FACING THE VOID:
WRITINGS OF TRANSMISSION AT THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATION

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My dissertation engages with the transmission of the unsayable in novels of French and Francophone writers of the twentieth century. I show that such narratives can be found in the work of writers preoccupied with the limits of representation in writing. By reading together André Gide, Georges Bataille, Marguerite Duras, and Edouard Glissant, we can identify a kinship between narratives of transmission and a theoretical search for a void inhabiting writing. What they call a "crystal," a "blankness," the "impossible," or "opacity" is revealed to be present in scenes of intergenerational transmission. I argue that this contiguity is not just coincidental; a disappearance of the certainty of the face plagues both. What is passed on in these narratives is not an object or some knowledge but rather a loss of the speaking face, a disfiguration. Transmission is enacted on the ruins of the ability to speak; in these circumstances, I show that the body is left with the responsibility to bear the weight of the unsayable. The stories in these novels dramatize the complicated relationship between the face and literature. As the bearer of intent, it holds the form together and gives it a foundation. It is also artistic inspiration that is figured through a scene between a muse and a writer, from one face to another. Destabilizing these foundations, the writers I study find the encounter with a void. Nevertheless, Gide, Bataille, Duras, and Glissant take up the task of "facing the

void" of encountering and giving a face to this nothingness. Even if I show that this task is impossible, I argue that they turn this impossibility into a force of writing as their novels unfold through the passing on of the undoing of the face. Although the transmission of the unsayable, like in intergenerational trauma, is a phenomenon that impedes life, these texts recuperate this destructive force into a force of creation. In the wake of these creative endeavors, the face loses its centrality, opening a space of potentiality for literature and our understanding of the transmission of the unsayable.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Romain Pasquer Brochard was born in Nantes, France in 1988. He first studied Life Sciences and completed an M.S. in Engineering in 2011. He worked for several years in Paris before returning to college to obtain a Master of Arts in Women and Gender Studies at the University of Paris 8 in 2016. While studying for his MA, he went to the USA as a visiting student at Cornell University. He returned to the United States to commence a MA/Ph.D. in French Studies at Cornell University in Fall of 2016. In the Fall of 2022, he was appointed as Visiting Assistant Professor of French and Francophone Studies at Union College, Schenectady, NY.

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INTRODUCTION

The Transmission of Trauma and the Literary Question

What does facing a void left by those who preceded us mean? The first time this question resonated in my work was when I encountered the phenomenon of intergenerational trauma. Discovering how the trauma of previous generations in cases such as the Holocaust or the slave trade left inexplicable marks on the next generations was the beginning of this research project and my dissertation. How could parents who refused to speak of the horrors they endured transmit their burden to the next generation? The cases of intergenerational trauma leave us with the enigma of a transmission that cannot be traced, that cannot be identified, but nevertheless inscribes itself in the next generation. In this transmission, the transmission's origin and object are not very clear; from where transmission originates if the parent remains silent? Could it come from the body? But then, how could it be addressed? How could it be received? As shown by psychoanalysis[1], the transmission of trauma can be more enigmatic than the passing on of enigmatic secrets that can be deciphered. Secrets are hidden behind a veil, but this veil nevertheless indicates that some knowledge is hidden behind. Yet, in some cases, it is not a matter of secrecy but rather that of a necessity for the next generation to bear a void that comes from the past. What my research has shown is that it becomes a question of how to make something of this void. How could the repetition of this void

[1] See the work of Davoine and Gaudillere: *History Beyond Trauma* (2004)*;* See also Fromm, Gerard. *Lost in Transmission : Studies of Trauma Across Generations*.(2018)

from one generation to the next be turned into a different kind of repetition? A kind of repetition that would allow the traumatic force to become something else. By turning to literature, we find that literary language contains the possibility of giving a face to the faceless and, in that sense, might be able to displace the repetition of a silent traumatic force.

Giving a face in literature is a rhetorical operation: a prosopopoeia. This rhetorical figure is an operation through which an imaginary or absent person is represented as speaking or acting. Approaching transmission through the prism of prosopopoeia might offer us a new line of research. It situates within itself the question of how one speaks. How does one recuperate an ability to speak when the transmission perpetuates a silencing or a void? But it also questions how one gets deprived of a voice and a face and how this absence can nevertheless be the site of transmission to another. This is the central tension raised by the rhetorical figure of prosopopoeia.

As Paul de Man writes about prosopopoeia in "Autobiography as Defacement": "Man can address and face other men, within life or beyond the grave, because he has a face, but he has a face only because he partakes to a mode of discourse that is neither entirely natural nor entirely human." (51) Prosopopoeia reveals that the human face is a product of language. Rather than being what constitutes us as human, the face is, according to de Man, a figure. Indeed, if prosopopoeia can give a face to that which has none, it also implies that the human face is nothing but a product of language. The defining aspect of a person is the face, which is a product of language. The predicament is that language, and prosopopoeia allow to give the deceased, the absent, the ability to speak while removing any certainty the speaker can have regarding their own face.

Thus, while literary language seems to open the door to a creative act that would allow for healing the trauma of the past through the fiction of a face, it is also an act that has destabilizing effects on the certainty of the existence of the human face. In that sense, there is a problem when one faces a trauma from the previous generation: how to give back a voice to those silenced by trauma without risking losing one's voice? There is tension between the giving of a face and the losing of a face. This tension finds its place in the writings of the authors I study in this dissertation. However, writing is more than the stage where these dramatic scenes of transmission take place. Literary texts become themselves the bearer of the oscillation between muteness and voice, and they even find from this contradiction a creative force.

From the tension between the force of the traumatic repetition, headless and mute, and the creative force of writing, the burden of trauma and the unsayable can be displaced. While this burden never completely disappears in the novels I study, it can be transformed. In Edouard Glissant's *The Overseer Cabin*, each generation of the Martinican family Celat is marked by the effects of the void left in their History by the trauma of the Middle Passage, the transport of enslaved people from Africa to the Caribbeans and the Americas. The last descendant receives this void, and through this transmission, her voice is made more and more like an anonymous wind. When a breath becomes wind, one loses its face. Nevertheless, in this loss, a space is created. A space for an intergenerational traumatic force, a wind representing the dying breath of enslaved people who died at sea. In Glissant, the transmission perpetuates the disappearance of a face. In the novel *My Mother* by Georges Bataille, the mother transmits to the son a sense of vertigo, a feeling that one feels at the edge of the void.

From the mother to the son, there is the repetition of an enigma. Yet, the repetition of this enigma is the origin of the narrative, which the son himself writes in the aftermath of his mother's death. As the son remembers his mother in his writing, it is also an attempt at figuring out this part of his mother, which he cannot know, and which also invaded him. While I show that Bataille's novel does not give a face to the void within the mother and the son, the writing of the text by the son transforms this void into a force of creation. Even though the text fails to overcome the parent's facelessness, it nevertheless transforms it into a creative force. In the case of Bataille's novel, the text becomes a site of transmission to the readers, who face a void as the certainty of the narrative disappears. In the repetition of the failure to recreate a speaking face, the texts inscribe their struggle. But this struggle is in itself a creation, an animation of a text at the border of the inanimate, of the faceless.

The Limits of Representation and the Absence of Foundations

The common element among the writers of this dissertation is that their writing is inhabited by a void. For example, at the center of the novel by André Gide, *The Counterfeiters*, is the idea of writing a novel about nothing, where writing would be animated not by the attempt to convey a message but rather by a motion which has for cause and sole purpose to perpetuate nothing. In this text, as is the case in novels by Georges Bataille, Marguerite Duras, and Edouard Glissant, there is an attempt to get nearer to the void. This void is approached through stories of transmission, where what is repeated is a strange kind of defacement, as characters are plagued by an element that remains outside of language. It resides outside of language less as a fantastical beyond

and more as an irresolvable tension, a contradictory position that characters cannot fully occupy and which gets transmitted. The stories of transmission turn the question of the void into a narrative, into a succession of events. This temporalization, as it is shown in my chapters, is put in jeopardy by the very "object" that is moved. Indeed, the temporality of the novel itself is to be questioned, as it is also the reinscription of a void.

The question of this void, both for literary texts and for intergenerational transmission, is rooted in the question of the origin; in both cases, foundations are questioned. For example, in Edouard Glissant's novels, the transmission of the trauma of the Middle Passage is the transmission of an absence of foundation. A void has replaced the possibility of History. In each generation of the Celat family, there is a deficiency that can be identified in the parents. The marks of the trauma show that something is wrong with the other. To use a French expression, the parents lose their face in their dealings with the traumatic past ("perdre la face"). This defacement is not just a coincidence, as the face stands for the reassuring illusion of a grounding for language. The face and its voice stand for an intention, which is what renders a text readable. Without the face, the text loses its ability to be read and to communicate. Moreover, the speaking face is the figure of the origin of language. As language is not created by each generation but rather given, the undoing of the face also challenges who gave the language, and more precisely, who gave the ability to the new generations? To the ones who received the gift? In that sense, the face fills the void. It gives a propping to language, an element that prevents it from falling into an abyss of meaninglessness. As every text I study encounters the undoing of the face, they also encounter the impossibility of figuring out the origin of language. While this could bring a stop to

writing, to literature, it rather becomes for these writers the opening of "infinite possibilities" to use Bataille's terminology.

The impossibility of figuring out the origin can thus explain the centrality of disfiguration in the texts I study. Even if the texts look backward toward the previous generations, they do not find a grounding. They only find the reinscription of a loss of foundation, of the loss of a face. It shows how the transmission of an unsayable or trauma is a particularly apt scene to dramatize the absence of foundation. There seems to be an endless repetition of ungrounding. Nevertheless, this failure at finding an origin, a speaking face, also encapsulates events of creation. Writing becomes the bearer of a change, the possibility to harness this disfiguration into a new kind of transmission, emerging as a mute voice from a face that loses its humanness.

In novels, the work of fiction is itself caught in an ambiguous relation to the origin, on how it plays both with the true and the fake simultaneously. As I would like to show by turning to literary critic Marthe Robert and the philosopher Jacques Derrida, literary texts are marked by the inconsistency of what precedes them. Literary texts bear, like children, the burden of the inconsistency of their predecessors.

The Illusion of the Origin and the Familial Novel

For the literary critic Marthe Robert, the force of writing is animated by fantasy, by the hallucinating power of language. Like the tension between void and face, the work of fantasy, as Robert shows in *Roman des Origines* et *Origines du Roman*, is what animates writing. Robert situates her argument within a psychoanalytic perspective, specifically through a short article by Freud:" Family Romances" (1909). In this article,

Freud discusses how among neurotics, there is the tendency during childhood to imagine that one's parents are not the child's birth parents. In the language of Freud: "He (the child) gets to know other parents and compares them with his own, and so acquires the right to doubt the incomparable and unique quality which he had attributed to them. Small events in the child's life which make him feel dissatisfied afford him provocation for beginning to criticize his parents and for using, to support his critical attitude, the knowledge which he has acquired that other parents are in some respects preferable to them." (Standard Edition, 236) What interests Marthe Robert here is the dissatisfaction of the child, what she calls in French "disillusionment." There is, for Robert, an inherent kinship between the child and the writer of novels.

The child's dissatisfaction can be understood as an encounter with a "reality" that does not meet the fantasy the child had created. The constructed reality gave his parents the appearance of gods or beings far superior to what the child can now see. In the face of this dissatisfaction/disillusionment for the child, the solution seems to be to displace this investment into other dreams and fantasies, leading, according to Robert, to the domain of the novel. It is the child's power of imagination that is the origin of the force of writing of the novelist.

How does Robert make that connection? She argues that the novel is the domain of the "vraisemblance." Without the illusion of "vraisemblance," the novel would not operate. As Marthe Robert summarizes:" La vérité du roman n'est jamais autre qu'un accroissement de son pouvoir d'illusion" (25)[2]. There is, in the novel, a perpetual paradox between truth and fictionality. It is this element that, for Robert, is a repetition

[2] "The truth in/of the novel is never anything else than an increase of its power of illusion." (*My translation*)

of an anterior scene where the child created godlike faces that they bestowed on their parents. But the child realizes that reality is an illusion. The parents were not who they were supposed to be. As Marthe Robert astutely formulates, reality is split between illusion and disillusion[3] , and it is the oscillation between these two poles that structures the novel. Thus, the most important aspect I would see here is the novel's "vraisemblance." For the child, the illusion is not simply a veil over reality, it is precisely that which renders vision possible. That is what the novel inherits, a split of reality: "Telle qu'elle est définie par le petit rêveur, partagé entre deux tentations, cette dialectique du "feint" et du "vrai" est l'héritage du roman bien avant qu'il ne soit couché par écrit."[4](52) The novel inherits a paradox, a reality contaminated but also animated by the power of illusion. It allows the writer to create, to play between truth and fiction. But what might be even more important is that reality as such is attacked, as it can be grasped not through objectivity but through the prism of illusion.

Should we not also question the use by Marthe Robert of Freud's family romance as the preceding scene? Although Marthe Robert makes a very compelling argument about the origin of this dialectic of illusion, should we not also put to the test her primary scene, this scene of disillusionment? If the novel "n'a de loi que par le scénario familial dont il prolonge les désirs inconscients"[5](50), is this familial scene not already infected by a literary structure? By a form? Is the "scenario" not the repetition in different children of a recurring form? Thus, when Marthe Robert argues that "le

[3] "Car la réalité a ici deux visages, l'un blessant qu'il s'agit d'annuler; l'autre prometteur de puissance, qu'il importe au plus haut point de considérer." (51)
[4] "Defined as such by the little dreaming being, a division between two temptations, this dialectic of the "simulated" and the "real" is the novel's inheritance even before it is put into writing." (*My translation*)
[5] "Its sole law is the familial scenario, through which it perpetuates unconscious desires" (My translation)

roman ne reçoit de la littérature elle-même à proprement parler ni prescriptions ni interdits" she immediately gives to the primal scene a literary form. In that sense, we see that there is a conundrum. Maybe it is the very conundrum identified by Marthe Robert in her theory of reality as a split between illusion and disillusionment. Rather than seeing this infection of the familial domain by literature as a failure of Marthe Robert's argument, I would argue that it enacts the paradox that Marthe Robert cannot escape falling into. The origin, if it is fiction, cannot be an origin. This absence of origin is made very clear when the giving of godlike traits by the child is described by Marthe Robert as "spontaneous,"[6] made by itself, without having been provoked, that which appears without any identifiable cause.

I would like to focus on how Marthe Robert uses a familial scene to attempt to represent the origin of the novel and the origin of the "creative urge" as coined by a reviewer of her work[7]. The familial romance is the representation of the question of the origin of the novel. There is in her work the insight that the familial scene is a very useful representation of how the novel comes to be. But what the novel inherits from this scene is a paradox, an absence of foundation, a void that cannot be explained. However, this absence of foundation is profoundly productive. The dialectic of the illusion and the disillusion limit the understanding of the original cause, but it also liberates an ability to create. The familial transmissions in novels might represent the attempt by the writer to grasp the origin of the creative urge. I would also like to ask if

[6] "Longtemps, en effet, le petit enfant voit dans ses parents des puissances tutélaires qui lui dispensent sans cesse leur amour et leurs soins, en échange de quoi il les revêt spontanément non seulement d'un pouvoir absolu, mais d'une capacite d'aimer et d'une perfection infinies qui les placent dans une sphère a part, bien au-dessus du monde humain."(37) Here we can notice a tension between the search of a cause to the idealization (love and care) and the child's spontaneity (creative act). Moreover the love and care are not discussed as being themselves a figuration, the positing of a loving other.

[7] See the review by james Hardin, *South Atlantic Review*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (Nov., 1981), pp. 75-76

this study which seems constrained to literature, could not also help us understand how the transmission of an unsayable, like trauma, can be approached through the paradoxes in which novels are themselves taken. Could the predicaments writers face allow them to access a truth about the transmission of an absence? About the transmission of an unsayable?

Derrida and the Disappearing Face of the Father

The relation between the concept of family and what precedes writing or its inspiration is a question that is widely present in the work of Jacques Derrida. In his discussion of Plato's pharmacy Derrida keeps returning to the figure of the father and the son that are present in the myths on writing in Plato's texts. In Plato's Pharmacy, Derrida states that in Plato, logos is given its origin and its power through the paternal figure[8]. He can support spoken logos because he can rectify its limits; as a speaker, he can clarify any misunderstandings that would erupt from the ambiguity of language. In opposition, writing is like an orphan whose father has died, whose father might have never existed. This paternal figure, present or absent, nevertheless remains as an origin. It is this origin that Derrida questions. If the logos has a father, i.e., an origin, the problem is that it is only with the son's language, the logos, that the father can be known and even exists. For Derrida, the true father, the true origin, is a simulacrum, already an imitation of what it should be. The family scene, through its paradox, is a particularly apt way to approach the radical absence of language's origin.

