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May 68: Parodic rehearsals of the future in Lacan and Duras

Abstract:

Within the context of May 1968, Lacan's *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (2007 [1969-70]) and Duras' *Destroy, She Said* (1970 [1969]) are significant titles. They describe a time of profound socio-political disruption and irruption. They signify a rupture with history that manifests itself in parodic terms, announcing further textual revisions and reversions while bearing witness to a desire for the radicalisation of conceptions of difference. Fifty years on, these works appear as traversed and gathered together by a consistent intentional movement visible through a multiplicity of parodic manoeuvres now perceived as 'style'. This understanding becomes possible through an interpretation of language that does not suppose a conscious subject who expresses it: 'style' speaks itself and 'it' writes itself. This is the condition of its transgressive force and authority. It is a style that repudiates the idea of accepted, institutionalised, or canonised form. It is therefore possible to read the style of Lacan and Duras as a symbolic stripping of established socio-political structures that paradoxically unveils more questions than those activated by the May events. This paper explores the capacity to revolutionise in texts by Lacan and Duras produced around May '68 which have had an enduring impact on literature, literary theory and critical inquiry.

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May 68

There is no consensus regarding the meaning of the events that we designate for the sake of convenience ‘May 68’. These events did not exactly take place in May 68. Nor did they occur in Paris alone. Perhaps more importantly, they were not strictly provoked by a bunch of disgruntled students. It was international opposition to the Vietnam War that first mobilised student attention and action, and then led to the 22 March protest at the Nanterre campus of the university on the fringe of Paris (Jackson 2011: 4). Within days, ‘unrest was brewing’ (Rabaté 2009: 30) in the Latin Quarter, the social heart of La Sorbonne, due to the closure of the Nanterre campus by the authorities. As the protestors gathered en masse in the Latin Quarter, sending shockwaves in the aftermath of their May 3rd protest to other French cities, to the countryside and to other countries, they were soon joined in spirit and action by farmers, factory workers, artists, doctors, footballers and lawyers to foment what has become the largest general strike movement in the history of industrial nations.

Historically, spatially and thematically May 68 has arguably given rise to ‘Manichean polemics’ (Jackson, Milne, Williams 2011) and it may even have become a myth. Symbolically, however, May 68 takes us beyond the polemics and controversies it has spawned in historical, sociological, political, literary and artistic circles. Some might say, as liberal conservative critic Raymond Aron suggested at the time, when he pointed out the self-defeating mimicry of the students who were imitating France’s legendary revolutionaries, that it does so via some Hegelian cunning of history (Rabaté 2009: 32). However, mimicry and imitation are but forms of repetition, and as Freud has shown, repetition is always effected with a difference (see in particular Freud 2001 [1909]: 122 and Freud 2001 [1920]: 63). Three questions arise in this respect: What difference was seeking expression in 1968? How did it manifest itself? And what is, fifty years on, its legacy?

One of the many slogans of May 68 was ‘*les structures ne marchent pas dans la rue* / structures don’t take up to the streets’, a sentence scrawled on the blackboard of one of the classrooms at La Sorbonne. It became the catch cry of student discontent. Its power derived from its literal use of language, highlighting the disjunction between signifier and signified, sign and concept, word and world, and therefore its relevance to many spheres of life synchronically and diachronically. We could say that beyond the contingencies of its immediate context, May 68 signifies desire for autonomy, uncensored participation and self-expression combined with a distrust of formal organisation, bureaucracy, authority and structures. But the key word was indeed structure. In particular, for French students, intellectuals and artists, structuralism itself was a dead end by dint of its universalising agenda, its adherence to empty stultified forms and its reified language. Needless to say, structuralism was also deemed apolitical as it denied the immediacy of the intimate knowledge gained from ‘the realities of suffering and resistance’ (Dews 1979: 134) played out not only in public, but also in private spheres—right down to the confines of subjectivity itself.

In this wider context of May 68 what Lacan’s *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (2007 [1969-70]) and Duras’ *Destroy, She Said* (1970 [1969]) are significant works. They capture the structural force of May 68 in a gesture of utter structural destruction that

was to culminate for Lacan in his repudiation of Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex, and for Duras in her rejection of traditional generic forms. These works signify a rupture with history that manifests itself as resistance to change expressed in parodic terms that announce further textual revisions and reversions. As such, they bear witness to a desire for radical difference present in the *Zeitgeist*. While the pairing of Lacan and Duras seems odd, given the apparent phallocentrism of Lacan and feminism of Duras, they nonetheless pair up magnificently in that they share one common passion: the question of love. By exploring triangular love scenarios, they reach similar conclusions about the make-up of subjectivity, the orchestration of the relations between the sexes and the politics of knowledge production.

