

APPROACHING LOL V. STEIN

Sarah Jones*

Marguerite Duras' novel *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*¹ published in 1964 came out in an English translation two years later with the title *The ravishing of Lol Stein*.² The translation notably omits the *V.* from the name of the character. Referring to the novel here I quote the English translation, but site the French for Duras' presentation of names. Also altered are the names of towns: *T. Beach*, *S. Tabla*, *U. Bridge* appear in the translation as *Tonn beach*, *South Tabla*, etc.. In Duras' text both Lol's name and that of the towns bear the graphical form of an abbreviated word – a form that foregrounds the writing of the names.

Hill claims in his paper 'Lacan with Duras'³ that Duras presents Lol V. Stein in her desire to see, whereas Lacan in his discussion of this novel refuses her this desire. This amounts to an act of excision, a refusal of Lol's subjectivity.⁴ Hill's propositions regarding sublimation and ethics emphasise the way these are shown through the characters and events depicted in the novel. For Lacan it is in regards to the writing that he says, 'in paying homage to Marguerite Duras, all that I shall show is that the practice of the letter converges with the workings of the unconscious.'⁵ He suggests that in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* the anguish of the narrative voice may not only be the narrator's anguish, but that of the narrative as a whole. Questioning the positions of subject and object in the ambiguous *de* in the title, he asks, is it Lol who is ravished or is it she who ravishes, and further, is it not we, the readers, who are ravished, which implicates Duras, and her artistry, in the subjective position of the ravisher?⁶ Duras gives 'a discursive existence to her creature', and for Lacan it is this recuperation of an object through art that applies to the meaning of sublimation.⁷

* Member of the School.

Freud suggests that fiction is able to offer to our attention more readily than ‘real life’ something in the way of *unheimliche* or uncanny effects.⁸ It is questionable whether or not *The Ravishing of Lol Stein* produces the disquieting effects, as Freud says of the *Unheimliche*, precipitated by something coming to light that should have remained secret and hidden.⁹ In Lacan’s seminar on anxiety it is the situation in which something manifests or *comes to light* in the place of the object that essentially contributes the occasion for anxiety.¹⁰ Despite its insistent approach to what we can call its object, rather than such a manifestation, in this novel it is the approach itself through relations of distance and proximity that comes to the foreground.

In the following I discuss how the narrative and the structures of the writing in *The ravishing of Lol Stein*, including the mode of narratorial address enact an approach to Lol V. Stein, and relate this to issues regarding language, knowledge and being that Lacan puts in question in his Seminar XX, *Encore* of 1972-3¹¹

Firstly, I will outline the narrative of the novel. Lol V. Stein and her fiancé are at a ball at Town Beach. Another woman enters the ballroom and Lol’s fiancé leaves Lol to dance with her throughout the rest of the night. At dawn this new couple proceed to leave. Lol has watched them throughout, transfixed, without any sign of suffering. At this point she protests their departure.

Lol’s fiancé does not return to her. A time follows in which Lol goes into a collapse. She is withdrawn and speaks little, except to utter her name in anger – she calls herself *Lol V. Stein* – and to say that it wasn’t late, and to complain of the boredom and tedium of waiting that way.

Just as Lol V. Stein starts to emerge from this state, she accepts an offer of marriage from a man who is almost a complete stranger. She moves away from her home town, S. Tahla for ten years, and has three daughters.

On her return with her family to live in S. Tahla Lol seeks out a childhood friend, Tatiana. This friend was with Lol at the ball while she watched the couple, her fiancé and the other woman, dance together. She has recognised Tatiana as a woman who has a secret sexual liaison with Jack Hold. Lol organises, with Hold's collusion, to be in view of the window of the room in the hotel where he and Tatiana meet.

At the same time Jack Hold has come to love Lol. He seeks her in the streets of S. Tahla where she takes daily walks, arranges to see her alone and expresses his longing to consummate his desire. When, finally, they are together in a hotel room, for Lol the sexual encounter precipitates a crisis.

