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An Elusive Vision: Genesis and Apocalypse in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*

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In homage to Philippe Bonnefis

In an often-cited quote from *La Vie matérielle*, Marguerite Duras comments on the process of writing: “Écrire, ce n’est pas raconter des histoires. [...] C’est raconter une histoire et l’absence de cette histoire. C’est raconter une histoire qui en passe par son absence. Lol V. Stein est détruite par le bal de S. Thala. Lol V. Stein est bâtie par le bal de S. Thala.” (31–32). Although Duras suggests that this may be true for any novel, it is undoubtedly the quality of absence in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* that sets this text apart from all others. How can Lol be seen as a construction, capable of being destroyed and rebuilt? What is it about the “bal de S. Thala” that both creates and destroys Lol’s character? Duras’s writing often seems to make explicit reference to Lol’s quality of absence – through laconic elements of the characters’ discourse and descriptions, for example – setting up a structure by which the main eponymous character from this novel is literally defined by her absence. Lol has difficulty speaking, and relies on an unusual narrative structure for her story to be related. On the rare occasions when she does speak, her phrases are often fragmented or even cut off, sometimes without any punctuation. Her descriptions seem strange and paradoxical, as if she were impossible to define, or even see. Indeed, certain other characters “cannot stand her face.”¹

How did Duras create such a character from absence and lack, and what can Lol’s unique status tell us about the author’s perception of the literary text? Through a textual genetic analysis comparing early preparatory manuscripts from *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* with the published, final text, this paper shows how a shift from the material to the visual signals a reframing of the main protagonist’s character, setting up an allegory of the very writing process that creates the text.² This allegorical dynamic between the protagonist and the writing seems to also point to the relationship

between the reader and the text itself, as defined by Tzvetan Todorov: “Based on the information he receives, every character must construct the facts and the characters around him; thus, he parallels exactly the reader who is constructing the imaginary universe from his own information” (78). Yet in the Durassian text, the construction is fragmented, never attaining a finished status. From a metaphor of creation, to the embodiment of apocalypse, this dynamic signals a larger, meta-textual reference to the experience of the reader before the ever-elusive state of the narrative.

To read *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* is to enter a perpetual state of waiting. The narrative never actually seems to begin: instead, the *incipit* vacillates between creation and self-destruction, as a series of statements of uncertainty continually call into question the narrator’s authority. On the one hand, the narrator affirms: “C’est ce que je sais” (Duras, 11); on the other hand, he expresses doubt: “[. . .] je ne suis convaincu de rien” (14). Adding to the ambiguity and self-contradiction of this unreliable narrator, the narrative is initially purported to be an account of an account, that given by Tatiana Karl to the anonymous (at this point) first-person narrator, who at first tells his story by including multiple elements of Tatiana’s account mixed in with his own, but then quickly calls into question all he has just recounted: “Je ne crois plus à rien de ce que dit Tatiana” (14). Yet he will pick up Tatiana’s narrative immediately after having confessed his distrust in her reliability, and continue his narration as an act of further storytelling and invention, adding his own confession of narrative unreliability:

Voici, tout au long, mêlés, à la fois, ce faux semblant que raconte
Tatiana Karl et ce que j’invente sur la nuit du Casino de T. Beach.
À partir de quoi je raconterai mon histoire de Lol V. Stein. (14)³

In addition to the high level of uncertainty and doubt, this narrator’s version of the story includes several other sources, revealed a few pages later: “Lol, raconte Mme Stein, [. . .]” (23), “Le récit de cette nuit-là fait par Jean Bedford à Lol elle-même contribue, il me semble, à son histoire récente” (25), “Ainsi, si de ce qui suit, Lol n’a parlé à personne, la gouvernante se souvient, elle, un peu [. . .]” (37). The opening pages of the novel, then, set up a multi-layered narrative structure, created from a variety of voices and riddled with uncertainty, invention, pretense, and subjectivity. The narrator immediately positions himself as spectator, one who validates or calls into question that which is, or was, seen by the others: Tatiana, Jean Bedford, Lol’s governess, and Lol’s mother. Throughout each account, the narrator interrupts the narrative with interjections of “j’invente” or

“je doute,” casting suspicion on what is told. The one person capable of commenting on the factuality of what is recounted, Lol, is the only source that does not speak. In the midst, the reader waits with anticipation for the substance, the story, to materialize. The narrative, it would seem, is not exactly “there.”

