trust anything Véra has to say about herself? While much of Duras' work in literature and experimental film has sought to question the relation between narrative and representation,⁴ there is perhaps something a little different to be gleaned from Véra's character. Although we should be wary of representation, at the same time it provides something for us to work with, a pretence of the politics of language. Véra's fragmented narrative deliberately withholds representation; the conversations between Véra and her interlocutors are somewhat like stilted prose, shaped by contingency, which is superimposed on how we might grasp her reality. Language itself becomes a crisis of method. We get the sense that Véra is insightful, perhaps even wise, but nevertheless imperceptible to herself.

In this film Duras does something remarkable; within the subtext of a failed love story she conveys the very presence of a woman. This makes an interesting contrast to Duras' *A Tranquil Life* (1944), a novel about *becoming* a woman, about the rite of passage into womanhood. Véra depicts similar solitary discoveries regarding dimly perceived identities and failures of love. However, being more aware from the outset that her life is a fiction, she struggles with determining her status as a feminine object. Moreover, Duras depicts Véra as a figure who embodies the presence of a woman beyond man's actions, actions which in the narrative are striving to

either confirm or eliminate the truth of what it means for Véra to be a woman. Duras captures such *being* as a distinctly cinematic truth, about which Badiou claims,

cinematic culture must begin with a question about existence. Whether it encompasses a culture or not is tantamount to the question, “to be or not to be” when it comes to this still-disputed art. But such a question cannot in fact be resolved, because an art can no more be proved than something’s existence... (2013, 21)

The villa setting provides a place to contemplate and reflect on the details of Véra’s life amidst the chaos and disappointment which envelope it. Here two women new to one another, *l’Inconnue* and Véra, share their voices and silences but little else; the voice rather than the word is the destiny for the subject. In addition, the presence of Jean Baxter is sensed through the voices of his ex-lover, Monique Combès, and his current lover, a young model whom he meets regularly in Chantilly.

It is not until we reach the most important transference between Véra and *l’Inconnue* that we have a real sense of Véra’s existence hitherto concealed by her anguish: her fear is not that she has lost Jean Baxter, nor her ex-lover Michel, but that she has lost herself in so far as these men have ‘stolen’ her away from herself. Until she speaks at length with *l’Inconnue*, Véra is a woman who is struggling to speak, answering affectlessly, often with a single word. *L’Inconnue* offers to stand in for something important to Véra, namely, as the object in which Véra’s voice can circulate. Although she holds Véra accountable for her own words she nevertheless, in the kindest and most sympathetic of gestures, allows Véra to simply speak, patiently bearing witness to her testimony of anguish.

Je ne fais que passer, traverser votre vie... alors si une... vérité était dite ici ce soir, elle n'aurait aucun devenir... elle resterait sans conséquences.



Image 4: *l’Inconnue* and Véra

L'Inconnue acts as both the capturer and the shadow of Véra's voice, supporting Véra in the refusal to think that her voice is stolen or that it is a prescriptive voice of reason. That is, there is no pressure to speak with any particular sense or sensibility. Véra's voice is hers and hers alone to formulate her *jouissance* on her own terms. Here *l'Inconnue* is an inscription of the transference between bodies and of transmission afforded by voices, ensuring that the voice takes on an ethical dimension in support of speech. She further alerts Véra to the most important revelation: that her truth cannot be fully spoken, everything said about it is a *mi-dire*, even that deliberate lying in order to preserve the ego is when the voice really vanishes.⁵

In the published film script, during a conversation between Michel and Monique, Duras offers an enigmatic comment: "*Le facteur essentiel de l'histoire vient d'être évoqué: le mensonge*" (1980, 15). Yet Jean Baxter insists to Véra that she is only one who speaks the truth, just as she remarks the same about him. It seems that in trying to stage truth, untruths not only become apparent but are essential: thus Véra is understood as an habitual liar; Michel lies to himself about falling in love with Véra; Jean Baxter lies to Véra about money; and Monique admits to lying to Véra about Jean Baxter. At the same time, it seems that this film is not about whether the voice speaks truth or lies but, rather, how in their rhetorical impotence, the intention of lies is to uphold the false truth conveyed by words. This usually occurs when one wants to believe what is said simply because it is said. A lie, on the other hand, has a paradoxical investment in truth, albeit truth that is conversely spoken. Thus there is a fantasy of truth operating within the lie, a lie which prepares the fantasy for reality. We could say then that truth is both true and untrue and perhaps can even be a lie. However, it would be unfair to claim that Véra is an habitual liar (as



Image 5: Monique Combès, played by Noëlle Chatelet, and Véra

implied by Monique), or deliberately utters falsehoods; she simply struggles with speaking *her* truth let alone any clearly heard voice such as an anxious ‘voice of reason’ which arguably subordinates the body to an affective command. Behind Véra’s malady, her *atteinte de fidélité*, resides a will to rearrange language in order to communicate a sort of *reasonable* truth regarding her and Jean Baxter. To this extent we could say that Véra is suffering from fidelity, whereas Jean Baxter suffers from infidelity. Although he thinks he speaks the truth, he is nevertheless unfaithful to Véra. We can say that Véra lives up to the character of her assigned proper name according to Latin etymology: truthful and faithful.

Given that we can’t necessarily perceive truth in Véra’s words, especially since it seems she cannot trust herself, where is Véra in her malady of words? At first, we come to think that she is situated between reality and fiction, until we discover that her most poignant actuality is the suffering and anguish which haunts her. Her first conversation at the villa with Monique Combès, although peppered by rhetorical impotence, arguably lays the ground for further truth as well as lies, which in turn pave the way for her release from the pretence of language in which she is trapped. Although Monique calls Véra out on lying, she does not realize that truth, at this moment, is elusive to Véra.

Monique: Véra, c’est faux ce que tu racontes là, n’est-ce pas?

Véra: Oui.

The conversation continues

Monique: On ment beaucoup toi et moi.

Véra: Beaucoup. Oui.

Véra maintains a nonchalant, even disengaged manner towards Monique, simply either confirming or denying Monique’s account of aspects of the love triangle between them. She has no interest in convincing Monique of anything. Their shared lies and rapport are a pretence, they are not even bound by their former mutual love and admiration for Jean Baxter. The entire encounter feels two-dimensional and empty.

This conversation is set in a partly furnished villa against the background of the upbeat music of a neighbour’s party which, through its repetition, appropriates almost the entire film. This sonic idiosyncrasy also frames Véra’s silence and helps locate her.⁶ The music ceases momentarily when Jean Baxter’s current lover finds that he has been in conversation with Véra on the phone; upon her replacing the phone, the music stops and *la maîtresse* speaks:

*Tu as téléphoné à Thionville, je vois... Tu devrais venir près du feu. Je suis allée à Villiers par les étangs. Ils ont détruit la forêt par là ... plusieurs hectares... c’est terrible... on ne reconnaît plus rien...*⁷



Image 6: Jean Baxter's *Chantilly-maitresse*, played by Nathalie Nell

When Véra speaks it is in conjunction with the music; this is absent only in the initial scene of Véra lying naked and ceases when *la maitresse*, from her room in Chantilly discusses Véra with Jean Baxter. Thus music plays a uniquely contrary role to Véra's voice; it provides more than mere background and when it does momentarily cease its absence is striking. The music renders a material trace which counterpoints Véra's despair. It also helps set the scene of feminine *jouissance* in a context of anonymity, loneliness, despair and anguish, as *l'Inconnue* moves around Véra as if in a symbiotic dance.

L'Inconnue tells Véra that because she is merely a passer-by, a stranger in Véra's life, any secrets are safe with her. This moment of tenderness between the two women transcends what might otherwise seem an unfulfilled relationship. Véra's prior hurtful experiences of being dismissed (her husband selling her for one million francs, her lover being ambivalent about continuing the affair, and the distinctly cool relationship with Monique suggestive that Jean Baxter has played them against each other in a bid to win their affections) contrast with *l'Inconnue's* insight into what it means to inhabit the empty space left by lost love. *L'Inconnue's* understanding is an expression of analytic love towards Véra, as Jacques-Alain Miller says:

Love in psychoanalysis is transference. The very concept of love, its question of expressions in psychoanalysis is directed by the concept and problematics of transference so that love seems to be only displacement – a case of

mistaken identity... That's why, in analysis, love is slapped with a certain inauthenticity (1992, unpaginated).

Just as it is for Michel, it is hard not to fall in love with Véra. She is transcendent in ultimately giving ground to her feminine *jouissance* upon the realisation that she has never in fact lost it. Although love has structured her past (marriage, children, status and so on) and eventually frees her through the understanding of *l'Inconnue*, it is at times stifled by money-talk in which even she indulges – the million-francs tag on herself being the amount to lease the villa, how Jean Baxter values money over love, and so on. The importance of these moments cannot be under-estimated; Duras beautifully demonstrates the painful obfuscation that money and status sometimes bring to love, even that these are an unfortunate symbolic part of love. That love and money can coexist might well be an enigma for Véra: she is sold because her husband loves her and wants her to be happy. Thus price and cost are more than merely metaphors for what Jean Baxter does to Véra.

We may consider Duras' film as being about a marriage in crisis, but also about Véra the woman as a contemporary parallel to Freud's Dora, one who is asking through a veil of melancholy and frustration, *what does it mean to be woman when there is no clear Other to be a woman for?* At the villa we meet a woman who, almost devoid of subjectivity, is struggling with the need to speak. In the end it is hard not to love and appreciate the woman she becomes, someone at ease with her vulnerable sensibility and who is willing to continue the struggle to speak. In retrospect we realize that her lack consists in the need to forge for herself a symptom she can live with rather than in an identity which has been imposed by her husband. More than anything else this is the nature of her despair. In this way we can understand her love as intrinsic to her perception of femininity rather than to the sexual geography she has mapped for herself through various conversations. The indeterminacy of the question, *what kind of lover can I be for the one I love?* is vividly portrayed in Duras' film. Colette Soler (2003) maintains that women want a love that does not encompass 'loftiness,' implying that love needs to *be* a proper name anchored *in time*. Of the proper name, Lacan says

It is indeed here that I want to pause again today on the point of departure of what we have to say about identification. The function of the signifier in so far as it is the mooring point of something from which the subject constitutes himself, here is something which is going to make me dwell for a moment today on something which, it seems to me, should come quite naturally to mind, not just for reasons of general logic, but also because of something that you should touch on in your experience: I mean the function of the name (*nom*), not the noun (*nom*), the noun defined grammatically, what we call the substantive in our schools, but the name in the way that in English – and what is more, in German – the two functions are distinguished. I would like to say a little more about it here, but you well understand the difference: the *name*, is the *proper name* (1961-62, 48) [*Italics in original*].

He continues,

I would like to say a little more about it here, but you well understand the difference: the name, is the proper name. You know as analysts, the importance that the proper name of the subject has in every analysis. You should always pay attention to what your patient is called. It is never indifferent. And if you ask for names in analysis, it is indeed something much more important than the excuse that you may give for it to the patient, namely that all sorts of things may hide themselves behind this sort of dissimulation or effacing of a name, concerning the relations that it may bring into play with some other subject (48).

It is Véra who bears the proper name, for it is her name which captures attention. It is the woman bearing *this* name who piques the curiosity of others. Duras uses the name Véra as a springboard to ask the important question Lacan poses in Seminar XX: *what does a woman want?* Yet at the same time Duras refuses this question in that she situates Véra's desire as a transitioning mediatory between subjectivity and time.

In this film, time isn't to be trusted as necessarily linear and thereby expressive of narrative. Rather time for Duras appears more Kantian in its sensibility, more an "inner sense" (1781 [2007], 69), a subjective condition uniquely necessary to make "the actuality of appearances possible" (67). Kant's insight here brings to mind the inner sense shared by the analyst and analysand, one not bound by the function of the ideal ego, but rather by sensibility of how the unconscious presents itself in transference.⁸ Located thus, time is a moment of the unconscious, a mixture of the symbolic and the extimate and is where Véra, the woman who inhabits a proper name, is situated. Although immersed within the empirical reality of time, she is arguably not wholly subject to that time through refusing it by attending to melancholia, thereby evading any claim to reality. Time for Véra is a contradiction: it rests upon her name and the ambiguous sense she brings to it as both a universal reality and a private, individual moment. In imagining the Véra Baxter at a moment one thousand years ago, *l'Inconnue* intuitively understands how time for Véra momentarily stands still, a compelling insight which arguably psychoanalysis shares. *L'Inconnue* tells Véra that she can speak with her precisely because she is a transitory figure: that is, in the future they probably won't ever speak together again. This is their shared understanding: that time is of the essence because it is both a profoundly private moment and an undeniably, universal conception of space in which voices are shared.