[8] "il suffirait de prêter une attention systématique – ce qui à notre connaissance n'a jamais été fait – à la permanence d'un schème platonicien qui assigne l'origine et le pouvoir de la parole, précisément du logos, à la position paternelle." (86)

In that sense, the face that would utter the logos or write the text exists in as much as it is gone before it could exist:

> De même que, nous l'avons vu, Socrate supplée le père, de même la dialectique supplée la noesis impossible, l'intuition interdite de la face du père (bien-soleil-capital). Le retrait de la face ouvre et limite à la fois l'exercice de la dialectique. Il la soude irrémédiablement à ses « inférieurs », les arts mimétiques, le jeu, la grammaire, l'écriture, etc. La disparition de la face est le mouvement de la différance qui ouvre violemment l'écriture ou, si l'on veut, qui s'ouvre à l'écriture et que s'ouvre l'écriture. (193)

> Just as Socrates supplements and replaces the father, as we have seen, dialectics supplements and replaces the impossible noēsis, the forbidden intuition of the face of the father (good-sun-capital). The withdrawal of that face both opens and limits the exercise of dialectics. It welds it irremediably to its "inferiors," the mimetic arts, play, grammar, writing, etc. The disappearance of that face is the movement of differance which violently opens writing or, if one prefers, which opens itself to writing and which writing opens for itself. (167)

The face that allows for logos to be uttered or a text to be written has disappeared before it could exist. But this absence of origin also puts writing into motion, into an endless movement of play and differences. The fact that there is no original cause, no essence at the beginning of writing, liberates an infinite process of signification always caught between the attempt at signification and the radical absence of a foundation to that process. Thus, there is no true father of discourse, its play of differences forsakes the possibility of original truth, an original intention, and an ability to speak that intention. The family scenario of the father and the son is thus a figure that opens the question of the origin of writing.

I am particularly interested in the echo of Marthe Robert's text and how the fantasy of the parents as godlike figures sets into motion the whole movement of dreaming and writing. At the origin, the child realizes precisely that the parents' godlike features were not a truth but solely an illusion. The reality the child took for granted and used to make sense of their world is split. There is an irresolvable play of difference

between illusion and disillusion. Thus, in Derrida and Robert, the family scene is a scene of destabilization, where the child is confronted with the absence of a grounding, of a foundation. The representation of parents in literature can be a questioning of the origin of writing, an attempt at figuring out the impossible. This representation seems to be both necessary and impossible. This tension might be why Derrida finds the "family scene" as an essential dimension of writing and its inception:

> Cette maîtrise philosophique et dialectique des *pharmaka* qu'on devrait se transmettre de père légitime en fils bien né, une scène de famille la met sans cesse en question, constituent et fissurant à la fois le passage qui relie la pharmacie à la maison. Le « platonisme » est à la fois la répétition générale de cette scène de famille et l'effort le plus puissant pour la dominer, pour en étouffer le bruit, pour la dissimuler en tirant les rideaux au matin de l'Occident. (193-194)
>
> This philosophical, dialectical mastery of the *pharmaka* that should be handed down from legitimate father to well-born son is constantly put in question by a family scene that constitutes and undermines at once the passage between the pharmacy and the house. "Platonism" is both the general rehearsal of this family scene and the most powerful effort to master it, to prevent anyone's ever hearing of it, to conceal it by drawing the curtains over the dawning of the West. (167)

For Derrida, "platonism" and the idea of presence are enacted and disrupted by the family scene. The father's authority could have allowed for a proper transmission to occur, for a truth to be passed on from him to the son. But behind this image of the family scene lies a feud, where the word "scene" would be less about a scene of representation as it would be the scene of a conflict, a tension that disrupts the transmission. Indeed, "scène de Famille" is an idiom describing the inevitable strife within families. Thus, the family is more than the transmission of the order. In that sense, the family scenes in literature and philosophy could be inhabited by a "noise" that the illusion of maintaining order has hidden. Through their figuring of an origin and transmission, family scenes confront the text with its lack of foundation.

Derrida shows through his study of these family scenes that they tell the story of an internal conflict: the irresolvable question of the origin. If we follow Derrida, the absence of a true origin liberates the movement of the text, the infinite oscillation of the movement of signification. For Derrida, this absence is about the absence of the speaking face:" The disappearance of that face is the movement of différance which violently opens writing or, if one prefers, which opens itself to writing and which writing opens for itself." (167). It is not just that there is an absence of origin. Instead, it is a disappearance of a face that opens a play of difference.

There is a kinship between the transmission of trauma and writing. Both are marked by successions of defacements. But there is a distinction in the case of writing. As Derrida formulates it, there is the possibility of différance, which creates a distinction between writing and the transmission of trauma. The "a" of différance (participle present) indicates the temporality at the heart of writing, and we could argue that writing brings a breath of difference in the suffocating repetition of the same. It brings a temporalization through the play of the signifier, through its insufficiency, which always necessitates more signifiers to make sense of the previous ones in an endless search for the signified. The void is displaced from the status of the traumatic kernel to the void keeping the creative activity going. And in the narratives on a transmission that I explore, we can identify this subtle shift in the way that the repetition of trauma in the text and the defacement it creates is also at the heart of the creative process. These narratives indicate that there is a different kind of defacement, one that animates the possibility of writing.

Exploring the Limits of Language in Literature

Through the writings of André Gide, Marguerite Duras, Georges Bataille, and Edouard Glissant, I explore how the transmission of trauma and unsayables can be linked to an attempt at creating new kinds of narratives. In the twentieth century, in French and Francophone literature, there has been a series of writers who have turned at some point in their work to this very intersection of transmission and questions of form. This crossing unites the different writers in this dissertation: André Gide, Georges Bataille, Marguerite Duras, and Edouard Glissant. This selection is not exhaustive, but it allowed me to bring writers who did not fit into any literary trend. While some would associate André Gide with modernism, Marguerite Duras with the New Novel, or Georges Bataille and Edouard Glissant with post-modernism, what interested me is how they are also all outliers within these literary traditions. I would argue that their singular literary paths offer an opportunity to explore how they were searching for a language in rupture, in search of something new. What unifies these singular trajectories is a search for a certain limit of language, a point at which language falters. In André Gide, this becomes very clear in his novel *the Counterfeiters*, which is an attempt to write about "rien" ("nothing"). For Georges Bataille it is a search for the impossible in his narratives[9]. Marguerite Duras explored the blanks in writings[10], and Edouard Glissant elaborated his concept of opacity to grasp that which remained at the border of language[11].

[9] This question is particularly developed in Georges Bataille, *Guilty* and *The Impossible.*
[10] Marguerite Duras develops this question in *Les Parleuses*, a series of interviews with Xavière Gauthier.
[11] See in particular, *Poetics of Relation*.

My first chapter on André Gide interrogates how a writer known for his stance against families pays so much attention to familial dynamics in his novel *The Counterfeiters*. It is surprising when the literary criticism of the novel has focused on its rupture of literary tradition and realism more particularly. The literary critic Jean-Joseph Goux connects this departure from realism with the main metaphor of the novel: counterfeited money. For him, the novel is historically situated when money, language, and the father figure have all lost their authority. This loss of authority and value brings forth a destabilization of society but also of literary language, where the realist model seems no longer viable. Rather than searching for a truthful representation of reality, Gide is looking to get close to the "crystal" of writing. This "crystal" would be writing deprived of representing anything. It would be writing about writing. Gide uses the metaphor of counterfeited money to show that a novel can be written around the passing on of this crystal, an object transparent with a fake golden cover. The central question is: could a novel be written based on this "crystal," a novel centered on an absence of representation, on a mere transparent object? I argue that this question is developed through something other than the passing on of counterfeited money. It is also developed through the transmission of disfiguration in the Vedel Family. The disfiguration touches, in particular, the father figure. Deprived of their authority, the fathers have nothing to transmit but their undoing, their loss. This transmission of nothing marks the face of the descendants. Through their disfiguration, their faces become the site of resistance to the logic of the ego, of the unified individual. The disfiguration reveals another scene, from where something different might emerge, like a desire that can only be expressed through the undoing of the face. Thus, Gide's text is not just a formalist

endeavor. By searching for the limits of representation, for the “crystal” of writing, I argue that he also finds a way of expressing desires that cannot be uttered. A kind of desire which can only be glimpsed at through the disfiguration of the individual’s face.

My second chapter discusses the novel *My Mother* by Georges Bataille. In this text, we encounter the troubled relationship between a mother and her son. After the father's death, the mother decides to provide the son with sexual education. The text plays through this relationship with the taboo of incest. In that sense, it is a new iteration of Bataille’s search for the impossible. In this chapter, I argue that the mother-son relationship poses the question of the transmission of this impossible. In my argument, I show that this transmission cannot be spoken. It can only happen through the body. The body is where what language cannot say gets inscribed. The impossible creates for the writer a sense of vertigo. This sensation comes from experiencing how the impossible is both the encounter with a limit and a liberation. Suddenly language is unbound. It can swirl endlessly, higher and higher. But similarly to Icarus's fate, such elevation movement can be deadly. However, the narrator-son does not follow the path of Icarus; he chooses writing instead. This choice makes writing the site of the inscription of this tension between infinite possibilities and the impossible. More importantly, writing itself can potentially transmit the impossible to the readers. The readers face a text whose grounding slowly disappears from underneath them. They are like Pierre, who repeatedly sees the mother remove any sense of certainty he might have. Thus, I show that although the transmission of the impossible is enacted through the body, it is also passed in writing. Therefore, the impossible is not entirely situated outside of writing; it is inscribed in it as its undoing. This inscription can be a

transmission site, showing a way of relating and creating a bond based on a new kind of communication. It is no longer the communication of a message or knowledge but the transmission of the impossible of language.

In my third chapter, I turn to the novel *Le Vice-Consul* by Marguerite Duras. Situated in colonial India, the novel follows the lives of English and French colonizers in Calcutta. One of them, Peter Morgan, is fascinated by the presence of a beggarwoman among the lepers in the streets. His fascination for this woman, who appears plagued by madness, leads him to write a story inserted at the novel's beginning. A radical forgetfulness of herself defines the madness of the woman, and what is striking is how this forgetting is passed on to Peter Morgan through the writing of the text. Thus, more than in any other chapters in my dissertation, writing, and forgetting are tightly intertwined. This forgetting, both in the beggarwoman and in the English colonizer, is a force that pulls the Englishman closer and closer to madness as it moves his writing forward. Writing decenters the colonizer from his position as a modern subject. He is invaded by a force of otherness, a force of forgetting. What is to be left of him if this force was to swipe everything away? It seems that this risk is for Duras, which animates writing. Through my analysis of other works and interviews by Duras, I show that the beggarwoman is like a muse, but a muse that brings oblivion rather than an idea or artistic inspiration. Thus, what the muse offers is the gift of forgetting, and not just to Peter Morgan but also Duras herself. Indeed, the beggarwoman, whom Duras encountered as a child in Indochina, left a mark of terror and fascination in the little girl, which then became a recurrent ghostly presence at the origin of many texts. In this chapter, the familial transmission does not occupy the same central part as in my other

chapters. However, I nevertheless show that the forgetting that weighs on the beggarwoman is a weight that is imprinted on her by her mother, indicating that the force of oblivion is a gift from another, even for the muse herself.

My last chapter focuses on intergenerational trauma in Edouard Glissant's writing. I focus on the trauma of the Triangular Trade that saw the displacements and death of millions of Africans to the Americas and the Caribbeans. In *The Overseer's Cabin,* I identified the reappearance across the generations of an enigmatic wind, a wind that I argue can be traced back to the trauma of the Triangular Trade. Yet while the wind is the echo of past trauma, there is not much that can be learned about it, and Glissant's writing shows that one should instead try to be carried away by it, like sails on the ocean. But the question then becomes: how to harness this force? How to use it to discover new lands? This question, I argue, is a central question asked by major trauma theorists like Davoine and Gaudillere in their work *History Beyond Trauma*. For Glissant, it is through the embodiment of that force and its expression through a voice that the wind can be recuperated and that the force of the trauma is turned into a force of creation. In particular, I try to show that the breath that animates the voice of the descendant of the trauma echoes the poet's breath. Both of them are the inheritors of the wind. In that sense, my last chapter shows that Glissant's question of the poetic creation and the transmission of trauma are bound together through an ungraspable figure, a wind. Thus, it opens the possibility of thinking together about poetic creation and the transmission of trauma.

CHAPTER 1

The Transmission of Disfiguration in Gide's *The Counterfeiters*

Introduction

Gide's *The Counterfeiters* can be characterized as a novel about the crisis of value. At the center of this crisis is the circulation in the novel of counterfeited money. Situated in the 1920s in France, this novel also registers a problem of the youth, educational system, and language. These multiple crises have been extensively studied, most notably in the work of Jean-Joseph Goux, *The Coiners of Language*. In this work, Goux develops a structuralist approach to identify how the different metaphors of values echo one another in the novel:

> *Language, money, father*: simultaneously metaphorizing each other in reciprocal homological interplay, their fundamental crisis, the crisis of a historical form of value, is exposed. Monetary falseness confers a title upon the crisis of the dominant value-form, a crisis that affects language and the father as well (33)

The father, money, and language in Gide's novel all lose their grounding, their guarantee to refer to a transcendental truth or referent from which they received their authority, and their ability to function and to remain unquestioned. The circulation of the counterfeited money becomes a metaphor for language, rendering the possibility of sincerity and truth inaccessible in the novel. The counterfeited money also symbolizes false fatherhood, as Goux summarizes:" a fundamental *resonance* is missing." (42) Through the critique of fatherhood in the novel, it is the father as a figure of authority, as an ideal image that one should wish to resemble which is ridiculed. In many ways, the father figures in the novel are Gide's version of the "emperor with no clothes." All the young students or characters are extremely perceptive to the failures of the paternal

figures, multiple scenes showing that there is no master in this novel. Thus, the recurring theme of the crisis of value is accompanied throughout the novel by the ironical style that Gide uses in many of his writings. The fact that the central social structure present in the novel is a pension for youth education highlights a crisis in transmission. Indeed, Gide questions the possibility of education or transmission in a social context where nothing seems worthy of being transmitted. In the novel, the father is deprived of his ability to "stamp" the son, that is, to imprint a particular form and identity on him. Gide, at the beginning of chapter 6, opens it with a citation from Shakespeare which allows us to get a better understanding of how he was also thinking about the relationship between father and children in his novel:

> We are all bastards;
> And that most venerable man which I
> Did call my father, was I know not where
> When I was stamp'd

The stamping, as noted by Goux, infers an idea that can be traced back to Aristotle, that the father is the one who gives a form to the child:" The father (here as genitor) is the man who, through the act of conception, transmits a *form*: like the imprint of a seal upon wax, like the image struck on a medal or a coin. Natural paternity is the minting of money imprinted with a stamped effigy…"(40) Goux points to an understanding of the father as the one who imposes the repetition of his image onto the child. Thus, there is a certain repetition of the same on the level of form. Rather than social reproduction, the novel represents the transmission of what cannot be grasped by the paternal figure. I want to argue that the father transmits something akin to a counterfeited coin to the next generation. Not as an object but as the undoing of the footing on which he holds his authority. Transmission in the text holds the position of

bearing a void in representation. By passing it on, it creates a narrative, and a temporality can emerge from the encounter with a limit of representation. A narrative is created when nothing else can be said.

Counterfeited Money and the Transmission of Disfiguration

The novel is in many ways akin to a Bildungsroman, as it follows the lives of young men trying to understand their place in society and what to make of themselves. The young men on whom the novel focuses are Bernard, Olivier, and Armand. They look at the generations who preceded them with disdain. They see in their parents a disconnection between the morals and ideals they preach and who they are as individuals. Thus, while their fathers would like them to take on their social roles, such as judge or pastor, the new generation sees these authority figures more like buffoons than guardians of social stability. Within these familial scenes, there is the irruption of Olivier's uncle: Edouard. He is a renowned novelist who is just arriving in Paris from England. As he arrives, he gets interested in Bernard and Olivier. While the father figures are despised, there is a desire in the young men for what Edouard represents, for his relation to art and writing. However, even Edouard fails to transmit or teach Olivier and Bernard.

