

WHILE THE HYDRA LIVES, THE MEDUSA CAN'T LAUGH: AN EXPLORATION OF THE ABSENT FEMININE IN LE RAVISSEMENT DE LOL V. STEIN

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Joanna Conings - University of Pittsburgh



ABSTRACT

From Aristotle to Freud and Lacan, Western thought has often defined women through the prism of absence and lack. Aristotle described women as governed by “cold and moist” humors, deprived of heat and therefore passive, incomplete beings. This notion of deficiency persisted across centuries, resurfacing in psychoanalytic theories that cast femininity as a “fundamental lack” — the absence of the phallus. In Western philosophy, absence is typically feared; it must be filled, explained, or given meaning. But what if, instead of resisting absence, we embraced it? What if the very void historically imposed on women could become a site of power and creation?

This article explores these questions through an analysis of Marguerite Duras’s *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, a novel saturated with silence, loss, and absence. I argue that Duras reclaims this absence, transforming it from a patriarchal marker of deficiency into a space of potentiality. By subverting narrative and linguistic norms, Duras destabilizes the symbolic order and opens a space for the “absent feminine” — a form of presence that resists representation yet disrupts patriarchal meaning itself.

KEY WORDS

Absence, Deficiency, Silence, Emptiness, Potentiality

In Western philosophy, we tend to be scared of absence; we always want to find a meaning to everything, to fill in the blanks. Each signifier requires a signified, every concept a term. We always want to fill the void, we *avoid* it. But what would happen if we'd let it *contaminate* us? If we'd embrace it? Is there something to be found in the lack of everything? Historically speaking, men have associated women with absence, emptiness, with the lack of something. The question now is, could women potentially turn this absence that has plagued them for centuries into something meaningful and productive? Could they reappropriate themselves this absence as an act of auto determination and of subjectification?

This essay will try to answer that question through a close reading of *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, “un livre sur rien” (Borgomano 13). Throughout her work - movies, books, plays- Duras has always seemed fascinated by the theme of identity, and more precisely of ontological instability. According to Eva-Maria Schulz-Jander, “Duras's women paradoxically find their identity in their loss of identity, in a passive refusal or absence from the world” (223). In one of the episodes of the anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, the protagonist, Shinji Ikari, wakes up in a completely empty world, a world where there is *nothing* restricting him. In this nothingness, he loses himself and finds absolute freedom. I will argue that much in the same way, Lol, Duras' protagonist, conjures up a world of absolute freedom in which nothing is solid; meaning always seems to escape us and words lose their fullness in a constant sliding down the signification chain, thereby creating a text contaminated by a *meaningful* omnipresent absence.

First, let's go down the historical rabbit hole of what women supposedly lack. Before Freud and his oh-so-fertile castration theory, there had already been a long-standing tradition in western philosophy of associating woman with absence. Think back to Greek statues; whereas men's anatomy is on full display, "woman's genitalia are simply absent, masked, sewn back up inside their 'crack'" (Irigaray 259). This is hardly surprising in an epoch where women were seen as "mutilated males" defined by their coldness, their *lack* of heat. According to the Aristotelian model, "women were men whose development was arrested too early. The female was 'a mutilated male' whose development had stopped because the *coldness* of the mother's womb overcame the heat of the father's semen" (Gilbert, n.p.). This association of coldness with women relates back to the four humors theory, often attributed to Hippocrates, which, according to Gail Kern Paster, will have lasting consequences as it will lead early-moderns to regard heat "as an attribute of sex difference. Men's bodies were thought to be hotter and drier, women's bodies colder, moister, clammier" (416). This view of women lacking something and of women as unfinished men will dominate for centuries to come and will establish the phallogocentric model we are now, seemingly, stuck in.

Psychoanalysis bought into and cemented this paradigm. According to Cixous, psychoanalysis stems from women, or more precisely from the fear of the unknown that femininity seems to represent for men. It is an effect or a "symptom" (to reuse one of Freud's own terms) of the phallogocentricity which, itself, reproduces the effects of this very phallogocentricity it is an effect of. "For, if psychoanalysis was constituted from woman, to repress femininity [...] its account of masculine sexuality is now hardly refutable; as with all 'human' sciences, it reproduces the masculine view, of which it is one of the effects" (Cixous 249). Therefore, psychoanalysis could be equated to the form of the great Ouroboros — a never-ending cycle— or to a great Hydra with phallus shaped heads; every time one is cut down, two new ones appear, and while the Hydra lives, the Medusa can't laugh. Freud introduces his notion of "fundamental lack" associated with women with his castration theory inscribed within his Oedipal Complex:

Castration is bound up in the Oedipal Complex which, according to classic psychoanalysis, feminine subjects never resolve [...] Rubin explains the experience of the Oedipal Complex for the girl, explicating the ways in which the feminine is rendered an *empty space* in this paradigm. Without the symbolic token, there are very real effects for the girl - and later woman - leading to a redirection towards the father. (Daly 339, emphasis added)

In this paradigm, women become a kind of emptiness, they do not fit in. Still according to Freud, the "redirection towards the father" he writes about would manifest itself in what he calls "penis envy", meaning that women try to fill this void, also known as their "fundamental lack", by seeking a penis through sexual relationships with the husband-father figure, and later through maternity.