Fifty years on, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (2007 [1969-70]) and *Destroy, She Said* (1970 [1969]) appear as traversed and gathered together by a consistent intentional movement. Such movement is foregrounded by a multiplicity of parodic manoeuvres that convey a profound distrust of tradition. In the 70s, for example, both Lacan and Duras demonstrate that language is not an act of communication. The communicatory dimension of language always fails because *id* speaks itself and writes itself. Thus what could be called 'the imposture of language' commands the transgressive potency of their work: *id* says more than was ever intended. This conception of language, indeed this excavation of language as exceeding itself opens up a new theory of the relation between art and the artist as well as text and reader by staging the unconscious as alive and functioning in the text. It is therefore possible to read *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (2007 [1969-70]) and *Destroy, She Said* (1970 [1969]) as symbolic obliterations of established socio-political structures. In so doing these works paradoxically uncover more radical truths than those activated by the May 68 events. These truths concern the fortunes of human desire as Lacan conveys in his 1965 'Homage fait à Marguerite Duras' (Lacan 2001 [1965] 191-97) where he applies his theory of vision split between the eye and the gaze to the triangulation of desire and the act of watching to what some consider Duras' last traditional novel, *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein / The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein* (Duras 1964). This theme of desire in language is the object of a hilarious parody by Hélène Cixous which performs the discursive relationship between Lacan and Duras based on the Lacanian theory of the four discourses.¹ In it, Cixous depicts Lacan and Duras as the perfect couple of Master and Hysteric by emulating their respective styles—Lacan's baroque sentences all studded with quotations and Duras' blunt sentences punctuated with holes (Cixous 2013: 31-37). What Cixous highlights in her parody is the lie of representation. This lie is intimately related to the question of style as Lacan and Duras understand it.

In 1966, Lacan opens his *Écrits* with the words '*Le style est l'homme même*' (Lacan, 1966: 9), quoting George-Louis Leclerc Buffon (Lacan, 2006: 766). Although Buffon's words are translated as 'The style is the man himself' in the most recent English translation of the *Écrits*, a better translation would be 'Style is man himself', for Lacan's point is to set up a critique of the notion of man. Man, he tells us in his preface, is no longer such a certain reference; man is in fact a magnificent fantasy. For Lacan 'style' *is* man or woman, but only in so far as it is the man or the woman one addresses oneself to or listens to (Lacan 2006: 9, my emphasis). For Lacanian

psychoanalysis, style can only be produced in discourse; style characterises the subject in discourse. Thus style is a symbolic function that marks the relation of the subject to the signifier and defines the particularity of the subject and as such it has nothing to do with what we might call ‘personal style’ – the idiosyncratic aspects of our imaginary identifications with other human beings. Style pertains to the particulars of subjectivity.

Post 68 this question of style is paramount for both Lacan and Duras. Lacan will destroy the rules and concepts of classical psychoanalysis, increasingly styling himself as a poet and Duras will ignore the boundaries between traditional literary genres, increasingly divesting herself of what is traditionally understood as style. In other words, using different artifices, both Lacan and Duras set out to denounce the lie of representation and will demonstrate the imposture of language. Paradoxically, by flaunting their own styles they will show that signifiers, including master signifiers, are fake and that this is the cause of the inherent abuse of power in politics and of the profound misunderstanding between the sexes. This is bound to have consequences for us today and I shall speculate about this towards the end of this paper.

Lacan’s *moment hérétique*

If May 68 set the scene for Lacan’s most political seminar with *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (see Rabaté 2009: 32-4), his conceptualisation of the unconscious as the driving force of language *also* prepared set the scene for May 68, stressing as it did the structural role played by language in the construction of consciousness and culture. For Lacan this was about to change, and in March 68 he already senses it. As the so-called events are brewing, Lacan feels vulnerable. On March 27th he voices his ‘keen displeasure at the disappearance of his “old guard” – and, by compensation, his need for reassurance from the younger generation’ (Rabaté 2009: 30). Jean-Michel Rabaté astutely points out that Lacan rephrases his personal discontent in more rational terms that nonetheless betray his anxiety about the topic of his seminar. At the time Lacan is preoccupied by two questions: the question of the non-rapport between the sexes and the nature of the psychoanalytic act. But as the events of 68 unfold, Lacan is compelled to re-visit his earlier conception of the unconscious. He now focuses on the construction of ideology and articulates his theory of discourse as neither transparent, neutral nor objective (Lacan 2007 [1969-70]). This is the driving force of *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (Lacan 2007 [1969-70]), where he shows not only how discourse governs the laws of politics and history, but also the foundations of psychoanalysis itself. Scandalously, this leads Lacan to dismiss Freud’s concept of the Oedipus complex as a mere ‘dream’ (Lacan 2007: 117) and to repudiate his own Law of the Father—thus far the very structuring principle of subjectivity. In this seminar Lacan articulates ‘the place of politics in psychoanalysis, and hence, ‘the (im)possible power of psychoanalysis itself’ (Hecq 2006: 216). This amounts to a critique of psychoanalysis that will lead to new concepts such as *llanguage* and the Borromean knot in his Seminar XX (Lacan 1998 [1972-73]) and to a shift in emphasis from neurosis to psychosis that will culminate in his seminar on Joyce (Lacan 2005 [1975-76]), a shift that will radically affect Lacan’s

conceptualisation of human subjectivity in the mid-70s and the Lacanian practice of psychoanalysis in the 21st century.