Edouard, who is a writer, is working on a novel called *The Counterfeiters*, creating in the text an effect of *mise en abyme*[12]. Through the theme of counterfeited money, Edouard studies how the representation of reality in fiction is somehow

[12] See Dällenbach, Lucien. *Le récit spéculaire : essai sur la mise en abyme*. (1977)

counterfeited, not truthful. This *mise en abyme* is intensified when Edouard argues that his novel will also contain a writer interested in distinguishing reality from what the writer makes of it. By creating all these mirroring effects, Gide creates a dizzying effect of infinity through the repetition of the question: what does representation represent? For the literary critic Jean-Joseph Goux, it is through this question that Gide is also trying to get closer to the limits of representation.

The limit encountered by representation is not a reality that would be situated beyond representation. It is instead the work of representation that is questioned in itself. The limit of representation is not an ending but rather what is embedded in the production of representation itself. I believe that Goux is articulating the same conclusion when he claims that "The deepest meaning (for it is the origin of the meaning) is not in the product but in the production of the work, a history that is labor and gestation." (74) And "…for Gide it is not the finished work like some gold-money issued on the language market that has value but rather the trace of the patient day-to-day history of the creation of the work; or yet again, perhaps finally, its wholly ideal construction, its crystal." (74) Goux emphasizes how Gide was interested in the writing process itself. The notebook of *The Counterfeiters*, also published, indicates this interest in the act of production itself. Thus, through his work, Gide gives a very tangible example of the theoretical point made by Marthe Robert on the centrality of *vraisemblance* as a productive tool in novels, even as this centrality is also the undoing of the grounding of the novel, of its foundation in a repetition of reality.

There are two consequences related to this search for the limit of representation in Gide. Both show how the novel is inhabited by a void that moves along the characters.

First, at the end of the previous quote, Goux connects the production of writing and a crystal. Why is that? To answer this question, we need to return to one of the novel's central themes: counterfeited money. In the middle of the book, while Edouard and Bernard enjoy a summer retreat in the Swiss Alps, Edouard starts discussing his project to write about a narrator trying to distinguish the reality represented within his novel from his involvement in the making of that reality: is the reality in the novel counterfeited? As they discuss this question, which is also at the center of Gide's narrative, Bernard takes out of his pocket a counterfeited coin and describes the coin as follow: "son revêtement est en or, de sorte qu'elle vaut pourtant un peu plus de deux sous ; mais elle est en cristal. À l'usage, elle va devenir transparente. Non, ne la frottez pas ; vous me l'abîmeriez. Déjà l'on voit presque au travers." (88) "… it is coated with gold, so that, all the same, it is worth a little more than two sous; but it is made of glass. It'll wear transparent. No; don't rub it; you'll spoil it. One can almost see through it, as it is." (137). The rubbing of the counterfeited money reveals a transparent crystal, and in French, "rubbing" is "abimeriez," which echoes the process itself of *mise en abyme*. What is fascinating here is that under the golden cover, there is a crystal, a transparent material. Thus, what is circulating in the novel among the characters is a transparent material void of any representation, a see-through material. I would argue that this crystal shows how the novel is put in motion by passing on a void from one character to the other, albeit under the guise of a gold coin. The act of rubbing the golden coin is essential. It shows an alteration, a degradation of the shiny cover of the representation.

There is a similar degradation within the Vedel Family, who owns a pension where students work toward their high school diploma. However, the pension has some

problems; it needs to make more money. It is slowly getting into more and more debt. Adding to that, the father, who is a pastor, is seeing his dream of having his son take his position getting away. In many ways, the family is in slow decay. Adding to these misfortunes, the son and the daughter of the paster, Armand and Rachel, are developing enigmatic marks on their bodies. At the novel's end, Rachel is slowly going blind, and Armand develops a white patch in his mouth, an almost tumorous growing excrescence. I want to show that these marks are not isolated events but caught within the family's decadence. The decay of Armand's and Rachel's faces is a transmission from their father and grandfather. Indeed, the blindness of Rachel, as I will show, can be related to the figurative blindness of the grandfather. At the same time, Armand's white patch echoes an enigmatic smoking addiction from the father. I argue that the transmission operates through a disfiguration of the new generations, as the traces from the past degrade their faces.

Moreover, I argue that these disfigurations are the inscription in the text of the void that was also present within the counterfeited money. However, in this occurrence, what is at stake is the disfiguration of the face, of that central element that holds characters together, the persona of the "personnage" (characters in French). While for the golden coin, the rubbing would reveal the absence of gold, here, the transmission of an element ungraspable by the parents creates the disfiguration of the descendants. It is the disappearance of the face. The transmission, like the rubbing of the counterfeited money, enacts the undoing of representation through the undoing of the faces of the characters. By developing this analysis, I attempt to show how transmission in the novel is the bearer of the void, of the limit of representation that exists within the production

of representation. Similarly to the passing on of the gold coin, the transmission of an unexplainable from one generation to the next animates the text while not resolving the question of the possibility of representation.

For Goux, there is a process of disfiguration in the novel, but he restricts his analysis of disfiguration to a question of perspective. According to him, there is a multiplication of perspectives created by the *mise en abyme* and the different narrators:

> Thus, just as in painting the combined points of view upon which cubism plays lead inexorably to the dissolution of figuration (and first of all of the human figure, the portrait: the figure is defigured, the face defaced), so in literature the attempt to multiply points of view cannot but lead to the increasing dissolution of the integrity of the character. A certain Cartesian idea of the ontological unity of the ego cogitans as the center of vision is undone at the same time as the literary certainty of a character capable of placing the world within a frame from his unique perspective collapses. (78)

While Goux discusses the narrator's perspective, I would like to focus on the disfiguration of the faces of the children of the Vedel family. Through this degradation of the eye and the mouth, we can see the degradation of the perspective and the voice of a text. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that Rachel loses her sight and that a tumor-like excrescence invades Armand's mouth. They can be read as metaphors for the narrative's perspective and voice. That these disfigurations result from a transmission shows how the text is articulated around the passing on of this undoing of representation.

As the transmissions occupy a similar role to the counterfeited money, they are creative in two ways. First, they structure the novel; they allow the temporalization of an impossible, the limit of representation. Rather than being at a stopping point where one encounters a limitation, the transmission displaces and allows for the limit to persist while writing can occur. However, for the descendants in the novel, these disfigurations are also creations around a void received from the past, from the previous generations.

Thus, although there is a disfiguration of the children's faces, the loss of their facial integrity is an act of creation.

In the notebook Gide kept while writing *The Counterfeiters*, he admits he failed at showing how the next generation allows to better explain the previous one:

> Que maints gestes de ceux d'une génération trouvent leur explication dans la génération suivante c'est ce que je m'étais proposé de montrer ; mais mes personnages m'entrainent et je n'ai pu me donner complètement satisfaction sur ce point. (Journal des Faux Monnayeurs, 20 Novembre)

> That many acts of a particular generation find their explanation in the generation that follows – this is what I started to show out, but my characters run away with me and I was unable to give myself complete satisfaction on this point (Notebooks, 20 November)

In this description of his shortcomings, Gide emphasizes how the characters "ran away" and took him in a different direction. He did not end up creating an explanation of the parents through the descendants. This is quite an interesting element to put in comparison with the discussion on disfiguration. The writing process did not lead him toward explanation but more into what I think is the perpetuation of the inexplicability of the gestures of the previous generation. While Gide does not equate the moving forward of the narrative with the repetition of the inexplicable, I will show that it is what happens in the novel. In that sense, Gide's writing shows how the repetition of the inexplicable is akin to the moving forward of the narrative. Thus, there is an interesting tension in the text between the repetition of what I have called a void and the unfolding of the narrative. In order to study this repetition which exists as transmission, I want to focus on the grandfather of the Vedel family and how his blindness to his shortcomings makes him "lose face" in front of the young students ("perdre la face" in French).

Azais Vedel: The Blindness of the Master

The theatre of the undoing of the grandfather is best represented through the decline of a familial business: the Vedel-Azais pension. This institution, where students are both lodged and educated, is described as quite suffocating. Olivier, one of the young protagonists, asks his uncle Edouard who used to live there: "Et vous n'etouffez pas dans l'atmosphère de cette boite?" (103)/ "And weren't you suffocating in such a hole?" (93) The students are under constant surveillance, yet we are far from the panopticon famously described by Michel Foucault. In his lessons at the *Collège de France,* Michel Foucault discussed how disciplinary power operates through the gaze, through the perpetual availability of the madman's body to the medical gaze: "In the disciplinary system, one is not available for someone's possible use, one is perpetually under someone's gaze, or, at any rate, in the situation of being observed."[13] Yet, if the gaze is the mean through which the disciplinary power is upheld on the subjects, this dimension is failing at the pension Vedel-Azais. The grandfather Azais, is in charge of the pension and surveilling the young students. However, he is completely blind to a terrible succession of events that will lead to the death of a student, the young Boris. As a grandfather, as the one who supervises the pension, Azais will come to represent how the paternal figure in Gide's novel cannot be a master for others and even of himself.

The tragic event of the young Boris's death resulted from a game created by a group of students named "La Confrérie des Hommes Forts." While this group was made precisely to exclude Boris from it, the three members, Georges, Phiphi, and

[13] Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power*, 40

Ghéridanisol, decide to include him in a game they want him to fail. By losing the game, Boris is forced to put a gun against his head and pull the trigger. The young Gheridanisol lied to his comrades and left the gun loaded, resulting in Boris's death. When the grandfather Azais tells his friend Edouard about the existence of "La Confrérie des Hommes Forts," he shows no concern regarding what this kind of association can produce. He retells the moment when he caught one of the members, Georges, wearing a badge and asked him to explain its meaning and then the meaning of their group. While the reader does not have access to the content of the conversation, Azais sees it as a similar kind of association as the one he joined when he was young:

> De mon temps, c'est-à-dire quand j'avais son âge, je m'étais enrôlé dans une association de ce genre, dont les membres portaient le beau nom de "chevaliers du devoir. (110)
>
> I told him that in my time - that's to say, when I was his age – I had been a member of a society of the same kind, and that we went by the grand name of Knights of Duty (99)

The past comes here to explain the present, "La Confrérie des Hommes Forts" being established as a repetition of the "chevaliers du devoir." Yet, as the novel will show, the two groups are quite different, and the perception of Azais will be shown to be biased by his obsolete experience. The experience of the master is here depicted as useless or even dangerous, for it renders the supervisor blind to the catastrophe that is slowly unfolding before his eyes. Indeed, Georges will have no problem lying to his headmaster and continue to perpetrate his deeds with his comrades.

Through the figure of Azais, the whole school system is portrayed as blind to the actions of the pupils they are supposed to educate. It is no coincidence that Rachel, the granddaughter of Azais, who dedicates her whole life to the boarding school, ends

up blind at the novel's end. Yet, we should already notice that if the supervisor's gaze fails, it is more a language problem than a problem of vision. I am here referring to the discussion of vision and language made by the theorist Joan Copjec. She defines vision as follows:" Semiotics, not optics, is the science that enlightens for us the structure of the visual domain. Because it alone can lend things sense, the signifier makes vision possible. There can be no brute vision, no vision independent of language."[14]. Vision is structured by language and is opaque because of its dependence on the signifier, as a signifier does not give access to the referent but rather to other signifiers. This is demonstrated by the novel itself, as it is through the metaphorical substitution of "La Confrérie des Hommes Forts" by "les Chevaliers du Devoirs" that Azais sees himself in Georges and that he misses the danger ahead. While there is an opacity in vision due to its relation to the signifier, what characterizes the blindness of Azais is his belief that he occupies the position of a master.

Azais lives in the last floor of the pension, a position from which he can oversee everyone at the pension:

> Il a laissé à la famille de son gendre le premier et le second étage de l'immeuble. De la fenêtre de son bureau (acajou, reps et moleskine), il domine de haut la cour et surveille les allées et venues des élèves. (80)
>
> He has handed over the first and second floors of the house to his son-in-law. From the windows of his study (mahogany, rep and horse-hair furniture), he can look over the playground and keep an eye on the pupils' goings and comings. (97)

Gide's rare description of the scenes and places in the novel should already alert us that this description is not insignificant. The pension, as an institution regulating the positions occupied by everyone, can be understood as a discursive structure. In this context, Azais is not given a position by the institution. Instead, he chooses his position

[14] Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire*, (45)

and the one held by others. The novel emphasizes how the master is the one who declares himself as such and who performs his authority. This authority is given a grounding through the building of the pension, allowing Azais to stand on top of it. Azais' *discursive* position as the master allows him to occupy a *physical* position from which he is supposed to dominate and see the actions of the individuals under his authority. As we have seen, this position does not allow Azais to supervise the students; on the contrary, it gives him a false sense of certainty. Edouard summarizes in his notes how the family is afflicted by blindness: " L'éblouissement de leur foi les *aveugle* sur le monde qui les entoure, et sur eux-mêmes. "(90) / "The dazzling light of their faith *blinds* them to the surrounding world and their own selves."(99) Thus, the Vedel-Azais are blind to themselves, to their implication in the signifier and the gap it introduces within themselves, between their discursive position and their discourses. Indeed, Azais occupies the position of the master and addresses the students as such, yet the novel reveals the failure of this speech and the lack of authority that the speech produces. As we will see with the report of one of the students, a speech given by Azais works against him. Even though Azais spoke as a master, his speech undoes his authority and reveals the gap between the two. The young Bernard retells Azais speech as follows:

> Que voulez-vous savoir…. Que le père Azais a prononcé un discours solennel, ou il proposait aux enfants de « s'élancer d'un commun élan, et avec une juvénile ardeur.. » J'ai retenu ces mots, car ils sont revenus trois fois. Armand prétend que le vieux les place dans chacun de ses laïus. » (251)

> What do you want to know? That old Azais made a solemn speech and exhorted the boys to "press forward in a common endeavor and with the impetuous ardour of youth .. ."? I remember those words because they occurred three times. Armand declares the old boy regularly puts them into all his pi-jaws. (229)

Azais addresses the youth as a flock in need of guidance, in need of a speech to unite them under what would be an image like him, as shown in the example of Georges and "La Confrerie des Hommes Forts." At this moment, Azais occupies the position of a master who intends to unify and link the youth into a common impetus through his speech. Slavoj Zizek defines the master in similar terms:" the master's gesture is the founding gesture of every social link."[15] Yet the founding gesture is in no way a creation, Zizek continues:" The Master adds no new positive content; he merely adds a signifier that all of a sudden turns disorder into order – into new harmony." While most Bildungsroman promoted at the time by writers in France would have made a true master out of Azais, one who could transform the disordered youth into an ordered and united social entity, this is not the case in Gide's novel. On the contrary, by presenting the speech through the eyes of Bernard, Gide shows that from the very beginning, the master's gesture fails at what it pretends to do. It does not mean that this gesture is void of consequences but that the aim of order leads to nothing.

Nonetheless, the demise of the master allows Bernard to pierce through the illusion that language should be taken at face value; it does not allow for sincere and effective exchanges between a speaker and his addressee. Azais cannot reign master above language; he is caught in its limits. While Azais believes that his discourse can transform the youth, his speech can only refer to previous enunciations, to a past that was more a myth than a reality. Azais' blindness results from a mythification of the past, in a nostalgic gesture that resembles more a fiction of the past than a reality that would

[15] Slavoj Zizek, *The Desire of the Analyst*, (87)

have been lost. Following Copjec's argument, I argue that Azais's blindness is rooted in the mythification dimension of language: to see is to mythologize.

In the novel, the master within the educational system has nothing to transmit. However, does Azais failure as a teacher and master mean that transmissions do not take place in the novel? According to the psychoanalysts Davoine and Gaudillère, it might mean that transmission will happen only through a different channel. In their work on trauma, they develop the following idea on the relationship between transmission and its interruption: "…. what we want to do here is describe a kind of anthropological constant: every interruption in the transmission that links people to one another is, paradoxically, searching for the pathways of an inscription."[16] I would like to argue that Gide's question on the status of the relationship between generations is caught up in a similar line of thought, that is, on the paradoxical nature of transmission. While Gide depicts a rupture between teachers and students, he inscribes a transmission within the Vedel-Azais family. As I mentioned, Rachel, the granddaughter, is slowly becoming blind. According to her brother Armand, this blindness is irrevocable. Thus, while Azais cannot stamp and unify the youth, his blindness is transmitted and inscribed on his granddaughter's body. Through this transmission, what is passed on is a limit of language. Indeed, Azais's blindness, as I have tried to show, is rooted in his inability to recognize that his perception of reality is embedded in the myths he constructed. As I have also tried to show, it is because perception is itself rooted in a language and misperception, as Copjec argues. It indicates that the transmission between the

[16] Davoine and Gaudillere, *History Beyond Trauma*, (12)

grandfather and the granddaughter is the passing on of the very question of the novel: the limits of representations.