Lacan also contributed to this view of women with his theory on the formation of the *subject*, and consequently of *culture*, through his famous Lacanian triangle formed by the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, "marked by a sexual division signified through the Phallus (as symbol)". (Daly 338) Elizabeth Grosz writes that the Phallus functions as "a crucial signifier in the distribution of power [that] represents the Name-of-the-Father (*Nom-du-père*), through which the subject is positioned in culture" (126). Lacan will say "la femme n'est pas toute," thereby promulgating this idea of woman having a certain lack, an absence; they are missing *something*. In this kind of phallic socio-linguistic order, the phallus becomes the privileged signifier.

In such a system, women become confined to the role of "the Other." They are defined by the negative vis-à-vis Men, by their "fundamental lack". According to Cécile Decousu, it is that definition of women as being Other, "la constitution du corps féminin en 'altérité pure'" (82), that prevents women from becoming the subject of their own existence. Women have historically been defined through the male gaze. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément denounce the "mythology" that has been constructed for women and the concept of femininity from a male perspective which is founded on a radical incomprehension, and on a gaze full of stereotypes and prejudice (Silva 238). In his 1926 book, *La question de l'analyse profane*¹, Freud expresses his disarray when confronted to feminine sexuality stating that "La vie sexuelle de la femme adulte est encore un continent *noir* pour la psychologie" (75), an expression he borrowed from J. R. Stanley, a man known for his "exploration" of Africa. Thereby, he clearly draws a parallel between women and what he considers to be an "exotic" other. By his use of "noir", which can mean "black" but also "darkness", he also associates women with the lack of light, associating them again with a certain absence.

Cixous seems to refuse this mystification, this othering and this absence of light Freud has shed on femininity. Using an intertextual reference, she comments on Freud's claim, "Le 'Continent *noir*' n'est ni *noir* ni inexplorable" (54). She denounces the colonization of women by men and states that women are neither this black

¹ French translation of *Die Frage der Laienanalyse : Unterredungen mit einem Unparteiischen*

hole Freud seems to envision nor this unexplorable Other. She continues by explaining that women's sexuality still has to be explored because men have taught women to stay in the dark about their own femininity and to worship the "white continent, with its monument to Lack" (Cixous 249). Men have historically used women's so-called absence to oppress them and to subordinate them to the One: men. The use of the black and white binary also has for effect the othering of women as they are associated with somewhere "other". Simone de Beauvoir understands the relationship between men and women in Hegelian terms; She explains that "Certain passages where Hegel's dialectic describes the relationship of master to slave would apply far better to the relationship of man to woman" (74). Cixous seems to share this Hegelian vision of the relationship between men and women; she states: "Opposition, hierarchizing exchange, the struggle for mastery which can end only in at least one death (one master — one slave, or two nonmasters \neq [sic]² two dead) — all that comes from a period in time governed by phallogocentric values" (256). Just like the master needs the slave to exist in order to be the master, "the One" needs "the Other" to exist in order to posit itself as the One. So, how can women get out of this position of eternal Other which relegates them to the position of object in order to become the subject of their existence? How can they puncture "the system of couples and opposition" (Cixous, 252)?

In *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, Lol uses *absence*, to negate the position of men as the One. By being in absence, Lol refuses the role of Other that she was assigned. Lol's refusal to be in presence can be seen as a revolt against the dominant phallogocentric structure. By writing women's absence, Duras challenges the idea of women as being Other and of men being the One. Lol's absence means there cannot be an Other and, without an Other, there can be no One as the One defines itself through a negative relationship vis-à-vis the Other. Therefore, by purposefully taking herself out of the equation, Lol denies men's role as the One and breaks free from this fake binary she (and women in general) was prisoner of. She finds freedom through a reappropriation of absence. As Marini puts it, durassian women present a "global refusal" : "Ne pas se laisser atteindre, ne rien sentir, et finalement s'absenter: telles sont les réponses féminines négatives au monde tel qu'il va" (63). Duras' language reflects her protagonists move towards absence; she reduces her language "more and more as she continues to write so that there is a linguistic movement toward silence that parallels the loss of identity of her women" (Schulz-Jander 231). Her text is permeated by an omnipresent absence. In what follows, we will look at some devices Duras uses to write this absence. To do so, I purposefully decided to not translate any excerpts of her book because each word, each syllable, each letter and each missing part is particularly important to the overall meaning, or the lack thereof. Therefore, I would be afraid to lose this absence in translation (for something to *not* be lost in translation as it were) which would be extremely problematic, because, as Cixous puts it "le manque est aussi une richesse" (151).