In an interview Duras troubles the notion of bearing a fixed name in time when claiming that she still identifies as a communist but without her former party identity:

Interviewer: Are you still a Communist?

Duras: I'm a Communist. There's something in me that's incurable.

Interviewer: But you left the Party.

Duras: The Party is not Communism.

Interviewer: Has there been any true Communist government over the years?

Duras: Not one. There was one Communist year: 1917.

Interviewer: Do you hope to see that sort of Communism return to the world?

Duras: I don't know. I don't want to know. I am a Communist within myself. I no longer have hope in the world.

Interviewer: And the other? Do you have hope for the next world?

Duras responds, unamused: Zero. Zero.

(Garis 1991, unpaginated)

Just as communism is closely linked with particular names and times so Duras, although no longer a party member, associates her name with a specific year in the communist calendar, 1917. Yet her rejection of the party as communism perhaps highlights not merely the naming of herself as an individual communist but rather that communism expressed in terms of a party is a fantasy of the truth of communism.

In the film, time is revealed through the reformulation of two subjects as one: the two Baxters, Véra and Jean are a double for the scene of the two women, Véra and *l'Inconnue*. Véra and Duras share something: that, in the face of categorisation, its consequent figuring of the subject is an inevitable destitution to be contended with. Such a *dis*-figuring leaves the subject with simply a body and a voice, which needs to confess an unwillingness to enter into a masquerade for the sake of a secure and anguish-free separation from the appeal of any particular social group. This *dis*-figuration is an anguish linked to a truth: it underpins the realisation that the not-all does not make a whole, that the feminine position has the potential to be revealing, because in the other it presents as a sexed being fully included in the non-rapport.

The sexed being of the not-whole woman does not involve the body but what results from a logical exigency in speech. Indeed, logic, the coherence inscribed in the fact that language exists and that is it outside the bodies that are moved by it – in short, the Other who is incarnated, so to speak as sexed being – requires this one by one (*une par une*) (Lacan, 1972-1973, 10).

Here the 'I' of the subject is an unequivocal occupation of that position as an identity emanating from speech, thereby giving the other no imaginary locus. Yet it is also an identity foregrounded not on collective identity but as an expression of what the subject stands in the name of regardless of social bond. For Duras, to be communist does not require membership of a collective to speak for her; for Véra,

to be a woman does not require that a man's voice responds to hers. Both Marguerite Duras and Véra stand by their own names, not in the name of feminine acceptance of what Lacan calls the "masculine myth" of Don Juan in which the masculine image depends on the woman-object of man's desire being always available in order to (falsely) postulate his absolute being.⁹ In this way, Duras furthers Lacan's theory of the libidinal subject by, with him, refusing to say "man is this, woman is that" but instead claiming that men and women are sexed beings of *jouissance*, or as Lacan puts it, "*les appareils de la jouissance*" (*Ibid* 55). It is this identification of the sexed-being with *jouissance* which links to a notion of truth. For Duras too, woman is the subject of all desires, known and unknown, that is to say, woman is both subject and object of desire.

Jean Baxter and Véra share a surname, for better or worse, but this leaves Véra with a conundrum: who is she if she is without Jean Baxter's name? Is she still a woman if she is no longer Véra Baxter? If she is without a name, is she destitute? She gives us a hint when suggesting to Jean Baxter that perhaps they separate and then find their way back together by re-identifying with each other, her as a woman who is named Véra, he as a man who is named Jean, both of whom desire each other. She is postulating Badiou's maxim: to remain loyal to love by recreating it as an event in which both can glimpse the truth about themselves, that in facing their individual anguish together, they are intrinsically bound. Here Véra's loss is poignant in being the loss of her name and therefore of her truth which then becomes an unspeakable, unreachable truth. We might even say this truth has an irrational character to it. In the quest to discover a potential truth to her subjectivity, Véra is willing to submit to subjective destitution, an estrangement with which she is already familiar. The truth inherent in her name takes on a different dimension, that of the melancholic and painful process which cannot be spoken but is instead a bodily experience of anguish. Might the shared anguish of Véra and Jean Baxter provide a reassurance against destitution?

Of subjective destitution, Anne Dunand says that it is

a necessity to be able, at a certain point in analysis, to recognise one's particular relation to castration, it is just as necessary to let go of a particular *jouissance* castration produces. It is probably the most difficult aim to achieve, since *jouissance* from castration is a protection against all possible forms of castration. In analysis, the subject first has to be instituted, just as the symptom has to emerge and the fantasy has to be constructed. At the end, the subject has to bring about his or her own destitution, and his or her castration really derives from the fact the Other is barred (what Freud described as the mother's castration). This amounts to the destruction of the subject-supposed-to-know, and it also goes against the satisfaction stemming from transference; it deprives the subject of finding him or herself lovable as an ideal ego contemplated by the ego-ideal (1995).

She then makes an important distinction between this and narcissism when she says that destitution is

not the same as narcissistic deflation; it goes much further, entailing a loss of fundamental references. At this stage, ethical principles have to be reconsidered, since they were, up until then, just another way of finding approval or love as compensation for whatever renunciation the subject had imposed upon him or herself. When a subject reaches this boundary s/he can no longer ask him or herself what his or her analyst's desire is, but what range is left to his or her own desire... (1995)

Such an unreachable truth is portrayed through the notable absence of Jean Baxter: we never actually see Jean Baxter but we do encounter an image of him as Véra's desire via his voice, a voice which appears to be signified not by him but rather by the image of either Véra or *la maîtresse*. His voice, it appears, anchors not his desire, but instead Véra and his mistress. Véra becomes animated, even desperate when she speaks to him on the phone. The fascination of Jean Baxter's voice gives character to this faceless man and resonates with what Régis Durand says of Duras' work:

There is no such thing as a neutral voice... If there was, it would be an experience of absolute terror. But even as it is, and even though it may charm, the voice frightens and disturbs. Is it because the voice gives us nothing to see, because it has no mirror image? Speaks to us of loss, of absence? (1977, 203) [*Italics in original*]

The disjunctive split between visual and aural, between subject and language is a classic Duras cinematic manoeuvre.¹⁰ It is not hard to get a sense of pure presence in the Jean Baxter of Véra's phone conversation, for we know that they are both wanting to resist the inevitable distance between them. His voice alone literalises Jean Baxter; although he is disembodied and somewhat mysterious his voice provides an exterior to him, whereas Véra remains an enigma to us even though we see her. What is even stranger is the curious ventriloquism that takes place because we never get to see Jean Baxter but only the two significant women in his life: we hear him speak but only as a response to them. When Véra demands something that perhaps she is not sure of herself, she and Jean Baxter share a sublime transmission in which sexual difference is revealed, even unburdened, in that they are both in different ways dislocated from themselves: he has no body without her and she, until the encounter with *l'Inconnue*, has without him, lost her voice. Equally poignant is that at the same time, the sensorial and bodily split between the couple exacerbate their inextricable sense of 'one-ness' with each other.



Image 7: Véra about to phone Jean Baxter in Chantilly

This is a specific identification which constructs not only the relation but also fully inscribes its absence, its erasure as Jacques-Alain Miller puts it:

This “panic point” of the subject is the point, so says Lacan, at which the subject is “effaced [...] behind a signifier.” This effacement should not be understood as an identification but as an erasure: it is the point at which he can no longer say anything about himself, at which he is reduced to silence. This is when he claps onto the object of desire. It is the same logic of the fantasy that is operative at the level of the unconscious where the subject has no possibility of designating himself, or where he is faced with his namelessness as a subject. This is when he turns to the fundamental fantasy, and it is in his relation to the object of desire that the truth of his Being resides (2013).

Miller importantly distinguishes identification from erasure without privileging or abandoning one for the other. During their phone conversation Jean Baxter leaves Véra with nothing more to say because he ends up saying nothing more. Because they do in fact identify with each other through shared history and an inevitably precarious future, the objects they clutch are the images of one another. However, as Teresa de Lauretis says, the function of identification is to “be actively involved in a process that, it must be stressed, is materially supported by specific practices – textual, discursive, behavioural – in which relation is inscribed” (1984, 141). But what if erasure can be inscribed only once identification is established? Is this not precisely what Véra does? Perhaps we can say that what happens between Jean Baxter and Véra is identification and erasure in synchronicity: in order for there to be an identification there must be evident a textual and/or material erasure which

leaves a trace. Conversely in order for the erasure to take place, identification must be established.

Following this phone conversation with Jean Baxter, Véra sits on the couch devastated and broken. When *l'Inconnue* enters the villa and meets Véra, she reacts by asking simply, “*Vous êtes Vera Baxter?*” This is not really a question, but a statement requiring confirmation from the name bearer. Once Vera replies, “*Oui,*” *l'Inconnue* puts Véra’s voice to work, immediately addressing what Durand refers to as the problematic area between language and the voice which “cancels, displaces the subject as referent” (1977, 110). *l'Inconnue* frees Véra’s voice from the conventions which have constrained her: to tell the ‘truth’ even through lying, to maintain candour and panache in the midst of rage, anguish and the intensity of pure desire. Because *l'Inconnue* is a transitory figure with no investment in Véra’s truth, she can offer Véra freedom from the symbolic confines of language. In willing her to use her voice she frees her from the bonds of her subjectivity and we witness how in the final idle conversation about the weather, that at last something in Véra has been released. In retrospect we can see that what has taken place between Véra and *l'Inconnue* is an analytic transference.

Jacques-Alain Miller says of analysis that it

isn’t an intellectual journey – its praxis is a certain suffering, a kind of complaint: the statement of a being wanting to change – and when these elements are absent, analysis becomes a hard task. Someone who feels fine, at the peak of his possibilities, desiring an analysis in order to become an analyst, for example, would not foster a praxis of the experience. When



Image 8: An image of Véra when we first see her

someone says “everything is great for me,” always wait until the second, or third meeting. For, basically the praxis of analysis is a suffering, not an intellectual journey. Certainly, nothing could empower the analyst to take on the complaint unless he presumes to have the means to relieve its suffering. This puts the analyst in the position of the therapist, the person who thinks he might cure. Thus for Lacan’s disciples as for Lacan himself, even surely for Freud, psychoanalysis cures; psychoanalysis is a therapy. But, not for that reason, may we deny, exclude ethics and the very notion of cure – in the sense of what results – not in the sense of the process but in the sense of the outcome, it being the cure itself. If psychoanalysis is a cure, we have a problem with the notion of cure, which in psychoanalysis is problematic, and this is easy to understand: it’s that the notion of cure is bound to the notion of symptom.

The analytic symptom, unlike the psychiatric symptom, lacks objectivity. It’s founded on the subject’s self-evaluation, so that sometimes, usually, it is imperceptible to others. (2017, unpaginated).