If the narrative suffers from a lack of authority, the descriptions of Lol seem to reflect this situation most strikingly. Just as the narrative is lacking, so the main protagonist, Lola Valérie Stein, whose name is almost always shortened to “Lol,” “n’est pas là” – is “not there.” Indeed, this very phrase is repeated on two occasions in the initial descriptions of Lol (my emphasis in bold):

Au collègue, dit [Tatiana], et elle n’était pas la seule à le penser, il manquait déjà quelque chose à Lol pour être – elle dit: **là**. Elle donnait l’impression d’endurer dans un ennui tranquille une personne qu’elle se devait de paraître mais dont elle perdait la mémoire à la moindre occasion. [. . .] Tatiana dit encore que Lol V. Stein était jolie, qu’au collègue on se la disputait bien qu’elle vous fût dans les mains comme l’eau parce que le peu que vous reteniez d’elle valait la peine de l’effort. Lol était drôle, moqueuse impénitente et très fine bien qu’une part d’elle-même eût été toujours en allée loin de vous et de l’instant. Où? Dans le rêve adolescent? Non, répond Tatiana, non, on aurait dit dans rien encore, justement, rien. Était-ce le cœur qui n’était pas là? 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. (12-13)

Lol’s very quality of absence is embodied in the nickname that she chooses for herself, since the final (and absent) part of her name, “la,” seems to echo the word for “there” in French, “là.”⁴ As a result of this accentuation of the truncated element of Lol’s name, the repetition of the spatial deictic⁵ in the incipit draws attention to the function of presence and absence through the meaning of the word “là”: since this is the absent element of the name, Lol is literally, linguistically, not “there.” The word also reappears in multiple other contexts throughout the novel, affirming its importance and emphasizing various elements that are “there”:

C’en sont là les derniers faits voyants. (25)

Le lendemain est là. (74)

Qui sera là dans cet instant auprès d’elle? (105)

[...] l'oubli est là. (135)

Mais l'horreur, je n'y peux rien, est là. Je reconnais l'absence,
son absence d'hier, elle me manque à tout moment, déjà. (137)

Interestingly, the word “là,” apart from the previously-cited references to Lol in the *incipit* of the novel, is used by the narrator exclusively, and always in an affirmative context, indicating presence, that which is “there” (however, many of these elements are in fact figures of absence, such as “le lendemain”, or “the day after”). In fact, a digital analysis of the novel’s text reveals that the word “là” appears well over a hundred times throughout the course of the story, marking the importance of what is “there” and what is not. Most notably, this spatial indicator serves to emphasize and place the presence of the narrator (who later reveals himself as Jacques Hold), positioning him as spectator who will affirm or deny the authority of what is recounted.⁶ Further stressing the importance of the visual, the story is interspersed with Jacques Hold’s interjections of “je vois” or “je vois ceci,” sometimes even directly followed by “j’invente.” Since the narrator confirms or casts doubt upon that which is viewed, that which is “there,” he also affirms, albeit doubtfully, the presence or absence of the story, and most of all, Lol’s “absence.” The reader, consequently, is continually in the flux of the narrative, never certain of any presence or absence in the story, because each visual image is immediately destroyed by its negation.

It is revelatory to discover that the emphasis on the visual, and on the narrator’s position as spectator, did not figure in to the earlier manuscript versions of *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*.⁷ In the initial drafts from this work, rather than focus on Lol’s lack of presence, Duras instead concentrated on the character’s “unfinished” qualities: in place of the spatial indicator, “là,” the passages originally emphasized Lol’s nascent materiality (my emphasis in bold):

Au collègue, dit elle, et elle n’était pas la seule à le penser, ~~dit-elle aussi~~, il manquait déjà quelque chose à Lol pour être – elle dit: **faite**. Elle donnait l’impression d’être inachevée, de vivre dans une attente, une sollicitation de ce qu’elle serait, ce qu’elle n’arrivait pas à atteindre.⁸

