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Article

## Écriture Féminine, Écriture Traumatique: Reinscribing the wounded (female) body in The Ravishing of Lol Stein

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Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word 'silence'.<sup>1</sup>

MARGUERITE DURAS' NOVEL, *THE RAVISHING OF LOL STEIN*, IS CONSIDERED AN EXEMPLARY WORK OF *ÉCRITURE FEMININE*, which breaks through patriarchal discourse by portraying a traumatized woman who is dealing with her psychological wounds in non-conventional and transgressive ways. In this study, I will analyze the manner in which the violent language of trauma serves as a crucial point of intersection for *écriture féminine* and psychoanalysis in this celebrated novel.<sup>2</sup> Psychoanalytic thought coetaneous with Duras refers to trauma as repression caused by an encounter with an overwhelming experience, which is manifested as a disruption in language.<sup>3</sup> This disruption in language becomes an act of textual violence coextensive with physical and psychological wounds. Both *écriture féminine* and trauma fiction are ruptures in language, causing narratives to challenge conventional language, structure and form. However, as I will demonstrate, the traumatic rupture in this novel.

subverts the current patriarchal system and opens up the possibility of restructuring certain concepts of gender as well as the restructuring of patriarchal discourse.

The Ravishing of Lol Stein is the story of Lol's traumatic experience of being abandoned at a ball by her fiancé and the effect that this experience has on her psyche for the remainder of the narrative. Lol does not, as one might expect, act irrationally nor does she seek revenge or reconciliation with her fiancée. On the contrary, she leads a very banal, routine-based life revolving around her nightly walks. This persists until she meets and marries a musician and moves away, creating a new, banal life in which she focuses on her family and her landscaping for ten years. Eventually, they move back to her hometown and Lol resumes her nightly walks. However, the return seems to trigger memories of the trauma. This intensifies when Lol runs into her old friend Tatiana Karl, who is accompanied by her lover, Jacques Hold. This moment transforms Lol, who begins a sexual relationship with Jacques Hold. Lol, however, does not encourage Jacques to end his relationship with Tatiana. On the contrary, Lol encourages him to continue his meeting with Tatiana while Lol sits outside the hotel, enjoying her indirect involvement in the encounter.

This unusual representation of a traumatic experience is what makes this novel so rich: it incorporates elements of psychoanalysis (the symptoms that Lol exhibits and the language used by the narrator are in line with the psychoanalytical teachings of the time) and of *écriture feminine*. The treatment of trauma in this novel is manifested on the level of content as well as in form and structure. It is in this way that psychoanalysis and *écriture feminine* are brought into proximity; and trauma is the factor that can be found at their point of intersection.

As Kathryn Robson argues in *Writing Wounds*, 'it is only when the seemingly unspeakable traumatic experience can be transformed into a narrative that the traumatic event can be put in the past and the survivor can begin to recreate an identity shattered by trauma'.<sup>4</sup> This echoes the psychoanalytic view that an individual's subjectivity is shattered and, in fact, the position of subject is evacuated as a result of a traumatic situation. Therefore, the memory of the trauma is repressed and the individual is effectively erased as a subject from his or her own history. In the case of the repressed (female) sex, the language of trauma – along with *écriture féminine* – are examples of textual violence that serve as an instrument to fracture the hegemonic patriarchal dominance over discourse.<sup>5</sup> According to the feminist theories of Duras' time (take, for example, Helene Cixous or even Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject), once the patriarchal system is ruptured or abjected, a space is opened up for women to rewrite themselves back into the history from which they had been systematically marginalized.

This relationship between trauma and repressed gender allows us to explore the intersections between speech and silence, mind and body, and agency and passivity, and thus to deepen our understanding of narratives of sexuality as means for women writers to represent and reinscribe themselves into hegemonic history. The relationship between trauma, *écriture féminine*, and sexuality is a central element in Duras' *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*. The novel uses elements of trauma and socially transgressive female sexuality to reflect the simultaneous and overlapping returns of the repressed – both of the female body and of individual trauma.