In her book, *Madeleine Borgomano Présente Le Ravissement De Lol V. Stein*, Borgomano describes Duras' writing as "un art de l'ellipse et du non-dit, qui laisse l'essentiel se jouer entre les lignes, entre les mots" (14). But why try to write the unwritable? Why bother with the extremely complex problem of writing absence? Cixous explains that women enter the phallogocentric order as soon as they start to speak: "On peut leur apprendre, dès qu'elles commencent à parler, en même temps que leur nom, que leur religion est *noire*"³ (41). Here, she refers back to Freud's quote who equates women's sexuality to "le continent noire" of psychology, to make a point about Lacan's theory according to which we all enter the symbolical order through language. According to Lacan himself, language is phallogocentric as you have to accept the "name-of-the-father"— "the laws and restrictions that control both your desire and the rules of communication" (Felluga, n.p.) — which is inherently linked to the Phallus, to enter it. So, according to this paradigm, the only tool women have to make themselves heard in a society where they are oppressed is the language of this very oppressor, a language by men for men, in which women are determined by their "fundamental lack", thus a language from which they are *absent*. This is why Cixous calls onto women to write in an attempt to "se forger l'arme antilogos" (46). This writing outside the Logos will then "always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system" (248). In her book, Duras breaks all conventions, to leave space for silence, for the absence of the word, the indescribable, for the "mot-absence". Doing so, she falls in line with a certain group of French feminists who use negative terms such as passivity, emptiness, absence and madness, "in their search to project the vision of a new world and a new language where the dispossessed and vulnerable will have their place" (Schulz-Jander 231).

Julia Kristeva is one of those feminist preaching for a negative practice of femininity. According to her a woman,

² Here, there seems to have been a translation problem. Whereas the original French text states "deux non-maître = deux morts", clearly using the equal sign, the English translation uses the non-equal sign thereby changing the meaning of the sentence.

³ I decided to go with the French translation to keep the echo to Freud's statement (cf. p. 3). English translation by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen: "As soon as they begin to speak, at the same time as they are taught their name, they can be their territory is black" (244)

cela ne peut par *être*: c'est même ce qui ne va pas dans l'être. A partir de là, une pratique de femme ne peut être que négative, à l'encontre de ce qui existe, pour dire que 'ce n'est pas ça' et que 'ce n'est pas encore.' J'entends donc par 'femme' ce qui ne se représente pas, ce qui ne se dit pas, ce qui reste en dehors des nominations et des idéologies. (21)

Lol represents this irrepresentability; she is always associated with absence. She is absent from her own story as she is not even her own narrator, Jacques Hold is. He says that Lol's tales are inexistant (Duras 44). He also keeps using words like "*j'invente*", "*je crois*", "*j'imagine*", etc. He tries to represent Lol and her story but fails to truly understand her. He ends up by stating that "moi seul de tous ces faussaires, je sais : je ne sais rien. Ce fut là ma première découverte à son propos : ne rien savoir de Lol était la connaître déjà" (Duras 83). To know nothing about Lol is to already know her, which makes sense as Lol is only present in absence and defines herself by the negative. Therefore, having an absent knowledge of Lol could be seen as knowing Lol. Jacques also admits that he is a "faussaire", he is not giving us the real Lol, something no one can do, but only the image of Lol he created, a mere copy that will never be close to the original. He doesn't represent Lol, he paints the image he has of Lol. By using a male narrator, Duras manages to keep Lol absent from her own story. This is very characteristic of Duras. In general, all of her female protagonists are silent on the narration level, they never take the floor in the fiction. Borgomano analyses this as an act of denunciation on Duras' part:

Dans ce silence et ce refus d'écriture des femmes fictives, le texte durassien met en scène la situation de l'écriture dans notre société, prenant par là une position politique de dénonciation. Ce que ces femmes méprisent et refusent, c'est l'écriture telle qu'elle existe, écriture au masculin, régie par la logique et les règles, métamorphosée en acte viril. (Borgomano 61)

Lol finds jouissance in her absence, an absence which will contaminate everything it touches, including the text itself.