Était ce le cœur qui n’était pas là? Tatiana aurait tendance à croire que c’était peut être en effet le cœur de Lol V. Stein ~~qui n’était pas encore achevé~~, *qui n’était pas* – elle dit: **fait**, il allait venir sans doute, mais elle, elle ne l’avait pas connu, même durant les fiançailles de Lol.⁹

While the seminal idea of visual substantiation is evidenced here, since the spatial deictic “là” can already be seen in these passages (although here, in a synecdoche reference to the part, the heart, instead of the whole, Lol), the emphasis at this point is nonetheless on the unfinished, on that which is not *yet* material. If Lol’s heart is not “there,” it is not in absence, but rather, in a progression towards coming into being (“il allait venir sans doute”). Here, it is Lol who is in a position of suspense, awaiting that which she would be, that which she has not yet *attained*: indeed, the verb *atteindre* implies a movement towards a final goal of substantiation of the character. Although Lol is incomplete in the initial manuscripts – “elle n’est pas faite” –, the eventuality of her coming into being here remains certain.

The paradoxical nature of Lol’s simultaneous presence and absence is also alluded to in this passage through the use of the past participle “achevé,” which may mean both “finished off”/“killed,” and “completed.” In the case of Lol, the verb *achever* underscores her status within the diegesis, where she is absent and “finished off” or “ravished” (*ravie*), but also meta-textually, since being “completed” seems to signal the status of the novel itself, whose writing process is finished. In the earlier versions of this passage, Lol is not *yet* finished – *inachevée* – but it is presumed that she is moving towards the state of completion. The *double entendre* of this verb echoes the complex meanings that may be found in Duras’s vocabulary choices, of which the title of *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* is one of the most cited examples: does *ravissement* indicate “ravishing” or “ravaging”? The variety of semantic resonances creates a poetic text that operates within a space of linguistic doubt or uncertainty. In the manuscripts, Lol is being created, both diegetically, within the space of the narrative, and meta-textually, within the genesis of the novel.

Another version of the text in the manuscripts marks this dynamic of coming into being with an explicit reference to Lol’s characteristic of incompleteness:

~~Elle disait qu’~~ au collège, dit-elle, il manquait quelque chose à Lol déjà, ~~que celle-ci~~ elle était étrangement incomplète, ~~qu’elle~~ avait vécu sa jeunesse comme dans une ~~instance constante d’elle-même.~~ Au sollicitation de ce qu’elle serait mais qu’elle n’arrivait pas à atteindre, au collège elle était une gloire de douceur et d’indifférence [. . .].¹⁰

The reference to Lol as “étrangement incomplète” (“strangely incomplete”) here seems to further underscore her status of progression towards a state of

completion. At first, the manuscript indicates that Lol is “dans une instance constante d’elle-même,” a semantically unusual phrase that would have meant, “in a constant proceeding (as in a court proceeding) of herself”. The change to “une sollicitation [sic] de ce qu’elle serait mais qu’elle n’arrivait pas à atteindre” (“a solicitation of what she would be but that she never seemed to attain”) retains the echo of legal process (“solicitation” might also be translated as “appeal”), but includes an extension of the temporal element, since the “constant” nature of the previous wording is replaced with a more indeterminate conditional/imperfect verbal construct, emphasizing the duration of time in which she remains in this unfinished state, and the uncertainty of when, if ever, she will become what she “would be.”

The shift from this state of coming into being to the state of absence that we see evidenced in the later, published version of the passage obviously surpasses the crucial state: that of being. Lol’s existence within the narrative depends on the aporetic voice of the narrator, and the visual representation that this “other” describes, through his constant interjections of “je vois” (“I see”). Yet because of the subjective nature of perception, Lol is never fully present in the text. Furthermore, because Lol is created by the gazes of others – the multiple “others” that participate as sources of the narration, its voice and eyes – her presence is scattered across a multiplicity of representations, without anything to ground her being.

Maintenant elle voit les regards de ceux-ci s’adresser à elle en secret, dans une équivalence certaine. Elle qui ne se voit pas, on la voit ainsi, dans les autres. C’est là la toute-puissance de cette matière dont elle est faite, sans port d’attache singulier. (*Le Ravissement*, 54)

Here we again find the spatial deictic in reference to materiality, yet it also highlights Lol’s lacking characteristics. The text makes reference to Lol’s own reflection upon herself, but it is a look of absence, as she “does not see herself.” Other references to Lol’s gaze also signal this absence: at one point, her gaze is described as “opaque et doux” (91) (“opaque and soft”); at another point, her eyes are “presque toujours étonnés, étonnés, chercheurs” (136) (“almost always astonished, astonished, searching”): searching, but never finding a resting point.