The language of trauma and its symptoms are used here as means to literarily render or represent the inaccessible point of pleasure and pain – *jouissance*. Because *jouissance* is considered by Lacan to originate in the

inaccessible and incomprehensible place of the lost object of desire, encounters with *jouissance* defy the conventional conception of what the 'normal' human psyche is capable of achieving. Thus, *jouissance* has been established – in the feminist discourse of Duras' time – as a place for women to position themselves in a restructured patriarchal discourse. In fact, it is trauma that shatters the structures of that discourse through the writing of the female body; after all, a subject must attempt to, paradoxically, reject the hegemonic system of language in order to reposition herself into a restructured system of language on her own terms.

Cixous identifies women as the product of subjugation in socio-cultural structures saying 'we the precocious, we the repressed of culture, our lovely mouths gagged with pollen, our wind knocked out of us, we the labyrinths, the ladders, the trampled, the bevies'.<sup>6</sup> Females are thus the repressed of culture, silenced by patriarchal discourse which abuses and stifles them. This repression, according to Cixous, can be undone or destabilized by writing, which she views as 'the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structure'.<sup>7</sup> Writing is the condition of possibility for the repressed to find their voice in history through the unconscious: 'the place where the repressed manage to survive: women.'<sup>8</sup> To reject their designated place in the Symbolic (which is comprised of language and the law), women must write their own literature, through their own bodies - thus shattering the place of repression and silence. *Écriture féminine* – by evoking the body and the unconscious - is closely related to the language of psychic trauma and the shared loss of subjectivity.

Perhaps the most explicit association of écriture féminine and psychoanalysis was formulated in the work of Luce Irigaray. According to Irigaray, *écriture feminine* involves a 'pre-symbolic "space" or "experience" for women constituted by a feminine *jouissance* or sexual pleasure, play and joy, which is outside of intelligibility. This is founded on the pre-Oedipal imaginary as the source of a feminine that, it is argued, cannot be symbolized because it precedes entry into the symbolic order'.<sup>9</sup> By attempting a writing that begins outside of the established discourse, jouissance - located in the Real (the unattainable, inaccessible register) - can perhaps be incorporated within the writing and may begin to form a fundamental part of the novel. Just as Lacan locates jouissance in the Real register, trauma - according to Lacan - is caused by an irruption of the Real. This irruption shatters the subject's history and his or her position as subject in that history. Slavoj Žižek adds that "traumatism" designates precisely the reemergent failure to integrate some "impossible" kernel of the Real'.<sup>10</sup> Trauma is understood in psychoanalysis as the psychic wound caused by an overwhelming event which the subject is unable to process properly at the moment of its occurrence. The result is a series of impossibilities: the impossibility of articulation of one's own trauma, the impossibility of understanding the effect this event had on the self, and the impossibility of holding the place of subject within this experience.

It is through writing of the wounded female body that *écriture féminine* and trauma come together on the linguistic and narrative level. Anne Whitehead defines 'trauma fiction' as writing in which 'the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection'.<sup>11</sup> To write a traumatic experience or the return of the represed materials, the conventional narrative must be abandoned in order to offer a mimetic presentation of trauma itself. In this way, the wounds within

the works become counterparts of – or perhaps even mirror images of – an individual or collective trauma.

Kathryn Robson states that 'the narrativization of the past does not simply dispel bodily symptoms: rather, the attempt to tell a story of trauma itself means trying to find words to give voice to the (female) body'.<sup>12</sup> She views 'the wound as a figure of psychological injury and rupture, but also as a figure for the fracture of knowledge and narrative' which 'points towards what cannot otherwise be articulated in narratives of trauma'.<sup>13</sup> *The Ravishing of Lol Stein* uses feminine writing as well as the language and structure of trauma to create a literary rupture in the masculine stronghold over discourse. However, the writer's unconventional style is not the only cause of a rupture; in fact, the plot of the novel portrays a woman's traumatic experience as well as her violent reclamation of agency through that very same trauma.