In light of this, what has been overcome for Véra? Her symptom remains but her anguish is noticeably diminished, this is obvious even from the ambiguous ending and certainly perceptible to both herself and *l’Inconnue*. This is not only the start of analysis but the realisation that, for better or worse, one is bound to the symptom. Véra’s symptom emanates from the recognition of Lacan’s poignant maxim: *woman is symptom of man*. The function of the symptom is that it compensates for the lack



Image 9: The fantasy of Véra

of sexual relationship, in the absence of which lies not only the symptom but also the subject's relation to it. Colette Soler puts this succinctly:

The variations of the symptom appear at the level of phenomena, for it is obvious that such phenomena can be either more or less uncomfortable. Some are intolerable because of the deleterious *jouissance* that they include; others are only too well tolerated – whether we think, for example, of drugs, or even as woman as a symptom: they are not always so disagreeable, and occasionally not disagreeable enough! (2003, 257)

While it seems that when we meet Véra she is in unrelieved melancholic anguish, we do get glimpses of Véra naked, posing, satisfied beyond words within feminine *jouissance*. But it is her engagement with *l'Inconnue*, not with Jean Baxter or Michel, which propels Véra towards *her* destined feminine *jouissance* not as a way out of her symptom, but into a relation with it on *her* terms. Perhaps the initial scene of Véra lying contentedly naked against the background not of party music, but the sound of the ocean, is in fact Duras' fantasy of Véra's destiny.¹¹

In Véra we see that what is overcome in speech is not the wrestling with the symptom, but a confrontation with it. For both Véra and *l'Inconnue* this enables a new satisfaction, what Lacan calls the "satisfaction of speech" (1972-1973, 61). This can occur only in the mutual commitment of two subjects to share their voices as well as silences. The analysand speaks (and stays silent) in order to glimpse the desire of the Other and the analyst co-opts the analysand into speaking into the analyst's silence. Lacan calls this "the pact, the agreement" between voices:

The desiring human subject is constructed around a center which is the other insofar as he gives the subject his unity, and the first encounter with the object is with the object as object of the other's desire... This defines, within the speech relationship, something that originates somewhere else – this is exactly the distinction between the imaginary and the real. A primitive otherness is included in the object, insofar as primitively it's the object of rivalry and competition. It's of interest only as the object of the other's desire. (1955-1956, 39)

What is remarkable about the character of Véra is that she thoroughly appreciates the futility of chasing subjective wholeness. In this lies Lacan's point: subjective wholeness is structurally impossible once one accepts one has an unconscious. Neither can consciousness make up for this lack because in it full meaning inevitably eludes us. Véra comes to a position where she accepts this and no longer desires such a desire but, rather, through language is enabled to navigate a *jouissance* which is livable. Although the ending is ambiguous, we sense that she is refusing man's small ideal of her as woman, a being of Jean Baxter's desire. For Lacan, we are *holed* rather than whole, by the signifying relations which simultaneously function as civil bonds, also by our need for separation. Véra leaves the villa with insight into how the abyss of the abject has invaded her. She realises how she needed to lose herself in order to *be*; and this is the melancholic position which bars any purifica-

tion of meaning. In *Baxter, Véra Baxter*, Lacan's maxim: *there is no such thing as a sexual relation* is established by Duras from the very beginning. However, Duras doesn't leave it there, instead offering that the possibility of an analytic love relation lies in the exchange of voices and silences. It is here that love emerges from nothing, only to change everything.

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Notes

1. In the 1980 film script this is a man (*l'Inconnu*) but played in the film by Dephine Seyrig and therefore referred to here as *l'Inconnue*. In her *note de l'auteur*, Duras critically reflects on this point: "*J'ai déjà dit le tort que j'avais eu de le remplacer dans le film par une femme. Il s'agit là d'une erreur si grande, si grossière qu'elle même une actrice comme Delphine Seyrig n'a pas pu la corriger. Je ne veux pas revenir là-dessus sauf pour dire que si jamais l'histoire était reprise, soit au cinéma soit au théâtre, ce serait cette version-ci qui devrait être retenue et non pas celle du film ou de cette première pièce intitulée Suzanna Andler*" (1980, 6).
2. There is a resonance here with Duras' (semi)autobiographical *L'Amant* (1984) in which the impossibility of an affair becomes for a time an obsessive fiction for the protagonist. Here Duras poses an interesting question for the man-in-love: *how does or rather should, one represent oneself to his lover?*
3. Because of her emphasis on feminine desire, Duras' literary and film work lends itself to be appropriated by psychoanalysis and feminism together with other critical discourse. Arguably, Duras' *oeuvre* is a genre in its own right in that it is not fixed and in its experimentation with concepts, resists the convention of classification.
4. Susan Cohen (1993) emphasises how the intertextual nature of Duras' work in its endeavour to transpose between genres and narrative configurations which deliberately disrupt simplistic representations of woman, opts for plots in which the protagonist's position is complex and changing, thus always varying the content of what is, or is not said. Deborah Glassman (1991) considers that Duras actively displaces and destabilises representation and the identities it affords, by signalling both the pleasure and trauma of the feminine body.
5. In her reading of Duras' films and writings, Cathy Caruth (1996) attests to this manoeuvre linking vocal transmission to both truth and fiction, maintaining that the language of truth and fiction co-opts trauma as a specific subjective experience of deferral demanding a witness.
6. Duras offers a stage direction which directly references Véra's silence: "*Silence partout. Ici et au dehors. Silence comme un événement*" (1980, 98).

7. This forest fire anticipates the important final scene in which *l'Inconnue* points out that the position of woman today is the same as that of women a thousand years ago; the forest had enabled women to speak and its destruction takes their shared language away, leaving them with their anguish: "... leurs maris étaient loin, presque toujours, à la guerre du seigneur, à la Croisade, et elles restaient parfois pendant des mois dans leur cabane, seules au milieu de la forêt, à les attendre. Et c'est comme ça qu'elles ont commencé à parler aux arbres, à la mer, aux animaux de la forêt..." (Duras 1980, 106).

8. As Mladen Dolar (2006) suggests, we can think of this as the Kantian voice of reason situated in the clinic.

9. This is how we might understand Jean Baxter's position, that he is the desired passion for woman.

10. This has been much discussed by Duras scholars, notably Renate Günther (2002) and Fernanda Negrete (2015). These authors consider the split between language and the subject insisted upon by love, is crucial to Duras' work. Lacan (1965) points to his appreciation of Duras' technique of 'splitting' between the object and the subject who comes into existence because of this very split. For Lol Stein as with Véra, it is the inability to find the right words because of the pain caused by separation, which features as the kernel of such splitting. Lol Stein and Véra linguistically dance around the inability to name the pain of separation (which is unsayable) and thus enact it at the level of affect: they are separated both from the immediacy of the Other and from parts of themselves caught in the transition of a separation which is seeking a way to 'be' for the Other.

11. Several of Duras' films, especially where the female protagonist is played by Delphine Seyrig, feature the reclining woman. Whereas Duras' reclining Véra portrays her naked and vulnerable, her reclining housewife, Anne-Marie Stretter in *India Song*, is beautifully dressed and surrounded by admiring male companions, thereby revealing a very different enigma of feminine *jouissance*.

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DOMINIEK HOENS

IN DURAS' DARK ROOM

Comments on Le camion

In an early film by Marguerite Duras, *Nathalie Granger* (1972), Gérard Depardieu plays a self-undermining role. He acts as a travelling washing-machine salesman whose smooth talk brings about a surprising but far from desirable effect, and in one scene it appears as if the actor has been left in the dark as to whether he is auditioning for a role in the film, or is actually already acting in it.¹ The questions that Duras' game with the young actor must have stirred – is this a film? am I in or out of it? – are echoed in a peculiar manner in a later work that also features Depardieu, *Le camion* (1977). In the latter, his role is quite limited: he listens to what Duras tells him about a film that *would have been*, and he offers minimal commentary, read from the script, on what is not shown but only evoked by Duras' words. It calls to mind Plato's dialogues, in which Socrates develops a certain reasoning and his interlocutors' only function is to ask questions in order to keep the conversation going and to endorse the correctness of the train of thought until a certain, if often aporetic, conclusion is reached. There is also a second element that invites the establishment of a connection with Plato: the notable dialogue between Duras and Depardieu takes place in what would later, in the published script, be called the "dark room," which is reminiscent of Plato's famous allegory of the cave.²

Perhaps Duras has no intention of alluding to Plato.³ Still, not unlike his distrust of illusory images, she considers language a means to escape from the prefabricated images produced by the film industry. In the presentation texts, which are added to the book version of *Le camion*, she leaves no doubt about it: it is a wasted effort to preoccupy oneself with film. Or to get involved with the kind of film where something is thematized (love, socialist or capitalist hope, freedom, social or fiscal justice, and so on), or which presents a certain target group and thus believes it is addressing them: women, youth, and so on (73).⁴ Since none of that is still worth the effort, the only cinema that matters is the cinema that testifies to the realization that cinema is no longer worth the effort. "Let the cinema go to ruin, that is the only cinema" (74).

This position can be dismissed as an exaggeration, and seemingly contradicts Duras' appreciation of the work of Antonioni, Bresson, Chaplin, Dreyer, Godard, among others. But that does not relieve us from the task of examining the way in which Duras "murderously"⁵ deals with the medium of film, and, in particular, and of asking: what sort of imagination, according to her, lies enclosed within text?

1.

The first question that Depardieu poses while reading the scenario – "Is it a film?" – is answered by Duras with: "It would have been a film." This past conditional is followed by the affirmative: "Yes, it is a film." After this confirmation, the mood reverts to the conditional: "The truck would have disappeared. And then, later, it would have appeared again. People would have heard the sea, distant but very powerful. And then a woman would have waited on the side of the road. She would have given a sign." This alternation between the conditional and the present indicative gives rhythm to the conversation. If there is something to "see," then it is only because of the words. As the spoken words are part of a film, one may expect the images, if not to directly visualize the text, then at least to contribute to a coherent audiovisual experience. Yet, in that respect, watching *Le camion* is a frustrating endeavor, for the visual track consists of the conversation between Duras and Depardieu, interrupted now and again by images of a blue truck crossing a desolate landscape of industrial sites, housing blocks, agricultural land and commercial centers.⁶ The relatively slow-moving vehicle is the only visual element that can be connected to the text.⁷ Other elements of the text are not supported, let alone illustrated, by the images, and remain as such within the domain of the spectator's imagination. Here, Duras' alternation between the conditional and the present indicative playfully elicits the spectator's imaginative potential, moving from "what would have been" to "what is" without any visual evidence for the latter, descriptive utterances. The corroboration of the conditional hypothetical statements is solely brought about by words, and not by any audio-visually observable fact. This testifies to Duras' appreciation of "the limitless potential of text, its limitless proliferation of images," as opposed to (Hollywood) cinema, which "stops the text and kills its offspring: imagination (*l'imaginaire*)" (75). Whereas cinema arrests representation "once and for all" (75), *Le camion*, in Duras' opinion, is an undeniable success in not representing anything. It may stir the expectation of representation, but representation does not take place.⁸

2.

We can imagine that the hitchhiking woman and the truck driver meet in the cabin of the vehicle: an enclosed space which, like a cinema, offers a view of the surrounding landscape. "They are locked up together in the same place: the truck's cabin. [...] They see the same landscape. At the same time. From the same space" (36 and 40). And yet, the man and the woman react very differently to what can be seen. For

him, everything coincides with its function, whereas for her the landscape consists of signs that inspire her to formulate associative and disparate thoughts. *Le camion* occupies a separate place within Duras' work because there is no love lost between the driver and the hitchhiking woman. The seclusion of the cabin and the mutual view of the road do not create an erotic tension between them. The characters have nothing in common save for a certain violence in their gazes (16). The man, in particular, appears to be who he is: rather young, a member of the Communist Party, defined by his profession and his task, which is to move goods from one place to another. And she is described as a "classless" woman (*déclassée*, 16 and 31) cloaked with the dignity of banality (65). "Their diversity would have been the subject of the film" (40) Duras states, but the viewer is not given the opportunity to see this diversity. The difference between the characters can only be derived from the opposition between, on one hand, the limited number of times that Duras refers to his role in the conversation – he is taciturn and not interested in a woman of a certain age (37) – and, on the other hand, the inconsistent set of thoughts, memory fragments, and categorical assertions with which the woman inundates the driver. She talks about Marx (*c'est fini*, 47 and 60) and about Mars (22); about her grandson and his name, Abraham (50ff); about the complicity between the proletariat and the employers (44); about God (*le vide*, 23), and so on. Still, their non-relationship is breached once, though not by the man and woman in the truck, but by the narrator, Duras, and her attentive listener and fellow reader, Depardieu. At a certain moment, they cheerfully read *together* the words that the woman would have said: "Let the world go to ruin, that's the only politics" (*Que le monde aille à sa perte, c'est la seule politique*, 25).

3.

The film intriguingly links two ideas: 1) we witness an end – the end of film, the end of the world – which must be welcomed, even actively brought about (*let* the world and *let* cinema go to ruin), and 2) in order to do so the use of the past conditional is instrumental.

The conditional can be found in many of Duras' works, including such early ones as *L'homme assis dans le couloir* (1962).⁹ An explanation of the use of this mood can be found in a radio interview during which the criticism is reiterated that, in another early text (*Le square*, 1955), the maid talks "in an unnatural, artificial way," to which Duras replies: "Yes, she doesn't talk in a natural way, because I let her talk the way she *would* be talking if she could do so. Realism doesn't interest me at all."¹⁰ The artificial, formal language of the maid is not to be taken as the supposedly adequate rendering of what and how ordinary people communicate, but rather as how she would be talking if she were listened to, if only "the lowest of the low"¹¹ had a voice. In that respect, the conditional mood is the one most faithful to imagination, for it not only expresses what one can imagine as a possibility, it goes further and renders explicit the virtuality of this imagination. The conditional mood does not suspend disbelief; on the contrary, it continuously tells the reader or listener not to take what is being expressed for real. In that sense, the material of *Le camion*

corresponds quite well to the conditional: at first sight, there is nothing that invites the spectator to believe what is being discussed. Save for the blue Saviem truck crossing the landscape, nothing is shown that supports or visualizes the dialogue's content. *Le camion* may be a film, but, like the conditional mood, it includes its own unreality.¹² As noted above, this should be taken as a logical conclusion drawn from the current state as Duras saw it: it is no longer worth the effort, and its end needs to be actively brought about – which is precisely what *Le camion* does.