Furthermore, the reference to Lol’s materiality only serves to expose its doubly fluid qualities: both because of its uncertain nature, and also through the maritime metaphor found in *port d’attache*, a place of registration of naval vessels. In addition to the link between the sea, *mer*, and the

mother, *mère*, who share a Greek root (*meros*, signifying *part* or *element*), ‘registration’ in French is *immatriculation*: the French reveals the Latin root leading back to materiality, and ultimately, to *mater* (n), both “a substance of which something is made,” and “the mother”: the origin, the creation. If Lol shows signs of materiality, if indeed she is *faite*, made of something, this “matter” has no point of reference, no origin, no mother. Linguistically, Lol is a signifier without a signified. Her materiality is still absence, even in its presence. In the finished work, Lol’s materiality is no longer “coming into being”: it is absence as well, through its necessary displacement in others in order to be expressed.

If Lol needs the narrator, it is not because this other can necessarily give an account of her being. Even the narrator admits defeat in this area, and indeed, his doubt and speculation about Lol throughout the story are evidence of his inability (or refusal) to define her. Neither in the manuscripts, nor in the final text, is Lol ever in fact “present,” or “là” (“there”); on the contrary, she is described as having a *nature détruite*, a metaphor of apocalypse that, ironically, survives the redaction and makes it into the published version:

Elle n’était personne elle-même, la soi disant Lol Blair. Au bord de l’être elle n’avait jamais sombré dans cette illusion. Le vide, la transparence de la personne incendiée de Lol Blair lui permettait d’accueillir ceux qui répondaient le mieux à sa nature ~~xxxx~~ détruite, ~~en~~ consommée jusque dans ses cendres. Il le découvrit.¹¹

À travers la transparence de son être incendié, de sa nature détruite, elle m’accueille d’un sourire. Son choix est exempt de toute préférence. Je suis l’homme de S. Tahla qu’elle a décidé de suivre. Nous voici chevillés ensemble. Notre dépeuplement grandit. Nous nous répétons nos noms. (*Le Ravissement*, 113)

Across the two passages, through the textual development, it is the metaphors of destruction that are kept intact, but the referent is rendered less specific in the published version: “la personne incendiée” (incinerated person) becomes “l’être incendié” (incinerated being), and this being as well as its “nature détruite” (destroyed nature) are qualified by transparency. The corporeal materiality suggested by “personne” is replaced with an abstract, indefinite referent, “être,” at first crossed out in the initial manuscript version (“Au bord de l’être elle n’avait jamais sombré dans cette illusion”). Lol is, once again, defined by a lack of physical presence, and even violently, here, by the very annihilation of her being. Yet the manuscript version of

this quote differs from the final published version because the element of “otherness” has been reduced, from “those,” “ceux qui répondaient le mieux à sa nature détruite,” to a blatant *depopulation* – “dépeuplement” – and centralizing of multiplicity within the two characters, *chevillés*, or “pegged,” together: the narrator, and Lol. Or is it three characters? This depends on how we understand the meaning of the first-person singular verb, *suis*: is it être, or *suivre*? In fact, in the context of the story, either works.

If the verb might be understood as *suivre*, then there are actually three characters in question here, not two: Lol, Jacques Hold (the narrator), and “l’homme de S. Tahla” (“the man from S. Tahla”), a character that seems to echo or take the place of “l’homme de T. Beach,” the appellation given to Lol’s former fiancé, Michael Richardson. Perhaps the character is intended to be a compounding of Michael Richardson and Jacques Hold, “chevillés ensemble” (“pegged together”), thereby transforming the narrator into Lol’s original companion. Coincidentally, *L’Homme de Town Beach* was one of the earliest titles that Duras considered for the novel, and the author kept this title across at least two versions of the original manuscript – one marked “1ere version,” and a later manuscript, inscribed, “avant-dernière version.”¹² Likewise, the proper name for Michael Richardson would only be definitively added in by Duras later in the novel, whereas during the redaction she alternated between inscriptions of “l’homme de Town Beach,” and a frequent correction of this appellation that renders the character more indefinite and that corresponds to the final toponym chosen for the site of the famous ball, “l’homme de T. Beach.” In the manuscripts, the previous version, “l’homme de Town Beach,” is often corrected to read “l’homme de Town<. > Beach,” the version that survives into the published text. Thus, even in the case of spatial naming, we see a subtractive tendency in Duras’s writing process.