Transmission and the Blind Spot of Representation

In the third part of the novel, which follows a summer during which most of the characters travel outside of Paris to get some fresh air, Armand and Rachel Vedel stay in the suffocating atmosphere of the Pension Vedel-Azais. Both are deprived of the adventures other characters, such as Bernard or Olivier, had during the novel's second part. While Olivier and Bernard return in the novel's third part with new experiences, Rachel and Armand remain in a vegetative and static state. Their bodies, through their lack of movement, already embody a particular attachment to the previous generation, to their parents, whom they cannot leave. In this duo, Rachel is the one who is the most implicated in the perpetuation of the social inheritance as she is the one in charge of the pension. However, Rachel's trajectory deviates from this social inheritance through the development of her blindness. As she becomes blind, her possibility of remaining in charge of the pension seems jeopardized. It is this marking on her face that will interest us here. How to explain the cracks in the reproduction of the social and in Rachel's face? I will argue that Rachel's character exemplifies a different kind of transmission, one that is less rooted in the reproduction of wealth and more in the undoing of one's face. This transmission of undoing is more than a curse; it is also the occasion for Rachel to be more than a beautiful representation of abnegation. Her disfiguration breaks the cast of beauty and opens up a site of resistance.

Rachel Vedel is a character described by others as pious and devoted to her work at the pension. The pastor's daughter seems to be the one who upholds the religious values of her parents. Other characters represent her as a kind and saintly woman. She sacrifices herself for others; her acts are turned toward saving others at the cost of her well-being. Edouard describes Rachel as a saint. However, his flattering description is like a grip that closes on Rachel, making her a lifeless pretty statue:

> Par une sorte de pudeur, elle ne dit jamais : je travaille. Rachel s'est effacée toute sa vie, et rien n'est plus discret, plus modeste que sa vertu. L'abnégation lui est si naturelle qu'aucun des siens ne lui sait gré de son perpétuel sacrifice. C'est la plus belle âme de femme que je connaisse. (200)
>
> Out of a kind of modesty, she never says' my work'. Rachel has effaced herself all her life and nothing could be more discreet, more retiring than her virtue. Abnegation is so natural to her, that not one of her family is grateful to her for her perpetual self-sacrifice. She has the most beautiful woman's nature that I know. (210)

The description of Rachel by Edouard is like an allegory of sainthood. Not only is she sacrificing herself for others, but she is also the most beautiful soul that Edouard has ever known. What is striking in this description is the redoubling of the aesthetic judgment made on her. There is a subtle shift in Edouard's presentation from the allegory to the image. While at first Edouard still indirectly inscribes in his discourse an "I" that he attributes to Rachel, she then becomes, through his description, an allegory of virtue. While an allegory still retains a motion, a temporality, the last sentence by Edouard completely freezes any potential movement. As he describes her as the most beautiful woman soul he has ever met, Rachel has been completely transformed into a lifeless image, a pure representation of a woman's soul. Thus, we witness the slow transformation of Rachel into a beautiful cast, an aesthetically pleasing image.

Edouard's description reveals itself as more than the transformation of a woman's life into a lifeless image.

If we follow Edouard's description of Rachel and her involvement in the pension, it would seem that she has no other desire than to help others, work for her parents, and perpetuate the family's business. However, as we mentioned, she is slowly becoming blind. How are we to grasp the meaning of this blindness? Indeed, it seems to go in a different direction than the presentation of Rachel as a saint. Through this blindness, it appears that Rachel would become useless for the pension, especially since one of her key activities is keeping the pension's book of accounts in check. The blindness creates a crack in the image of the devoted daughter, as she is becoming less valuable.

The presentation of Rachel's blindness is made by her brother Armand, in a lengthy description that is used rhetorically to illustrate his larger argument on the limitations of the mind of the "idiot":

> Nous allons parler sérieusement, puisque c'est le genre sérieux qui t'agrée. Rachel, ma sœur aînée, devient aveugle. Sa vue a beaucoup baissé ces derniers temps. Depuis deux ans elle ne peut plus lire sans lunettes. J'ai cru d'abord qu'elle n'avait qu'à changer de verres. Ça ne suffisait pas. Sur ma prière, elle a été consulter un spécialiste. Il paraît que c'est la sensibilité rétinienne qui faiblit. Tu comprends qu'il y a là deux choses très différentes : d'une part une défectueuse accommodation du cristallin, à quoi les verres remédient. Mais, même après qu'ils ont écarté ou rapproché l'image visuelle, celle-ci peut impressionner insuffisamment la rétine et cette image n'être plus transmise que confusément au cerveau. Alors, pourquoi est-ce que je te raconte tout cela ? … Parce que, réfléchissant à son cas, je me suis avisé que les idées, tout comme les images, peuvent se présenter au cerveau plus ou moins nettes. Un esprit obtus ne reçoit que des aperceptions confuses ; mais, à cause de cela même, il ne se rend pas nettement compte qu'il est obtus. (240)

> We'll talk seriously, since seriousness is the style you favor. Rachel, my eldest sister, is going blind. Her sight has been getting very bad lately. For the last two years, she hasn't been able to read without glasses. I thought at first it would be all right if she were to change them. But it wasn't. At my request, she went to see an

> oculist. It seems the sensitiveness of the retina is failing. You understand there are two very different things - on the one hand, a defective power of accommodation of the crystalline, which can be remedied by glasses. But even after they have brought the: visual image to the proper focus, that image may make an insufficient impression on the retina and be only dimly transmitted to the brain. Do I make myself clear? You hardly know Rachel, so don't imagine that I am trying to arouse your pity for her. Then why am I telling' you all this? ... Because, reflecting on my own case, I became aware that images and ideas may strike the brain with more . A person with a dull mind receives only confused perceptions; but for that very reason he cannot realize clearly that he is dull. (253)

Before studying the description of blindness by Armand, we must consider how it is framed and introduced to the reader. Rachel's blindness, just like in Edouard's description, is used by Armand as a figure. Armand uses the presentation of blindness to discuss how a dull mind would not be able to escape its dullness since this dullness would taint all its perceptions. We find here the description of the problem encountered by their grandfather. Azais cannot realize that he is blind because his ability to see is conditioned by the fiction he tells himself. The physical blindness of the granddaughter is in the text, a figuration of the blindness of the grandfather. Rachel's body and her blindness are mere figures in Armand's speech. However, the description of Rachel's body reveals that the very language used by Armand disrupts the turning of Rachel into a figure: When he describes the phenomenon of blindness, his description is as follows:

> Mais, même après qu'ils ont écarté ou rapproché l'image visuelle, celle-ci peut impressionner insuffisamment la rétine et cette image n'être plus transmise que confusément au cerveau. (240)

> But even after they have brought the: visual image to the proper focus, that image may make an insufficient impression on the retina and be only dimly transmitted to the brain. (250)

The verb "impressionner," which has the same Latin root as the English to impress, means to put pressure on a surface, to stamp. Thus, Armand is describing in his example an image that would be animated by one force and would thus pressure the

retina. However, this image does not pressure enough; it encounters resistance. Indeed, the image does not impress enough, which means that the force of the image is not strong enough. In physical science, a force does not exist by itself, and it is always a reaction; it cannot exist alone[17]. This means that the lack of sensitivity is not just an *absence* of sensitivity, an incapacity, but rather a *force* that resists the imprinting of the image on Rachel's retina. In that sense, while Armand was using Rachel's blindness as an example, as a figure, to confirm his idea that individuals could not escape their system of representation, like his grandfather, it appears that in the representation of the blindness, there is a force of resistance. What we discover here is that this description of Rachel's body is a moment in which the allegory of blindness finds resistance to its beautiful rhetorical articulation. This resistance, as I said, is a force that precisely resists the form, the figure created by Armand. The text reveals a resistance to symbolization, an element within the blindness that does not let itself be used so easily.

Yet, what does it mean that a force here resists formalization? What is the specificity of this bodily force of resistance located in Rachel's retina? I want to turn to an essay by Jacques Derrida on this very question, as we are here facing a question that has larger consequences than just in Gide's text. Jacques Derrida, in his essay "Force and Signification," was extremely cautious in his discussion of the specificity of the concept of force:

[17] For a discussion of the notion of force, how it is related to language see chapter 4 :"The Falling Body and the Impact of Reference" *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth. See also Gasché, Rodolphe. *Deconstruction, Its Force, Its Violence.*

> Our intention here is not, through the simple motions of balancing, equilibration or overturning, to oppose duration to space, quality to quantity, force to form, the depth of meaning or value to the surface of figures. Quite to the contrary. To counter this simple alternative, to counter the simple choice of one of the terms or one of the series against the other, we maintain that it is necessary to seek new concepts and new models, an economy escaping this system of metaphysical oppositions. This economy would not be an energetics of pure, shapeless force (22)

Following Derrida's argument, we need to seek new ways to understand this force of resistance which precisely does not let itself be grasped by a figurative dimension. And yet, it is also not a force without any shape. It is a force rooted in Rachel's body, in her blindness, in the surface of the retina, which resists. Just like blindness cannot be solely understood as a form or a figure, it cannot be solely understood as a force. Rachel's face in the text loses its stability, its peacefulness. The eye becomes the site of resistance by losing the capacity to see. The eye becomes just a body part and not what allows one to be at the center of their perspective on the world. Rachel's fate thus disturbs what Derrida calls the "peacefulness of the face," which he connects to the stability of form and meaning:

> To comprehend the structure of a becoming, the form of a force, is to lose meaning by finding it. The meaning of becoming and of force, by virtue of their pure, intrinsic characteristics, is the repose of the beginning and the end, the peacefulness of a spectacle, horizon or face. (31)

Rachel's face is the site of a disfiguration, a loss of "the peacefulness of the face," to borrow Derrida's words. Here disfiguration is to be understood on two distinctive levels[18]. First, Rachel's blindness is presented as an alteration of her face. It disrupts the temporal continuity of her face. In addition to this alteration, the blindness is also an odd force that undoes the figurative status given to Rachel's face by Armand.

[18] The distinction presented here is defined in these terms by Cynthia Chase in *Decomposing Figures*, see in particular the introduction (5-6).

In that sense, the disfiguration is also to be understood at the level of the structure of the text. I want to develop further this less evident second dimension of the disfiguration.

The text uses Rachel's face as an allegory and takes the description of the eye as what allows to render perceptible an abstract idea. Here the abstract idea is the incapacity to extract oneself from one's own system of perception and beliefs. The key example is the grandfather Azais whom we studied in the first section. Yet, this description is odd, and the force of resistance in the eye also reveals that the very language of Armand is caught in a *hallucinatory effect*. I will argue that the readers themselves are caught in the blindness that affects Rachel: the undoing of Rachel's vision questions what the reader can and cannot see.

In Armand's description of the encounter between the image and the eye, we have the presence of an image that is supposed to impress on the retina:

> But even after they have brought the: visual image to the proper focus, that image may make an insufficient impression on the retina and be only dimly transmitted to the brain. (250)

However, what does it mean for an image to impress on the retina? It entails that this image is animated by force. Here it is not that the image is moving, which, as Derrida argues, is still something that a discourse on forms and representations can grasp. No, here it is an image with force, a capacity to impress. However, how can an image also be a force? How can it enact pressure on the retina? Here the allegory, in its attempt to give a representation of the limitations of perception, seems to describe something that cannot be represented, an impossible image.

I would argue that the allegory's attempt at creating a perception is undone because instead of producing a description, the allegory produces a figure of speech.

Instead of a scientific description of blindness that would give us a representation of a referent, here, the text produces a figure. The representation we read is an impossible description, an almost supernatural image animated by force. Suppose language can give the illusion of perception. How does one ever know if one faces a hallucination or a perception, even when one thinks he sees a hallucination: the text reveals here what one could call a *hallucinatory effect, or force, within language*. This force results from the tension between the aim of the allegory to offer a description and the production of a hallucinatory image. Here forms are destabilized. They miss their aim, which is already acknowledging forces within language. But here, it is not a felicitous performative in the Austinian sense; it is a force of undoing. I would almost compare this force to the uncanny, where language dispossesses us of our certainty in our senses since it can make us believe that we see a description when it is only a figuration. While Armand, through a figure, is trying to make perceptible an abstract idea, he achieves the opposite. Figuration is not an expansion of our field of vision but its radical disruption.

Indeed, in Armand's allegory, are we not deprived of our sense perception? Does it not create blindness through the hallucinatory effect of the allegory? I want to argue that the transmission of blindness continues from the text to the reader. Our sight and certainty are destabilized, not by something we could not see, but rather by the realization that there is a hallucinatory force within language. The reader is now marked by a question, by an impossibility to know if what one sees is a hallucination or a sense perception. This is how we could understand Derrida's formulation that force is not darkness. It is instead the infiltration of the system of form and its destabilization, the blurring of their apparent opposition. This destabilization destabilizes the reader, who

is now inhabited by an uncanny feeling. Are we really at home within language? Our sight is now inhabited by an uncanny presence, an otherness that we cannot grasp entirely, an interruptive force that is precisely inherent to the work of figures and of language. The uncanny force in Rachel's body is now dwelling in the reader.

While Rachel's face is altered, her body is also at stake. Indeed, how can one apprehend the body once the face has been disfigured? Is the undoing of the face not also the liberation of the body? Could it not be suddenly the site for a different subjectivity to emerge? One which would not be caught in the logic of the Cartesian ego mentioned by Goux earlier? By turning more specifically to psychoanalysis and the question of the body, I want to argue that Rachel's body can also be read as the site of a new subjectivity, one which is not rooted in social recognition but rather in the inscription of a surplus for which there is a no name.

The Deadlock of the Symbolic and the Body as Excess

We have identified a failure in Armand's speech to turn Rachel's blindness into a figure. As we discussed, from this deadlock, we encountered a remainder, something Armand's speech could not account for precisely because it was going against the use he was making of the blindness. Thus, I would like to argue that Rachel's body can be defined as an excess in the text, as a surplus. It is essential to note that this surplus differs from the system that produced it. Indeed, the surplus is a force, and as we showed through Derrida, it cannot just be subsumed back into the world of form and language, as it is other to it. Thus, in Armand's speech, the body is what is left out, what could not be subsumed into his rhetoric. However, it is not only on the level of the mechanics of

the text that the body exists as an excess; it is also rooted in the narrative. Rachel is the only one who tries to get the pension rids of its debts, and she is the only one who truly knows the state of the finances as only she reads and takes care of the account's books. The blindness renders Rachel useless for the pension; she will not be able to save the pension from its financial collapse. Rather than making the same mistake as Armand, we need to be more careful in treating this excess of the body, not to treat it too quickly as an incapacitation or a limitation. On the contrary, the force seems to point to a potentiality within the body. I want to argue that through psychoanalysis, we can read the blindness not as a dysfunctionality of the body but as a potential.

Joan Copjec, in a discussion on the concept of Jouissance, came to define Jouissance as a surplus in similar terms in her interpretation of the surplus value in capitalism:" Money returns to itself but without coinciding with itself, for it returns to itself with interest, as a surplus beyond itself. If this return nets only fake jouissance – and not jouissance as such – it is because the surplus is merely an *increase*; what it is not is that *alterity* or estrangement of the self-produced by the surprise appearance of a different kind of surplus, object *a*."[19] Thus here Rachel's body must be understood as an estrangement to herself, but even more broadly to the order of the signifier. Indeed, this resistance to seeing and being subsumed into a form point to a resistance to the order of the visible, which is the domain of the signifier. Moreover, here we have to pay attention to the part left out. It is the retina; the eye is the waste. Thus, blindness is the transformation of the apparatus of seeing and knowing into a body part only: a blind eye. This is why the blindness in the text can be understood as a return of the body, but

[19] Joan Copjec, *Inheritance in Psychoanalysis*, p.342

a return as an excess that has lost its value. As we discuss returns and surplus value, Copjec's text intimates us to also pay attention to the other meanings of "pension" in French and English, as it does not solely mean the place where the youth is educated. Pension in English is linked to the French word pension, which has its root in the Latin *pensio*: " a payment, installment, rent." This is why it has then been used in contemporary French to talk of financial markets through the term "fonds de pension," which is a combination of pensions put on financial markets to produce benefits, to create a surplus value, *more of the same*. Here is the significant distinction between the logic of financial surplus and the surplus that represents Rachel's body. Rachel, through her body, becomes an excess that makes her different, a waste more than the good worker who allows the production of a surplus. This is because what is at stake in this waste is a jouissance, which is a surplus that is defined by a logic of "self-estrangement" rather than a production of a socially valuable surplus.