In the final scene Lol lies asleep in a field of rye from where the lighted window of the room where the two lovers meet is visible. Jack Hold can see her from the window, a small stain in the field of rye, as he waits to meet Tatiana Karl.

The first third of the novel has a particular structure of first person narrative voice. The narrator places himself in the scene as someone who has met, and, we learn, loves Lol, but he maintains his anonymity as regards to the reader until page 65, (English Translation) at which point the narrative voice changes. In moments where he appears in the story, he refers to himself as *he* without disclosing that the identity of the *he*. In this first section an account of the ball, of Lol's marriage, and her move back to S. Tahla is put together from what is said by others, such that in effect there are multiple narrators. Lol V. Stein's history is told by her childhood friend, Tatiana Karl, Lol's mother, her husband, their governess, and the 'common gossip',¹² in which 'they say ...'.¹³ The principle anonymous narrator organizes and responds to these accounts. For example, in the opening paragraph he says:

Lol V. Stein was born here in S. Tahla, and she spent a good part of her youth in this town. Her father was a professor at

the university. Lol has a brother nine years older than she – I have never seen him – they say he lives in Paris. Her parents are dead.

I have never heard anything especially noteworthy about Lol V. Stein's childhood, even from Tatiana Karl, her best friend during their school years together.¹⁴ (Translation modified)

In his discussion of what he calls the *dit-mension* of the said, Lacan proposes that the dimension of the unconscious, that is, of the Other is the locus of language; and the signifiers of the unconscious are derived from what has been said.¹⁵ In his initial approach to Lol V. Stein, his approach to *knowing* her, the narrator utilises language in the form of what is said of an object.

Tatiana Karl relates to the narrator that in their adolescence she and Lol danced together in the school playground when it was empty. She describes Lol as someone who 'seemed always to be evading you', her heart, perhaps, or something, was not all there.¹⁶ Tatiana's accounts are followed by the narrator's negation of their reliability. In fact, this negation covers the possibility of conviction about anything that might be going to be said about Lol V. Stein in the remainder of his narrative. 'I no longer believe a word Tatiana says. I'm convinced of absolutely nothing,' he says, within the opening pages of the novel.¹⁷ Despite this negation, obviously, *il parle encore*.

The narrator dismisses the veracity of the words that speak of Lol, but what is it that he would find of her beyond the being presumed in words?¹⁸ He claims:

Now, I alone of all these perverters of truth know this: that I know nothing. That was my initial discovery about her: to know nothing about Lol V. Stein was already to know her. One could, it seemed to me, know even less about her, less and less about Lol V. Stein.¹⁹ (Translation modified)

Beyond what is said by the perverters of truth, the narrator affirms a non-knowledge. Lacan says of the true that it is only able to appear in its perversion: that is, truth cannot manifest as itself; it can only be half-said in its twisted pathway through the predicates. Despite the small crowd including himself who speak of Lol V. Stein, it is not this knowledge, this approach via what is said that acquires conviction for the narrator.

We can relate this aim of the narrator's towards what is beyond the sayable to Lacan's assertion regarding love. It is 'in loves approach to being that something emerges that makes being into what is only sustained by the fact of missing each other'.²⁰ He argues that being can only be an effect of the articulation of language: 'nothing is, if not insofar as it is said that it is.'²¹ However, the being that results from the said can in itself only be spoken in the meaningless form, for example, of *man is* or the tautological form of *man is man*.