Cixous' above mentioned quote — "On peut leur apprendre, dès qu'elles commencent à parler, en même temps que leur *nom*, que leur religion est noire" (emphasis added, 41) — is interesting insofar as it insists on the fact that women start interiorizing the phallogocentric norm at the same time as they learn to say their *name*. In Duras' book, proper nouns are one of the places where absence is the most visible. According to linguists, proper nouns don't have a signified, they are only used to designate and to identify. As Borgomano notes, in Duras' writing "les noms ne nomme[nt] pas" (p. 113), et n'identifie pas non plus, mais ils entrent dans un réseau de significations" (27). The meaning of words is embedded into a greater signifying chain.

The proper nouns used by Duras are even more special insofar as they use a lot of abbreviations; "une marque élémentaire de silence" (Ricatte 3). Silva writes "l'absence et le manque sont aussi exprimés à travers les noms des personnages éponymes, marqué par l'abréviation" (244). Indeed, most proper nouns are cropped: **S**. Tahla, **T**. Beach, **U**. Bridge, etc. Interestingly, this succession of letters—**S-T-U**— all seem to lead us to one letter, **V**, which is at the heart of Lol's name whose complete noun is Lola **V**alérie Stein; something that won't be revealed before page 113. The fact that the **V** is hidden at the *heart* of her name is especially meaningful as Tatiana claims that Lol's heart is absent: "Tatiana aurait tendance à croire que c'était peut-être en effet le cœur de Lol **V**. Stein qui n'était pas – elle dit: là – il allait venir sans doute, mais elle, elle ne l'avait pas connu" (Duras 13). Insofar as the **V** remains hidden until page 33 and stays hidden until we learn that it actually stands for Valérie, maybe we could consider that Tatiana wasn't completely off the mark.

As we've seen, Lol's name keeps varying throughout the book. Depending on who is talking, and, on the setting, she can be "Lol", "Lola", "Lola Valérie" or "Lol V. Stein". It is anything but stable. Duras writes: "Elle se croit coulée dans une identité de nature indéfinie qui pourrait se nommer de noms indéfiniment différents, et dont la visibilité dépend d'elle" (41). Lol's identity, if we decide she has one, is as unstable as her name. The nature of her identity is undecided, ever changing, depending on what she wants to project to the world. She controls the gaze by controlling which one of her many personas she lets people see. In a sense, she "performs" identity. She resists essentialization by having no immutable nature. This absence of one being is also reflected in her last name: Stein. By extrapolating a bit, we can find an anagram in it: STEIN → NI EST, Latin for 'to not be'. As such Lol's nonbeing, her absence, is thus present within her name.

Lol's first name actually is "Lola", which according to Madeleine Borgomano, is a Spanish diminutive for Dolores, which means "douleur" or pain in English. This isn't innocent as very early on, we are told that Lol never really suffered: "Gloire de douceur mais aussi d'indifférence, découvrait-on très vite, jamais elle n'avait paru souffrir ou être peignée, jamais on ne lui avait vu une larme de jeune fille" (Duras 12). She is indifferent, never truly in pain. Even when she sees her fiancé, Michael Richardson, being snatched away by Anne Mary Stretter during

the ball at T. Beach, she doesn't seem to suffer: "La nuit avançant, il paraissait que les chances qu'aurait eues Lol de souffrir s'étaient encore raréfiées, que la souffrance n'avait pas trouvé en elle où se glisser" (Duras 19). Like Marceau in *l'Étranger*, Lol won't even cry at her mother's funeral. Early on, Tatiana, Lol's childhood friend, says about Lol that she was never really *there*, translated to "là" in French: "Au collège, dit-elle, et elle n'était pas la seule à le penser, il manquait déjà quelque chose à Lol pour être – elle dit: là⁴" (Duras 13). She is never really "là". Lol misses her "là" to truly be Lola. This is extremely important as "là" doesn't only mean "there" (a link to presence and thus to absence), but it is also the homonym of the definite pronoun "la", a decisively feminine pronoun, and a literal mark of femininity. So, in a way, Lol is "amputée de son féminin" (Calle-Grüber 38).

Lacan talks about this "la" as being a signifier: "It is by means of this la that I symbolize the signifier whose place must be marked, and which cannot be left empty. This la is a signifier whose distinction it is to be the only one capable of signifying nothing, merely grounding the woman's position in this: that she is not all" (68). According to Borgomano, the whole text gravitates towards absent words. She analyses Lol's missing "la" as being her femininity and says "Le mot absent désignerait-il la "féminité", cette insaisissable qualité, 'ce sexe qui n'en est pas un'" (107)? It would make sense for femininity to be the "absent-word" as it is a signifier without a signified, it is absent from language, defined by the negative, it is thus irrepresentable. But still, Duras manages to come close to its representation by inserting absence at the heart of her text.