Yet, there is another dimension to the unreality of *Le camion*, the film sealing of the end of film. This is highlighted by the fragment that Duras puts in front of the published script of *Le camion* (7), an excerpt on the conditional taken from *Le bon usage*, a handbook of French grammar by Belgian philologist Maurice Grevisse.

Traditionally, one considers the conditional to be a mood. One can reckon that in reality it is a tense (a hypothetical future) of the indicative mood.

The conditional expresses a possible or unreal event whose realization is considered as the consequence of a supposed given, of a condition (...)

[It is also used] to indicate a simple imagination that somehow transports events into the field of fiction (in particular a preludic conditional used by children in their proposals for role-playing games).¹³

Relying on Cécile Hanania's detailed analysis of Duras' selection of these quotes from Grevisse's book, one can point out the influence of French philologist Gustave Guillaume on this way of defining the conditional. Guillaume argues that what is generally called the conditional mood is not a mood, but a future tense. According to Guillaume, the conditional and "proper" future tenses (of the indicative) can be distinguished according to "certainty": the conditional is uncertain, whereas the usual future tense is certain. Or, stated otherwise, the future can be split into a categorical or unconditional future ('will'), and a hypothetical or conditional future ('would').¹⁴ This proximity between the conditional and unconditional future – also echoed in the occasionally barely audible difference in French between verbs in the conditional and in the future, like *j'irai* (I will go) and *j'irais* (I would go) – may explain why Duras was unable to name her use of the conditional consistently.¹⁵ More often than not she refers to it as the 'future anterior' (89).¹⁶ One can only speculate about other reasons, if any, for this conflation, but in my opinion the main one resides in Duras' 'ludic' use of the conditional. Regarding Duras' (pre)ludic use of the conditional, Hanania argues there is in fact nothing (pre)ludic about it. Duras' choice for the *past* conditional may have "narrative potential," insofar as it presents something that may have been the case, but the story is also over and done with.¹⁷ Let us take a closer look at this.

As noted above, from the entry in Grevisse's French grammar, Duras also cites the passage which states that the *conditionalis* may be used to indicate the fictional aspect of certain assertions, which is what children do when playing: they put themselves in the shoes of characters in order to figure out what would happen if

they were those characters. More precisely, the moment a child imagines herself to be a pirate, or that a storm is about to break out, she *is* a pirate and a storm *breaks* out. This magical, immediate materializing of a mere product of the imagination is repeated by *Le camion*, alternating between the conditional and the present indicative, and moving from 'would' to 'is'. In children's games, the conditional does not differ from the present, as it creates and merges with it. But this pleasant continuity, the uninterrupted shift from imagining the game ('would') to the game itself ('is') – quite often within the game itself – seems to most adults no longer accessible. In that respect, one can read *Le camion* as an attempt to restore this infantile pleasure in the force and power of imagination by creating a world within which an hypothetical, conditional future coincides with the present. That, in turn, allows one to speculate that, for Duras, the adult writer, the task of creating a miraculous indistinction between hypothesis and reality requires the additional time of the future anterior. In that respect, one of the most blatant examples of confusing the past conditional with the future anterior – “Sometimes I unveil destiny through the future anterior of events. ‘She *would* have been beautiful,’ ‘She *would* have swum far”¹⁸ – attests to a desire to connect the hypothetical with reality and positions Duras as the one who transforms what would have been the case into what, at one moment or another, will be the case. However, if Duras' reference to the future anterior is incorrect, and yet indicates the desire to obtain the conditional's (pre)ludic pleasure, why then opt for the *past* conditional? Whatever “present” the conditional may be able to create, does not its past tense suggest that the “game” is over?

4.

In Lacanian theory, the future anterior is used as one of the ways to describe the subject and, in particular, its relation to time. In a seminal paper from 1953, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” Lacan highlights the temporality of the subject as follows: “I identify myself in language, but only losing myself in it as an object. What is realized in my history is neither the past definite as what was, since it is no more, nor even the perfect as what has been in what I am, but the future anterior as what I will have been, given what I am in the process of becoming.”¹⁹ The crucial word in this passage is “realized,” for beyond the objectified, alienating illusion of the imaginary ego, what can be considered as real? The original French version provides a subtler answer, for the “real” that one may expect as the pendant to “the loss of oneself as an object” is not something that is “realized,” but rather something that actively “realizes itself” (*se réalise*). But the question remains the same: what is it that realizes itself in one's history? According to Lacan, it is not the past definite, which can be objectively situated as “past” on a chronological timeline; nor is it the perfect of what is past yet part of me. Rather, what realizes itself is what belongs to the future. Despite the common psychoanalytical focus on the past – fueled by the Freudian idea of a determination by an (infantile) past – the Lacanian subject (of the unconscious) is not some hidden affective core or a set of repressed thoughts and fantasies. Rather, the Lacanian

subject essentially lacks any essence. It is, simply put, the indication of something that remains open: in what concerns the past, it is the gap in any causal determination; and in what regards the future, it is the anticipation of any possible identity. In that respect the subject is, as Lacan once put it, “a reply from the real”; in other words, it is a symptomatic, or fantasmatic, and hence incoherent, construction required to situate and interpret the opaque dimension of the desire of the Other, that is to say, the fact that the material at one’s disposal for building an identity is marked by a structural lack. That is why Lacan, from early on, introduced a logical time that supplements the inevitably objectifying chronology of one’s biography. The “logic” in logical time refers to the symbolic and, at their most fundamental, unconscious level, to logical formulae that endow a human being with a place, and hence an identity, within a pre-existing symbolic universe. In that respect, the subject – the underlying support, or *hypokeimenon*, as Lacan often puts, relying on an Aristotelian terminology – of one’s identity is logic. The “time” involved in this logic, however, concerns the latter’s inconclusiveness (or, as Lacan will put it at a later stage of his work, its “impasses”), which requires an unconscious decision about how one situates oneself within the symbolic. This “moment of concluding” is the paradoxical moment where the (logical) Other fails to “support,” that is to say, to function, as the subject of one’s identity. And that is what propels the human being involved to “jump” beyond this gap. This leap is anticipatory, for although nothing allows one to conclude, one must do so in order to get inscribed in the symbolic order. The subject, properly speaking, is therefore nothing but the movement from one symbolic element to another, a lack-of-being in search of the one element that would found one’s identity, an ultimate signifier that is, however, structurally absent from the symbolic order – hence the Lacanian notation of the subject as an erased signifier, \$.²⁰ This allows us to understand what is meant by the “*ce qui se réalise*” cited above: what realizes itself in one’s history is what never becomes real, but can only be supposed as the subject that supports one’s identity. The latter consists of imaginary constructs (the ego, jealous rivalry, fantasmatic scenarios, etc.) and symbolic formations (symptoms, ideals, etc.) and presents itself as such. And yet, their subject has no being, no ontological ground, which is why it can only manifest itself, via these imaginary and symbolic “detours,” as a desire for being. This “being” is what *will have been*, which means that it is projected into the future, not as a goal one could possibly obtain, but rather as something that will be missed, as one is, temporally speaking, both before and after it.

To relate “becoming,” “openness,” and the subject’s non-coincidence with itself (and hence its lack of identity) with the future may appear to be an obvious and unproblematic gesture. After all, is not the future that period of time which is characterized by the same openness – by “possibility” instead of necessity, by the potential “change” that interrupts a vicious repetition of the same, and by “uncertainty”? That, however, misses the intricate relation between future and past that is expressed in the time of the *future anterior*. The ethics of psychoanalysis is not so much rooted in a belief that things can be different – for the future has not yet

been written, as long as, with some therapeutic help, one has the courage to be the author of one's future "story," etc – but rather consists in confronting the openness that characterizes one's temporality as a subject. This includes, indeed, the future, but also the past. In order to briefly explain this, it is worth paying attention to a text by Guillaume that Lacan quotes from repeatedly – without, as so often the case with other sources that Lacan draws inspirations from, referencing it explicitly – entitled "Periods and Temporal Levels Within the System of French Conjugation."²¹ In that text, Guillaume raises a simple question: why is it that French has two past tenses (and, as noted earlier, two future tenses, the categorical ("will be"), and the hypothetical ("would be"))? Why can one say: "he sang," and also "he has sung"? In order to clarify the issue, he introduces a distinction between *incidence* and *décadence*. On a classical timeline divided into two halves, sentences situate things either in the past, the future, or the present. With regards to the past, both the imperfect ("sang") and the perfect ("has sung") belong to this period. And yet, while the latter has mere incidence – it falls upon time, from the Latin *in cadere*, "to fall upon" – the former has both incidence *and* decadence. The imperfect, according to Guillaume, not only falls upon the timeline (*incidence*), but traverses it (*décadence*). The "decadence" of the imperfect resides in its inclusion of a subjective time, added to the chronological one of "incidents," which is needed to imagine its temporal stretching-out. Simply put, in order to be able to formulate a sentence such as "he sang," one needs not only chronological distinctions (cf. the "periods" in the title of the text), but also, within the chronological period of the past, an "image" of a time that transgresses any precise moment. The imperfect – and its pendant in the future, the conditional – situates itself on a chronological line that is divided into periods, but that also touches upon another temporal level, in which things not only "have happened" but "were happening." Guillaume illustrates this with the example of *Un instant après, la bombe éclatait*.²² If one were to opt here for the simple past and thus use *éclata*, the sentence would leave no space for interpretation: the bomb has exploded. Which, in Guillaume's terminology, means that the simple past, like the perfect past, describes an incident, with a *décadence* reduced to zero.²³ However, the meaning of the imperfect, *éclatait*, depends on the context in which the sentence occurs, for it can, depending on the context, either mean that the bomb has exploded or that it was about to explode, but something happened that prevented this. This "decadent" time that transgresses the chronological time of "incidents" – indicating their "becoming," as Deleuzians would put it – is made visible by the imperfect, and this is what the difference between the two past tenses amounts to.

The "decadent" time included in the imperfect may be an apt tense to express the temporality of the subject, or, as Bruce Fink puts it: "Applied to the subject, the French imperfect tense leaves us uncertain as to whether the subject has emerged or not. His or her ever-so-fleeting existence remains in suspense or in abeyance."²⁴ This detour also makes clear why it is too easy to conclude that Duras' use of the *past* conditional misses the (pre)ludic aspects pertaining to the conditional, high-

lighted by Grevisse, and quoted as a motto in *Le camion*. Certainly, the sentences created with this past tense can only refer to what is chronologically past. Yet, with Guillaume's analysis of the imperfect in mind, one must also consider the fact that, within the past, there is also an unfinished, "decadent" temporal level. My suggestion here is that, while the imperfect combines incidence and decadence, the past conditional diverts our attention exclusively to the decadent aspect, to what *would have been*: to a hypothetical future imagined in the present, yet seen from an unfinished past.

5.

Taken together, the above can be understood as an indirect appeal to the childlike imagination, for a writing that not only removes us from reality, but also changes it. Or, as Duras proposes elsewhere: for "a sort of decalcifying of experience and imagination. For it is always *someone* who has imagination, who experiences it. One has to remove imagination from the personal sphere [*orbite*] and treat it from the outside."²⁵ May '68, or the praise of an indestructible imagination that detaches us from ourselves, does not seem far away – were it not for the fact that the hitchhiker, Duras, and Depardieu all see the world as falling apart.

Que le monde aille à sa perte, c'est la seule politique. At first glance, this is an abysmal sentence.²⁶ It raises questions, such as: what connection is suggested between politics and the end of the world? And what are we to think when the end of the world is not considered as something to avoid but, on the contrary, as something to affirm?

In order to situate this downfall, we can again refer to Gustave Guillaume. His influence is not limited to Grevisse's handbook on French grammar, or to Lacan's theory of the subject. Giorgio Agamben also makes use of Guillaume's reflections on language. The idea that the world can go to ruin usually refers to the specter of an apocalypse projected in future, a devastating catastrophe that announces the end of time. Paradoxically, the fact that this end evokes a variety of fantasized images can be explained by its unconceivability, by the fact one cannot imagine the end of the world. To put it in Kantian terms: given that the idea of "world" is necessary to be able to experience and know anything at all, one cannot imagine the end of it. And yet Duras invites us to do so: she invites us to go beyond the limit that reason has set for itself.