Everything that has been said about being assumes that one can refuse the predicate and say 'man is', for example, without saying what. The status of being is closely related to this lopping off of the predicate. Thus, nothing can be said of it except through dead-end detours and demonstrations of logical impossibility, whereby no predicate suffices.²²

Knowledge finds its limit in the *jouissance* resulting from speaking, which pertains to the condition that what is left when the predicate is lopped off does not amount to knowledge. Despite this condition, in the *inter-dit*, where what is prohibited inserts itself between the words, nothing is being said except of being.²³

In arguing for discordance between knowledge and being Lacan claims that it is not actually that knowledge of being is prohibited or censored, but rather it is impossible.²⁴ Knowledge posits the Other as the locus of the signifier, and as such, the condition of possibility for truth in the *dit-mension* of the said. It is also from the Other that the letter issues, with which the subject constitutes himself at his own

expense, at the price of being.²⁵ That is, it is on the basis of the Other that the letter of the subject is born, and that knowledge becomes possible. Lacan emphasises that this does not mean that the Other knows anything about it.

The narrator affirms an emptying out of the knowing that arrives through what is said of Lol V. Stein by the perverters of truth, himself included, thus evoking the way language fails to arrive at the being of the object spoken of. On the other hand, for Lol herself we might question whether she could sustain her being as 'the property of what is said'.²⁶ She is not presented as speaking her own account of her desire and history.

In between retelling the accounts of others, the narrator presents Lol's activities in a mode that is somewhat similar to omniscient narration. These sections are prefaced by comments such as, 'this I invent'. The time of telling and the events proceed in the present tense, where the perspective moves to Lol's point of view.

[...] this I invent, I see: the only times she feels the suffocating heat of summer are when he does something besides just walking, when he runs his fingers through his hair, when he lights a cigarette, and especially when he eyes a passing woman.²⁷

That the *he* referred to is the narrator has not yet been revealed. What is emphasised here again is the *telling* of the story of Lol V. Stein, of its invention in words, and a grammar, in which the past is formed in the time of its relating. That the narrator announces his act of invention works as an inter-diction in the narrative emphasising his address to the reader. In this way the level of discourse between the reader and the text is explicitly evoked.

In *Encore* Lacan differentiates the function of the written from that of the signifier. The signifier's function in discourse is that of a link between those who speak.²⁸ A signifier represents a subject for

another signifier, and the signifier will ultimately represent the Other. Relating the signifier to the written, Lacan says that the written is a function of that which is read, and what we read are signifiers. However, we only read what we hear²⁹ – the effect of the signifier, the signified or the meaning effect is not what we hear. The distance between the signifier and the signified, their separation by a bar marks the point where in any use of language writing may be produced. Thus the signifier produces the effect of a link between those who speak on the basis of the Other; whereas the function of reading what has been written relates to the point of failure or impossibility inherent in such links. The condition of the written, according to Lacan, is that it must be sustained by a discourse.³⁰

The narrator relates in the traditional past tense, ‘he walked and walked’, but it is in the present tense that we read what he claims he invents: ‘Each one of his steps echoes in Lol, strikes, strikes true, in the same place, the nail of flesh.’³¹ She is following the man as he walks. We hear that the steady strike of his walking, her walking, stops ... *she feels the suffocating beat* Lol walks every day. In the rhythm of her steps she can bear thinking about the scene, the time of the two lovers at the ball. It is a time marked by the attribute of eternity – in effect, an *indestructible* thought. It strikes in Lol as always in the present, as eternally true.

What strikes in the reader in the writing of this first third of the novel is the effect of distance between himself and the character, Lol V. Stein. The narrator’s emphasis on the failure of the knowledge produced by recounting what is said of her works to indicate the distance by which the jouissance of the text misses.³² Duras’ *practice of the letter* works with the failure of language to arrive at the being sustained therein. When the narrator explicitly invents her experiences, a conditional tense is implied: what might have been Lol’s experience or history in the event that the narrator speaks of her – the distance from Lol and from truth is maintained. Hold’s efforts don’t succeed in making up for what cannot be written.

The structure of narrating changes at the point where the narrator discloses his identity. Distance continues to be at issue, but now, less a structure of the mode of narration, it becomes, acutely coupled with proximity, a specific theme. This theme emerges prominently in the scene in which the narrator reveals himself, which occurs in the chronology of the events when he first meets Lol V. Stein. Prior he has spoken of her relationship to him, while he remained anonymous to her.