Now, let's take a closer look at the actual letters, the pure signifiers as Lacan calls them, forming Lol's name— L-O-L. In his "Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras du *Ravissement de Lol V Stein*", Lacan praises Duras for knowing what he teaches without needing his help: "C'est précisément ce que je reconnais dans le ravissement de Lol V. Stein, où Marguerite Duras s'avère savoir sans moi ce que j'enseigne". (2) Apart from the very clear example of mansplaining Lacan gives us here, he does offer some interesting takes, amongst which his analysis of Lol's name. He writes: "Lol V. Stein: ailes de papier, V ciseaux, Stein, la pierre, au jeu de la moure tu te perds. On répond : O, bouche ouverte, que veux-je à faire trois bonds sur l'eau, hors-jeu de l'amour, où plongé-je" (1)? First, let's take a closer look at "*Ailes de papiers*"; in French "ailes" means wings, but it also designates the letter "L" as well as the feminine subject pronoun "elle". By drawing an association between "elle" and "ailes", we can see the femininity represented by the pronoun "elle" as, again, something that escapes definition, every time we try to grasp it, it "flies away".

These "ailes" can also refer to Lol's alienation of self; "on ne peut pas être plus près d'un être humain que je le suis d'elle, plus près d'elle qu'elle-même si constamment envolée de sa vie vivante"(Duras 165). Here, Jacques Hold explains that no one can be closer to Lol than he is, not even Lol herself as she is so often "envolée de sa vie vivante"; She literally "flies away" from her own life. Lydon expresses this idea of Lol's alienation of self and of femininity as follows: "Lol's first name, then, is literally an O (letter, zero, and/ or eau, "water") borne by two wings, represented by its two L's (ailes) whose duplication inscribes the doubling and splitting of Lol's femininity (elle) —the book's subject". (357) The word "ailes" also calls up the idea of "voler" in French, which means "to steal" and "to fly", a double meaning Cixous plays on when saying "Voler, c'est le geste de la femme, voler dans la langue, la faire voler" (58). Cixous comments on the double meaning of "voler" and how it is used to throw meaning off. By multiplying meaning we throw language of balance, a balance that has always tipped in favor of men, we shatter language into pieces. She continues:

La femme tient de l'oiseau et du voleur comme le voleur tient de la femme et de l'oiseau : *illes* passent, *illes* filent, *illes*⁵ jouissent de brouiller l'ordre de l'espace de le désorienter, de changer de place les meubles, les choses, les valeurs, de faire des casses, de vider les structures, de chambouler le propre. (emphasis added 58)

She equates women to thieves; They both disturb order by moving furniture (the word being the metaphorical furniture of language) to find something valuable and by doing so they change the "value-system" as someone loses value while someone else gains it. They empty structures of their value; they destroy the established order and enjoy it. In Duras' world, "destruction" is not a negative word. In Duras' paradoxical vocabulary, to destroy is to make space to invent something new (Borgomano 103).

⁴ This is a perfect example of what can be lost in translation because you lose the intertextuality of the "là" in English as it is translated by "there" which doesn't have the same link to the concept of femininity as does the pronoun "là".

⁵ The use of "*illes*" is particularly interesting as usually we would use the masculine plural subject pronoun "ils" in this situation, as we are referring to two masculine word, l'oiseau and le voleur, and a feminine one, la femme. In French, when we have a group of people, however many women make up that group, if there is one man, the masculine will overpower the feminine. Here, Cixous breaks this grammar rule to make both genders present within the pronoun subject.

The idea of moving furniture in a certain space is particularly relevant in Lol's case. After the events at T. Beach, what most people consider to be Lol's first "crisis", she gets married to Jean Bedford, without really wanting to but being happy to not have had to make a choice: "Ainsi, Lol fut mariée sans l'avoir voulu, de la façon qui lui convenait, sans passer par la sauvagerie d'un choix". (31) For ten years, she will live as if she were asleep, in a constant erasure of self, which seems to please her husband:

Il aimait cette femme-là, Lola Valérie, cette calme présence à ses côtés, cette dormeuse debout, cet effacement continu qui le faisait aller et venir entre l'oubli et les retrouvailles de sa blondeur, de ce corps de soie que le réveil jamais ne changeait, de cette virtualité constante et silencieuse qu'il nommait sa douceur, la douceur de sa femme. (33)