Regardless of whether the above citation may be read as être or *suivre*, the significance of the narrator’s statement in relation to Lol is that she, and her absence, is substantiated by the presence of the other. Her compounding with the *other*, be it one or two or multiple *others*, allows her to be narrated, and therefore, made present. But the unreliability of the narrative creates a simultaneous dynamic of presence and absence, through the depopulation that occurs in this strange “pegging” together. As Tara Collington points out, in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, the narrator’s relationship with Lol causes him to slip into the same type of confused dynamic as she, as if her “condition” might have rubbed off on him. Thus, Collington demonstrates, the narrative becomes more and more temporally and spatially ambiguous

as the novel progresses (125–141). The “pegging” together of the characters, then, would seem to suggest that the phenomenon of depopulation applies not just to Lol, but to the entire novel, and thus that the novel is ever in this elusive state.

The interaction with the other is such a necessary element to creating being in Lol’s character that she even becomes other unto herself in order to be substantiated. She and the other characters all seem to melt together into one single being, at once object and subject:

L’approche de Lol n’existe pas. On ne peut pas se rapprocher ou s’éloigner d’elle. Il faut attendre qu’elle vienne vous chercher, qu’elle veuille. Elle veut, je le comprends clairement, être rencontrée par moi et vue par moi dans un certain espace qu’elle aménage en ce moment. Lequel? Est-il peuplé de fantômes de T. Beach, de la seule survivante Tatiana, piégé de faux-semblants, de vingt femmes aux noms de Lol? Est-il autrement? Tout à l’heure aura lieu ma présentation à Lol, par Lol. Comment m’amènera-t-elle près d’elle? (*Le Ravissement*, 105)

Even Lol’s approach – and one could say, her *coming into being* – is said not to exist. The space of her existence is one that she chooses, and one in which she is multiplied, almost schizophrenically, into a variety of different women. Although her desire is mentioned here, “Elle veut” (“She wants”), her position as subject is immediately supplanted by her objectification by Jacques Hold, “être rencontrée *par moi* et vue *par moi*” (“to be met *by me* and seen *by me*”; my emphasis). The repetition of the prepositional phrase that re-establishes Jacques Hold’s control, “par moi,” acquires an almost obsessive tone as the narrator attempts to retain his grasp, his *hold*, on the subject’s ever-displaced being.

In *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva has called this simultaneous presence/absence in Duras’s work, and in particular in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, a “*maladresse stylistique*” (225) (“stylistic clumsiness/awkwardness,” my translation). Kristeva suggests that Duras’s writing is less preoccupied with formal concerns than with a representation of pain in the world. She states, “If there be a formal search, it is subordinate to confrontation with the silence of horror in oneself and in the world. Such a confrontation leads her to an aesthetics of *awkwardness* on the one hand, to a *noncathartic literature* on the other.” (Kristeva 225) However, it would seem that Duras’s unusual formal treatment is in fact the very evidence of her meticulous work on the text. Christiane P. Makward and Cécile Hanania, among others, have argued as

much: the former, by elaborating the elements of stylistic work in Duras's texts (28–39); the latter, by demonstrating how certain perceived linguistic ambiguities in fact intentionally inform the text rather than deplete it, as some have claimed (111–122). It appears not to be a result of “awkward” stylistics, then, that Duras created a text that constantly eludes and escapes the perception of its reader, but rather an intentionally *subtractive* process that progressively reduces the character and the text, making them all the while simultaneously present and absent in the eyes of the reader.¹³