They [Tatiana and Lol] are almost at the terrace. At any moment, the distance separating them from that terrace is going to be covered, forever.

Before that happens, the man Lol is looking for suddenly finds himself in the direct line of her gaze. Lol, her head on Tatiana's shoulder, sees him: he almost lost his balance, he turned his head away. She was not mistaken. [...]

Arm in arm, they ascend the terrace steps. Tatiana introduces Peter Beugner, her husband, to Lol, and Jack Hold, a friend of theirs - the distance is covered - me.³³

Within the first few pages of the novel, the narrator has said of his approach to Lol V. Stein:

I am [...] going to look for her, I shall pick her up at that moment in time which seems most appropriate, at that moment when it seems to me she first began to stir, to come towards me [...] .³⁴

This moment is the scene at the ballroom of the T. Beach casino. This coming towards, the separating distance from which she comes, is what is covered for the narrator, when he identifies himself as 'Jack Hold [...] - me'.

The pronoun *me* set apart and isolated by a dash is an unusual address in this genre. It startles, as if to parry a *you: so it is you!* In *The Ethics of*

Psychoanalysis Lacan discusses the isolated use of the words *you* or *me* referring to the effects of a mandate coming from beyond the psychical apparatus. The mandate, responded to with *Me!*, designates the subject there, as responsible or accountable for something.³⁵ Such a mandate is evoked in Hold by, what he describes as ‘that immense, half-starved look she had given me’.³⁶ He says: ‘I intend to find out why, no matter what I have to do, why me?’³⁷ And as the evening of his first meeting with Lol draws on, Jack Hold says, ‘I had to know her, because such was her desire’.³⁸ Under the force of this disturbing conviction, he finds that ‘suddenly we are stifling in Tatiana’s living room’.³⁹ This ‘desire’ of the Other is encountered by Hold as a question and as a sudden, stifling proximity.

The question of the ‘me...why me?’ that has opened for Hold almost closes on the nothing, the insignificance and emptiness he becomes in what he calls the desire of Lol V. Stein. When they are alone together Lol is unable to articulate to him what she wants, so she utters his name. Hold narrates that:

For the first time my name, pronounced, names nothing.

‘Lola Stein.’

‘Yes.’

From somewhere beyond the burned-out ruins of her being, she greets me with a smile. Her choice implies no preference. I am the man from S. Tahla she has decided to follow. Here we are, bound together inextricably. Our emptiness grows. We repeat our names to each other.⁴⁰

For Lol, Hold is the bearer of the gaze, of the object. It is a gaze that must be directed at another woman, at Tatiana. Lol will see from a distance, from her position in the field of rye, she will see or imagine that the man is undressing the woman, and then, perhaps, Lol fantasizes that the interminable wait and the tedium of being Lol V. Stein will end. Regarding the locus of the gaze in this novel, Lacan says that it is not Lol who looks; rather, she is realized in what happens.⁴¹ She is ‘caught as an object in her own knot’.⁴² It is not that

Lol speaks, such that the object falls from the Other; rather, Lol says, 'I don't understand who's there in my place'.⁴³ According to Lacan Hold gives Lol 'a consciousness of being that is sustained outside of herself, in Tatiana.'⁴⁴

Lol tells Jack about the time she followed him, unbeknownst to him, when he was meeting Tatiana.