In addition, it must be noted that recently – more specifically, since Hiroshima – the conceivability (as well as the plausibility) of an actual end of the world has increased. It is likely for this reason that Hiroshima is referred to briefly in *Le camion*, and not only because of the film, *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), based on a script by Duras. The idea of the end of the world no longer arises from a religiously inspired fear of divine retribution, or from the hope for a new world. Rather, it lies within the capabilities of humankind itself. Of the many answers given to the question of

what differentiates humans and animals, the most recent is this: human beings can destroy themselves.²⁷ Since the second half of the 20th century, faith in progress has had to deal with a serious obstacle: not only is it difficult to consider a number of developments as progress, but the possible destruction of mankind means that the subject and agent of this supposed progress would be erased.

Upon closer analysis, this provides a peculiar temporal perspective. Humankind has lived through the Hiroshima and Nagasaki catastrophes, and catastrophes like those can be repeated any time. It is as if the catastrophe of the self-destruction of humankind has been realized as a possibility and, since then, we have been anxiously awaiting the fulfillment of this possibility. We retain the memory of the worst as of that which will possibly come to fulfillment.

The time between the end of progress and the “progress” of the end is analogous to what Agamben calls messianic time.²⁸ It is located between profane time – *chronos*, which was completed with the resurrection of Christ – and the end of time, or *Parousia*, which is when He will return.

The idea of living in an interim time is not only characteristic of Pauline Christianity, but is also, according to Agamben, found in the linguistic reflections of Gustave Guillaume. According to the latter, it is difficult for us to imagine time. That is why we invariably latch onto spatial constructions, the most famous example of which is an infinite line that is divided into two parts, past and future, by a point: the present. A timeline such as that is a simple and perfect representation, but it is not suitable for illustrating how man, as a speaking being, experiences time. According to Guillaume, an operative time precedes the de-subjectivized timeline. We need this time in order to operate the transition from a possibility to its realization in chronological time. When we arrive at a statement while speaking, we need time to indicate how the statement relates to chronological time by means of the verb. Speaking is thus anticipating, and for this an operative time is needed, which can only subsequently be converted into chronological time. Agamben's reference to this notion by Guillaume enables him to posit that interim time – the time simultaneously after and before the end – is necessary in order to (according to Paul) be able to relate to the approaching end of time. In this regard, interim time is, as the title of Agamben's book puts it, *the time that remains*. “Whereas our representation of chronological time, as the time *in which* we are, separates us from ourselves and transforms us into impotent spectators of ourselves [...] messianic time, an operational time in which we take hold of and achieve our representations of time, is the time *that* we ourselves are, and for this very reason, is the only real time, the only time we have.”²⁹

Agamben relates this interim time to Paul's notable determination of the subject of this time: let those who have live as though they did not have, let those who mourn live as though they did not mourn (1 Cor. 7, 29-32), and so on. This subject indeed has qualities and possessions, but deals with them as if they were not there or, at least, as if they were of no importance. The subject that sparks Duras' interest is

also destitute: the hitchhiker, whose disjointed statements can only be retold in the conditional, which reveals the possible of anything that is actual and considers as actual what is merely possible.

In the first instance, we connected the catastrophic in *Le camion* to Hiroshima because of its reference to Resnais' film. This led us to a reading of "*Que le monde aille à sa perte*" as an interim time and, in grammatical terms, a conditional; a time that lies behind as well as ahead of us. Why, however, is this "the only politics" (*c'est la seule politique*)?

6.

When Duras herself explains the statement – with rather concise and complex reasoning – she refers to the loss of the world: not so much in the sense that the world is running toward its inevitable end, but that the world has lost its meaning and coherence. With this she proposes three things simultaneously: 1) political projects have either failed or are something to fear; 2) the West has seen an increase of guaranteed safety and material wealth, but has lost its interest in social inequality, famine, and a host of other appalling situations in other parts of the world; 3) we are alienated in and by the dominant influence of a certain economy, which provides us with commodities, to the detriment of *l'origine des choses*.³⁰ The loss of the world cannot be set right by an appeal or hope for a different world. It is, simply, its loss. With this, Duras sounds like a Nietzschean "madwoman" who, after the death of God, announces that every political project has failed. Yet, even if we recognize this, one cannot consider, or one may not wish to consider, the consequences. Duras does not seem to regret this loss of the world; rather, she is encouraged by it – "let it go to ruin" – because the only thing that will lead to a world experienced in community is the continuation of bringing this loss to light. One who thinks s/he can *have* the world has precisely lost the world in thinking so, because, when not shared with others, the world is an un-world. The world is tragically lost by the dominance of having: it is lost through possessions and the accumulation of them. We can remain indifferent to this, but we can also connect to (*rejoindre*) the loss of world which, according to Duras, makes the world communal. The writer thus develops a paradoxical reasoning: those who wish to have the world will lose it; those who, on the contrary, affirm this loss, will rediscover the world in community. And *that* is the only politics.

This second, less apocalyptic reading of the claim that one loses the world – or, more precisely, that one realizes that one has lost it – opens up the possibility for transformation, from particular individuals who believe they have something, into subjects without qualities or a class who, precisely in and through this loss (of world, of qualities, of particularity), create a community with a world to share.

7.

In *Experience and Poverty* (Erfahrung und Armut, 1933), Walter Benjamin poses the following question: “Who still meets people who really know how to tell a story?”³¹ According to Benjamin, the lack of people who can tell a story has to do with the trauma of war. This trauma makes people speechless and deprives them of the sense of relating, or makes every story meaningless and futile. It is indifferent whether we connect Duras’ lost world, and the world still to lose, with Hiroshima or with the destructive power of the shopping center, for in both instances one can speak of a trauma that assails subjectivity. Duras’ response to this is fiction – not as the result of the creative labor of a brilliant individual, but as the text that can be read and deciphered in a truck driving across an ordinary ZAC (an urban development area). Embrace the loss of the world, assent to the absence of any political project, face the consequences of the constraining grip of capital on the most diverse areas of existence, dedicate oneself to the loss of one’s particular identity, point out the narrative potential of the past conditional, pit against cinema the indefinite virtuality of a fiction to be read... The despair that transpires from this is just as unmistakable as Duras’ commitment to infect her audience with a gay despair.

Notes

1. For the details of Depardieu’s first role as a film actor, see Laure Adler, *Marguerite Duras: A Life*, trans. A.-M. Glasheen (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 288.
2. Marguerite Duras, *Le camion* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), 11. Further references are given parenthetically in the text; translations are mine.
3. Discussing *Le camion*, Dominique Noguez is reminded of Plato as well. Socrates is referred to in order to oppose the not-knowing of the hitchhiker to the militancy of the truck driver – “a militant is someone who has no doubt” as Duras puts it (42). See Marguerite Duras, *La couleur des mots. Entretien avec Dominique Noguez autour de huit films* (Paris: Benoît Jacob, 2001), 146.
4. This series also includes the Portuguese, the Malians and the Senegalese. In an interview with Annie Declerck, screened in 1981 on Belgian television, this series of target groups is completed with black, Algerian, poor, homosexual, and socially destitute people. When the interviewer expresses concerns about the politically incorrect implications of this statement, Duras’ riposte is: “When I allude to a clientele, I am racist. That is self-evident (*obligatoire*).”
5. See *Les yeux verts* (s.l.: Cahiers du cinéma, 1987), 93: “*Je suis dans un rapport de meurtre avec le cinéma.*”
6. The conversation with Michelle Porte, included in *Le camion*, reveals that the truck’s trajectory starts from Trappes to Plaisir, two municipalities of the Yvelines department (108). The shooting of the dialogue between Duras and Depardieu took place a few miles away, inside Duras’ countryside residence in Neauphle-le-Château.

7. Duras considers the truck a “somnambulistic” vehicle unknowingly transporting “the non-written writing” (*l'écrit non-écrit*) (106); see also *La couleur des mots*, (133). In another text, writing is considered “a matter of deciphering something already there, something you’ve already done in the sleep of your life.” Duras, *Practicalities*, trans. B. Bray (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 25. One could argue that the truck’s cabin, where the driver and the woman meet, is that part of the non-written writing that can get deciphered in the dark room where Duras and Depardieu do their reading. For more on this dark room of writing, see Anne Cousseau, “La chambre noire de l’écriture,” *Marguerite Duras*, eds. B. Alazet and Chr. Blot-Labarrère (Paris: Editions de l’Herne, 2005), 110-117 and Julie Beau-lieu, “La ‘chambre noire’ dans Le camion de Marguerite Duras,” *Écriture, écritures*, eds. M. El Maïzi and B. Stimpson, (Caen: Lettres Moodrnes Minard, 2007), 179-191.
8. *Marguerite Duras à Montréal*, eds. S. Lamy and A. Roy (Montréal: Les éditions Spirale, 1981), 32.
9. The very first sentences even of *La maladie de la mort* (1982) and *Les yeux bleus cheveux noirs* (1986) are in the conditional.
10. The interview is part of an episode of *Les Nuits de France Culture*, entitled “Tous les plaisirs du jour sont dans la matinée”, broadcast on 22 Feb. 2015; see: <https://www.france-culture.fr/emissions/la-nuit-revee-de/tous-les-plaisirs-du-jour-sont-dans-la-matinee-marguerite-duras> (minute 28).
11. Marguerite Duras, *The Square*, in *Four novels*, trans. S. Pitt-Rivers & I. Morduch (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 26.
12. As Duras puts it: “*Le conditionnel rend mieux que tout autre mood l’idée de l’artifice qui sous-tend la littérature comme le cinéma. Tout événement apparaît comme la conséquence potentielle, hypothétique, de quelque chose d’autre.*” And links this to children’s games: “*En jouant, conscient jusqu’au bout de la fiction et en même temps de la légèreté du jeu, les enfants conjuguent constamment les verbes au conditionnel.*” *La passion suspendue. Entretiens avec Leopoldina Pallotta della Torre* (Paris: Seuil, 2013), 73.
13. *Le camion*, 7. Duras quotes from the entry on conditional verbs in Maurice Grevisse, *Le bon usage. Grammaire française* (Gembloux: J. Duculot, 1969), 680-683. Cécile Hanania has pointed out that this ninth edition is the one Duras must have been using. See her “Pour une grammaire de l’imaginaire: Marguerite Duras ‘lectrice’ de Grevisse,” in *Dalhousie French Studies*, vol. 80 (2007): 111-122.
14. Gustave Guillaume, *Temps et verbe* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1965 [1929]), 56, and *Langage et science du langage* (Paris: Librairie Nizet; Québec: Presses de l’Université de Laval, 1969), 253.
15. Moreover, in indirect speech situated in the past, the future anterior takes on a conditional form; e.g. “He said that she would have arrived before noon.”
16. Cf. Jean Pierre Ceton, *Entretiens avec Marguerite Duras* (Paris: François Bourin Editeur, 2012), 75ff and Hanania, *op. cit.*, for other examples.
17. Hanania, 117.
18. *Les yeux verts*, 234f: “*Quelquefois je dévoile le destin par le futur antérieur des événements. ‘Elle aurait été belle’, ‘Elle aurait nagé loin...’*”

19. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006) 247, see also 37 and 684; *The Seminar, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique* (1953-1954), ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. J. Forrester (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988), 158; *Le séminaire, livre IV. La relation d'objet* (1956-1957), ed. J.-A. Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 235; *The Seminar, Book VI: Desire and Its Interpretation* (1958-1959), ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. B. Fink (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 158; *Le séminaire, livre IX: L'Identification* (1961-1962), unpublished, lesson of 9 May 1962; *Le séminaire, livre XVI: D'un Autre à l'autre* (1968-1969), ed. J.-A. Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 51.
20. Here, one cannot be but reminded of the well-known passage from *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, trans. R. Seaver (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966), 38, describing Lol's belief in the existence of such conclusive word, "[...] an absence-word, a hole-word, whose center would have been hollowed out into a hole, the kind of hole in which all other words would have been buried."
21. Gustave Guillaume, "Époques et niveaux temporels dans le système de la conjugaison française" (1955), in *Langage et science du langage*, 250-271.
22. Guillaume, 255. Cf. Lacan, *Écrits*, 568: "[The] duplicity we find in *Un moment plus tard, la bombe éclatait* [The bomb was to explode a moment later], where, without any context, we cannot know whether the event occurred or not." See also (713); *Le séminaire, livre XV: L'acte psychanalytique* (1967-1968), unpublished, lesson of 10 January 1968; *The Seminar, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-1960), ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. D. Porter (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992), 220: "When one says 'a moment later and the bomb exploded (*éclatait*)', that may mean two contradictory things in French, namely, either the bomb did, in fact, explode or something happened which caused it not to explode."
23. In an almost Lacanian fashion Guillaume states that what differentiates *imparfait* (involving at least a minimum of *décadence*) from *passé simple* or *parfait* (involving zero *décadence*) is an infinitely nothing (*rien*) not to be confused with zero. Guillaume, 255.
24. Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 63f.
25. *Marguerite Duras à Montréal*, 58.
26. The statement appears in *Le camion*, 25. The first part of it – "*Que le monde aille à sa perte*" – is repeated on (67) and, almost twenty years later, in *No More*, trans. R. Howard (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1998), 36. *Duras commented on it in: La couleur des mots*, 148-152; in the interview with Annie Declerck; in the conversation with Michelle Porte, *Le camion*, (74); and in *Outside*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 139f.
27. Which makes Lacan sarcastically conclude that human beings are superior to other animals. Jacques Lacan, *The Triumph of Religion*, trans. B. Fink (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013): "What a sublime relief it would be nonetheless if we suddenly had to deal with a true blight, a blight that came from the hands of the biologists. That would be a true triumph. It would mean that humanity would truly have achieved something – its own destruction. It would be a true sign of the superiority of one being over all the others" (60).
28. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. P. Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

29. Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 68.