For is not the reader exactly that— present and absent all at once? As a reader, we process the text mentally, but we are also viewers, visually experiencing it. Just as Lol's descriptions are filled with inconsistencies and absences, just as her speech is filled with ellipses and fragmented discourse, so our text reflects these elements of her being. The text creates absence: textually and visually; and we, the readers, are the *others* that experience it, who remark its absences. This interaction with the text, rather than simply passively receiving the text, is the result of a shift in Duras's writing at this period (which we will discuss further below): it allows the reader a place as character, who may construct the text along with the narrator. As the Vietnamese francophone writer Anna Moï describes the addition of space (for the reader) in the narrative:

Écrire n'est pas tout dire: dans bien des circonstances, il est préférable de se taire; il convient d'adopter l'ellipse [. . .]. Ce silence, plus ou moins long, plus ou moins syncopé, s'entend. Son rôle est d'attirer le lecteur sur une présence fantôme insérée dans l'espace du texte et non décrite. Un jeu de l'absence avec une mise en valeur de ce qui n'est pas écrit [. . .]. (15)

Lol, then, is the allegorical embodiment of such absence, of the absence of *text*. She is that which is not written, and the trace of that which was removed. Like a phantom, she can only exist if seen by others, and yet she haunts the narrative. She can only speak if the narrator speaks for her; and yet, the only way to know Lol, says the narrator, is to not know her, and to aim to know her less and less:

En ce moment, 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. On pouvait, me parut-il, en savoir moins encore, de moins en moins sur Lol V. Stein. (*Le Ravissement*, 80–81)

This passage serves as a key to understanding the elements of doubt in the narrator's speech, for paradoxically, it is exactly these aporetic utterances and interjections that distinguish him from "tous ces faussaires": not to know is to know. Thus his tentative and constantly negating interjections into his telling of Lol's story make sense, as the narrator attempts to refrain from knowing Lol too well. This gesture on the part of the narrator allows space for interpretation on the part of the reader.

The element of discovery here, "ma première découverte" ("my first discovery"), parallels that of the reader, as the text's elusiveness unfolds, and the reader assimilates the absences and lacking elements of the story as contributing to a representation of void. Likewise, in one of the manuscript excerpts cited earlier, the experience of presence from the "ashes" (*les cendres*) is described as a "discovery": "il le découvrit." Although this phrase does not remain in the final version of the cited passage, its reappearance elsewhere in the published text, as in the previous quotation, emphasizes the importance of the element of discovery in the novel, especially in the context of absence, or even destruction, as the narrator discovers Lol within the incendiary ashes from which she emerges.

In *D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie*, Jacques Derrida traces the origins of the word "apocalypse," through its Greek and Hebrew roots, to show that instead of its conventional meaning in western civilization, referring to a catastrophic end, the concept of apocalypse more accurately describes an unveiling, or revelation of meaning:

Apokaluptô, je découvre, je dévoile, je révèle la chose qui peut être une partie du corps, la tête ou les yeux, une partie secrète, le sexe ou quoi que ce soit de caché, un secret, la chose à dissimuler, une chose qui ne se montre ni ne se dit, se signifie peut-être mais ne peut ou ne *doit* pas être livrée d'abord à l'évidence. (12)

While the theme of apocalypse lurks throughout the novel, it is within Lol that this apocalypse is most directly represented: "Elle se promène encore. Elle voit de plus en plus précisément, clairement ce qu'elle veut voir. Ce qu'elle rebâtit c'est la fin du monde. Elle se voit, et c'est là sa seule pensée véritable, à la même place, dans cette fin, toujours, au centre d'une triangulation dont l'aurore et eux deux sont les termes éternels: elle vient d'apercevoir cette aurore alors qu'eux ne l'ont pas encore remarquée" (*Le Ravissement*, 47). Here, the apocalyptic element, existing in a space of creation and destruction, is revealed as Lol "seeing herself," as the text's reflection on its own textuality, always in a state of simultaneous creation

and destruction. Understanding Lol as an allegory of the writing process, as an allegory of the text, sheds light on certain descriptions of her, such as when her face is described as “son graphique diaphane” (“her diaphanous graphic”). “Diaphane” actually may be used to refer to a transparent variety of paper, exactly the sort of typewriter rice paper Duras used during certain parts of the redaction process. What more explicit visual reference to Lol’s textual quality than that of the printed word on the fragile paper of the manuscript?