'The light went on in your room, and I saw Tatiana walk in front of the light. She was naked beneath her black hair.' [...] The intensity of the sentence suddenly increases, the air around it has been rent, the sentence explodes, it blows the meaning apart. I hear it with a deafening roar, and I fail to understand it, I no longer even understand that it means nothing. [...] The void is Tatiana naked beneath her dark hair.⁴⁵

Lacan writes that Lol, with these words, elevates the gaze to the status of a pure object, revealing its place. Tatiana's beauty passes into a function of the intolerable stain, which pertains to the object.⁴⁶ Hold's response evokes the effects of the experience of such a proximity to the object. Again he approaches the void that threatens to appear in his desire for Lol, and his relationship to her jouissance:

She loves, loves the man who must love Tatiana. No one. No one loves Tatiana in me. I belong to a perspective which she is in the process of constructing with impressive obstinacy, I shall not resist.⁴⁷

As the narrator Hold articulates his desire. His anguish at his proximity to something found in his relationship with Lol is the anguish of a subject: the subject of a question. 'Suddenly, like a slap, the image of the field of rye comes back to me, I ask myself, and the question is sheer torture, I ask myself what I may expect next from Lol?'⁴⁸ In concluding that he cannot know Lol the question she evokes in him, his *Why me?* has the possibility of remaining in

question. Hold asserts that he will not resist the perspective constructed by Lol, but we can assume that the anguish of his question does pertain to an obstacle to this ‘perspective’ in the Other.

In the penultimate scene in the novel Jack and Lol are spending the night together for the first time. He says, ‘I’m obliged to undress her. She won’t do it herself. Now she is naked. Who is there in the bed? Who does she think it is?’⁴⁹ For Lol in the sexual encounter something pertaining to her subjectivity dissolves. Hold relates:

She doesn’t recognize me, hasn’t the faintest idea who I am any more. [...] Later, shouting, she insulted me, she begged me, she implored me to take her again and in the same breath said to leave her alone, like a hunted animal trying to flee the room, the bed, coming back to let herself be captured, wily and knowing, and now there was no longer any difference between her and Tatiana Karl except in her eyes, free of remorse, and in the way she referred to herself - Tatiana does not state her own name - and in the two names she gave herself: Tatiana Karl and Lol V. Stein.⁵⁰

This scene further explores the problem concerning nakedness that has already been opened. In *Encore* Lacan asks what the enjoyment of the body might be, when there are no more clothes? Love, he says, addresses itself to another in his attire, as an identification with the other person *as clothed*. What lies under the clothes, ‘what we call the body, is perhaps but the remainder I call the object *a*.’⁵¹ What holds the imaginary image together is this remainder.

The object *a*, as lost, functions as a prop for being. It is because language can only approach and miss the referent making of it a para-being, a being beside,⁵² that the object *a* is claimed as the cause of desire. According to Lacan that being-there or *Dasein* is not nothing is assumed, due to the *objet a*: this object that is enveloped by the clothing of the self-image.⁵³ However, the object ‘that would have us

take it for being', that is 'apparently something' dissolves, cannot sustain itself in approaching the real.⁵⁴

The last two thirds of Duras' novel can be read as revolving around a form of nakedness, which occurs essentially because the relationship sought by Lol V. Stein is not based on love. For Hold, beyond the imaginary attire of the object, he is ravished by its bareness, his narration propelled by anguish. Lol's insistent but unarticulated movement towards her object appears to lack a relation to the clothing that might otherwise envelop it. Her approach unmitigated by anxiety, nor, we might say, by the limit to knowledge posed by being leaves her finally unable to clothe her own nakedness.

Duras gives a discursive existence to her object with the attire offered by words. Both at the level of the narrative, and of the symbolic effect of the writing Duras' novel testifies to an impossibility – an impossibility that I have considered in relation to aspects of Lacan's discussions of language, knowledge and being in *Encore*.

In Duras' approach to Lol V. Stein she avoids, Lacan says, presenting her as something to be understood,⁵⁵ which is something he also says of writing: its function does not pertain to being understood. The novel can be read in terms of the problematic of a subject's relation to the object, particularly his angst in a relation that in many respects lacks the dimension of love, and his angst in the face of the threat of a manifestation in the place of the object. We can affirm with Freud that literary writing is able to provoke and show something regarding the uncanny effects of such relations to the object. I would argue, however, that this novel does not provoke an *unheimlichen* effect, due to both the thematic presentation and the structural enactment in the writing of relations of distance and proximity. In this way Duras' *recuperation of an object through art* approaches, but also mitigates the effects of the uncanny: that is, something in the realm of what *should have remained secret and hidden* does in fact remain so.