Through the blindness, it is also Rachel's ability to be devoted to the other that vanishes. She can no longer be the figure of abnegation defined by Edouard. The blindness is a turn toward herself, what I would call self-enjoyment. Indeed, her enjoyment is no longer mediated by others. She has turned toward her enjoyment despite all the rest. Of course, we should not understand this enjoyment as mere pleasure; it is here to be understood as *jouissance*, as an unconscious logic that can be defined as a negation against the order of the visual, against the production of more of the same. Thus, to conclude, the relation to the body in Gide's text is more subtle than a mere opposition between language and reality or mind and body; it is an alteration inherent to what the symbolic order of language cannot constrain. However, from this constraint,

the excess is created as something other than the means of production. It shows that literature is where the deadlock of symbolic operations becomes the revelation of excess within language, which Lacanian psychoanalysis coined as the Real. Alenka Zupancic made a similar argument in her case against an understanding of the real as the outside of language, as a beyond with which we might one day reunite in some utopian space that we have yet to invent or discover:

> This is why it is very important to keep insisting upon the notion of the Real that, in turn, has to be defined in terms other than those of some "authentic Real" lurking behind the deceptive appearances. And the (late) Lacanian of the Real can help us do precisely that. The Real is not some authentic Beyond, constituting truth of the reality. The Real is not the Beyond of reality but its own blind spot or dysfunction – that is to say, the Real is the stumbling block on account of which reality itself does not fully coincide with itself. The Real is the intrinsic division of reality itself. (Zupancic, 80)

The critical aspect of Zupancic's argument is the refusal to equate a beyond with the notion of Lacanian Real. To some extent, the logic of the beyond is still symbolic; it is the production of an outside that is still within the order of language. In a similar sense calling the real unrepresentable is also a mistake because the work of negation maintains the symbolic as a whole[20]. In contrast, understanding the real as an element almost "spitted out" by the symbolic points to the symbolic as an operation that is both dysfunctional and productive. The character Rachel bears the weight of this tension in the novel, but in psychoanalysis, this weight that is received from the past can be read not just as a burden but also as a potentiality.

[20] For an elaborated discussion of this distinction in relation to the concept of Sexual Difference, see Copjec's "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason*"* in *Read My Desire*

Transmission and Jouissance: The Passing of an Impersonal Potentiality

The word jouissance in French is not entirely foreign to the idea of transmission. While we could translate it into English as "enjoyment," it has come in France to define the enjoyment of an inheritance. One can "jouir d'un bien," which is the possibility of enjoying possessing a property that is not one's own. In that sense, Jouissance is close to the meaning of usufruct. Usufruct definition will be helpful to grasp what is at stake in the transmission of Jouissance; it is defined as "the right to enjoy the use and advantages of another's property short of the destruction or waste of its substance." Thus, it is understood as the use of something that is not one's own and as a use that does not exhaust the thing; the use does not exhaust the capacity to enjoy it. Jacques Lacan, in his seminar XX Encore also articulates Jouissance as Usufruct: "Usufruct means that you can enjoy your means, but not waste them. When you have the usufruct of an inheritance, you enjoy the inheritance as long as you do not use too much of it."(3)

Lacan's framing of inheritance through usufruct echoes Gide's text. From Azais to Rachel, there is the passing on of something which is not owned by any of them. It is instead a disturbance. On the story level, there is the repetition of the loss of the face. Azais "loses face" ("perdre la face") because of the blinding effects of his beliefs. For his granddaughter Rachel, it is literal blindness that comes to mark her face. In the passing of this blindness, we nevertheless saw that the eye was a site of resistance, maybe from a subjectivity, against this social role imposed on Rachel. What is passed on and not used up is a deficiency that also contains a potentiality. This is how I have argued we can also read the larger question of the text on the limit of representation. In the narrative, from Azais to Rachel, there is the passing on of an impossibility to account

for representation. The grandfather's sight is revealed to be blurred by fiction: the grounding of reality is lost. For Rachel, her blindness is used as a description, a reference to reality, but is discovered to be a figure, a fictional and impossible reality. Yet, both grandfather and granddaughter occupy in the text a point at which representation is not a repetition of reality but is the repetition of fiction. This is the motif of the *mise en abyme,* which structures the novel, and which is seen here as being passed on both as a deficiency of language and a capacity.

In an interview in 2014, Joan Copjec discussed how, in Freud, there is this notion that transmission operates not just on the level of the ego, the social persona, but also on the level of the unconscious and of jouissance: "What we inherit through the id, or as jouissance, is not something we have conscious access to and it does not mold us; we have to mold or express it."[21] Thus, the transmission of jouissance is not deterministic, which does not mean it cannot be determinant. There is an important distinction that needs to be made here. Transmission is not a closing of all possibilities like some causal explanations could be; it is a determining factor, but it does not close all the potentialities of action. Copjec summarizes this idea:" What every individual inherits is not an identity or identifying property, but a *potentiality*, a *capacity*, which does not prescribe in advance what it is a potential for."[22] I think this psychoanalytic question is central to the transmission described by Gide in his text, where what is passed on is something that undoes the face, the central element of the individual's identity.

Copjec argues in her interview that the potentiality of this transmission of jouissance is to be found in its impersonal aspect:" It is this that Lacan names jouissance,

[21] Joan Copjec, *The Inheritance of Potentiality. An Interview with Joan Copjec*
[22] Joan Copjec, ibid

he calls it an "inheritance" of the subject, but not one that can be used up, it is "impersonal" and does not belong to the subject." Thus, while we saw that through the blindness, Rachel could not be depersonalized into a figure, the force embedded in this blindness is also not something that can be understood as a personal force. The logic at stake here is twofold. At first, this blindness as a transmission comes from a place that precedes her, a place to be found in the grandfather. Yet, can the blindness solely come from the grandfather? As we saw earlier, Edouard defined the grandfather and the parents as both caught in this "éblouissement," this blindness to their limitations. Thus, while we identified the logic of blindness through our reading of the grandfather's position, we have to consider that the transmission at stake might come from a group rather than just one individual. This is what Freud is hinting at in *Ego and the Id* when he describes a form of transmission through the id:

> The experiences of the ego seem at first to be lost for inheritance; but, when they have been repeated often enough and with sufficient strength in many individuals in successive generations, they transform themselves, so to say, into experiences of the id, the impressions of which are preserved by heredity. Thus, in the id, which is capable of being inherited, are harbored residues of the existences of countless egos… (35)

Thus, the impersonality mentioned by Copjec is shown in Freud and Gide's text to be communal. What is this commonality? Is it not that each in the Vedel family might be cursed? Obligated to bear the lack of foundation of representation, its disconnection from reality? Indeed, it would be as if, without foundations, the family was caught in an inevitable fall. A force of decadence is bringing each generation closer and closer to a state of decay. But the glimmer of hope is that in doing so, the newer generations nevertheless bear the possibility to recuperate a subjectivity, as Rachel's social role is

undone by a blindness that resists the imposition of any preconstructed cast or image on her.

In the last part of this chapter, I would like to turn to the individual who discussed Rachel's blindness: her brother Armand. It is striking that later in the novel, it is revealed that the support of his discourse, Armand's mouth, becomes the site of the brother's disfiguration. There is, in his mouth, the development of a white patch, formless and growing, resembling a tumor-like excrescence. As we will discover, here again, the transmission of a disfiguration is at stake, as the father is the one who seems to transmit to the son the consequences of his limitations.

Transmission and the interruption of the father

Through the analysis of Armand and his father, I would like to discuss how the transmission of disfiguration can also be where a desire is uttered, only not from the ego but rather through the gaps left by its enunciations. Thus, while the transmission reinscribes a debilitation on the son received from the father, this undoing can also be the site where something can be created. The text is structured around a void, around nothing, as a creation built through its limitations. Armand follows a similar pattern, as it is on the site of his potential, a tumor-like excrescence in the mouth, that a desire can also be glimpsed at. Thus, the transmission from the pastor to Armand repeats a similar gesture as the one we saw with Rachel, but here, the disfiguration becomes a site of address and desire. With Armand, Gide asks if it is possible for a desire to be uttered from a position of voicelessness, which exists at the very limit of language. While the face is disfigured, the other, by being confronted with this disfiguration, might allow for

a different kind of face to appear through their position as the listener. But first, lets us turn to Armand's father to grasp how what is at stake in the transmission between the father and the son is the transmission of the undoing of the father's authority.

Armand's Father and the Disruption of Mastery

During the wedding of Laura and Douviers, Armand's sister Sarah shows Edouard a personal diary written by her father. Edouard retells in his journal the following lines taken from the Pastor's journal:

> Celui qui est fidèle dans les petites choses le sera aussi dans les grandes », puis « pourquoi toujours remettre au lendemain cette décision que je veux prendre de ne plus fumer. Quand ce ne serait que pour ne pas contrister Mélanie (c'est la pastoresse). Mon Dieu, donnez-moi la force de secouer le joug de ce honteux esclavage. » (Je crois que je cite exactement.) Suivait la notation de luttes, de supplications, de prières, d'efforts, assurément bien vains, car ils se répétaient de jour en jour. On tournait une page et tout d'un coup il était question d'autre chose. (114)

> He who is faithful in small things will be faithful also in great.' Then followed: 'Why do I always put until tomorrow my resolution to stop smoking? If only not to grieve Melanie' (the pastor's wife). 'Oh, Lord! give me strength to shake off the yoke of this shameful slavery.' (I quote it, I think exactly.) Then came notes of struggles, beseeching, prayers, efforts - which were evidently all in vain, as they were repeated day after day. Then I turned another page and there was no more mention of the subject. (102-103)

The pages taken from the Pastor's journal reveal an obsession to stop smoking. This common addiction to smoking could easily be disregarded as quite ordinary. Moreover, it would not seem to hint at a specificity linked to the pastor. However, this recurrence of smoking is quite puzzling for Edouard, who discussed it with the pastor a few days ago, during which the pastor indicated he had never felt addicted to smoking. Edouard is quick to note the potential hypocrisy of the pastor, but it is Sarah's interpretation that surprises and fascinates him: "Ou peut-être bien, reprit Sarah, cela

prouve que “fumer” était mis la pour autre chose. “Etait-ce Sarah qui parlait ainsi ? J’étais abasourdi. Je la regardais osant à peine la comprendre…”(114) « Or perhaps,' rejoined Sarah, it proves that "smoking" stood for something else.' Was it Sarah who spoke in this way? I was struck dumb.”[23] (103) Could smoking be the figure of something else, of another fight against another type of addiction? The pastor’s journal hints at a potential reading where smoking would be the figure of a sexual desire, of a potential affair he would have with someone else:” Quand ce ne serait que pour ne pas contrister Melanie (c’est la pastoresse).” Even Edouard’s specification, “c’est la pastoresse,” seems to imply that smoking interferes with conjugality.

We are here facing what can be defined as a force of interruption in the pastor’s everyday life. As the pastor describes it, he is failing to find the force for fighting this urge that he cannot resist. There is in the life of the pastor a bodily force that comes to interrupt his well-being. Moreover, this force of interruption does not just affect his personal life; it also puts into danger his marital relationship. Thus this “smoking” goes against the possibility of remaining in a state of homeostasis, at peace with the social. On the contrary, smoking creates an excess of tension. By using a private journal, the Pastor is trying to keep this shameful addiction away. Yet, this attempt by the Pastor to confine the urge fails. Indeed, the stealing of the intimate journal comes into the narrative to redouble the failure at concealing the urge to master it; the Pastor experiences a doubling of a state of dispossession.

[23] It appears that in Gide’s novel Edouard here represents a repetitive relation to women, where one is dumbstruck, surprised precisely by how they break the mold of expectations. In many ways, the role of women in the novel is secondary. Yet when they do appear, they seem to strike with a deadly precision a blow to men and the symbolic.

In both cases, the "smoking" remains an enigma; when Edouard and Sarah read the journal, they cannot conclude, just like the smoking remains an enigma to the Pastor. This is because what matters in this passage is not answering this enigma but rather the repetition of the disruption of dispossession. Thus, I would like to argue that Gide's text creates repetitions around a gap that is not resolved, around an enigma that is not given meaning. But it is because what is at stake here is the *repetition of a disruption*, where the disruption of the ego, master of its body and external image, is disrupted. The nature of the disruption for the pastor remains a mystery. Is it smoking or a sexual affair? It is Sarah, through her reading, which prevents the possibility of giving a clear reading of the stolen journal. Tobacco addiction might be a smoke screen for something else, or it might not. However, even without a clear origin and cause, the Pastor's disruption is somehow echoed in Armand's body, in his mouth.

Armand and creation ex nihilo

Literary critics have characterized Armand Vedel as an anti-hero, and he is the opposite of the main young characters, Bernard and Olivier. Rather than going on adventures and trying to discover himself and his place in society, he stays in a vegetative state with his family during the summer. Thus, rather than using the summer heat to experience the outside and its freedom, he stays inside the pension and is closer to rotting than blossoming. When his friend Olivier comes to visit him, he finds him in a room that is a clear indication of his place in the family:" la mienne (*La chambre d'Armand*), qui n'était d'abord, à vrai dire, qu'un cabinet de toilette ou qu'un débarras." Gide again uses the structure of the pension's building to convey what place the

individual occupies in the family. Armand is metonymically associated with the dejection of a debased material that is left out. It is noteworthy that both Armand and Rachel, who are supposed to inherit and perpetuate the familial inheritance, are associated with devaluation in some way or another. While Rachel's blindness rendered her useless, Armand is associated with dejections, with filth. This is also why they are so important in the novel, as outsiders who become figures of what representation leaves out, an ugly reminder that one would prefer to forget and put in a toilet cabin.

What is the meaning of this filth? Armand answers this question when he presents to his friend Olivier a poem named "Vase Nocturne" (Nocturnal Vase). This poem, as Armand tells it himself, is inspired by his pot chamber and by the famous fable of the potter:

> « Le Vase nocturne ; hein ! quel beau titre ! … Avec cet épigraphe de Baudelaire :
>
> Es-tu vase funèbre attendant quelques pleurs ?
>
> « J'y reprends l'antique comparaison (toujours jeune) du potier créateur, qui façonne chaque être humain comme un vase appelé à contenir on ne sait quoi. Et je me compare moi-même, dans un élan lyrique, au vase susdit ; idée qui, comme je te le disais, m'est venue naturellement en respirant l'odeur de cette chambre. (212)

> 'The Nocturnal Vase - eh? What a magnificent title! ... With this motto from Baudelaire:
>
> '" Funereal vase, what tears awaitest thou?"
>
> 'I take up once more the ancient (and ever young) comparison of the potter creator, who fashions every human being as a vase destined to hold - ah! what? And I compare myself in a lyrical outburst to the above-mentioned vase - an idea which as I was telling you, came to me as the natural result of breathing the odour of this chamber. (251)

In this short passage, Armand compares himself to the pot chamber, to a pot that, according to the fable, is supposed to contain "on ne sait quoi." This "on ne said quoi" indicates how Armand's role in the novel is to circumscribe an enigmatic thing, an element that cannot be known. The example of the potter is an allegory that has had much resonance in philosophy and psychoanalysis. It is an example that has been used by Heidegger and then by Lacan in his *Seminar VII* in order to present his interpretation of *creation ex nihilo*:

> Now, if you consider the vase from the point of view I first proposed, as an object made to represent the existence of the emptiness at the center of the real that is called the Thing, this emptiness as represented in the representation presents itself as a nihil, a nothing. And that is why the potter, just like you to whom I am speaking, creates the vase with his hand around this emptiness, creates it just like the mythical creator, ex nihilo, starting with a hole. (121)

Lacan presents to us a different understanding of the creation *ex nihilo.* It is not a creation *out of* nothing, but *around* it, thus not instituting something instead of the emptiness but creating something that would be molded around it. It is remarkable to see how both Armand and Rachel seem to be molded around a certain void in meaning from the previous generation, how they both are creations around a *nihil*. I would also like to insist on an element in Lacan's citation: "*as an object made to represent the existence of the emptiness at the center of the real that is called the Thing*." The object is here a representative of the *existence* of the emptiness, it is thus more than just a representation of it. The vase is not a representation but rather a molding. It is different from a simple representation that would stand in the absence of emptiness. The representation model is insufficient to understand Lacan's argument's stakes. Indeed, how does representation stand for the absence of a referent? As it is usually understood, a representation must have a referent, yet the vase does not even take the emptiness as

a referent. Rather than an anteriority of the referent and a repetition of the referent through representation, the vase is concomitant with the hole. There is the question of a co-constitution of the hole and the vase, as the vase exists only in as much as a hole inhabits it. Lacan describes how chains of signifiers in their arrangement leave gaps and that these very gaps, more than the I who speaks, constitute the subject:

> Production is an original domain, a domain of creation ex nihilo, insofar as it introduces into the natural world the organization of the signifier. It is for this reason that we only, in effect, find thought - and not in an idealist sense, but thought in its actualization in the world - in the intervals introduced by the signifier. (214)

As Lacan returns later in his seminar to creation *ex nihilo*, he connects it to the creation of thought, but a kind of thought not situated in the signified or the enunciated, but rather in "the intervals introduced by the signifier." The "we" in the citation could indicate a reference to the community of psychoanalysts. This community is precisely the one that listens to the gaps in the signifiers articulated by the analysand. They listen to these gaps because it is there that one can see the effects of the subject of the unconscious. This subjectivity is for Lacan, where we can also find a new dimension of the human, not rooted in the identity and stability of the ego, but rather in the disruptions of this stable image.