Jacques Lacan claims that, in the case of The Ravishing of Lol Stein, 'it turns out that Marguerite Duras knows, without me, what I teach'.<sup>14</sup> Duras uses the language of psychoanalysis to represent the repressed female condition and presents a fictional case of the shattering of that repression, paradoxically, through embracing trauma itself. The novel (re)opens certain socio-cultural wounds through violent stories of sexuality in order to work through them - or at least expose them – in order to regain some level of subjectivity and agency. The Ravishing narrates the traumatization of a woman abandoned by her fiancée for another woman at a ball. The novel succinctly describes Lol's subsequent marriage with another man and ten years of a very domesticated, routine lifestyle. However, the memory of that ball lingers; 'in the distance the ball trembles, ancient, the only wreck on a now-peaceful ocean'<sup>15</sup> but, eventually, 'she begins again to live in the past'.<sup>16</sup> This narrative displays the symptomatic behavior of a trauma victim who can do nothing but act out the past belatedly without being aware of her own psychological wounds. In acting out, the past appears through a mute repetition of the event, although the victim is not aware that she is repeating this trauma.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, Lol recreates the painful night in her memory, specifically the moment at dawn when she was separated from the lovers:

what she is reconstructing is the end of the world. She sees herself – and this is what she really believes – in the same place, at the end, always, in the center of a triangular construction of which dawn, and the two of them, are the eternal sides: it is the moment when she has just become aware of that dawn, while they have not yet noticed it. She knows; they still do not. She is powerless to prevent them from knowing. And it begins all over again. <sup>18</sup>

This abandonment at the ball – 'the end of the world,' as the narrator terms it – is present in her memory as a triangular construction composed of her exfiancée (Michael), the new woman (Anne-Marie), and dawn; most importantly, Lol herself does not form part of the triangle but rather she is trapped within it. This moment is the end of Lol's reality in the sense that she has become traumatized and cannot do more than relive the past over and over again without understanding herself as a subject in that history.

Lol senses an inexpressible lack, which is referred to as 'an absenceword, a hole-word, whose center would have been hollowed out into a hole, the kind of hole in which all other words would have been buried'.<sup>19</sup> This 'holeword' is that which Lol cannot express in the Symbolic order, the order of language, and which remains inaccessible due to its connection to the Real. In his fifth seminar, Lacan discusses a traumatic signifier which 'separates itself from it [the Symbolic] to see the trauma' and which cannot be articulated. This inexpressible signifier leaves disruptions in the symbolic and 'it is in starting from these holes that the subject can realign himself within the different symbolic determinations which make him a subject with a history'.<sup>20 21</sup> Trauma empties language of its function, because certain meaningless signifiers take on importance for the subject and the individual can no longer identify herself a subject; her subjectivity is void. Lacan's notion helps us to understand Lol's exclusion from the Symbolic (evidenced by her inability to function 'normally' in society). Lol spends the decade after the ball in near silence because 'by its absence, this word ruins all others, it contaminates them'.<sup>22</sup> As a result of her experience, it appears that Lol has not only lost the 'hole-word', but rather that it has contaminated and damaged the entire language network (what Lacan often refers to as the Symbolic order) and she no longer speaks about things other than her children, her home, and her landscaping.

Although trauma disrupts the symbolic, the insistent presence of symptoms of trauma has the potential to bring her back into a structure of language. While Lol may have forgotten or repressed the trauma, the traumatic signifier has not forgotten her and appears and reappears in symptom formation. In the novel, Lol begins to follow Tatiana Karl and Jack Hold to a hotel where she witnesses their sexual encounter through a window. Her observance of them causes 'the recollection of a certain memory'.<sup>23</sup> Following this first experience, 'the light of the ball was suddenly extinguished',<sup>24</sup> and she transposes the memory of the triadic relationship from Michel and Anne-Marie to the present a new one, consisting of Tatiana and Jack. This is the way in which past and present become conflated, but the present seems to be supplanting the past and Lol inscribes herself into this new triad – which becomes a source of *jouissance*.

Lol orchestrates a reenactment of a triadic relationship with the significant modification that she now holds the place of subject; she is no longer a helpless and inactive observer as she was in the original trauma. In fact, Lol has placed herself in the position of puppet-master in this sexual relationship in which she tells Jack what to do while she sits outside of the hotel, excluded yet pleased. While it appears that Lol is directly repeating the experience at the ball, this is not exactly the case. This transposition onto the new triad (Lol, Jack, Tatiana) is a reenactment of the traumatic triad (Michael, Anna-Marie, dawn) in which Lol was helplessly trapped in the center. However, Lol enjoys control over and (imaginary) participation in the new triad. She is also having a separate relationship with Jack between his meetings with Tatiana, further complicating this reenactment.