Lacan achieves this critique of psychoanalysis through a multiplicity of parodic manoeuvres begun in the session of May 15th 1968 of his seminar, *L'acte psychanalytique / The psychoanalytic act* (Lacan 1968) by parroting two contradictory positions, namely that of Raymond Aron who has just published a newspaper article deriding the students protest on the one hand, and that of now iconic student protester, Daniel Cohn-Bendit on the other hand (Rabaté 2009: 32). Sympathetic to both, Lacan does not take sides, but rather attempts to translate their respective positions in analytic discourse, placing himself in the position of object *a* cause of desire, thus parodying the psychoanalytic act itself. One week later, through some ironic reversal, this parodic move has an unexpected effect: it forces Lacan into a double-bind. The 'old guard of psychoanalysts' are present that day and, intending to criticise classical psychoanalysis, Lacan comments on the act of the psychoanalyst. He does so by borrowing a phrase from General De Gaulle for his repudiation of the phallus as a fake signifier and for his final denunciation of psychoanalysis as a fraud (Miller 2002: 2):

I have a crow to pluck with the General. He stole a word from me that for a long time I had – it was certainly not, of course, for the use that he made of it: psychoanalytic diarrhoea *la chienlit psychanalytique*. You cannot imagine for how long I wanted to give that as a title to my seminar. Now the chance has gone! (cited in Rabaté 2009: 33)

After May 1968, the question of the (im)possible power of psychoanalysis looms larger than ever in Lacan's discourse--both at the formal level of the structure of his discourse and at the narrative level. More particularly, power, impossibility and impotence are notions that pervade Lacan's discussion of the psychoanalyst's act, *jouissance*, object *a*, real and symbolic fathers, and truth, moving on to '*un discours qui ne serait pas un semblant*' / 'a discourse that would not be a semblant', the title of his next seminar (Lacan2006 [1971]). This testifies to his distancing himself from the symbolic father as agent of castration and as structuring agent. What I want to stress is that it is the question of power that prompts him to elaborate his theory of the four discourses in an attempt to subvert the make-believe of a social bond commonly attributed to the discourses of philosophy, politics and science – including medicine.

Lacan approaches defining these four discourses in characteristic 'style', one that entails borrowing, citing and ventriloquising other texts and thinkers—one that I have called 'baroque', but could have called 'postmodern'. The four discourses at stake are the master's discourse, the hysteric's discourse, the analyst's discourse and the university discourse. They are based on the original matrix that characterises the signifier. This matrix captures the fact that the subject is not only a subject of language but also divided by language as well as the fact that each signifier is defined in opposition to other signifiers. Interconnected through the derivation and permutation of their components, the four discourses reveal the structure of a social bond whose definition remains taken for granted: following Hegel's dialectic of the master and slave, Lacan conceives of it in terms of relations of power and domination. Similarly, it is in terms of power and domination that he uses concepts or signifiers he

borrowed from Freud, Marx and Bataille to substantiate some of his own conceptions. Thus Lacan's parodic practice at first seems to constrain the definition and import of the four discourses. Oliver Feltham explains:

Lacan has two if not three different answers to this question [of the four discourses]: in one he sounds like Hegel (whom he continually criticizes), in the other he sounds like Freud (whom he criticizes for his mythical geneses of stricture), and very occasionally he sounds like Thomas Kuhn (whom he never mentions), or an early Badiou (which is anachronistic) (Feltham 2006: 180).

Feltham is right. Lacan's parodic manoeuvres are confusing. But perhaps this is the point. In constantly shifting positions and discourses, indeed, in performing these discourses as he does when he taunts students for wanting a new master, himself impersonating the discourse of the master, for example, Lacan invites his audience to consider the limits of psychoanalysis (Lacan 2007 [1969-70]: 24). He also suggests that subversion springs from the impossibility of mastery rather than from the hysterical demand for a new master characteristic of political revolution.

This is not to say that Lacan's style or technique is new, but now he has the discursive tools to effect his own subversive move, one that re-casts the aim of his iconoclastic bricolage or parodic logophagy. Perhaps it is Rabaté who best understands Lacan's gesture in the context of literature when he traces the development of Lacan as 'home-made bricoleur' (Rabaté 2013: 67) from the early Lacan of structuralism to the later Lacan of Joycean emulation in *Le Sinthome* (Lacan 2005 [1975-76]). Rabaté rightly labels Lacan a "'literary' theoretician' (Rabaté 2013: 67), by which he means one: "whose conceptual borrowings create a singularly syncretic writing which is less the definitive statement of a 'founder' of discursivity than the textual experiments of a quesser often doubled by a jester" (Rabaté 2013: 67). Rabaté understands Lacan's gesture, one that returns to poetry via topology (Lacan 2001 [1971]; Lacan 2006[1971]) after delivering a particularly brutal critique of linguistics in the 70s and beyond (Lacan 1998 [1972-73]).