30. *La couleur des mots*, 149.

31. Walter Benjamin, *Experience and Poverty*, trans. R. Livingstone <https://www.atlasof-places.com/essays/experience-and-poverty/>.

SIGI JÖTTKANDT

HISTORY'S HARD SIGN

Vladimir Nabokov's 'The Visit to the Museum'

The characteristic of the real is the fact that it sticks to the soles of one's shoes.

Jacques Lacan¹

All of the constructs of museology – identification, possession, inheritance, display – breed the perfect conditions in Vladimir Nabokov's short story "The Visit to the Museum" for the dissolution of the idea of history as the record of past experience.² Originally composed in Russian, this "disconcertingly resistant text," as Will Norman aptly describes it, reveals the archive as an aporetic structure.³ The Nabokovian Museum fails to record anything, it no longer seems to preserve memory or offer instruction as would befit its definition as a place of learning but instead ushers in a sort of a cinematic parallax view of the real. Parallax, as Slavoj Žižek reminds us in *The Parallax View*, is defined as the seeming change in an object's location, brought about by a shift in observational perspective.⁴ This change, moreover, effects not only the subjective view of the object but, as he puts it, "always reflects an 'ontological' shift in the object itself."⁵ To expose the object of history to a parallax view, as Nabokov does in this tale, is to re-set the perceptual and cognitive programmes giving rise to a certain understanding of Being. What Nabokov uncovers is a startlingly Lacanian point, which is that our sense of ourselves as wholes is itself the effect of a parallax. Rather than being the 'natural' viewpoint, it is a parallax that coheres the infant's disparate parts into the appearance of a One, giving us the illusion of being a totality. Parallax would seal, as it were, the representational contract that permits the flowers, in Henri Bouasse's famous optical trick that Lacan refers to several times, to be perceived as sitting upright in the reflected vase, which is in fact upside down.⁶ The lesson Lacan draws from this is that our apprehension of our body is in a strong sense virtual, our sensorial unity no more 'real' than the sun that appears to emerge, crowning the streetlamp in the reflected pond in Image 1.

In “The Visit to the Museum” – to visit, from *videre*, “to see, notice, observe” – ordinary perception becomes progressively distorted until the entire premise of experience, as what happens to a body occupying a particular location in space and possessing a continuity over time, is rescinded. The story, whose twist turns on a missing Russian alphabetical sign, mysteriously transports the narrator from a Museum in an unspecified, sun-dappled moment in the south of France to the stark present-day of Soviet Russia. But the tale’s apparent premise, namely, of history’s separation from the linguistic material that composes it, becomes increasingly questionable following the cinematic distortion of vision that Nabokov’s Museum inflicts.



Image 1: By Brocken Inaglority <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index>

We take our start from the story’s narrator who, we learn, has been asked to help in the recovery of his friend’s inheritance. This takes the form of a portrait of his friend’s grandfather painted by the famous painter Leroy which ended up in the museum of Leroy’s birth place, the French town of Montisert. From the outset of the tale, then, “The Visit to the Museum” puts into play the idea of representation and of its proxies, even as it questions the status of possession and inheritance, identification and knowledge. For, having located the painting – to his great surprise, given his friend’s frequent failure “to remain this side of fantasy,” – when the narrator tries to buy it from the museum’s director, M. Godard, he finds himself strangely rebuffed. The director tells him that the only Leroy painting they have in the collection is not a portrait but, rather, a cattle-dotted landscape titled “The Return of the Herd.” To an increasingly mystified narrator, M. Godard insists,

I have been curator of our museum for almost twenty years now and know this catalogue as well as I know the Lord’s Prayer. It says here *Return of the Herd* and that means the herd is returning, and, unless perhaps your friend’s grandfather is depicted as a shepherd, I cannot conceive of his portrait’s existence in our museum.⁷

Countering its promise of completion and accuracy, the Montisert Museum’s catalogue is an unstable record in which the past is encountered as a textual impasse that goes on to saturate the rest of the tale: letters go unanswered – “When I asked why he did not get in touch with the museum, he replied that he had written several times, but had never received an answer,”⁸ – paper and pen supplies are scarce:

“while wandering about Montisert’s empty streets in search of a stationery store....”⁹ With fatal errors in its record leading to spotty gaps in the precincts of history and memory, the Montisert Museum seems riddled with the literary analogue of silver lice (well-known “bathroom pest on the Riviera”¹⁰). Nabokov’s archive disarticulates history’s linear assumptions, which become overwritten by the silvery traces of other technologies for constructing time. Tunnelling orthogonally through the leaves of the archive, these other technologies take different forms but their association with cinematics is a constant as one soon discovers as we shadow the narrator with our own “felted steps” to survey the Montisert Museum’s collection.

First up, and presided over by two stuffed owls – stealth predators whose acute nocturnal vision implicitly cites a certain noir aesthetic continually shadowing Minerva’s flight, – is a case of old coins, the vestiges of ancient economies harbouring different orders or models of representational exchange. Swimming next into view is a display of “venerable minerals.”¹¹ Formed through the process of “twinning,” the diffracted, mirror image pattern of crystal growth registers a potential rupturing of Euclidean space, posing the cinematic challenge to organic models elaborated by Gilles Deleuze in the suggestive terms of a virtual regime.¹² As they lie like dormant cinematic projectiles awaiting their moment of firing in “open graves of dusty papier mache” (the favoured material not only for masks and theatrical backdrops but also for sabots, the small disks or rings in a firearm that guide a bullet through the driving band of a gun), the crystal hints at the Museum’s stealth assassination of linear models of Time that the idea of History seems to institute.

As it roves further over the Museum’s attractions, the narrator’s eye pauses at a display of “black lumps of various sizes,” which he likens to “frass,” the fine powdery material that cellulose-digesting insects extrude as their waste. The custodian explains that this black *Stoff* was the discovery of a certain “Louis Pradier, Municipal Councillor and Knight of the Legion of Honour,” whose surname recalls that of a certain 19th-century Swiss copyist, giving us a first clue (indeed, it is always advisable to pay attention to names in Nabokov).¹³ In anticipation of our encounter with the Leroy portrait, mimetic representation is already put into question here at multiple levels. For a quick search reveals that Charles-Simon, the ‘real’ Pradier of the “Knight of the Legion of Honor,” received his citation for his engraving of “Virgil Reading the Aeneid to Augustus,” which was first painted in 1812 by the history painter Ingres. Charles-Simon’s “Virgil Reading” would thus be an etched copy of a painting that preceded it. But there’s a Nabokovian twist – readily visible if one is on the lookout for it given the painting’s implicit references to both a double and a ghost,¹⁴ not to mention the drama of the scene itself, which depicts a blocked scene of reading. Pradier’s imitation, it seems, served as the ‘original’ for Ingres’ 1864 recreation of his painting. Ingres evidently reworked his original by tracing over Pradier’s engraving, whose lines are partially left visible in the finished canvas.

In these inversions of the expected order of succession, Virgil’s hypostasized scene of instruction ricochets the viewer into a mysterious site where the mimetic premise of original and copy, of the real and its representation are suspended – as if lit-

erally blocked by Augustus's upraised hand that interrupts Virgil's recitation of his text (see Image 2). Out of the swoon that replaces or perhaps now becomes the act of "reading," an alternate, 'cinematic' history of representation unfolds, which is set forth in the Museum's ensuing exhibits A "Chinese vase," like the omphalous of some other reproductive process, "probably brought back by a naval officer,"¹⁵ highlights ideographic and phonosemantic rather than alphabetic writing systems, shrugging off what Saussure calls the "linear nature of the signifier" in favour of a more visual simultaneity.¹⁶ In the "group of porous fossils" that follow it, we encounter moulded images cast directly through the Earth's own, material, printing techniques – inscriptions by a representational 'agent' that is utterly removed from human hands and human time. "A pale worm in clouded alcohol" is similarly suggestive, not only of aborted branches of other evolutionary lifeforms but also of other, perhaps only temporarily suspended poetic traditions for, as Nabokov in a later text reminds us, the French *vers* (verse) is aurally identical to *ver* (worm).¹⁷ Conjuring up the idea of secret messages inscribed in invisible ink as in Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Gold Bug,"¹⁸ the seventeenth-century map of Montisert printed in "red-and-green ink" might provide directions to these other, pre-Enlightenment traditions. Indeed, the "trio of rusted tools" immediately following this seems to support this Poe connection as does the Museum's name itself: Montisert echoes Poe's Montresor in "The Cast of Amontillado," imposing the idea of some kind of literary "Fortunato" being unsuccessfully contained.¹⁹ Thus the tools – rusty with disuse – could be for digging into *textual* riddles. Each of these visual and aural cryptonymic figures point back to the counter-anachronization of the Pradier image that appeared to spawn them: purporting merely to imitate, a copyist etches inscriptions which the official historical record paints over but the off-cuts and shavings remain discernible as the detritus of a different representational agency that eats through the books of History, leaving its waste in "black lumps of various sizes" – *letters*.

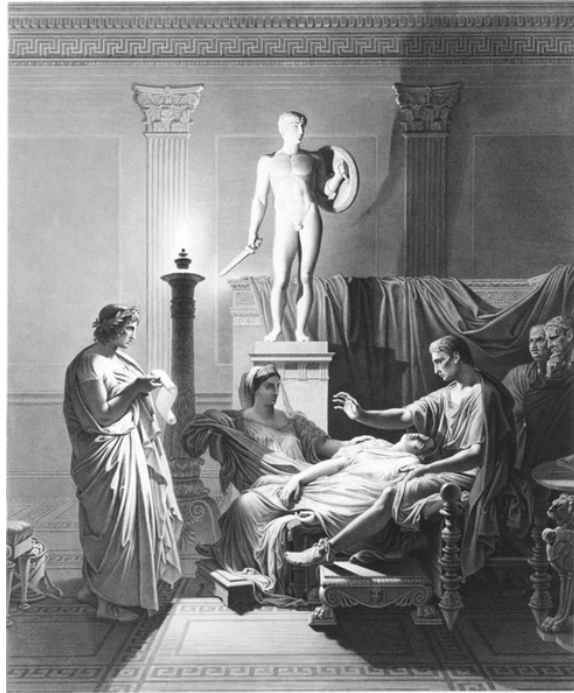


Image 2: By Charles-Simon Pradier - Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=31178176>



Image 3: By Nadar| (a.k.a. Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, 1820–1910): PhotographerAdam Cuerden - Restoration - Gallica Digital Library digital ID btv1b530922314, Public Domain

It is in the dim glow of this other, counter-historical light, in a room dominated by a “large sarcophagus” (perhaps one of the same Saturnine tombs from whose hypogrammatic inscriptions Saussure fled in terror²⁰), the narrator chances upon “the very object whose existence had hitherto seemed to me but the figment of an unstable mind.” The Leroy painting hanging between “two abominable landscapes (with cattle and ‘atmosphere’)” is described thus:

The man, depicted in wretched oils, wore a frock coat, whiskers, and a large pince-nez on a cord; he bore a likeness to Offenbach, but, in spite of the work’s vile conventionality, I had the feeling one could make out in his features the horizon of a resemblance, as it were, to my friend. In one corner, meticulously traced in carmine against a black background, was the signature *Leroy* in a hand as commonplace as the work itself.²¹

As it emerges from the status of fantasy into the apparent field of reference, the grandfather’s portrait takes shape as a cinematic figure par excellence. The “likeness,” which the narrator casually observes it possesses with the Parisian composer of comic operettas, initially seems to connect it with the famous 1860’s photograph of Jacques Offenbach by Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon).²²

In this studio portrait (Image 3), one of numerous photographs of well-known artists made by the Nadar brothers, Offenbach peers through oval lenses at something out of frame to his right, his enormous fur collar seeming to blend with his dappled “whiskers” like an extension of his body. The fur’s viscous textures initially seem to recall the brushstrokes of oil paints, but another complication of the technological history of representation enters into play once one recalls that painting’s “wretched oils” have also long harbored the chemicals also used in film processing such as silver halide’s iodine.

