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MARGUERITE DURAS

by

Marguerite Duras



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HOMAGE TO MARGUERITE DURAS,
on *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein**

Jacques Lacan

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 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.

Lol V. Stein: paper wings, V, scissors, Stein, stone, in love's guessing game you lose yourself.

One replies: O, open mouth, why do I take three leaps on the water, out of the game of love, where do I plunge?

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, is it then that her creature moves within a space which is doubled; or is it 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.

But let's read.

The scene of which the entire novel is but a recollection describes the enrapturing of two in a dance that fuses them together before the entire ball and under the eyes of Lol, the third, who

**Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein* was published in America under the title, *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*, Grove Press, 1966.

endures the abduction of her fiancé by a woman who had only suddenly to appear.

And to get at what Lol is seeking from this moment on, must we not have her say, "*Je me deux*," to conjugate, with Apollinaire, "*douloir*?"¹

But, precisely, she cannot say that she suffers.

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 roughly what we discern in this scene, to which Lol will return many times, where she watches a pair of lovers in whom she has found, as if by chance, a friend who was close to her before the drama, and who helped her even as it unfolded: Tatiana.

This is not the event, but a knot retying itself there. And it is what this knot ties up that actually ravishes—but then again, whom?

The least we can say is that at this point the story puts one character in balance, and not only because Marguerite Duras has invested this character with the narrative voice: the other partner of the couple. His name, Jacques Hold.

Nor is he what he appears to be when I say: the narrative voice. He is, rather, its anguish. Once again the ambiguity returns: is it his anguish, or that of the narrative? He does not, in any case, simply display the machinery, but is in fact one of its mainsprings, and he does not now just 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.

What I have just described is not a madrigal, but a limit of method, one whose positive and negative value I hope to affirm here. A subject is a scientific *term*, something perfectly calculable, and this reminder of its status should terminate what can only be

¹*Je me deux* is the first person reflexive form of the now archaic French infinitive, meaning to feel sorrow. It means, therefore, "I feel sorrow," but also, read in another way, it can mean literally, "I two myself." No English verb captures the ambiguity of the French; the closest approximation might be, "I am rent," which suggests the splitting of the subject of which Lacan will be speaking. (TN)

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.

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.

In this respect, I do not wrong her genius in bringing my critique to bear on the virtue of her talents.

In paying homage to her, all that I shall show is that the practice of the letter converges with the workings of the unconscious.

Let me assure whoever might read these lines by the dimming or rising footlights—indeed, from those future shores where Jean-Louis Barrault, through his *Cahiers*,² would harbor the unique conjunction of the theatrical act—that the thread I will be unraveling takes its bearings at every moment, and to the letter, from the ravishing of Lol V. Stein; and furthermore, that work going on today at my school certainly crosses paths with it. Moreover, I do not so much address myself to this reader as I draw upon his inmost being in order to practice the knot I unravel.

This thread is to be picked up in the first scene, where Lol is robbed of her lover; that is to say, it is to be traced in the motif of the dress which sustains the phantasm (to which Lol is soon to be-

²This article first appeared in the *Cahiers Renault-Barrault*, December 1965. (TN)

come fixed) of a beyond that she cannot find the word for, this word which, as it closes the doors on the three of them, might have espoused her at the moment her lover was to raise up the woman's black dress to unveil her nakedness. Will this go further? Yes, to this unspeakable nakedness that insinuates itself into the place of her own body. There everything stops.

Is this not enough to reveal to us what has happened to Lol, and what it says about love; that is, about this image, an image of the self in which the other dresses you and in which you are dressed, and which, when you are robbed of it, lets you be just what underneath? What is left to be said about that evening, Lol, in all your passion of nineteen years, so taken with your dress which wore your nakedness, giving it its brilliance?

What you are left with, then, is what they said about you when you were a child, that you were never all there.

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.

What lies concealed in this locution? A center is not the same on all surfaces. Singular on a flat surface, everywhere on a sphere, on a more complex surface it can produce an odd knot. This last knot is ours.

Because you sense that all this has to do with an envelope having neither an inside nor an outside, and in the seam of its center every gaze turns back into your own, that these gazes are your own, which your own saturates and which, Lol, you will forever crave from every passerby. Let us follow Lol as she passes from one to the other, seizing from them this talisman which everyone is so eager to cast off: the gaze.

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. It will return under the pen which pointed it out to me.

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.

I teach that vision splits itself between the image and the

gaze, that the first model for the gaze is the stain,³ from which is derived the radar that the splitting of the eye offers up to the scopical field.

The gaze spreads itself as a stroke on the canvas, making you lower your own gaze before the work of the painter.

Of that which requires your attention one says, "*ça vous regarde*:" this looks at you.

But rather, it is the attention of that which is regarding you that has to be obtained. For you do not know the anguish of what gazes at you without, however, regarding you.

It is this anguish that takes hold of Jacques Hold when, from the window of the cheap hotel where he awaits Tatiana, he discovers, stretched out at the edge of the rye field before him, Lol.