Yet in order to better understand Lol as a representation of apocalypse, we must look outside the published novel (which in this case means looking farther *into* the novel), to her genesis, and see the manuscripts and the published text as inextricably informing one another. Lol, then, can be understood as an allegory of the creative process, embodying a simultaneous engagement with concepts of genesis and Derridean notions of the Apocalypse, and in particular, with a discovering, or dis-covering, and yet continual obscuring, of meaning.

The change in the way Lol is presented between the manuscripts and the final, published text seems to signal a transformation in the author’s notion of what constitutes a literary text. If Lol can be considered an allegory of the writing process, then the shift from the material to the visual, with an emphasis on absence rather than presence, highlights a development in the way the writing is produced: less emphasis on a neat, concise story, and more accentuation of the real status of the text, which is always elliptical, always fragmentary, even when it creates the illusion of wholeness. Since the text is made up of language, its characters’ supposed corporeality and/or materiality, conveyed through the descriptions of their appearance and the narration of their actions, are simply illusions of language. They are always *personnages* (characters), never *personnes* (persons). Indeed, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* marks a turning point in Duras’s novels, launching a period of writing that will continue up until her death, wherein the text becomes less and less descriptive, and the narration less and less reliable. Alain Vircondelet has noted that this shift away from the neat, concise narrative to a more fragmentary one can be linked to an engagement with the writing process; he states: “À ses yeux, il ne restait plus guère que [les écrivains] qui pouvaient rendre compte de ce qu’elle appelait “le labeur de l’écrivain.” C’est pourquoi elle avait abandonné les récits des années 50, ceux dont elle disait qu’ils procédaient de trop de facilité, qui ne l’engageaient pas assez” (20). Duras herself comments on this dynamic of absence in *Les Parleuses*, her collection of interviews with Xavière Gauthier:

- M.D. – “La peur a commencé avec *Lol. V. Stein*, un peu avec *Moderato*, je dois dire.”
- X.G. – “Est-ce que ce n’est pas à partir du *Ravissement* qu’il commence à y avoir le trou?”
- M.D. – “L’expérience, alors, l’expérimentation. Ça rejoint ce que vous disiez; j’expérimentais ce blanc dans la chaîne.”
- X.G. – “Ça se passe sur l’oubli, au départ, et l’oubli aussi c’est un blanc. C’est un peu basé – si on peut parler de base, parce que ce n’est vraiment pas le mot –, dans le *Ravissement*, sur l’oubli de la souffrance.”
- M.D. – “Une omission, plutôt.”
- X.G. – “Oui, une omission. Peut-être que c’est ça, justement, qui est effrayant, parce qu’on commence à entrer dans le manque.” (15)

As Duras suggests here, starting from *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, her novels become progressively more laconic, with noticeably more “holes” in the text. On the one hand, this allows space for the reader; but the reader’s experience likewise becomes increasingly disoriented, as key information is omitted and the voices in the text disintegrate into mere echoes.¹⁴ In comparison with her previous texts, notably *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (published in 1950), *Le Marin de Gibraltar* (1952), and *Les Petits chevaux de Tarquinia* (1953), this later series marks a drastic change in the way the author is writing.

It is precisely this dynamic of the elusive text, at the same time presence and absence, which sets up the possibility of discovery in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*: discovery of the illusory nature of the text. In fact, Lol cannot be completely revealed, for to do so would be the end of the narrative. The apocalypse only exists as long as it is awaited, as long as it is alluded to, as long as it is progressively discovered, uncovered, revealed, little by little, always escaping the final moment, the final arrival. In the same way, Lol must always constantly elude and escape the perception of the reader, never fully revealed or described, but always sought after. This dynamic pulls the reader into each textual space, inviting the reader to look around, to search for clues that will further inform the narrative, while the picture of the main character remains ghostlike, impossible to visualize. Each narrative picture that is created is immediately usurped by the doubt and invention that plagues the text. By existing in the space between creation and destruction, Lol – and the text of *Le Ravissement de*

Lol V. Stein that creates her – remain eternally “à venir,” always “to come,” “approximative et provisoire,” awaiting another reading to recommence the cycle of simultaneous presence and absence, never arriving at a final interpretation, but always regenerating the act of reading (Alazet 71). The reader continues this gesture of simultaneous creation and destruction, of both genesis and apocalypse, as the act of reading adds yet another layer to the eternal cycle of the elusive, ever-shifting text.