When Lacan discusses the case of Antigone, who refuses to see her brother Polynices not being given a funeral, it is because she stands for what in Polynices exists beyond his deeds:

> (…) it can be seen that Antigone's position represents the radical limit that affirms the unique value of his being without reference to any content, to whatever good or evil Polynices may have done, or to whatever he may be subjected to.
>
> The unique value involved is essentially that of language. Outside of language, it is inconceivable, and the being of him who has lived cannot be detached from all he bears with him in the nature of good and evil, of destiny, of consequences for

> others, or of feelings for himself. That purity, that separation of being from the characteristics of the historical drama he has lived through, is precisely the limit or the ex nihilo to which Antigone is attached. It is nothing more than the break that the very presence of language inaugurates in the life of man. (279)

For his sister, Polynices' value is beyond what he did in his life. Antigone takes a stand for the "break" created in Polynices by language. This value of his life cannot be evaluated by putting the good and the bad on a scale. This different kind of value comes from what is left out of this evaluation. It is what remains after any evaluative operation, a kind of remainder that falls out of speech. It opens the question of another dimension of the human, which could only be accessed through the gaps left behind, through the creation *ex nihilo* of a hole where a hypothetical humanity might reside.

In light of this discussion, we can see how Armand's relation to his pot chamber is more than a joke. Armand argues that every human is like a vase supposed to contain "on ne sait quoi." This comparison, in his case, is the disruption of his quality as a human and of self-worth. He describes the vase as "funereal," as if it was to hold the cinders of his death. But there is also an irony of this "funereal," as it might be related to death by humiliation. Indeed, the vase is supposed to hold the tears, a metaphor for the feces one leaves in the vase at night. The comparison to the vase is thus showing death and devaluation, but it also indicates a different understanding of the human. Indeed, compared to the vase, the human is now a degrading receptacle, a left-out element that no one would get close to. Yet, this nauseous vase could also, quite like in the creation *ex nihilo*, be the creation of a different dimension of the human, a dimension lodged in breaks and gaps. As such, it would have no human face, reduced to something akin to an empty vase or the feces filling it.

Armand's comparison to a vase reveals another dimension of the human, one that we identified in Azais and Rachel, a kind of void that cannot be represented and which here is echoed in the hole of the vase. The void, quite like Rachel's blindness, is a gift that comes from the Vedel family. Indeed, the air Armand is breathing, the putrid and suffocating air of his room and of the family's pension, makes him realize he might be the vase around this "emptiness." Thus, this putrid air from the familial home goes through Armand's body and makes him realize that he is this vase around an emptiness. From one generation to the next, with Rachel and now with Armand, there is the reinscription of a void. The comparison with the vase reveals how Armand plays a similar role as Rachel's, but in this role, there is also the dimension of creation. Indeed, I would argue that the metaphor of the vase, in Armand's speech and Lacan's, is the idea of creation, of the productive aspect of the chain of signifiers. If the chain of signifiers repeats a break, the breaks also create a dimension of the human. However, how can this dimension of the human be heard? How can this creation ex nihilo be somehow heard? In Lacan's speech, it appeared that the psychoanalyst who listens for the gap in the analysand's speech could be one that could hear this creation. In Gide's text, there is an address made by Armand toward another character, Olivier. This address is made by showing Olivier a white patch in the mouth. Like the vase holding the transmitted void, the patch in the mouth is the result of transmission. The white patch is a mold around a void coming from the past. While this patch, as for Rachel, attacks Armand's face, it remains the site of a potential voice. In the end, it might be Armand, in the showing of a white patch, who might try to turn a scene of disfiguration into a

scene of address. A scene where the undoing of the face becomes the site of a new kind of address.

Disfiguration and The Speaking Body

At the end of the novel, when Armand meets with his friend Olivier, he suddenly switches the conversation to something he has been noticing in the interior of his mouth:

> “Tiens regarde : sur le bord de la lèvre ; à l’intérieur »
> Il se pencha vers Olivier et d’un doigt souleva sa lèvre.
> « Je ne vois rien.
> -Mais si ; la ; dans le coin. »
> Olivier distingua, près de la commissure, une tache blanchâtre. Un peu inquiet :
> C’est une aphte, dit-il pour rassurer Armand
> Celui-ci haussa les épaules.
> « Ne dis donc pas de bêtises, toi, un homme sérieux. D’abord « aphte » est du masculin ; et puis aphte c’est mou et ça passe. Ça c’est dur et de semaine en semaine ça grossit. Et ça me donne une espèce de mauvais gout dans la bouche. » (277)

> ‘He put down his hat and went up to the window. 'Just look here; on the inside of my lip ?'
> He stooped towards Olivier and lifted up his lip with his finger.
> 'I can't see anything.'
> 'Yes, you can; there; in the corner.'
> Olivier saw a whitish spot near the corner. A little uneasily:
> 'It's a gumboil,' he said to reassure Armand.
> But Armand shrugged his shoulders.
> 'Don't talk nonsense - such a serious fellow as you! A gumboil's soft and it goes away. This is hard and gets larger every week. And it gives me a kind of bad taste in my mouth.' (328)

This passage of the dialogue seems to come literally out of nowhere. The sudden change of subject to this white patch is quite unsettling. The revelation of this white patch is the irruption of something quite different from the rest of their conversation, which was focused on art. Yet, it might be the relation to art as a creation that is playing here in the discussion on the white patch. However, what is the origin of this patch?

Armand gives us a hint when he cites a line from the play Phaedra by Racine: “Mon mal vient de plus loin” As Armand does not give an explicit origin, he nonetheless points to the potentiality of a transmission. In referring to the play, he picks a line in which Phaedra tells her servant that her love for her son-in-law is a curse that Aphrodite has cast on her family. I argue that the enigmatic origin described in the quote and the transmission referred to in the play both point to what we identified in the father, in the enigmatic interruptions that were interfering with his life. The smoking habit of the Father has marked the mouth of the son. The enigmatic interruptions echo this “on ne sait quoi” that Armand, as the vase, was supposed to contain. Yet here, I also think that we need to point to the odd temporality that transmission creates, where it is only retroactively, through the transmission to the son, that the importance of the interruptions is revealed, that they come to be given a possible meaning. Thus, as Gide wrote in his journal, the next generation is supposed to shine a light on the previous one, and nonetheless, Gide also argued that he failed at this task. This shows what is already at play here, the transmission allows us to reveal another scene that can give us some clue to the meaning of certain acts, yet it does not give them a complete explanation.

While the father tried to make his son a pastor just like him, it is a different kind of transmission still linked to speaking that has been instantiated. Yet, instead of being a transmission where the mouth is seen as an instrument of speech, it is here the mouth as a bodily element that becomes the transmission site. Thus, Armand’s body becomes the site of a transmission from his father, but the transmission of a disfiguration rather than an inherited object or a social position. The undoing of the mastery of the pastor, who, like Azais, loses face (“perdre la face”), is passed on to the next generation as a

degradation of the face. However, here the degradation, in light of the vase metaphor, can be read as a creation. The white patch is a creation around this void that came from the past, around this "mal qui vient de plus loin."

I want to emphasize the act of creation at stake in the shift from the father's smoking to the white patch in the son's mouth. In the father's journal, the word used is the infinitive form of the verb "fumer." Thus, what is described here is an act, a repetitive and addictive act of inhaling, of closing one's lips on a cigarette. I think that this example is also quite striking in its resemblance to Freud's discussion of the sucking of the breast by the baby in his *Three Essays On Sexuality*:

> At first sight, it might appear as if sensual sucking therefore does depend on the presence or absence of an object, but strictly speaking, this is not the case. The breast, or one of its surrogates such as a milk bottle, is only a thing by means of which the infant discovers that sucking is pleasurable. More concretely, while sucking at the mother's breast, the lips of the infant behave as an erogenous zone and the warm milk creates a pleasurable excitation that the infant will later try to reproduce. This implies that the infant's relation to the breast—or attachment to the object providing the milk—is not essential to sexuality. (46)

In this passage, Freud describes that what the child is in search of is the act of sucking. It is not linked to an object but to the stimulation of the erogenous zone itself. Thus, what Freud also reveals here is that there is an element, not visible, that comes to disrupt the hunger instinct, that comes to invest an otherness in the act of sucking, a force *asking* for more repetition, but whose voice is not heard. While this force can be analyzed as an instantiation of the logic of the death drive, what interests us here is the absence of face. The force asking for more pleasure does not come from a particular entity, yet it acts on the individual. That which demands the repetition of pleasure, for the baby, and the pastor, has no face and yet expresses itself. It is not a coincidence, then, to see the son developing a white patch in his mouth as if the force was trying to

pierce out from the body to speak. Armand would become a speaking body that could suddenly give a voice to a faceless force.

The transmission is occurring in the mouth and in a scene of address, where Armand asks Olivier to bear witness to this excrescence. Hidden and revealed in this scene is a desire for Olivier. Armand, who never clearly utters his attraction toward Oliver, shows him his patch, growing and getting harder. Through the sexual innuendo, Armand's white patch stands for a hidden desire. Could the faceless force be transformed, through a scene of address, into a desire?

Facing the Unsayable Desire

Armand and Olivier in the novel are two characters who have a tender affection for each other but who never completely articulate their desire. The homosexual subtext between these two characters is also present among other characters in *The Counterfeiters* and other novels by Gide. Gide's relationship with his sexuality was the source of many contradictory feelings, where his protestant education and aesthetic beliefs would interfere with a homosexual desire. I am not here trying to analyze Gide's psychology but rather to argue that Gide's personal life and many of his writings point to desire as an untenable, dislocated position. Armand experiences this impossibility of being at one with his desire through the impossibility of avowing his desire to Olivier. Yet, the scene of the white patch is also a staging of his desire.

When Armand presents the white patch to his friend, he leans forward as he opens his mouth, yet it is not to kiss a lover but rather to show him the formless white patch. This patch in the mouth, described at this moment, reveals itself to be more than

just the harbinger of death: “Ça c’est dur et de semaine en semaine ça grossit. Et ça me donne une espèce de mauvais gout dans la bouche.” The leaning forward, accompanied by a description of the white patch as hard and growing, can be read as having a sexual connotation. But as we said, this patch seems like the harbinger of illness and death, and when Olivier asks his friend why he refuses to see a doctor, Armand answers that he already suspects the meaning of the white patch. A man of science cannot categorize this white patch, nor does it need to be cured. Here to get rid of the white patch is to get rid of Eros, to remove a desire with a scalpel. Thus, while Armand never directly utters his desire, in the refusal to see the doctor, he stands in for this white patch in the face of illness. In doing so, Gide produces a stage for a desire that could not be said at this time in France, and Armand, the most indecisive character in the novel, would rather face death than give up on his desire. Armand's disfiguration is also the possibility of creating a stage for his desire.

As Lacan argues in his discussion of sublimation in *Seminar VII*: “Sublimation is an ethical problem for one fundamental reason: it creates socially recognized values.”(107) We see that in standing in front of death, Armand creates a desiring position that goes “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” and thus beyond the reality principle and the social values of his time. Armand’s stand for his desire in the face of death raises the homosexual desire out of the pathological onto the subject's realm.

Conclusion: Disfiguration and the Limits of Representation

There is something beyond this historical reading of desire repressed by social norms. What peaks out through the white patch is the attempt to express something which has no voice, a "disfigured humanity," speechless, existing between each enunciation. *The Counterfeiters*, through the transmissions in the Vedel Family, show the possibility of relating the limits of representations and the passing on of a disfiguration. As Gide tries to find the "nothing" which inhabits language, he comes to find in his text the undoing of the face, the disfiguration of the Vedel Family. By giving a human face, language makes it just a figure; the face is no longer the human face and is a by-product of language. This also affects language in return, for the condition of language is that a speaking face utters it and that the signifiers are not just randomly put together; there is an intent, a consciousness articulating them. As de Man argues in *Rhetoric of Romanticism*:" "Face" is, first of all, a "speaking face," the locus of speech, the necessary condition for the existence of articulated language." (89) Thus, the absence of a grounding speaking face undoes the belief in the human face and the origin of language, the originary uttering instance. Thus, the counterfeited money is not the sole metaphor for the limit of representation in the novel, the transmission of disfiguration is also an essential aspect of Gide's research. In disfiguration, the origin of language is undermined, but Gide nevertheless situates in it a mute resistance. This resistance is seen in Rachel's eyes and in Armand's mouth, a mute enactment bearing the possibility for a new understanding of what animates us. Through Armand, in particular, we see a desire uttered in the cracks of language, in its gaps. It is not the mouth as the tool of the speaking face which speaks, but rather a mute element in this

mouth, a white excrescence. While the descendant is disfigured by the transmission of the limits of language, this disfiguration in Gide's text is also staged as the possibility for the inscription of a desire which might otherwise not be given the possibility of existing.

CHAPTER 2

Face to Face with the Impossible in Georges Bataille's *My Mother*

Introduction

Georges Bataille's writing is marked by a search for an impossible. A task accomplished not by attaining the limit of language but rather by inscribing *in writing* the impossibility of reaching any object or meaning. In that sense, there is, for Bataille, a writing that resembles that of the mystics[24]. He saw in their writings an attempt at reaching God beyond God, but without knowing that they were doing it. This writing practice contains the belief in a message and meaning while undermining the possibility of ever finding it. In *Guilty*, Bataille echoed this practice when he argued that his writing was constantly oscillating between an infinity of possibilities and the impossible:

> Did a wind from outside write this book? To write is to articulate an intention .... I intended this philosophy "whose head was near heaven while its feet adjoined the realm of the dead." I'm waiting for the onslaught of a squall to uproot .... Right now I'm in touch with everything possible! At the same time I'm in touch with the impossible. I'm attaining the power of existence to reach the opposite of existence. My death and I slip away together into the wind from outside, where I open myself to my absence. (118)

As writing is the place of an intention, of a will that puts together words on a page, for Bataille, it is also the undoing of this presence. A wind comes in and comes out without the presence of a soul. It is, to some extent, how we could read this quote and Bataille's project. But it's not because Bataille aims to attain a level of absence, that it should be expressed through the most abstract writing and without an embodiment of

[24] For an analysis of the impact of mysticism on Bataille, see Amy Hollywood, "Bataille and Mysticism: A "Dazzling Dissolution," *Diacritics*, 1996

the writer in the text. On the contrary, through the narration of horrifying encounters with the impossible, Bataille makes his writing soar to the highest skies while falling into the most bottomless abyss in the same movement. This vertiginous movement can be encountered through what Bataille calls the sacred, a concept that takes away reason from God to leave us only with a sense of horror. In *Guilty,* he wrote:

> It seemed to me that human thought had two terms: God and the sentiment of the absence of God. But God being the confusion of the sacred (the religious aspect) and reason (the instrumental aspect), he has a place only in a world where the confusion of the instrumental and the sacred becomes the basis for reassurance. God terrifies if he is no longer the same thing as reason (Pascal, Kierkegaard). (6)

The question of the encounter with a terrifying divine presence in the texts by Bataille thus points to a meeting with the dissolution of reason. These scenes in Bataille create for the characters a sense of ecstasy that comes from the very realization that they are facing an absence, a radical disappearance of an object to experience. Freed from the instrumental aspect of religion, the individual is left alone in the face of a religious feeling, a bodily state no longer attached to discourse.