Let us try to summarise the radical changes brought about by Lacan's serious parodying before and after *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (Lacan 2007 [1969-70]). In structuralist fashion, Lacan's earlier approach to the three registers of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real favoured two registers, each time opposed to one another – the symbolic being the main point of reflection on human functioning. With *The other side of psychoanalysis* (2007 [1969-70]) this dialectical view on the relation between the real, the symbolic and the imaginary shifts in favour of an approach that focuses on the intermingling and connection between the three registers, paving the way for the introduction of the Borromean knot in *Seminar XX: Feminine sexuality, the limits of love and knowledge* (Lacan 1998 [1972-73]: 122-26). With this change in focus, Lacan's view on the functioning of language changes. Before 1970 Lacan is guided by the Hegelian belief that 'the word is the murder of the thing' (Lacan 1956 ref) and that the signifier brings structure to *jouissance* by introducing it to the symbolic. Now he makes a conjunction between both, which brings him to define 'a *jouissance* of the signifier' (Miller 2007: 72).

Crucial concepts that Lacan will later use to illustrate *jouissance* in speech are ‘*lalangue*’ / *llanguage* (Lacan 1998 [1972-73]: 138) and ‘*parlêtre*’ / *speakingbeing* (Lacan 1998 [1972-73]: 142). These concepts enable Lacan to stress the libidinous aspect of language. Moreover, by introducing the concept of *llanguage*, Lacan indicates that, apart from its inherent structure, language has a radical non-signified or non-communicative quality. The full force of Lacan’s subversive gesture can be traced in his nineteenth seminar, *Ou pire / Or worse* (Lacan 2011 [1971-72]). Whereas previously Lacan sees the signifier as a differential element through which the subject and the world are represented, he now adds that, apart from the meaning they entail, signifiers are also saturated with the drive. To speak, even when there is nothing to say, or to keep silent, even when something ought to be said, implies a *jouissance* that cannot be elucidated via structuralist theories, theories which were in the process of being dismantled in May 1968. Indeed, Lacan now turns to a different set of constructs, including set theory and topology that will allow him to trace a mode of drive gratification that has nothing to do with the message speech conveys, but rather with the act of enunciation itself. Taking both aspects of speech together, in *Seminar XX* Lacan (1998 [1972-73]) will suggest that each signifier carries both structure *and* drive: on the one hand a signifier is just ‘a difference from another signifier’, but on the other hand it is a sign of *jouissance* (Lacan 1998 [1972-3] 142); a sign that refers to the speaker’s being.

Perfect couplings

What does this excursus in Lacan’s work tell us about art and more particularly about writing and parody within the context of May 68 and what it paved the way for? One of the links is Marguerite Duras. Lacan’s 1965 text ‘Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras’ (Lacan 2001 [1965]: 191-97) is partly a parodic response to *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein / The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein* (Duras 1964). In it, he appropriates and elaborates on letters, and nouns from the novel, including the famous ‘nom trou’ / ‘noun hole’ (Duras 1964: 48) the narrator slips in the novel which Lacan relates to object a while at the same time invoking Freud. Lacan reminds us that for Freud:

the artist always precedes him, [...] he does not have to play the psychologist where the artist paves the way for him. This is precisely what I recognise in *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, where Marguerite Duras proves to know without me what I teach. (Lacan 2001 [1965]: 192-93. My translation)

What is interesting here is that Lacan both imitates Freud’s gesture and parodies Duras, particularly as regards her ‘practice of the letter’ (Lacan 2001 [1965]: 193) and intuitive discovery of a ‘grammar of the subject’ (Lacan 2001 [1965]: 194). In doing so, Lacan exploits language’s excess, the part of language that ‘escapes the linguist’s attention’ (Lecerle, 1990: 5) and hence invokes a different formulation of the unconscious, one that hinges on the letter whose status and function Duras highlights in the title of her book. The letter as a stripping down of language is in turn parodied by Hélène Cixous who manages to send up Lacan as well as Duras. All in one gesture:

Elle l’appelle l, l, zero; elle, elle, 0. Encore un coup de genie: la trouvaille du nom-trou. Un vrai miroir aux aloùêtres. Tous nous nous y jetons. LOL!! Un trou avec deux

l l à ses côtés, deux bâtonnets, deux phallus en miroir deux ailes deux elles deux traits de zèle (zèle, c'est la jalousie. – Vous vous moquez? Me dit-on. – Non: ça (LOL, le signifiant qui ne manquera de rien du rien à séduire les psychanalystes) c'est de l'écriture libre, de l'écriture jeu, inspire, prise de folie comme le veut l'écriture. Je vous dois la vérité en écriture, dit-elle (elle qui?), et elle est folle. Fol Lol (Cixous 2013: 34).

She calls it l, l, zero: *elle, elle. 0*. Another stroke of genius: the discovery of the noun-hole. A real mirror for larkinbeings. We all fall for it. LOL! A hole with two l l next to it, two sticks, two phalluses mirroring each other two wings two *elles* two streaks of zeal (zeal, that's jealousy). Are you ridiculing? Someone says – No: it (Lol, the signifier that will not fail to seduce analysts) is free writing, play writing, inspired, possessed by madness as writing *demand*s. I owe you truth in writing, she said (she who?), and she is mad. Mad Lol.