The absence of her "self" is especially noticeable in the compulsive order she keeps in her home. Her house is described as coming straight out of a decoration magazine. It's impersonal and empty. "Lol imitait, mais qui ? les autres, tous les autres, le plus grand nombre possible d'autres personnes" (Duras 34). But just like Sleeping Beauty, Lol will be waken up from her deep slumber by a kiss but a kiss between two other people, Tatiana and Jacques Hold, who passing in front of her house will awaken the ball's memory in her mind and set off Lol's second "crisis", an all-consuming, everlasting one. She doesn't immediately recognize which memory is trying to resurface but she discovers it by roaming around the streets of S. Tahla. As her memory resurfaces, she starts changing the order of her house. She announces to her husband that she is going to make changes around the house, maybe change the *furniture*. Alongside the changes she brings to her house, she also starts "tidying up" her memory of the ball, which she sees as her real "home". It is the place she likes to dwell in: "Elle, elle pénètre dans la lumière artificielle, prestigieuse, du bal de T. Beach. Et dans cette enceinte largement ouverte à son seul regard, elle recommence le passé, elle l'ordonne, sa véritable demeure, elle la range". (46)

Just like "voler", the word "ravisement" used in the book's title, also has multiple meanings, multiple signifieds. According to Linternaute, the word "ravisement" can mean three different things: "Sentiment provoqué par une joie ou une admiration intense", or an older meaning of the word could also be "Enlèvement brutal et violent", and finally it also has a religious meaning "Etat de félicité de l'âme provoqué par une extase transportant l'âme hors d'elle-même". Interestingly, each one of these meanings could work in Lol's case. Lol's fiancé is being ravished from her but she doesn't suffer from the scene, if anything she seems to find the scene ravishing, enticing, delightful even. Anne Marie Stretter didn't only "ravie" Lol's fiancé but she also "ravie" Lol from herself thereby offering her a moment of absolute "ravisement" almost in the religious sense of term.

Later, she will try to recreate the circumstances of T. Beach's ball at all costs. She protects and nurtures its memory; "Le bal reprend un peu de vie, frémit, s'accroche à Lol. Elle le réchauffe, le protège, le nourrit" (Duras 46). She especially tries to recreate the end, her own end, in which she finds "une grâce infinie" (46). The end she tries to recreate is the one she wasn't able to witness because of the break of dawn: "dans les multiples aspects du bal de T. Beach, c'est la fin qui retient Lol. C'est l'instant précis de sa fin, quand l'aurore arrive avec une brutalité inouïe et la sépare du couple que formaient Michael Richardson et Anne-Marie Stretter" (49). She wants to see Michael Richardson take Anne-Marie Stretter's dress off, to witness the moment of her replacement, of her erasure:

Le corps long et maigre de l'autre femme serait apparu peu à peu. Et dans une progression rigoureusement parallèle et inverse, Lol aurait été remplacée par elle auprès de l'homme de T. Beach. Remplacée par cette femme, au souffle près. Lol retient ce souffle : à mesure que le corps de la femme apparaît à cet homme, le sien s'efface, s'efface, volupté, du monde. (49)

This desire of seeing her own end, of witnessing the replacement of her self by another brings us back to Lacan's words "hors-jeu de l'amour". "Hors-jeu" is, phonetically speaking, remarkably close from the word "je". So here, Lol is outside the "je" of love. She is not the subject of love, nor is she the object, she is external to it and finds her "ravisement" watching the "jeu de l'amour" but not taking part in it.

Lyden also draws a comparison with "the game of mora", the ancient game of "*pierre, papier, ciseaux*" (all mentioned by Lacan), or the game of "even and odd" Lacan refers to in his "Seminar on the Purloined Letter": "reputedly from the Italian *mora*, meaning 'delay'; and translated into French, 'le jeu de la mourre' evokes 'le jeu de l'amour,' or the game of love. Here Lacan expresses poetically the view that there is something intrinsically 'out of sync' about love". (357) *Jeu de l'amour - jeu de la mourre - jeu de la mort ?* Lacan's reference to "le jeu de la mourre" sounds strikingly similar in French to "le jeu de la mort". This is interesting because Anne-Marie Stretter, the woman responsible for the ravishing of Lol's fiancé, seems to embody the idea of the *femme-fatale*. She possesses an intense seductive power and plunges Michael Richardson in profound despair only with one look. She changes his entire being and transforms his story and he, or anyone else for that matter, is powerless to stop her: "