Do you read on a comic level his panicky agitation, be it violent or only dreamed, before, significantly, he gets a grip on himself, before he tells himself that Lol can probably see him. Just a little more calm, and then the next phase, when she knows that he can see her.

Still, he must show her Tatiana, propitiatory at the window, no longer moved by the fact that Tatiana hasn't noticed anything, cynical at having already sacrificed her to the law of Lol, since it is in the certainty of obeying Lol's desire that he will go through the motions with his lover, upsetting her with those words of love whose floodgates, he knows, can only be opened by the other, but these same cowardly words tell him that this is not what he wants, not for her.

Above all, do not be deceived about the locus of the gaze here. It is not Lol who looks, if only because she sees nothing. She is not the voyeur. She is realized only in what happens.

Only when Lol, with the appropriate words, elevates the gaze to the status of a pure object for the still innocent Jacques Hold is its place revealed.

"Naked, naked under her black hair," these words from the lips of Lol mark the passage of Tatiana's beauty into a function of the intolerable stain which pertains to this object.

This function is no longer compatible with the narcissistic

³For an understanding of the function of the stain in Lacan's theory of the gaze, see his "The Split between the Eye and the Gaze" in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Norton, 1977, pp. 67-78. (TN)

image in which the lovers try to contain their love, and Jacques Hold immediately feels the effects of this.

From that moment on, in their dedication to realizing Lol's phantasm, they will be less and less themselves.

What is manifest in Jacques Hold, his division of the subject, will no longer concern us here. We are interested rather in how he fits into this threefold being, in which Lol is suspended, laying over his emptiness the "I think" of a bad dream which makes up the content of the book. But in so doing, he contents himself with giving her a consciousness of being that is sustained outside of herself, in Tatiana.

It is Lol, however, who puts together this threefold being. 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 ravishment.

Even more superfluous is my own commentary on what Marguerite Duras has done in giving a discursive existence to her creature.

For the very thought, by means of which I would restore to her a knowledge which was always hers, could never encumber her with the consciousness of being an object, since she has already recuperated this object through her art.

This is the meaning of sublimation, something that still confounds psychoanalysts because, in handing down the term to them, Freud's mouth remained sewn shut.

His only warning was that the satisfaction it brings should not be considered illusory.

But clearly he didn't speak out loudly enough since, thanks to them, the public remains persuaded to the contrary. And the public will remain so if the psychoanalysts don't come around to acknowledging that sublimation is to be measured by the number of copies sold for the author.

This leads us to the ethics of psychoanalysis, a topic which, in my seminar, produced a schism within the unsteady ranks of the audience.

In front of everyone, however, I confessed one day that throughout the entire year my hand had been held in some invisible place by another Marguerite, Marguerite of the *Heptameron*.⁴ It is not without consequence that I find here this coincidence of names.

It seems quite natural to me to find in Marguerite Duras that severe and militant charity that animates the stories of Marguerite d'Angoulême, when they can be read free from those prejudices which are intended solely to screen us off from their locus of truth.

This is the idea of the "gallant" story. In a masterful work, Lucien Febvre has tried to expose the trap it sets.

I would draw attention to the fact that Marguerite Duras has received from her readers a striking and unanimous affirmation of this strange way of loving: of that particular way of loving which the character—whom I placed not in the role of narrator but of subject—brings as an offering to Lol, the third person indeed, but far from being the excluded third.

I am delighted to see this proof that the serious still have some rights after four centuries in which the novel feigned sentimentality, firstly to pervert the techniques of the convention of courtly love into a mere fictional account, and then to cover up the losses incurred—losses parried by the convention of courtly love—as it developed into the novel of marital promiscuity.

And the style which you adopt, Marguerite Duras, throughout your *Heptameron*, might well have paved the way for the great historian I mentioned earlier to attempt to understand some of these stories for what they really are: true stories.

But sociological reflections on the many changing moods of life's pain are but little when compared to the relationship that the structure of desire, which is always of the Other, has with the object that causes it.

⁴Marguerite d'Angoulême (1492–1549), author of the *Heptameron*, published posthumously in 1558–59. The seventy-two tales of the *Heptameron*, told by a group of travelers delayed by a flood on their return from a Pyrenean spa, illustrate the triumph of virtue and honor. (TN)

Take the exemplary tale in Book X of Amador, who is not a choir boy. Devoted even unto death to a love which, for all its impossibility, is in no way Platonic, he sees his own enigma all the more clearly by not viewing it in terms of the ideal of the Victorian happy ending.

For the point at which the gaze turns back into beauty, as I have described it, is the threshold between-two-deaths, a place I have defined, and which is not merely what those who are far removed from it might think: it is the place of misery.

It seems to me, Marguerite Duras, from what I know of your work, that your characters are to be found gravitating around this place, and you have situated them 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 an 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.

You probably couldn't come to the aid of your creations, new Marguerite, bearing a myth of the personal soul. But does not the rather hopeless charity with which you animate them proceed from the faith which you have in such abundance, as you celebrate the taciturn wedding of an empty life with an indescribable object.

Translated by Peter Connor