Incidentally, it is impossible to do justice to Cixous in translation. If her word-play evokes the styles and preoccupations of Lacan and Duras in the mid 60s it also resonates with the wider culture, in particular phrases disseminated by Roland Barthes and Edith Piaf².

Duras' novel, says Lacan, is '*une grammaire du sujet* / a grammar of the subject (Lacan 2001 [1965]: 194), referring to the relationship between the characters in the novel as well as to the impact this has in transference terms on the reader, that of provoking anxiety. This is what for Lacan voids Duras of anxiety and enables her to recuperate the object a, the lost object, via her art (Lacan 2001 [1965]: 195). In other words, Duras' writing about object a as cause of desire encapsulates and might lead to an articulation of the impulse of sublimation (Lacan 2001 [1965]: 194) that uncovers the truth of the subject in its 'relation de structure qu'à être de l'Autre / relation of structure to be but from the Other' (Lacan 2001 [1965]: 197). My point, however, concerns less sublimation, which is precisely the theme of the novel Duras is here parodying, or re-writing, namely *La princesse de Clèves*³ by Mme de Lafayette (1678), than the presentification of object a, a gesture reiterated in *Destroy, She Said*, whose scenario 'works somewhat like an analysis' as Jacques Rivette points out in an interview with Duras (Duras 1970: 126). As Sarah Jones points out, Lacan '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 (Jones 2005-06: 14). Jones explains:

Questioning the positions of subject and object in the ambiguous 'of' 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? 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 (Jones 2005-06: 14).

But this gesture also bears witness to a desire to destroy the traditional relation between art and the artist as well as text and reader. By presentifying object a Duras, in Lacan's interpretation, makes the reader anxious, therefore breaking the traditional author-reader contract.

In her approach to Lol V. Stein, Lacan says, Duras avoids presenting her character as something to be understood (Lacan, 2001: 191), which is something he also says of language in *Seminar XX* (Lacan 1998 [72-73]: 14-26) and of the writerly dimension of language in particular, predicated as it is on the letter whose main quality is to be an index of the real and therefore to resist meaning and understanding as they can manifest themselves in the imaginary and the symbolic (Lacan 1998 [1972-73]: 29-38). The novel, as Jones rightly concludes in her analysis ‘can be read in terms of the problematic of a subject’s relation to the object’ (Jones 2005-06: 25), by which I understand the shadow of *das Ding* – especially the subject’s anxiety in a relation that in many respects lacks the dimension of love emphasised in *La princesse de Clèves*⁴, but is pure desire in the face of the threat of a manifestation of *das Ding* in the place of the object. ‘We can affirm with Freud that literary writing [here] is able to provoke and show something regarding the uncanny effects of such relations to the object’ (Jones 2005-06: 25), something that shakes up our expectations regarding the contract between text and reader signalling the ‘counter-song’ of modern literary parody as Linda Hutcheon understands it (Hutcheon 1978: 201). Thus this novel, with its ‘*recuperation of an object through art* [that] approaches, but also mitigates the effects of the uncanny’ (Jones 2005-06: 25, emphasis in the text)⁵ by the sheer narrativisation of the material is a borderline case, a multifunctional narrative which extends the possibilities of its positioning to literary categories and other texts.

Duras’ *moment hystorique*

After May 1968 Duras crosses this ‘border / line’. She does so deliberately ‘to convey the ‘failure [of May 68] that was infinitely more successful than any success at the level of political action’ (Duras 1970: 11). The intent of *Détruire, dit-elle* was political, but its effect was personal (Duras 1970). As has been pointed out by several commentators, the title *Détruire, dit-elle / Destroy, she said* is evocative of Duras’ project in relation to the May events (see for example Beaulieu 2007; Denès 2005; Palavras-Chave 2011). But it harks back to the political agenda that many critics have overlooked, in particular regarding *The ravishing of Lol V. Stein* (Bradley Winston 2002) of which *Détruire, dit-elle* is both a parodic reification and complication. It is also well documented that in the 60s, Duras, as a journalist for *France-Observateur* and later *Libération*, was a counter-voice to the politics of Charles De Gaulle and the Communist Party she had broken away from. She wrote against the war in Algeria, the invasion of Hungary and the occupation of Czechoslovakia. By 1968, Duras, like many other artists and intellectuals, was scathing about political structures. She took part in the ‘Comité d’Action étudiants-écrivains,’ which organised meetings between students and writers over a period of several months in an attempt to form a radical collectivity which became, among other things, increasingly critical of structures, including those of the French Communist Party and its dogmatic adherence to the Soviet colonising project (Duras 1974). In a parallel gesture – one that Lacan would have qualified as hysterical in his theory of the four discourses – she lent her voice to the French feminist project in articles published in *Sorcières* and interviews later collected in *Les parleuses* (Duras and Gauthier 1974) and *Les lieux de Marguerite Duras* (Duras and Porte 1977). Suffice it to say, in her own characteristic style Duras

was, perhaps even more viscerally than Lacan, intent on capturing the structural force of May 68 as a gesture of structural destruction that would affect the fate of the novel, film and theatre. Like Antonin Artaud, albeit in a more systematic, sustained and rational fashion, Duras aimed at destroying the very foundation of representation as it had been understood for millennia (Duras 1966).