aucun mot, aucune violence au monde n'aurait eu raison du changement de Michael Richardson. Qu'il lui faudrait maintenant être vécu jusqu'au bout". (Duras 17) More than being the typical seductress that the expression "femme-fatale" usually refers to, the one that makes men mad with love, she is also a femme-fatale in a more literal form, "celle qui tue, 'une donneuse de mort'. Séductrice de Michael Richardson au premier regard, sans l'avoir cherché, elle devient 'ravisseuse', et par là 'meurtrière' de Lol, presque sans le savoir, semant sur son passage, comme par inadvertance, la folie et une forme de mort". (Borgomano 41) This more literal sense of femme-fatale is also alluded to in her physical appearance: she has a "grâce [...] d'oiseau mort"(14), she is wearing "une robe noire à double *fourreau* de tulle également noir"(14)— the *fourreau*, a sheath in which she can carry an imaginary sword, a symbolical bringer of death — and finally, the narrator alludes to her "ossature admirable de son corps et de son visage se devinait"(14), insisting on her extremely thin silhouette which shows her "admirable ossature"— an image that calls to mind a walking skeleton. The setting is also described in morbid terms: the ball is presented like a sort of *dance macabre* ending with the musicians putting their violins back into their "boîtes funèbres" (Duras 20).

The theme of the violin and of the musique resurfaces throughout the text, like during the ball and later when Lol's husband plays his violin. Borgomano writes that when the music stops, with the break of dawn, the sun rises on the end of the world (131). "Présence/ absence, le violon fait partie du 'ravisement' : signe vide, il ne signifie pas. Comme la musique elle-même, il existe seulement 'éperdument'" (Borgomano 132). While Anne-Marie Stretter seems to be the giver of death, she also looks like she is close to death herself. Tatiana remarks that "Rien ne pouvait plus arriver à cette femme, pensa Tatiana, plus rien, rien. Que sa fin" (Duras 16).

Although Anne-Marie Stretter could be interpreted as the woman who kills, she could also be seen as a giver of life as by depositing Lol, Stretter wakens her up. For the first time, Lol seems to feel, to enjoy being alive in this new found absence. She finds great pleasure in what is happening and never wants it to end. As we saw, Lol doesn't seem to be hurt by Anne-Marie Stretter taking her fiancé, on the contrary she finds the scene quite *ravishing*; "Lol les avait regardés, une femme dont le cœur est libre de tout engagement, très âgée, regarde ainsi ses enfants s'éloigner, elle parut les aimer" (Duras 18). Lol looks at the couple with love, feeling no pain. The pain will only set in when she stops being able to *see* them: "Quand elle ne les *vit* plus, elle tomba par terre, évanouie" (Emphasis added, Duras 22).

Lol will desperately try to reconstruct her ravishing in a *mise-en-scène* in which she can feel this blissful absence again. She becomes the active agent of her own deconstruction, the director of a looped movie reenacting her end; "the endless end, the endless beginning of Lol Stein" (Duras 174-175). She wants to live in the instant of her end, which is paradoxically also the one her beginning, in the never-ending end of Lol V. Stein. She sees herself as being at the center of a triangle of which "l'aurore et eux deux sont les termes éternels" (Duras 47). This triangle will keep coming up like an echo throughout the text. It is even inscribed within Lol's name: Put the two L's together and, with some effort of imagination, you might have a triangular form in the center of which lies an O, a zero, an empty circle, an emptiness in the middle of her name, a never-ending cycle. "Lol, prénom clos symétrique, clos sur-lui même, évoque aussi la forme à trois du triangle" (Duras 23).

Lol won't only be "ravie", she will also "ravie" herself. As the story progresses, she "ravie" Jacques Hold from Tatiana, and even from himself. Hold will end up losing his own sense of self in the process, he says: "Pour la première fois mon nom prononcé ne nomme pas" (113). Lol's absence contaminates him up to a point where he gives his entire being up to her, he surrenders to her absence, lets her femininity contaminate him, "une féminité pareillement rejointe en moi" (91). He wants to be crushed with the rest of everything:

Je désire comme un assoiffé boire le lait brumeux et insipide de la parole qui sort de Lol V. Stein, faire partie de la chose mentie par elle. Qu'elle m'emporte, qu'il en aille enfin différemment de l'aventure désormais, qu'elle me broie avec le reste, je serai servile, que l'espoir soit d'être broyé avec le reste, d'être servile. (Duras 106)

Jacques Hold's contamination by absence, the destruction of his individual identity, is most visible in his discourse after his third encounter with Tatiana, his mistress and Lol's childhood friend, at the hotel while Lol watches from the field: "*Je ne sais que faire [...] Je me caresse. Il parle à Lol V. Stein perdue pour toujours, il la console d'un malheur inexistant qu'elle ignore*" (Emphasis added; Duras 162). His switch from the first to the third person singular reflects his split of identity; "Il" is not "je" anymore, *I* becomes *he* and *he* isn't *me* anymore.