If the Leroy painting, like the previous Museum objects, is already allied with the cinematic challenge to the mimetic order, what is also striking is the way cinema itself seems split between an allegiance to photography’s ‘punctum’ and to something that appears to lead back to older representational instruments such as the hand, albeit only *after* its initial dispossession by the non-human agency of the camera. The narrator’s mention of a “horizon of a resemblance” calls forth the im-

age of a line and, with this reference, a different “likeness” to Offenbach emerges, leading this time back to the hand-drawn sketch of him, also made by Nadar in collaboration with Edouard Riou (Image 4). In this caricature, a cartoon version of the photograph, Offenbach again peers out through his circular glasses, bewhiskered, and with a suddenly accentuated nose. However his collar has been replaced with his cello, which wraps his neck and upper body almost as effectively as the furred ruff in the photograph. The photograph’s textured riches alluding to oil paint’s depth and interiority have been replaced with a musical instrument’s two-dimensional strings.



Image 4: By Nadar after Édouard Riou - Bibliothèque nationale de France, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11543458>

Photography’s “likeness,” a mimetic concept tied to the idea of a pre-existing real, finds itself over-written with quivering, proto-animated lines drawn perhaps by the “ghost” hand secreted in the custodian’s pocket as some sort of manual dexterity that seems to have become separated from its seat in any body. This hand, another prototypical cinematic figure, introduces the idea of the cut as what severs the museological notion of inheritance as a process of continuity and succession. Hence to speak of “resemblance” in this context would mean beginning from a different model than the reflection implied by photography. Called up by figures of plucking, scratching, stippling, the facsimile – from *facere*, to make – suggests the furrowing of the representational manifold with sharpened tools such as the “spade, a mattock, and a pick” that the narrator absent-mindedly passed over in his tour of the Museum’s first room.²³

The upshot is that while the narrator and the Museum director tussle over the epistemological status of the object of perception, as authorized either by Imaginary apprehension or the Symbolic’s written record, both are equally inattentive to the appearance of an order that has already turned against both registers. If a ghost of the comic French composer presides over this story of a failed commission, then, it is the Offenbach of *Les deux aveugles* (*Two Blind Men*) rather than the composer of *Orphée aux enfers*.²⁴ What is this other order? At this point writing re-enters as a doubled topos: it is simultaneously the instrument of law, authority and memory, that is, of what would be transmitted by the blue end of the pencil Godard offers the narrator to seal their agreement in writing: “‘All right,’ he said. ‘Here, take this red-and-blue pencil and using the red – the red, please – put it in writing for me,’”²⁵

– and a carnivalesque, “festive” overturning of all such constructs, which becomes incarnated in the colour red.

Red has already made an advance appearance in the “carmine” lettering of Leroy’s signature (perhaps also indirectly citing the flamboyant Nadar’s own signature flashing letters lighting up the outside of his studio in illuminated red gas lamps). It now begins a flooding of the Museum’s visual topos. A red bus “packed with singing youths” nearly runs the narrator over before disgorging its boisterous load at the museum. Wearing “some kind of festive emblems in their lapels” and “very purple-faced, and full of pep,” the youths cause a commotion with their “rowdy cries.”²⁶ Like throwbacks to some counter-Athenian tradition (recall the Spartans’ own famous red cloaks), these members of “some rural athletic organization” fire shots at Minerva – “another was taking aim at an owl with his fist and forefinger” – in a comic spectral war. These would be avatars of a counter-historical tradition, a Benjaminian “materialist historiography,” that vests the Museum’s trademark silence with Homeric mirth: a “lewd laughter” mocks the Museum’s iconography of death – “some at the worm in alcohol, others at the skull.”²⁷

Like the glow of a darkroom light, red redounds here with the realization that, never “natural,” the real has always been a hothouse for experiment, a “deserted laboratory with dusty alembics on its tables,” sans maker or designer. And in the wake of this discovery, a full-scale cinematic derealization of the world begins, as if started by the phantom flame that a youth pretends to ignite with a borrowed light from the portrait’s “glowing cigar.” Causal logic collapses: above the “din,” and with increasingly Carrollian reasoning, the museum director shouts, “I must first discuss the matter with the mayor, who has just died and has not yet been elected.”²⁸ Teleological histories slide into reverse “‘Who’s the old ape?’ asked an individual” gesturing to the Leroy painting. Nothing can be decided because “[d]ecisiveness is a good thing only when supported by law” and the law of the archive as authorized by the signature “fell like snowflakes into a massive spittoon,” having been torn into pieces by “fingers, moving as it were on their own.”²⁹

The immediate consequence is the refragmentation of the body. The body is sliced back up, limbs amputated, the head disassociated from the trunk. We enter into cinematic zones of magnification:

I lost my way for a moment among some enormous marble legs, and twice ran around a giant knee before I again caught sight of M. Godard, who was looking for me behind the white ankle of a neighboring giantess.³⁰

“Ancient Sculpture” elicits another experience of the body, prior to its integration by mirror logics. Alan Cholodenko observes of cinema that “it violently opened a wound – a wound in a sense never closed, a posthumous wound – in ‘reality,’ as well as in the ‘self,’ the ‘subject,’ a wound no amount of suturing (and its system) could close.”³¹ Nabokov, too, renders the cinematic encounter as an uncontrollable opening. For once the body has been cut up by the camera, the Imaginary frame is

no longer containing. As the body's form expands, the Museum amplifies in tandem.

The angle of vision then takes another fantastic turn. We pass through a succession of *entr'actes*, each presiding over a diminishing human perspective. A whale skeleton, implicitly citing Herman Melville's description of Leviathan as the "unspeakable foundations, ribs and very pelvis of the world,"³² obtrudes as a figure of sheer exteriority, a series of curved bars encasing the void. Moving into "still other halls, with the oblique sheen of large paintings, full of storm clouds, among which floated the delicate idols of religious art in blue and pink vestments,"³³ an aterrestrial viewpoint unfolds. When our gaze returns earthwards, it is to a deserted *oikos*. An "abrupt turbulence of misty draperies," ushered in from a fallen 'house' vacated of the human viewpoint, transports us to a scene where the lines of rectilinear perspective bulge into hemispheric globes of fish-eye lenses: "chandeliers came aglitter and fish with translucent frills meandered through illuminated aquariums."³⁴ Prismatic, iridescent with reflections, this is the "perspective of the inside" to recall Jean Epstein's suggestive phrase, "a multiple perspective, shimmering, sinuous, variable and contractile" perspective through which the world "becomes its own image, and not an image which becomes world" in Deleuze's phrasing.³⁵

These ocular displacements then introduce another order of dimensionality: "Racing up a staircase, we saw, from the gallery above, a crowd of gray-haired people with umbrellas examining a gigantic mock-up of the universe."³⁶ An entire system of the world, which the Museum synecdochically fronted for, has always been a "mock-up," suggests Nabokov, as another model, now self-consciously cinematic, overruns it. When the narrator is found lingering among "models of railroad stations,"³⁷ one is reminded that such 'mere' toys are nevertheless what engineer the catastrophic derailings of models of knowledge that the cinema exults in. Yet if film is revealed to be fakery at its core, its circular loopings on comically shaky miniature trestles end up being unexpectedly operational. In a quarter turn, the doors of the arriving train swing open to become the cascading drawers of filing systems: "in front of me stretched an infinitely long passage, containing numerous office cabinets and elusive, scurrying people."³⁸ A strange loop, whose content upends into becoming its own formal principle, the self-citational, cinematic 'train' auto-archives itself.

It is at this juncture that the logos of the Museum transposes aurally back to its "ancient" source in *music*. Like hands criss-crossing one another on piano keys, music takes us to a scene of reflective models in a mise-en-abyme of self-cancellation:

Taking a sharp turn, I found myself amid a thousand musical instruments; the walls, all mirror, reflected an enfilade of grand pianos, while in the center there was a pool with a bronze Orpheus atop a green rock.³⁹

Resonating from a khoratic pool, music should be understood not just as the Apollonian allusion, Orpheus' worship of the sun-god, but as the Greek name for something that auto-theorizes itself. For as Penelope Murray and Peter Wilson observe,

mousikē in fact names the totality of instrumental sound, poetic word and movement embraced by the Muses. The first of the “*tekhnai*” nouns formed in the form –ική, *mousikē* is thus intimately connected with *theory*, representing, as they surmise “the first area of Greek cultural practice that produced more or less systematic descriptive and explanatory accounts of itself.”⁴⁰ What chiefly interests is the way such self-theorization entails a different – performative – relation to the past than that represented by memory. As Murray and Wilson describe it, *mousikē* “betokens a total and privileged access to the past.” As such, *mousikē* would entail the originary fashioning of the structures of spatial and temporal difference itself.

And with this recomposing, a whole other program of knowledge and understanding – *exposition*: “the act of expounding, setting forth, or explaining” – seems in the process of being constructed, Metropolis-like, in the catacombs honeycombing the Museum’s foundations as the narrator threads precariously down staircases of stone steps resounding with “whistles, the rattle of dishes, the clatter of typewriters, the ring of hammers, and many other sounds,” coming from “exposition halls of some kind or other, already closing or not yet completed.”⁴¹ Here, consciousness, perhaps even ‘Being’ itself, harks back to its primordial structuring by technics: “whistles,” “rattles,” “clatter” “hammers.” What these sounds call up are the alternations of rhythmic beats and patterned serial repetitions. They sequence what Bernard Stiegler has theorized as the body’s originary grammatization, namely, the processes, John Tinnell explains, “by which a material, sensory, or symbolic flux becomes a gramme, which – broadly conceived – can include all manners of technical gestures that maintain their iterability and citationality apart from an origin or any one particular context.”⁴²

Suddenly sightless from cinema’s winding back of existing perceptual and cognitive paradigms, the narrator gropes about the “unknown furniture” of a different epistemological regime. But it is just at this point that the vector of the narrative changes and the tale embarks on its final fantastic turn. A qualitative shift, like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon, seems to take place and the narrator finds himself “with a joyous and unmistakable sensation,” metamorphically egressing from the museum’s cinematic vortex and back out into “reality.”⁴³ He marvels at the new solidity of the ground, “The stone beneath my feet was real sidewalk, powdered with wonderfully fragrant, newly fallen snow, in which the infrequent pedestrians had already left fresh black tracks.” Contrasting with his previous chaotic “feverish wanderings” comes a “pleasant feeling” of peace. The quiet of a snowy streetscape “replaced all the unreal trash amid which I had just been dashing to and fro.”⁴⁴

As he “trustfully” starts to “conjecture” what has occurred – “why the snow, and what were those lights exaggeratedly but indistinctly beaming here and there in the brown darkness”⁴⁵ – the narrator is suddenly struck by a missing letter, the absent Russian “hard sign” on an advertisement. Unspoken, manifesting only in written form to mark a separation between certain consonants and vowels (non-palatized and iotated), the Russian “hard sign” – “ъ” – was abolished in the orthographic reform following the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, as Nabokov informs us in a footnote.⁴⁶

It is this hard sign's omission from the cobbler's placard "... INKA SAPOG' (... OE REPAIR') that clues the narrator in to what has happened. A wormhole in space-time, the Montisert Museum has somehow tossed its visitor out into "the factual Russia of today, forbidden to me, hopelessly slavish, and hopelessly my own native land."⁴⁷ And with this realization, we, too, seem to have exited from this confusing, whirling, cinematic vortex into a more readily comprehended narrative space. As if materializing from the frescoes of the Museum's pediment, the golden figure of allegory swoops down to proffer the solution to the tale's riddle, prompting the established, "Orphic," interpretation of the story: as a satire of the USSR, "The Visit to the Museum" would be Nabokov's testament to the sovereign power of the imagination to retrieve and resurrect the past. It is only memory, and specifically literary memory, that can protect our narrators's "fragile, illegal life" from the unspeakable ordeals of History embodied by the Russian Red Guards.⁴⁸