It would be fair to say that this had been the project of the Surrealists and of proponents of the *Nouveau Roman*. But with *Détruire, dit-elle / Destroy, She Said* (1970 [1969]), Duras went further than the Surrealists who, despite their subversive take on psychoanalysis, remained enslaved to fantasies of male dominance. She also went further than the proponents of the *Nouveau Roman* whose viewpoint was existential and for whom significance though no longer given to the individual mind was then reinstalled on its journey through cosmic time. Acts of signification, absurd or existential, escape our attention unless we exploit the unlimited or limited freedom which the unconscious or the construction of our minds allows and withdraws it from the flux of experience. For Duras, unlike the Surrealists and the practitioners of the *Nouveau Roman*, writing is no longer an exemplary activity because it ceases to mimic the daily activity of the human mind itself, called upon to register or bestow order on its chaos. It is chaos. It is timeless. It is ruled by the present-tense of human desire and *jouissance*.

Détruire, dit-elle, is a complex title. It is both a novel published one year after the events (Duras 1969) and a film Duras adapted from the book and screened the same year. Duras's novel, like many of her more experimental works, owes much to the theatre and the cinema. It is therefore not surprising that she adapted it for the screen, signifying a break with the traditional novel and inaugurating a refusal of traditional forms, genres and narrative styles. In the English translation, the title of the book reads *Destroy, she said* (Duras 1970), which does not capture the intent to destroy inherent in the French, for '*dit-elle*' can refer to the present as well as past simple and imperative – personally I would have chosen to translate the title as 'Destroy, she says', which at least gets across some equivocation in English. Like *The Ravishing of Lol V Stein*, the text is a dramatisation of triangular love even though there are five characters. The text revolves around the erotic choreography between two women and three men – one man only making a brief appearance—only to uncover a generalised and perhaps new form of madness. Elizabeth Alione is convalescing in a hotel in provincial France – though the setting could have been anywhere (Duras 1974: 51). The sophisticated involvement between the characters serves to obscure an underlying violence embodied by Alyssa, the central character who, like Lol Stein, seems to orchestrate relationships. Thus when the veil over symbolic relationships is lifted, the real of desire, a desire for death and destruction is uncovered as that which is at the heart of the human bond. However, in this book we can affirm that there is a radical change to the established combinations which constitute specific literary genres, with a consequent shift in the concept of coherence. This constitutes a second breach to the traditional reader / writer contract which in this text compounds the contractual breach instigated in *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, namely the invasion of the text by anxiety.

The reading of *Destroy, She Said* presents problems if the reader attempts to ascribe to it a chronological unfolding of a plot in the narrative tradition which *The ravishing of*

Lol V. Stein still respects. More importantly, there is no character development nor inter-relationships between the characters who glide from one role to another so that they are ‘practically interchangeable at the end (Duras 1970: 127). This shift away from the literary tradition as it is exhibited in earlier Duras works such as *La vie tranquille* (1944), *Des journées entières dans les arbres* (1954) and *Les petits chevaux de Tarquinia* (1953) is increasingly seen in subsequent texts, especially those published in the 70s such as *L’amour* (1971), *India Song* (1973), *Le Navire Night* (1979) and *Agatha* (1981), but also, later, *Emily L* (1987). It would be tempting to see the title of *Destroy, She Said* (1970 [1969]) as mimetically expressing Duras’ writerly gesture in the novel, namely as a destruction of form. However, this is not the case. Instead, it is a destruction of ‘style’ in the common-sense acceptance of the word in favour of subjective style which entails repeating plot and reifying voice.

Duras’ writings have moved progressively through a reduction of narrative description towards consisting largely, or even solely, of dialogue. Further, much of the dialogue itself has been reduced to a minimum – indeed to the point of screaming like a cliché that invites parodic responses from readers.⁶ Some of her works contain little text which is not dialogue; *Agatha* (1981), *Le square* (1955) and *L’Amante anglaise* (1967) consist entirely of dialogue. Indeed, a considerable number of texts are dialogic, and therefore resemble a play, though the descriptive content or ‘stage directions’ sometimes exceed the information required for directing a play. *Destroy, she said* (Duras 1970) and – with the exception of the later *Emily L* (Duras 1987)—the texts produced in the 70s are unclassifiable in *traditional* terms. While being too reduced to satisfy definitions of the novel, they do not conform either to the conventions of drama since they flaunt a decidedly narrative aspect in their non-stage directions. These works show us how Duras uses, but modifies traditional narrative conventions. As we witness a reification of her gesture due to an increasing break down of the narrative thread, the unconscious looms in these texts: object a is that which is presentified in diverse guises, and not merely shown. In *Destroy, She Said* (1970 [1969]), object a is active in the text as that which governs all relationships, for these relationships, static though they may seem, are eroticised by the lost object itself: the still-born child, the word that cannot be spoken beyond clichés, the silence that gapes open between desire and death. What the novel foregrounds in 1969 is the hole at the heart of the subject as ‘displaced person Lol V. Stein’ (Duras 1970: 129), a remaining unseen in the unseeing gaze of the characters and unsymbolised in their stutterings.