If there is one character who embodies particularly well the impossible, the absence of God, and horror, it is the figure of the eroticized mother in Bataille's *My Mother*: "Death, in my eyes, was no less divine than the sun, and my mother, through her crimes, was closer to God than anything I had seen through the window of the church?" (43) For Pierre, the narrator of *My Mother*, his mother, through her erotic crimes perpetrated on others and himself, brings herself closer to God than a visit to the church would. The mother figure in the novel is, to some extent, the paramount figure of the impossible for her son. Through her erotic gestures towards him, she plays with the incest taboo. In doing so, she represents an object impossible for the son while at

the same time attracting him towards her. She also diverts him from religion and its institutionalization to confront him more directly with the sacred ecstasy she feels in her body.

While the erotic dimension in *My Mother* echoes other writings by Bataille, what is specific is the mother-son relation. What is raised through their interaction is the question of the transmission of this impossible — the transmission from the mother to the son of an impossible object of ecstasy. The mother represents the son's impossible object of desire, but it does not stop there. The text connects her to death and the sun, as we saw earlier, and the sacred. All these categories are for Bataille elements that cannot be directly perceived or represented. Thus, accompanying the question of the transmission is the question of the figuration of this impossible through the mother's appearance. What does it mean to give to the impossible a "human face"? How might the impossible be related to the figuration of the face in literature?

Pierre writes *My Mother* in the aftermath of his mother's death. It makes the text a recollection of the encounter with the impossible. It immediately raises the question of the veracity of the recollection. As the readers get closer to the end, the face of the mother becomes less clear. It seems to be fragmented, to appear in other characters' faces, or to even be found in the novel's environment. Is the narrator to be trusted? What could he remember clearly from these overwhelmingly erotic scenes with the mother? While the text is called *My Mother*, it seems less and less evident where the mother is in the text. Yet could this dissemination of the mother and her face be what allows the text to transmit the impossible to the readers themselves? This will be my argument, and I will attempt to show how the undoing of the mother's face in the text creates a

sense of vertigo for the reader, which is the exact feeling that the mother transmits to Pierre. For Bataille, Vertigo is the feeling one feels when encountering the impossible, like gazing into a bottomless abyss. My argument will be that this feeling is created in the text by how Pierre writes. The use of metaphors and metonymies produces a dissemination, a destabilization of the unity of the mother. It becomes hard to believe the recollected encounters narrated by Pierre.

Encountering the Erotic Mother

Georges Bataille's novel *My Mother* discusses the relationship between a mother and a son once the father dies and the son discovers the double life the mother was living. This other life is a life of excess, an effusion of sexual activity, a life of debauchery and abundance. These themes are recurrent in Bataille's novels, but what makes it so distinct in this novel is that it is staged by the mother for the son to witness. Why does Bataille turn here to the figure of the mother and a first-person narrative? Several critics have mentioned the autobiographical dimension of the novel, how Bataille and his mother abandoned his blind father during the German invasion of France in the first world war. However, the mother also occupies a particular role in Bataille's thinking of society. The mother occupies a position of purity for Bataille, an object that is kept away from eroticism, on which the prohibition of incest weighs. This weight is partially removed in this novel as the mother and the son enter an erotic relationship. Between the mother and the son, there are scenes of erotic pedagogy, where the son tries to grasp what he cannot comprehend in the mother. While he will not be able to understand the cause of the mother's erotic outbursts, she will nevertheless

transmit to him the physical effects that she feels. Without giving a reason or an explanation to what animates the mother, the text nonetheless enacts a transmission from her toward her son. At the beginning of this new relationship between son and mother is the father's death.

The Death of the Father and the Adoration for the Mother

The first element we discover in the novel about the mother is that she is not a loving mother. She is a much more ambivalent figure. And while the novel is famous for the question of incest it raises, we could also not define the relationship between the mother and the son as sexual. While in the second part of the novel, Pierre, the son, is in a long sexual relationship with a prostitute "Hansi." In the novel's first part, the relationship with the mother is made of adoration and fear. This could be summarized in a feeling of anxiety felt by the son, which echoes how the mother will come to call him the fruit of her anxiety.

In the novel, there is a distinction between genital sexuality and a "desexualization" of desire. This is illustrated through the difference between Hansi, the prostitute or the "fallen woman," and Hélène, the mother and the "falling woman." In this falling out of the position of purity, there is a "headless force," which does not seem to be attached to an intent, a psychological self. This force can be understood as what creates in the mother this impulse for debauchery, these uncontrollable impulses. The complexity for the son to grasp the meaning of this force of falling in the mother will be a source of anxiety and creates his falling. There is a difference when the sexual interaction is between the son and the mother and when it is between the son and Hansi.

It is the distinction between a desire that would be bound to sexual intercourse and a desire that would be liberated from its attachment to any sexual object.

To understand the impact of the falling for the son, we need to grasp how the mother is "seen" by her son at the novel's beginning. Indeed, we should ask ourselves from which position does the mother fall? The book comprises a minimal number of characters; at the beginning, we are presented mainly with a small family structure: the son Pierre, his mother Hélène, and the father. The novel, from the start, emphasizes that the son hates the father while he is in adoration for his mother. Moreover, from the perspective of the son, the father is mainly seen as a figure that disturbs the union between the son and the mother:

> Ma Mère m'aimait : entre elle et moi, je croyais à l'identité des pensées et des sentiments, que seule troublait la présence de l'intrus, de mon père. (12-13)
>
> My mother loved me; I believed that we thought and felt alike, in a unison marred only by the presence of the intruder, my father. (28)

The writing evokes through the alliteration of the "M" in "Ma Mère m'aimait" a movement of sucking, evoking a moment of union with the mother where love and satisfaction seem to be combined in the sucking of the breast. The writing also indicates a clear connection between the mother and her breast through the very use of "ma mère," which in French is the homophone of "mammaire" (mammary). In addition to this homophony and the alliteration of the "M," the very letter "M" echoes the word love in French (aime), as well as the sound of the baby child calling his mother. It is as if the narrator is caught in a mad process of meaning overlaying, where every tool of language is used to name the love from the son. Indeed, while through our interpretation, we can read a suction and a love from the son, the literal meaning "Ma Mère m'aimait" is a

love from the mother. In a sense, while the enunciated seems to indicate the mother's love, its means of expression all point to the son's love, the complete union he longed for, and the sucking of the mother's breast. Is it not already indicatory to see these two loves being united in the expression "Ma mère m'aimait," and yet while one is on the level of the signified, the other seems to be related to the signifier? It is as if two layers of meaning were juxtaposed; two currents of love were flowing, yet like the cold and warm water currents, they seem unable to rejoin[25].

As we have seen in the quote above, the father is despised and disrupts the relationship with the mother. In reaction to his father, an atheist, Pierre turns to religion as a reaction against him. However, the question of religion in Bataille also turns toward what he defined as the sacred. This notion allows us to understand how Pierre's turn toward the sacred is about adoration for the mother. The relation to the sacred is enacted through a kind of bedazzlement toward a figure who is so overwhelming that the tension it creates in the body almost transforms it into a petrified statue:

> Je le détestais si pleinement qu'en toutes choses, je pris le contrepied de ses jugements. En ces temps-là, je devins pieux au point d'imaginer que j'entrerais plus tard en religion. Mon père était alors un anticlérical ardent. Je ne renonçai à l'état religieux qu'à sa mort afin de vivre avec ma mère, devant laquelle j'entais perdu d'adoration. (12)
>
> I detested him so heartily that I took the opposite view to his on everything. At that stage I had become devout to the point of imagining myself eventually entering the Church. My father was then ardently anti-clerical. Not until he was dead did I decide against a religious vocation to live with my mother, before whom I stood in blind adoration. (28)

[25] This is what Denis Hollier in *Against Architecture* will identify:" The woman called "my mother" throughout the narrative is, therefore, for the narrator, the object of his desire. But the narrator-son, conversely, never stops describing himself as being his mother's object of desire. These two desires are not symmetrical. " (164)

As is often the case in the novel, Bataille's language is highly playful. We notice that the turn to religion is described in a language that echoes coitus. The narrator, by describing himself as pious (pieux), which in French can also mean a stick or even a bed in argot, and by saying that he would enter inside religion, mimics conversion to sexual penetration. Yet, this motion is not used with the mother. Instead, there is a movement of "perdu d'adoration." This shift from coitus to adoration is the difference between religion and the sacred. Here the stiffness in Pierre is not related to his penis but seems more related to a petrification of the body in a moment of bliss. This movement of petrification in front of the mother might allow us to think that the narrator's name is linked to this specific relation to the mother: Pierre / stone. In the facing of the mother, there is something overwhelming for the son. Through this experience, Pierre gets in touch with the sacred. Even more than love, it is adoration that will describe the attitude of the son toward the mother at the end of the novel:"J'ai adoré ma mère, je ne l'ai pas aimée."(122). The petrification of the son in the face of the sacred mother seems to echo how in the myth of Medusa, the Greek soldiers facing her would be turned into stone. Here we can already see that in Pierre's name and his relation of adoration to his mother, there is a witnessing of something that petrifies, of something in the mother that seems to exceed the mother as an individual.

In the context of this opposition to the father and adoration for the mother, the father's early death could be seen as what will allow perfect communion between mother and son. The fact that they must go to his funeral in the city of *Vannes* (valve/dig) could show that his death might bring with it the liberation of a flow. The mother's love for the son might be released through the father's disappearance. And yet, instead of love,

what Pierre faces is the revelation that his father was only a veil that prevented him from seeing who his mother was:

> Tu es trop jeune, dit-elle, et je ne devrais pas te parler, mais tu dois à la fin te demander si ta mère est digne du respect que tu lui montres. Maintenant ton père est mort et je suis fatiguée de mentir : je suis pire que lui ! (21)
>
> You are too young,' said she, 'I oughtn't to talk to you at all, but sooner or later you will be wondering whether your mother merits your respect. Well, your father is dead now and I am tired of falsehoods: I am worse than he. (35)

In this revelation, what is essential is its unexpectedness. What is the most important in her address to the son is that it takes him off guard, that there is a force to the uttered speech. This force is like a force of breaking that will leave an imprint on the son. Here it is less about a shock brought by the incommensurability of the event as it is about the loss of a sense of certainty. Pierre can no longer rest assured that his mother's relation to him is a relation of love. But what can be the effect of a mother-son relationship that would not be based on love but on witnessing the mother's debauchery?

The Impossible Witnessing: Elevating the Mother's Falling

What is particular about the mother's falling into debauchery is that it must be a scene where the son is addressed and taken as a witness. However, she wants more than just to be looked at; she wants him to love her, to respect her in this falling from purity. This creates a complicated movement where the son sees the mother as falling, but he should also be elevating her. She asks the son to realize an impossible action of lifting what is falling, of respecting that which cannot be respected:

> Je ferais le pire devant toi et je serais pure à tes yeux (25)
>
> Even if I did my worst in front of you, I'd still be pure in your eyes. (24)

> Mais je veux de ton amour que si tu sais que je suis répugnante et que tu m'aimes en le sachant. (23)
>
> But I don't want your love unless you know I am repulsive and love me even as you know it. (23)

There is an interesting echo in words pire/pure. The text creates a duality. We should recognize how the mother asks, or rather orders, the son to be caught in an impossible position. She is seen by him and exists in him as the impossible. While the pire/pure creates an opposition, the notions of repugnance and love show that she must live in him as both a force of attraction and repulsion. There is a tension that is created in the son through this witnessing, two forces working against one another. Thus, this shows that the mother's falling into debauchery is also, for the son, a paradoxical falling, as he must both witness it and elevate her. As we said, it creates tension, which in the son's body creates a trembling:

> Maman m'écriai-je avec feu, rien de ce que tu peux faire ne changera le respect que j'ai pour toi. Je te le dis en tremblant mais, tu l'as compris, je te le dis avec toute ma force (34)
>
> Nothing,' I answered her fervently, 'nothing you could do would alter the respect I have for you. Saying so may be making me tremble; but you know I say it with all the strength there is in me. (30)

The trembling of the body is a recurring feature in Bataille's writing. In *Guilty*, the trembling happens in the face of an object not bound by reason[26]. The mother is not bound by reason; as an incarnation of the sacred in Bataille, she is not bound to a discourse. The trembling marks the encounter with the sacred, forcing Pierre to approach the impossible. As an impossible force beyond reason controls the mother, the

[26] "Clearly, I'm bound to tremble if the object of my fear isn't limited by reason. I have to tremble if the possibility of gambling doesn't attract me." (6)

son is now caught in this tension that he cannot resolve. Thus, when discourse falters in the face of the mother, of the sacred, the body becomes the sole recourse to receive it, to record the encounter. It is the tension between attraction and repulsion that will create the son's horror for himself:

> Que je cède à l'horreur de la débauche ou je savais maintenant que ma mère se complaisait, aussitôt le respect que j'avais d'elle faisait de moi-même et non d'elle un objet d'horreur. A peine revenais-je de la vénération, je devais me dire à n'en pas douter que sa débauche me donnait la nausée (35)
>
> If I gave way to horror at the thought of the debauchery, I now knew was the delight of my mother's life, then the respect I had for her would immediately make of me, and not of her, an object of horror. And, no sooner returned to my worshipful attitude, I would be forced to the realization that her debauchery nauseated me. (31)

The mother's fall has been passed on to the son. Now they share a common fate. And yet we also should wonder what this communion would look like since it is already complicated to assert specifically the mother's position in the son's eyes. Because what is transmitted is not a message or knowledge, it does not create a common ground between the mother and the son. While Pierre tries to elaborate a discourse about the mother to rationalize and stabilize their relationship, he keeps failing in his endeavors. The mother is animated by a force that cannot be understood, a kind of headless force. By exploring the union's failure with the mother, I would like to show how Pierre cannot speak of nor know the object of the transmission. He can only be marked by it and repeat the impossibility of speaking of it.

The Open Wound and the Impossible Communion

However, what characterizes the way Pierre sees his relationship with his mother, is a perpetual back and forth between union and disunion. Through Pierre's horror for himself, he might experience a form of communion with the mother's debauchery. This communion seems to be for Pierre also the possibility to create a piece of knowledge about the mother. This new foundation would allow the construction of a stabilized relationship with her. Witnessing is accompanied by a movement in which Pierre goes from being overwhelmed by the mother's debasement only to feel that this debasement is now a new knowledge about the mother, an understanding that he can own and thus recreate the communion with the mother, as in this example:

> La vie recommença. Dans sa lenteur, le temps cicatrisait la déchirure. Ma mère devant moi semblait calme, j'admirais, j'aimais sa maitrise, qui m'apaisait profondément. Jamais je ne l'avais aimé davantage. Jamais je n'avais eu pour elle une dévotion plus grande, d'autant plus folle qu'unis maintenant dans la même malédiction, nous étions séparés du reste du monde. Entre elle et moi, un nouveau lien s'était formé, celui de la déchéance et de la lâcheté. (51)

> "Life got started again. Slow-moving time healed the gash. To me, my mother seemed calm, I admired, I loved her self-mastery, that coolness had a profoundly soothing effect upon me. Never had I loved her more. Never had my devotion to her been so great, the more so and the madder for the fact that, united now in the same malediction, we were divorced from the rest of the world. Between her and me a new bond had formed; moral decline and cowardice were its sinews. (41)

As in this passage, Pierre repeatedly returns to a moment of communion with the mother, where both would be caught in the same state. This shows how the narrator could be like a healing wound opened by the mother's debauchery. The wound opened in the narrator by the mother can heal through the feeling of communion. It is like a dialectical movement, where the tension within language, over time, can become knowledge and thus allows for what has been broken to be repaired. This passage can overcome the tension between love and repugnance. The narrator accomplishes it through the transformation of repugnance; the repugnance is elevated and transformed

into love. The tension between attraction and repulsion has been dissipated; the falling has been transformed into an elevation. However, even though repeatedly in the text Pierre experiences these moments of healing, the mother perpetually reopens the wound, pushes the son over a cliff, and precipitates him in his collapse and falling, an "effondrement":

> Le système que j'avais construit dans lequel je me refugiai, s'effondrait. Ma Mère était parfois de bonne humeur. Mais elle n'avait jamais cette gaieté sans piège, cet enjouement qui me clouait. (64)
>
> The system I had built up, within which I had taken refuge, was now about to collapse. My mother might sometimes be in a jovial humor, but there was always a catch to that gaiety of hers, a barb to her playfulness. (48)

The system built by the son is jeopardized by the mother[27]. This is how we can better understand the son's falling. It is a falling of the system of knowledge that he is trying to build to create stability and communion with the mother. This communion would be based on a common idea of filth and debauchery. However, the demand from the mother is not a demand to share knowledge or a trait. On the contrary, the mother's demand creates tension, an imprint that is not made of knowledge but a force of tension. This tension results from a contradiction; something cannot be formalized into a piece of knowledge, the irresolvable combination of attraction and repulsion. Thus, the witnessing of the mother is not the passing on of knowledge. On the contrary, it is the marking on the body of a trembling, of a tension[28].