This new repetition fits within the psychoanalytic vision of traumatic individuals' experiences of symptoms. Bruce Fink explains that 'repetition seems to be something of a misnomer, consisting in return, not of the same, but of the different – the return of something else, something other'.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, repetition is not the traumatic event itself returning, but rather traces of the experience that were not assimilated into the psyche at the time of its occurrence which appear in new manifestations. Lacan also explains that 'repetition demands the new'<sup>26</sup> and therefore the 'variation [from the original event] makes one forget the aim of the significance by transforming its act into a game, and giving it certain outlets that go some way to satisfying the pleasure principle'.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Lol's repetition of the event does not consist of flashbacks nor dreams, rather acting out and restaging of the past experience in the present. However, in this acting out, Lol has written herself back into this new, modified triadic relationship with Jack and Tatiana.

This mastery of the situation leads to the pleasure that Lol receives from this seemingly unpleasurable experience of reliving a past trauma of abandonment and exclusion. This pleasure stemming from distress is related to Freud's well-known case of his grandson's favorite game, 'Fort-da'. Freud observes that the child invented a game to cope with the abandonment felt by his mother's frequent departures. In the game, the child recreates departure by throwing his toy, occasionally retrieving it using an attached string – forcing a return. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud asserts that 'at the outset he was in a passive situation – he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an active part<sup>28</sup> By putting oneself into the active role, the experience becomes stripped of the impact it had on the helpless victim and allows this person to become 'master of the situation'.<sup>29</sup> In this well-known case, the repetition of an unpleasurable experience offers the possibility of repetition with different conditions or new results in which the person is now in control of a previously powerless situation.

In the same way that Freud's grandson created a game in order to cope with his reaction to a loss, Lol created her own game to deal with the feeling of abandonment that she had kept within for a decade. By slightly modifying the details of the original exclusion, Lol has made herself the master of the relationship between Tatiana and Jacques. This redistribution of power has enabled Lol to move from a passive observer of her abandonment at the ball to an active observer/orchestrator of the sexual encounters between Tatiana and Jacques. This attempt to take control of a previously passive situation accounts for one of the most disconcerting aspects of the novel: why does Lol insist on being physically excluded from the couple's meetings?

In order to understand Lol's paradoxical pleasure we must also understand that it is directly related to her memory and reliving of a painful moment of loss which itself was a trauma (an irruption of the incomprehensible Real). As a result, Lol is perpetually sensing this lack, this 'hole-word', within her now fragmented self. However, through repetition, she seems to have gained access to this Real element which is her ultimate pleasure, her *jouissance*. This relationship of painful traumatic events and feminine *jouissance* can been seen in the relationship between pleasure and pain. Žižek reminds us that '*jouissance* is "pleasure in pain"<sup>30</sup> and that '*jouissance* is suffering, since it is *jouis-sans* [...] enjoying the lack of enjoyment will therefore mean suffering/enjoying the lack of the Thing, the fact that the Thing is a no-thing'.<sup>31</sup> There is, however, more to Lol's enjoyment than a masochistic pleasure-in-pain; it is an attempt at unifying her fragmented self by regaining control of the situation through her own sexuality.

This is evidenced in the fact that Lol believes 'she must enter it [the unknown], that that was what she had to do, that it would always have meant, for her mind as well as her body, both their greatest pain and their greatest joy, so comingled as to be indefinable, a single entity but unnamable for lack of a word'.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, entering this no-thing, or no-word, is what Lol believes will deliver her mind and body into simultaneous pain and pleasure. She has found a way to enter the previously unknown through the new triadic relationship between Tatiana and Jack, relishing in the moment of exclusion from their passion between Jacques and Tatiana, but rather the *jouissance* experienced by Lol which enables this entrance to the unknown. In fact, Jack refers to the hotel window as 'that mirror which reflected nothing and before which she must have shivered with delight to feel as excluded as she wished to be'.<sup>33</sup> By

representing the window as a mirror, the unimportance of what is *seen* through the window is highlighted. In fact, the only significant element is what is *felt* and *imagined* by Lol in her own fantasy construction. The term mirror also suggests that it allows Lol to *see herself* as a subject with a history despite the ruptures in her reality.