But in *Destroy, She Said* (Duras 1970 [1969]), we witness the abolishment of narrative style along with the abolishment of narrative time. The characters are stuck in transit in a no-time, no-place: they happen to meet in a hotel on the edge of a forest and they busy themselves with the emptying of subjectivity, of its reduction to a minimal difference effected by a parody of everyday speech and classical love triangles that elude desire itself. The cast comprises the death-inducing Alissa, a modern-day version of *La princesse de Clèves* (Mme de Lafayette 1678) and reified version of André Gide’s namesake in *La porte étroite* (Gide 1909) as the one who provokes yet never satisfies desire, at every turn rekindling the death drive embodied by Elisabeth Alione, a version of Baudelaire’s mournful women, Max Thor and Stein,

both lovers of Alissa, and as such interchangeable. Although Bernard Alione makes a short appearance, it is only as mere puppet in the finely orchestrated quatuor whose function is to foreground the repressed part of *jouissance* that returns as the real to disrupt the would-be consistencies that language expresses in its communicatory dimension. As such, Alione's brief appearance foregrounds object a as the empty place in words and images whose function is, paradoxically, to warm up the empty place awaiting the arrival of hope, perhaps, but more likely death, beyond the text.

The film Duras made of her hybrid text is contaminated by the rules of the novelistic genre, but the gaze looks at you as a function of judgment or idealisation whereas the voice speaks to you from some point beyond its manifest words, decentring you from the apparent stability of being attached to the grounding by words in the communicatory dimension of language. In other works such as *L'amour* (Duras, 1984) it is the sound rather than the voice which is the object of investigation: the sound is out of language because it is historically anterior to language and as such it is not symbolised. In that later text voice is both articulate and inarticulate cry.

In *Destroy, She Said* (1970 [1969]), the distortion of images and the lack of movement in the sequence of images are the antithesis of a systematic sequence of events. Because traditional character development relies on a chronology of events, having as its function or effect some disclosure of personality, interaction of different protagonists and so on, 'true to life characters' cannot evolve in a timeless zone. Only true to death characters can. In abandoning the traditional spatial / temporal structure or, at least, disturbing it, Duras is emphasising the arbitrariness of the literary text by manipulating the text's referentiality just as Lacan does in his seminars.

However, in her next work, *India Song*, (Duras 1973) the hybrid dialogue text inevitably draws attention to the narrator and raises questions about the problem of enunciation, to be precise, about the divorce between enunciation and communication. In this text which falls somewhere between the novel and the play, the role of the narrator is progressively undermined and taken over by the characters, the narrator assuming a disappearing role. Dialogue becomes more prominent as interior monologue disappears and the conventional role of the narrator is consequently unstructured and modified. Even in a text like *Destroy, She Said* (1970 [1969]) which has no specifically first person narrator, something which asserts and parodies the functions of the conventional narrator continues to be evident (Duras 1974: 94). If anything, this suggests that there is no one type of narrator, no one type of voice, but rather a variety of speakers whose relationship to language is determined by desire. Indeed, speakers who are spoken by desire and convey, as does Alyssa, the fear of its disappearance as made manifest by pure anxiety (Duras 1974: 130). As Duras says of *India Song*, she is interested in investigating new narrative regions (Duras 1973: 9). To distinguish these narrators or voices that are increasingly disembodied, and therefore radically distinct from the conventional narrator I will call them *extimate voices*.

The move away from an all-knowing narrator as is still active in *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*, exemplified in this article thorough the reference to 'le mot trou' / 'the noun hole' (Duras, 1964: 55) would seem to imply a corresponding shift away from the

assumption that stories pre-exist, that is that they exist before they are spoken or written. To know and then to presume to tell also presumes an already formulated story which can be uncovered and relayed, but texts such as Duras' *Détruire* and *India Song*, which scrutinise knowing and telling posit that a story is the product of the telling, or more accurately, of the enunciating, rather than an entity awaiting discovery. The multivocal text where there are variations on a theme, questions and answers, recyclings of facts and suppositions thus becomes the enabling condition for narratorial production – or story production. Duras' manipulating of the narrating voices, extimate as these are, and the varying and shifting points from which they necessarily speak raises the problem encountered in attempting to fix and account for a 'narrating voice'.