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- ¹ Duras, Marguerite. *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964.
- ² Duras, Marguerite. *The ravishing of Lol Stein*, tr. Richard Seaver, New York: Pantheon, 1966.
- ³ Hill, Leslie. 'Lacan with Duras', in: *Writing and Psychoanalysis: a reader*, ed. Lechte, John, London, Sydney: Arnold, 1996, pp.143-165.
- ⁴ *Ibid*, p.160.
- ⁵ Lacan, Jacques. 'Homage to Marguerite Duras', in: *Writing and Psychoanalysis: a reader*, ed. John Lechte, London, Sydney: Arnold, 1996, pp. 136-142, p. 139.
- ⁶ *Ibid*, p. 137.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, p. 141.
- ⁸ Freud, Sigmund. 'The Uncanny', *Standard Edition*, Vol. XVII, London: The Hogarth Press, 1953, p. 249.
- ⁹ *Ibid*, p. 224.
- ¹⁰ Lacan, Jacques. *Seminar X, Anxiety*, unpublished seminar, tr. Cormac Gallagher.
- ¹¹ Lacan, Jacques. *Book XX, Encore: on Feminine Sexuality: the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, ed. Miller, Jacques-Alain, tr. Bruce Fink, New York, London: Norton, 1998
- ¹² Duras, Marguerite. *The ravishing of Lol Stein*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, p. 1.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 1.
- ¹⁵ Lacan, Jacques. *Book XX, Encore*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
- ¹⁶ Duras, Marguerite. *The ravishing of Lol Stein*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 4.
- ¹⁸ Lacan, Jacques. *Book XX, Encore*, *op. cit.*, 'the property of what is said is being', p. 102.
- ¹⁹ Duras, Marguerite. *The ravishing of Lol Stein*, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
- ²⁰ *Ibid*, p.145.
- ²¹ Lacan, Jacques. *Book XX, Encore*, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
- ²² *Ibid*, p. 11.
- ²³ *Ibid*, p. 119.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, p.119.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 98.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, p.102: 'the property of what is said is being'.
- ²⁷ Duras, Marguerite. *The ravishing of Lol Stein*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 30.

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- ²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 33.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 35.
- ³¹ *Ibid*, p.46.
- ³² Lacan, Jacques. *Book XX, Encore, op. cit.*, p. 111-2.
- ³³ Duras, Marguerite. *The ravishing of Lol Stein, op. cit.*, p. 64-5.
- ³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 4-5.
- ³⁵ Lacan, Jacques. *Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Miller, Jacques-Alain, tr. Dennis Porter, London: Norton, 1992, p. 56.
- ³⁶ Duras, Marguerite. *The ravishing of Lol Stein, op. cit.*, p. 69.
- ³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 70.
- ³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 75.
- ³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 75.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 103.
- ⁴¹ Lacan, Jacques. 'Homage to Marguerite Duras', *op. cit.*, p. 140.
- ⁴² *Ibid*, p. 138.
- ⁴³ Duras, Marguerite. *The ravishing of Lol Stein, op. cit.*, p. 127.
- ⁴⁴ Lacan, Jacques. 'Homage to Marguerite Duras', *op. cit.*, p. 140.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p.105-6.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 140.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 122.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 141.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 178.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 178-9.
- ⁵¹ Lacan, Jacques. *Book XX, Encore, op. cit.*, p. 6.
- ⁵² *Ibid*, p. 44.
- ⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 92.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 95.
- ⁵⁵ Lacan, Jacques. 'Homage to Marguerite Duras', *op. cit.*, p.141.