In conclusion, *The Ravishing of Lol Stein* complexly and multifariously incorporates psychoanalytic and literary tenets of its time and, as much scholarship on the novel has confirmed, it is a novel that also deftly employs *écriture feminine*. The story embraces trauma and traumatic language in order to portray a woman who is unexpectedly strengthened by her painful traumatic experience instead of weakened by it. By restaging the event, Lol has placed herself in control of her new triadic relationship and has abandoned the patriarchal symbolic network that had subjugated and governed her since birth. A paradox lies in the fact that this traumatic experience brings her pleasure in the seemingly unpleasurable situation. Lol embraces her own traumatization which provides for her a *jouissance* that she never relinquishes. This novel uses themes such as trauma and sexual transgression in order to break the silence, to tell the story of the repressed female body and demonstrate the need for women to explode back into their own history while trying to write: to narrativize the Real - the place of trauma and of jouissance. Thus, the novel forges an intersection between trauma and *écriture féminine*. Here, sexuality emerges as the link which binds them and which enables the reinscription of the female body back into a position of subject within repressive patriarchal discourse.

## Florida State University

## Notes

1	Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in <i>Signs</i> , 1.4 (1976), 875-893, p. 886.
2	In Encyclopedia of contemporary French culture, Alex Hughes and Keith Reader list
	Marguerite Duras as one of the most important writers of <i>écriture féminine</i> and <i>The</i>
3	Ravishing of Lol Stein as an exemplary novel, pp. 173-74.
5	Jacques Lacan, Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-1954 (New York: W.W. Norton,
4	1988), p. 190.
•	Kathryn Robson, Writing Wounds: The Inscription of Trauma in Post-1968 French
	Women's Life-Writing (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), p. 11.
5	Hal Foster, 'Obsence, Abject, Traumatic', October, 78 (1996), 106-124 (p. 124).
6	Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 878.
7	Ibid,, p. 879.
8	Ibid., pp. 879-880.
9	As quoted in Chris Barker, The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies (London: Sage
	Publications, 2004), p. 57.
10	Slavoj Žižek, <i>Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out</i> (New York:
	Routledge, 2008), p. 91.
11	Anne Whitehead, Trauma Fiction (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 2
12	Robson, Writing Wounds, p. 34.
13	Ibid., p. 14.
14	Jacques Lacan, 'Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras, du ravissement de Lol V. Stein'
	Paru dans les Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, 52 (Paris: Albatros, 1965), 7-15 (p. 9).
	Jean-Michel Rabate, Jacques Lacan: Psychoanalysis and the Subject of Literature
	(Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), p. 116.
15	Duras, Marguerite, The Ravishing of Lol Stein (New York: Knopf Doubleday
	Publishing Group, 1986), p. 36.
16	Duras, The Ravishing of Lol Stein, p. 36.
17	Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through', The Standard
	Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII (1911-
	<i>1913)</i> (London: Hogarth Press, 1914), pp. 145-156.

<sup>18</sup> Duras, *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*, p. 37.

- Jacques Lacan, 'The Formations of the Unconscious', *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book V*, (unpublished translation, ed. And transl. by Cormac Gallagher), p. 10.
- <sup>21.</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Freud's Papers on Technique*, *1953-1954*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), p. 197.
- <sup>22</sup> Duras, *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*, p. 38.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 54.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 58.
- <sup>25</sup> Bruce Fink, 'The Real Cause of Repetition', *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: Including the First English Translation of 'Position of the Unconscious' by Jacques Lacan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 223-229, (p. 223).
- Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 62.
- <sup>27</sup> Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 62.
- <sup>28</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (London: Hogarth Press, 1950),
  p. 15.
- Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, p. 16.
  Slavoj Žižek, Lacan: The Silent Partners (London: Verso, 2006), p. 354.
- Slavoj Zižek, *Lacan: The Silent Partners* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 3
- <sup>31</sup> Žižek, *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, p. 354.
- <sup>32</sup> Duras, *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*, p. 39.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

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