And yet. It seems that whatever is elicited by the "real" here has already been undercut by the hypostasized scenes of shredded writing and arrested reading that preceded it. If the 'nightmare' of history would be the sole dream from which one cannot awake – if History is "what hurts," as Fredric Jameson famously puts it⁴⁹ – what is curious is how a strange symmetry, a certain visual echo, suffuses this putative 'real':

Oh, how many times in my sleep I had experienced a similar sensation! Now, though, it was reality. Everything was real – the air that seemed to mingle with scattered snowflakes, the still unfrozen canal, the floating fish house, and that peculiar squareness of the darkened and the yellow windows.⁵⁰

The scattered snowflakes, re-materializations of the "snowflakes" of M. Godard's torn-up contract, suggest metonymic fragments of the reader's and author's contractual "agreement" to adhere to a certain representational order of origin and copy, the firm boundaries separating text from interpretation dissolving in the "unfrozen canal." As one pauses at the "peculiar squareness of the darkened and the yellow windows," why should the panels of a comic strip suddenly come to mind? Looking back, the description of the Museum's mottled facade of "many colored stones" suddenly becomes recognisable as the marbled sides of a leather-bound book whose ornate columns and "gilt inscription" recall the gold-leaf ornamentation of early book covers. Its "bronze door" doubles as a clasp, blocking our exit. Is allegory's "real" merely one more cover, a final flailing gesture of History's order of the book as it goes under in a cinematic parallax of all of its tropes and figures? If so, with them too must go the humanist armature and model of reading through which a certain figure of Nabokov, Redeemer of the Past, has been traditionally cast.

For training one's eye back over the text in a more "leisurely" way this time, something else also leaps out:

Continuing my leisurely examination, I looked up at the house beside which I was standing and was immediately struck by the sight of iron steps and railings that descended into the snow on their way to the cellar. There was a

twinge in my heart, and it was with a new, alarmed curiosity that I glanced at the pavement, at its white cover along which stretched black lines, at the brown sky across which there kept sweeping a mysterious light, and at the massive parapet some distance away.⁵¹

Iron steps, railings, a chiaroscuro sketch of light and dark bands. An expanding series of lines leads away from every promise of a return to substantial reality. It is into a cartoon world that we have been summarily disgorged. The “factual” world, it transpires, is no less insubstantial than the Museum’s cinematic one. Both tend towards a “drop,” a black pit into which language as sense or meaning descends.

I sensed that there was a drop beyond it; something was creaking and gurgling down there. Further on, beyond the murky cavity, stretched a chain of fuzzy lights. Scuffling along the snow in my soaked shoes, I walked a few paces.⁵²

What creaks, gurgles, fuzzes and scuffles is *The Return of the Heard*: language unleashed by its internal phonics.



First published in Russian in 1939, “The Visit to the Museum” was written just before the outbreak of the Second World War yet it reads strangely presciently as we emerge from our Covid-19 cocoons into a world whose anchor in a certain “real” has shifted. One may think of Trump’s cartoon-like suspension of the Symbolic law in favour of a gravity-defying market for jouissance as the symptom of one’s exit from the world formerly known as History. Dumped out into this new, “factual” reality – the ‘hard sign’ of a world becoming uninhabitable for human life – we find that it is facts themselves that have become elusive as a catastrophic illogic reigns and the historical record is either wiped clean or written over.

Thus if climate change inaugurates a decisive rupture with humanity’s past, it is emerging just as much as a rift in older models of the social relation. Where, in a previous era, the neurotic’s access to enjoyment was mediated by the Name-of-the-Father, whose instituting cut placed a prohibition on jouissance thereby opening the subject onto the exigencies of desire, in the contemporary “post-truth” world, the paternal prohibition seems largely absent, giving rise to increased anxiety, depression and the new epistemic category that Jacques-Alain Miller and others identify as “ordinary psychosis.”⁵³ It is as if, taking advantage of the opening in time cinema inaugurated, what Lacan called the “ghost” of the subject released in the founding Cartesian gesture that gave birth to the world of reason, has in the meantime taken control of the knobs and levers of perception and, with it, the instruments of identity and memory that previously framed it. Unknotting itself Houdini-like from its hold in the three psychic registers – the “old cases” and “displays” of the Enlightenment fantasy that, by parenthesizing it, maintained the

object of desire at the correct (“safe”) distance from the subject, – jouissance has swarmed into every gap.

If the 21st century is increasingly being defined by the retreat of desire, I suspect few would argue for a return to the paternal signifier – even if this were possible: the strutting Symbolic Father is precisely the comic figure most keenly performed by today’s new masters of jouissance. These fake or Make-Believe Names-of-the-Father would be the symptoms of a “hole” in a Symbolic system gone psychotically awry. Lacan, speaking of psychosis, comments, “At the point at which the Name-of-the-Father is summoned a pure and simple hole may thus answer in the Other; due to the lack of metaphoric effect, this hole will give rise to a corresponding hole in the place of phallic signification.”⁵⁴ How, then, to repair the Symbolic’s hole in the ravaged days of the late Anthropocene? Here Nabokov re-enters – ironically, of course, given his legendary antipathy towards psychoanalysis – as a writer uniquely equipped for this moment (out) of Time.

Recall how in the story the narrator is only able to orientate himself in space and time because he notices the absence of the Russian hard sign on the shoe shop’s insignia.

And by the light of a streetlamp whose shape had long been shouting to me its impossible message, I made out the ending of a sign – “... INKA SAPOG” (“... OE REPAIR”) but no, it was not the snow that had obliterated the “hard sign” at the end. “No, no, in a minute I shall wake up,” I said aloud, and, trembling, my heart pounding, I turned, walked on, stopped again. From somewhere came the receding sound of hooves, the snow sat like a skullcap on a slightly leaning spur stone and indistinctly showed white on the woodpile on the other side of the fence, and already I knew, irrevocably, where I was.⁵⁵

Abolished by the Bolsheviks, the hard sign was officially erased from the Russian alphabet. Yet as one can see in Image 5, the hard sign merely went underground or, rather, overground. A reversed-out letter *ѣ*, the shape of the St Petersburg streetlamp (on the Angliyskaya [English] Embankment no less) “has long been shouting its impossible message” to all in plain sight, in stark defiance of the representational regime that sought to eliminate it.⁵⁶

And if one does a little more sleuthing, one discovers that what has been truncated in the signboard is the phoneme *поч* [POCH]. The corrected sign should read *починка сапог*. “POCHINKA SAPOG” (SHOE REPAIR). Poche, French for pocket. With a breath-taking insouciance for Enlightenment models of phenomenality, an oil lamp pockets the missing hard sign from the Real’s inky bog. Poch, poche, poach, pocket, – as if seanced by this bubbling stream of open phonemes, *Offenbach* returns. He comes into focus not as the Orphic avatar of the lyrical tradition – always a sweltering costume for the composer of *opéra bouffon* (whose own Orphée, incidentally, is only too delighted to lose Eurydice⁵⁷) – but as one of the cinematic O-shapes that have been cycling, like the woman “in besplattered stockings [...]”

spinning along on a silver-shining bicycle,” scarcely noticed until now throughout the tale: the October night, the Owls, the Oriental vase, Orpheus of course, the Obvodny canal, the narrator’s exclamation “Oh!” and, finally, the truncated sign: “OE REPAIR.” If the soles of language’s metrical ‘feet,’ the connecting legs of the Symbolic’s transport system, can be patched, Nabokov suggests, it will be by way of another operation of seeing and hearing secreted within History’s rectilinear perceptual order. Nabokov’s cinematic parallax forces it into the open.



Image 5: By YKatrina, Английская набережная [English Embankment], St Petersburg, 12 June 2009
<https://commons.wikimedia.org>

Notes

1. Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire 4: la Relation d'objet*, texte établi par Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris, Seuil, 1998). English translation, Cormac Gallagher (unpublished).
2. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 277-285.
3. Will Norman, “Nabokov and Benjamin: A Late Modernist Response to History,” *Urbans Review* 10, *My Nabokov* (2007): 79-100, 19.
4. Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2009), 17.
5. Žižek, *Parallax*, 17.
6. Henri Bouasse, *Optique géométrique élémentaire: focométrie, optométrie* (Paris: Delagrave, 1917). Available at <http://www.archive.org/details/optiquegomtriqu00bouagoog>. See

also Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink in collaboration with Heloise Fink and Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 2006), 565.

7. Nabokov, 280.

8. Nabokov, 277.

9. Nabokov, 277.

10. Vladimir Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins*. In *Vladimir Nabokov, Novels 1969-1974* (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 563-747, 591.

11. Nabokov, 278.

12. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 70.

13. Nabokov, 278.

14. The painting depicts Octavia fainting at the hearing the name of her dead son Marcellus whom Aeneas meets as a ghost in Book 6 of *The Aeneid*. There were, moreover, two historical figures named Marcus Claudius Marcellus.

15. Nabokov, 279.

16. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally with Albert Sechehaye and Albert Riedlinger, trans. and notes Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw Hill, 1915), 70.

17. "I let my index finger stray at random over a map of northern France; the point of its nail stopped at the town of Petiver or Petit Ver, a small worm or verse, which sounded idyllic." Nabokov, *Harlequins*, 620.

18. In Poe's "The Gold Bug," a hieroglyphic signature appears "rudely traced, in a red tint." Edgar Allan Poe, "The Gold Bug." In *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, Vol. 1, Project Gutenberg, 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2147/2147-h/2147-h.htm> <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2147/2147-h/2147-h.htm>

19. For a brilliant reading of Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," see Tom Cohen, "Poe's *Foot d'Or*: ruinous rhyme and Nietzschean recurrence (sound)." In *Anti-Mimesis from Plato to Hitchcock* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1994), 105-126. My debt to Cohen's reading practice is comically obvious but it also proves what he discovered in Hitchcock is indeed Real.

20. Paul de Man, "Hypogram and Inscription: Michael Riffaterre's Poetics of Reading," *Diacritics* 11.4 (1981): 17-35, 24.

21. Nabokov, 279.

22. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Offenbach.

23. Nabokov, 279.

24. Performed in a former magician's theatre, Salle Lacaze, "a little theatre of magic," in 1865, *Two Blind Men* was Offenbach's first foray into comic opera. It was made into a film in 1900 by George Méliès.

25. Nabokov, 281.

26. Nabokov, 281.
27. See Walter Benjamin's description of messianic universal history as a "festively enacted history." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 4: 1938-1940*, Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 404.
28. Nabokov, 282.
29. Nabokov, 281.
30. Nabokov, 282.
31. Alan Cholodenko, "The Crypt, the Haunted House, of Cinema," *Cultural Studies Review* 10.2 (2004): 99-103 (108).
32. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or the Whale*, Project Gutenberg 2008. Retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2701/2701-h/2701-h.htm>
33. Nabokov, 283.
34. Nabokov, 283.
35. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 23, 57.
36. Nabokov, 283.
37. Nabokov, 283.
38. Nabokov, 283.
39. Nabokov, 283.
40. Penelope Murray and Peter Wilson, *Music and the Muses: The Culture of Mousikē in the Classical Athenian City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2.
41. Nabokov, 283.
42. See John Tinnell, "Grammatization: Bernard Stiegler's Theory of Writing and Technology," *Computers and Composition* 37 (2015): 132-146.
43. Nabokov, 284.
44. Nabokov, 284.
45. Nabokov, 284.
46. Nabokov, 673.
47. Nabokov, 285.
48. See Irene Masing-Delic, "Replication of Recreation? The Eurydice Motif in Nabokov's Russian Oeuvre," *Russian Literature* LXX (2011): 391-414 (395). See also Norman, 95.
49. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 102.
50. Nabokov, 285.
51. Nabokov, 284.

52. Nabokov, 284.

53. Jacques-Alain Miller, "Ordinary psychosis revisited," *Psychoanalytical Notebooks* 26 (2008): 139-167.

54. Jacques Lacan, "On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis." In *Écrits*, 465-6.

55. Nabokov, 284.

56. My profound thanks to David Ottina who drew this to my attention.

57. This operetta is also famous for its "Duo de la mouche" where Jupiter's part in the love song consists of a fly's buzzing sound.