Notes

1. “Pierre Beugner, une nouvelle fois, détourna la conversation, il était visiblement le seul de nous trois à mal supporter le visage de Lol,” p. 78. All references to *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* refer to the original 1964 Gallimard edition. In in-text citations, I have abbreviated the title of the work to *Le Ravissement*.

2. All references to manuscripts from *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* refer to those under conservation at the Institut Mémoires de l’Édition Contemporaine (IMEC).

3. Several problems with the English translation of *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* – including the fact that the “V” is removed from Lol’s name – have influenced my decision to retain the original French text rather than providing translations. In citations from other authors and critics, I have kept the original language, unless a certified translation from the French was available (as is the case with the quotations from Kristeva and Todorov’s works).

4. “Elle prononçait son nom avec colère : Lol V. Stein – c’était ainsi qu’elle se désignait.” p. 23.

5. Émile Benveniste, in “L’homme dans la langue,” demonstrates how the deictic is an empty referent whose meaning depends exclusively on the context in which it is used. Benveniste goes on to associate certain deictics with particular speech instances. Notably, he opposes “ici : là,” the former being a correlate to the first and second person speech instances, while the latter corresponds to the third person. Since the third person is necessarily absent from the speech instance, Benveniste considers this subject a “non-personne”: “La “troisième personne” représente en fait le membre non marqué de la corrélation de personne. C’est pourquoi il n’y a pas truisme à affirmer que la non-personne est le seul mode d’énonciation possible pour les instances de discours qui ne doivent pas renvoyer à elles-mêmes, mais qui prédisent le procès de n’importe qui ou de n’importe quoi hormis l’instance même, ce n’importe qui ou n’importe quoi pouvant toujours être muni d’une référence objective.” p. 255–256.

6. “Tatiana présente à Lol Pierre Beugner, son mari, et Jacques Hold, un de leurs amis, la distance est couverte, moi.” *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, p. 75.

7. It is difficult to determine the chronological sequencing of the manuscripts from *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, since the author did not note the dates of composition as she was writing each part of the text. Further complicating attempts to discern chronological order in the handwritten manuscripts, the author often switched between several different pen types (ball point and fountain), ink colors, and sometimes used pencil or even markers. Large parts of the text are also written by typewriter, and often these texts are cut up and glued over or into the written manuscripts, or vice-versa.

8. DRS 28.10, f° 2. Because this article deals with multiple versions of the unpublished, preparatory manuscripts and tapuscrits of *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, all quotations from the Duras manuscripts and tapuscrits are given with their bibliographic references (“côtes”) from the IMEC archive. In my transcriptions from the manuscripts of *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, I have preferred to use a “diplomatic” approach, which requires that the electronic transcription reproduce exactly the original manuscript, including the author’s corrections, editing, and grammar or spelling errors. All transcriptions in print indicate the original manuscript; all transcriptions that appear in italics are handwritten corrections later added to the document by the author. For more information regarding diplomatic transcription of original manuscripts, or textual genetic criticism in general, refer to Almuth Grésillon’s groundbreaking work, *Eléments de critique génétique: lire les manuscrits modernes* (Paris, PUF, 1994). I thank Jean Mascolo for having graciously granted permission to publish these quotes from the manuscripts of *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*.

9. *Ibid.*

10. DRS 28.11, f° 60.

11. DRS 28.3, f° 47.

12. The IMEC’s inventory of manuscripts from *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* indicates that dossiers DRS 28.1, DRS 28.2, DRS 28.3, DRS 28.4, DRS 28.5, and DRS 28.9 probably contain versions of “L’homme de Town Beach.”

13. I thank my original dissertation director, the late Dr. Philippe Bonnefis, for having transformed my initial description of Duras’s creative process, “*genèse minimalisante*,” into “*genèse soustractive*” during one of our early meetings to discuss my research, in 2011.

14. *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* is considered the inaugural text in a group of novels, plays, and films that critics have called the “Indian Cycle.” In one of the later texts in this series, *India Song*, the name of the subject has been replaced with the indication “Voix 1” and “Voix 2”, both of which avoid the active voice and speak in disorienting fragments.

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