A brief analysis of the incidence and function of the narrating voice as extimate voice in Duras' writing is an attempt to show how she seems to have used it to demonstrate that the single narrating voice only tells a single story. It follows, therefore, that the communicative process where the input is multiple will produce a multiplicity of stories and voices based on the same template. As Duras herself puts it:

Cette découverte (les voix extérieures au récit) a permis de faire basculer le récit dans l'oubli pour le laisser à la disposition d'autres mémoires que celles de l'auteur, mémoires qui se souviendraient pareillement de n'importe quelle autre histoire d'amour. Mémoires déformantes, créatives. (Duras 1973: 10)

This discovery (the voices external to the narrative) enabled the narrative to be forgotten only to make it accessible to a remembering by others than the author, others who would remember any love story. Disfiguring, creative memories.

Duras' discovery is not about the dialogic nature of story-telling. After all, even the traditional novel is essentially dialogic and the narrator generally relies on attributive discourse as a supplement to, or even a reinforcement of, its own role. Duras, however, highlights the deficiencies of the narrating voice as a means of contrasting it to the other voices extimate to the text. Because her narrators can be shown not to be omniscient there is all the more reason to take account of the other voices that resonate around one single story whose prototype is the love triangle, and more particularly around object a and its avatars in the love triangle. Her discovery is that words are fake, that we are spoken and written by the noun hole. In other words she shows that there is no such thing as knowledge, but one that is organised by the loss of the primary object. This explains why from *Destroy, She Said* her project is to break sentences and divest herself of 'style'.

In lieu of an afterword, now

What is May 68's legacy as regards the revolutionary gestures of Lacan and Duras? Reviews of works by French psychoanalyst and novelist Marie Darrieussecq are informative in that respect. The titles of reviews appraising her latest book *Clèves* are particularly revealing in their pointed references to Duras and Lacan: 'La p... de Clèves' (Leménager 2011) conjures up Duras' *La pute de la côte normande* (Duras 1986) 'Marie Darrieussecq, pincesse au petit moi' (Diatkine 2011) evokes Lacan's *objet petit a* / object a as well as his reworking of the Freudian concept of the ego. And indeed, Darrieussecq's novel, like Duras' *Le ravisement de Lol V. Stein*, is a

reworking of *La princesse de Clèves*. The book relates the sexual tribulations of Solange, a teenager living in Clèves, a small village in the French Basque country during the 1980s, her dreams of reaching sexual maturity, of ‘doing it’, ‘doing it again’ and yearning for the perfect husband. But whereas Madame de La Fayette’s Clèves refuses to give in to her desire for Nemours, opting for convent life instead, and whereas Duras’ reincarnation of the heroine has no choice but to incarnate the object that facilitates the circulation of desire between Stein and Tatania Karl, the desire of Darrieussecq’s Solange is unbridled and lawless. What the novel asks in the last instance is to what extent the adolescent generation of the mid 80s is deceived by parents whose lives did not live up to the promise of 1968. The power relations at play in the sexual encounters recounted in remarkably crude language reveal that there is no inhibition and no anxiety for this adolescent generation, and that language is no longer a veil for what is prohibited. Object a is circulating in the open for everyone to see and grab, yet eluding this generation for whom love and desire are confused and replaced by the sheer mechanics of sex. As opposed to Duras and Lacan, for Darrieussecq it is not so much the presentification as the commodification of the object which is at stake. There is no veiling of the object and therefore no play on the possible unveiling of it. It is there raw to be consumed because all semblants have gone.

By way of some tentative conclusion, one might say that Lacan’s *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (2007 [1969-70]) and Duras’ *Destroy, She Said* (1970 [1969]) are significant in their rehearsing of a desire for the eradication of the law. They describe a moment of socio-political and subjective questioning in spirit and action. They signify a rupture with history at a macro and micro level expressed in parodic terms that foreshadows the unease some may feel today due to the disruption of the symbolic order that seems to have been consummated socially, subjectively and artistically.

Endnotes

1. These are the discourse of the master, the discourse of the hysteric, the discourse of the university, and the discourse of the analyst (Lacan 2007). I show how they function below
2. There are, for example, clear echoes of Barthes’ essay *Le plaisir du texte* and of a famous song by Édith Piaf with its refrain ‘*Non rien de rien non je ne regrette rien*’ that are untranslatable.
3. See Plazenet in Armel (2013: 99–104) and Noguez (in Loignon 2012: 28). Clues to *La princesse de Clèves* as a reference for Duras’ novel are also obvious from the list of titles provided in her archives concerning the ultimate title for it. See Loignon (2012: 28).
4. The setting of Madame de La Fayette’s novel is the court of Henri II. Mme de Chartres marries her daughter to the prince de Clèves for worldly reasons. The princess, a woman of highest character, cannot return her husband’s love, but is scrupulously loyal to him. When the duc de Nemours falls in love with her, and she with him, she strives from a sense of duty to hide her feelings from him. Eventually, hoping to be strengthened in her virtue, she admits the situation to her husband. This increases their mutual esteem, but he becomes embittered by jealousy and dies of a broken heart. She retires to a convent and succumbs soon thereafter.
5. Jones argues that *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein* does not provoke an uncanny effect due to two aspects of the narrative: the thematic presentation of its subject matter and the structural enactment in the writing of relations of distance and proximity (2005-06: 14-27).

6. Parodies of Duras's work include Rambaud (1988) and Noguez (1990).

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