Lol's absence won't only infect Jacques, but also the text itself, its syntax, which could be seen as a continuation of Lol's body as Lol is one with the text. Nowhere is this presence of absence in the text more visible than in its description of "un mot-absence", "un mot-trou":

Un mot-absence, un mot-trou, creusé en son centre d'un trou, de ce 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, il aurait retenu ceux qui voulaient partir, il les aurait convaincus de l'impossible, il les aurait assourdis à tout autre vocable que lui-même, en une fois il les aurait nommés, eux, l'avenir et l'instant. Manquant, ce mot, il gâche tous les autres, les contamine. (Duras 48)

When the ball ends and dawn breaks upon the ball, Lol looks for a word to convince Michael Richardson and Anne-Marie Stretter to stay, she wants to stop time, live in this instant forever. Lol will never find this word, Jacques believes that this is why she decided to stay silent. But Lol isn't silent, at the end of the ball, she screams, one long scream, a sound without one meaning, a word that isn't word, *un mot-absent?* Lol "for lack of word becomes the word" (Shoukri 324). Lol is the word, Lol is the text, Lol is the language, Lol is nobody; "Mais Lol n'est encore ni Dieu ni personne" (Duras 49). Emptiness is at the heart of Duras' language, like the absent name (V) is at the heart of Lol's name. Here, Duras points to a new linguistic region "that has not been usurped by the male masters with their words of ownership and might" (Schulz-jander 231), a language in which the phallus wouldn't be the privileged signifier.

Lol's story has a variety of impacts on its readers with the absence of definitive answers providing room for the text to be interpreted in many different ways. The absence of one stable meaning allows the multiplication of meaning. Lol frees language by giving words autonomy and freedom: "le mot traverse l'espace, cherche et se pose. Elle a posé le mot sur moi" (Duras 133). She pierces through the phallogentric language by deconstructing the meaning of words, the logical syntax of sentences, "le vide est statue, le socle est là" (Duras 116), the basic algebra of what a text should be. She lets unfinished sentences hang in the air. The repetition of certain scenes, of certain leitmotifs, empty the latter from their meaning. The reader is left with a sense of deep instability, of incomprehension, of emptiness. The reader is "ravished".

The silence and absence represented by Duras in this book is far from empty. Duras highlights "l'impuissance de l'écriture à dire le corps féminin autrement qu'en annihilant" (Borgomano 66). Which is why Duras writing is s writing *malgré*, she tries to write what she knows is unwritable, the feminine. And maybe this feminine should stay unwritten, undefined, unstable, because creating one feminine would mean falling into the trap of essentialization. Marguerite Duras isn't trying to write "la femme" but she writes "du côté des femmes" (Borgomano 68) In this text,

La féminité ici ne se pose plus en s'opposant, et surtout pas en s'opposant à la virilité

sur l'axe du corps et du sexe : elle se pose comme une différence absolue et indéfinissable, une alternative à tout ce qu'offre le monde existant. Comme telle, elle ne parvient pas à se mettre en mots, ce qui l'enfermerait encore dans des grilles, celles du langage, mais elle se présente comme cette ombre profilée derrière les mots et leurs assemblages ; on la sent toujours à l'arrière-plan, insaisissable, mais fascinante, absence-présente, creux dessiné par le plein, comme Lol ou Anne-Marie Stretter. (Borgomano 68)

By making the feminine something that escapes definition, Duras frees it from this role of other vis-à-vis men and breaks free from the phallogentric cage guarded by language. Duras treats the signifier "femme" like a proper noun, empty in the beginning, she lets her writing produce its multiple signifieds. The feminine refuses to be one defined object but rather becomes a moving force that can only be understood in its dynamic (Borgomano 59). Defining the feminine would only mean to cut its wing off by reducing its meaning; it would mean to rob women from their characteristic gesture, *voler*, "voler, c'est le geste de la femme, voler dans la langue, la faire voler" (Cixous 58). Through her writing of absence, Duras destroys the established order to leave space for something new, a new age

in which the symbolic representation of the feminine sex is not impossible, where the phallus is no longer the privileged signifier and the feminine sex is no longer mutilated but has found its own symbolic representation and expression. This new language is thus characterized by the *mot-trou*, the symbolic representation of the feminine sex, the vagina, and the *mot-absence*, the absence of the hitherto omnipresent phallus. (Schulz-Jander 232)

Only by representing absence, the place women have hitherto been relegated to, can we start making space for the feminine. It is time to stare into the void, to display its beauty, to show the ravishing beauty of the endless possibilities hidden within the void. Only by representing the holes, which language so often tries to cover with inadequate grace, will we take down the Hydra to make space for the Medusa.

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