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[27] There is on the part of Pierre, a very strong impulse to overcome the mother's debauchery. This perpetual failure by the son to "live up" to the mother's impact seems a very interesting metaphor of the work of the philosopher or the literary critic, always trying to formalize the force of an impact:" Après ma longue détresse, cette voix me ramenait à la vie. Je l'aimais d'autant plus que maintenant, de savoir, j'étais prêt à penser qu'il n'était rien qui ne fut perdu, et que soudain, j'éprouvais cette sérénité hors d'atteinte, qui triomphait du pire, rejaillissant intacte de l'infamie." (43)

[28] We could even go as far as saying that by asking to elevate what is falling, the mother is making the demand to transform into a knowledge the force of falling that disrupts it. In that sense, this demand is

In the text, this is particularly clear when Pierre describes the mother as a storm that always comes unannounced and can strike at any moment, destroying the fortress built by the son's knowledge. Accompanying the storm is the image of lightning. This lightning is a paradoxical object to be witnessed because to witness it means to be potentially blinded[29] by it. Thus, through its unexpectedness and the blinding effect of the lightning, the storm shows that the mother's falling is an experience that disrupts the possibility for the son to receive or create knowledge about it. Rather than the witnessing of an image of the lightning, what makes the mark on Pierre is the trembling on the body, the tension between attraction and repulsion. The lightning thus does not leave a representation as a memory, but the trembling of a stricken (*foudroyé*) body. Even though it seems impossible for Pierre to know what animates the mother, there is nonetheless the enactment of transmission through the marking on the body.

We see how the transmission enacts the passing of a force from the mother to the son. Could we not read this trembling at the site of the lightning as the passing of an energy that cannot be perceived? The mother's enjoyment which strikes the son is like the passing on of a force at the site where no knowledge can be produced, and nonetheless, a transmission can be enacted. What defines this transmission is that it erases the possibility of grasping its moment of origin, the moment of its passing on. In the face of this ungraspable event, the body becomes the sole possible receptacle for the transmission. The body becomes the site of an inscription that cannot be known. If the impossible object in the mother cannot be perceived, we see that it complicates the

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the demand to try to transform something in her, that she cannot see, into a knowledge. Rather than doing so, Pierre can only tremble, thus offering the sight of the impossibility of turning it into a knowledge.

[29] "Qu'avais-je à faire en ce monde mort, sinon d'oublier la fulgurance qui m'avait aveuglé quand ma Mère était dans mes bras ? Mais je savais déjà : je n'oublierais jamais » (27)

ability to speak of it. There is resistance to turning the impossible into a discourse in the text.

The Kiss of the Lightning

The lightning returns as a marking on the body, as a touching, through another character: Rea. Rea, in the novel, is introduced by the mother to give Pierre a sexual education. Rea's most crucial role, however, is that of a detour. She is a detour allowing Pierre to return to something in the mother he could not glimpse at otherwise, an unattainable object:

> Réa m'attirait sans doute mais en elle je désirais moins les facilités du plaisir que l'objet associé aux désordres de ma mère. (100)
>
> Rhea held an attraction for me, undeniably; but in her I desired not so much the facilities of pleasure as the object connected with my mother's disorders. (66)
>
> J'embrassais Réa, à ne plus voir en elle que l'accès, par un détour, a ce qui dans ma mère, était inaccessible pour moi (101)
>
> I would view Rhea as nothing but the indirect access to what I could not get at in my mother. (67)

This object that cannot be obtained by Pierre comes to be figured as the lightning that we discussed earlier. Here again the lightning is associated to a trembling in Pierre, but this time the lightning results from a kiss with Rea, where Pierre can taste the enigma of the lightning:

> L'innommable baiser qui m'était proposé (et que je supposais ma mère aimait) seul était digne de mon tremblement. Ce baiser seul était tragique : il avait la saveur suspecte et l'éclat effarant de la foudre. (87)

> The unnameable caress which had been proposed to me (and which, I supposed, my mother relished), it alone justified my trembling. This caress alone was tragic: it had the suspect savour and the glaring awfulness of lightning[30]. (60)

There is an interesting shift in how Pierre experiences the lightning, while when he witnessed the mother's debauchery, it could be "experienced" through a blinding. Here there is both a blinding and a tasting of the lightning. Through the kiss with Rea, the mouth allows another sense to indirectly grasp the witnessing of this "object" of the mother. Thus, the mouth comes to supplement the eyes. In this new situation, "not seeing" does not prevent the experience. Moreover, no knowledge of this "saveur suspecte" is required for the experience to occur here. The transmission happens through an indirect path, through Rea, and through a sense other than vision. The witnessing of the lightning can only be a witnessing that remains blind to the image of the lightning.

Yet, what else can the mouth reveal here? The mouth is an organ that is occupied by an emptiness. This imagery of the mouth can indicate how Pierre's mouth becomes the space in which the mother's enigma, the striking lightning, finds a space. While this is here an argument that is mainly based on the mouth as a symbol, this is also made quite clear by Pierre himself when he describes the kiss between him and Rea:

> Réa m'avait guidé, avait guidé ma main vers l'humidité pénétrable et quand elle m'avait embrassé elle avait introduit dans ma bouche une énorme langue. (84)

> Rhea had guided me, had steered my hand towards penetrable wetness, and when she had kissed me she had thrust an enormous tongue into my mouth[31]. (59)

[30] Here the translation of "baiser" into caress by the translator seems to miss the importance of the mouth, which in the novel both evokes the place of the tongue and of the language. However, the evocation of caress and of touching does point to the transmission that would imply a bodily contact, a transmission that would not be based on communication, on speech.

[31] It is interesting to note that the translator reinstituted the "H" in Rea, even though it was not there in the French version, and that in French, the titan Rhea is also written with a "h", the translator seems to be correcting Bataille.

Through Rea, it is now not the mother's lightning that is introduced but a tongue, the mother's tongue. It is the introduction of a language[32], but a language that is being introduced while remaining mute; it is an enormous tongue that seems to fill Pierre's mouth. Thus, Pierre's mouth and its cavity become the depositary of the mother's enigma, while a foreign tongue is also introduced into his mouth. In the text, Pierre's mouth is a place that gives existence to an enigma from the mother, to what remains mute, but it is also a place that is given a tongue, the mother's tongue. The mother's tongue fills Pierre's mouth, rendering it unusable. There is no space left for Pierre's tongue or voice. But is there a voice for what animates the mother? Is there a voice that can speak the language of what is unsayable in her? Through this transmission by the mouth of a literal tongue, it is also the revelation by the text that the transmission of the impossible is not spoken, in this case, taking the form of a "mute tongue." Because of the obstruction of Pierre's mouth, it is not the mouth but the trembling body that will be the site through which Pierre might answer the mother's address to him.

The mother in the novel bears something impossible which cannot be articulated. While trying to transmit her experience to her son, the transmission cannot be expressed in words. How could we understand this peculiar scene between a mother and a son? Is the mother not a key figure in the child's introduction to language? A figure who, through her care, brings the child into the realm of love and desire. While the mother and the child can figure a scene of origin in literature and psychoanalysis, Bataille's text questions this scene. Literary theorists Cynthia Chase and Paul de Man have highlighted a temporal paradox in the scene between the mother and the child. It

[32] Here there is a play with the french word "langue" which can both mean the organ and a language.

is the child who gives a speaking face to the mother. In their argument, the mother's face is not a foundation but a product of language. In literature, this scene between a mother and a child expresses the radical ungrounding of language, its lack of foundation, and of origin. This creates a sense of vertigo, as language seems suspended, without foundation or propping. Thus, the transmission of the impossible is the encounter with the lack of foundation of language, which is also an encounter with the disappearance of the human face and its voice. Therefore, I will argue that this particular transmission between Pierre and his mother is silent.

I would add that the undermining of this mythical foundational scene in Bataille is also situated in a particular genre: erotic literature. As argued by Deleuze and Kristeva, the mother in certain erotic texts occupies a particular position. As Kristeva argues, in Bataille's novel, the mother bears what is unbearable for sight, desire and life. Namely, the sun, the incestuous object, and death. Echoing Kristeva's analysis, Gilles Deleuze, in his study of masochism in literature, also situates the mother in the position of an unbearable sight: death, and more particularly, the death drive. Deleuze and Kristeva situate the mother as the site of the death drive in Bataille and masochist literature. Kristeva writes:

> In short, what is involved in the obscene narrative is an encoding of death drive, which Freud told us preceded both object and love. (…) As the other, the mother, is impelled by a libido that is less Eros than Death, she provides us with the focal point of that subjective and discursive dynamics. (370)

The death drive in the novel can be glimpsed in the headless force that directs the mother. Not as a kind of intentional shadowy force but more as that which stands for the enigmatic actions of the mother. This is how the question of the mother's face in literary theory rejoins in Bataille's narrative the question of the death drive and the

enigma of the cause of desire. Both point to the disappearance of the foundations of language and of knowledge. As I will show the undoing of the mother's face, her irrevocable silence on what animates her shows both the lack of foundation on what animates her desire, but also on language itself. Yet, as we will see later, Bataille situates the encounter of that impossible in a scene of transmission, where the impossible is passed on, showing that even in the face of the impossible, a precarious link can still be salvaged.

Facing the Mother and the Absence of Foundations

In an essay on the question of desire in Lacan, Cynthia Chase discusses the relationship between the child and the mother as a scene of reading. As the mother fulfills the infant's need for food, she also cares for him and accompanies the feeding with an extra, something more than what the child "asked for" through its cries. This excess arrives for the child as something new, a succession of marks that could indicate love and care from the mother[33]. In that sense, there is a positing of intent by the child; it is the interpretation of the mother's body as significative. The multiple movements of the body, aggregated by the child, are turned into a whole, into a desire to care for the child. But could the mother's body be meaningless? An absence of meaning would be turned into a loving face through the interpretive act of the child. Where precisely there is only a body, then comes a face, a face that can love and desire. This giving of a face is what Chase describes as a figure of rhetoric:" prosopopoeia is the giving of voice to

[33] "The infant interprets these marks of care as signifying love and desire, her desire in the strict sense, desire for something else than need-fulfillment, other than merely responding to the demand of her offspring" (Chase, 1006)

deceased or absent entity" (1007), which she links to the reading of the mother's body by the child:

> *The marks of maternal care*, in this account, are a figure for the indeterminably significative marks that are the material of any text, and the infant's interpreting them as a sign of love is the giving of a face, the *prosopon poiein*, that posits a structure of signification and reads the marks as a meaningful *pattern*. (1009)

Here we can see that the reading of meaning is linked to the transformation, by the child, of a succession of marks into a pattern. Indeed, what Chase argues is that giving a face to the mother is the result of a reading of a pattern. The multiple random marks are turned into *one pattern*. The mother becomes one and is given a face through an act of reading from the child, who can only start interpreting her desire by giving a face, as it is what allows the hypothesis of an intention. What is troubling is that the human face here is not a given but is instead the result of a positing on the part of the child. The mother does not have a face before the child's language act. In another text by Paul de Man, the language act is described as a claim, a speech act. Using a text by Wordsworth, de Man argues that the mother in the poem receives her face from a speech act. He also argues that the face exists through the unification of its different features, thus being the result of a synecdoche more than a speaking face that would precede the rhetorical operations of language:

> The Babe,
> Nurs'd in his Mother's arms, the Babe who sleeps
> Upon his mother's breast, who, when his soul
> Claims manifest kindred with an earthly soul,
> Doth gather passion from his Mother's eye![34]

[34] See in Paul de Man, *Rhetoric of Romanticism*, (90)

De Man argues that the encounter between the mother and the child is not the result of mutual recognition: ”It occurs as an active verbal deed, a claim of “manifest kindred” which is not given in the nature of things.” (91) Thus, the kindred between the mother and the child in the poem is the result of a language act, a claim. The perception of the mother’s face by the child is linked to a speech act. De Man continues even further when he argues that the use of the “eye” as a figure for the mother’s face is based on a synecdoche, on the fact that the face is the combination of different elements, which altogether constitute the face. Reading the face as a whole composed of various parts would require what de Man calls “the totalizing power of language”(91). In the poem, the perception of the face is based on language, on reading a part for the whole or the whole for its different parts. Just like in Chase’s description of the child and the mother, the random marks are combined into a pattern. Thus, de Man and Chase identify in the scene of the mother and the child a reading of the mother that transforms the multiple and the random into the one and the intentional.

The speech act reveals that the child creates the “foundational mother” retroactively. In the psychoanalytic theory read by Chase and the poem read by de Man, the foundation of language is given the mother's trait. However, in both cases, the mother’s face is not foundational; it results from an operation of language. Before the speaking face, before the intentional voice, there is a voiceless structure, a rhetorical operation. It shows that the attempts to bring forth a foundation to language through fiction bring more questions than it gives

answers. In the search for a foundational face, the texts find the disappearance of the certainty of the human face.

In *My Mother*, the impossibility for the son to read the mother's intent can be linked to the discussion of the mother's place in de Man and Chase. For the son, the mother cannot be understood. She is, for Pierre, an irresolvable tension between love and repugnance, elevation, and decadence. There is a resounding silence about what animates the mother. This silence is caused by the fact that the mother stands, in the novel, for what has no voice, for what language cannot fathom. She is the impossible, a dimension of language that precedes the possibility of the human face, which cannot be grasped through language. The mother and the impossible are an otherness to language.

An otherness erupts on the mother's face in the novel. When Pierre sees his mother's face almost melting before him, we can read this terrifying scene as an encounter with the impossible, which is, for Bataille, the disfiguration of his mother:

> Le visage de ma mère acheva de se fermer. Soudain ses traits se déformèrent. Comme une cire coule, ils mollissaient, un instant la lèvre inferieure entra dans la bouche (20)

> My mother was by now completely withdrawn, remote. But suddenly the hardness vanished from her features; the way wax melts, they softened, for an instant she drew in her lower lip. (22)

The mother then commands Pierre to look at her, only for him to see the increase of this disfiguration. The force that animates the mother is the undoing of her face, as it is also the undoing of the stability of knowledge and language. Behind this disfiguration lies a faceless force. I would argue that this faceless force is

nothing but the impossible present within language itself. There is no face to speak, and thus there is no intent that can guide the meaning of language. Therefore, the transmission from the mother to the son cannot take the route of discourse or knowledge.

Literary theory shows how the mother in Bataille is not the only mother figure to occupy the position of the impossible of language. Adding to this theoretical dimension, we can also consider how the genre of the erotic gives the mother the place of the foundation but of a foundation that is more like an abyss than a solid ground. Turning to Deleuze and his study of Sacher-Masoch, I want to argue that the mother can be read as the holder of the death drive, a faceless force that is a "foundationless foundation." Thus, through literary theory and genre, we will conclude that the encounter with the mother in *My Mother* is an encounter with the disappearing foundations of language.

The Mother and the Death Drive in Masochism and Literature

Deleuze in his study on Sacher-Masoch argues that there is a particular relation between masochism and literature, in as much as masochism is always related to the construction of a fantasy, to the creation of a certain image of death, an evocation of the death drive: "Si l'instinct de mort n'est jamais donné, il est pensé dans le surmoi, à la manière sadique, il est imaginé dans le moi à la manière masochiste. "[35] (110). Here what is essential to note is that masochism circles around a certain image of death through writing, through fantasy. Deleuze argues that the masochist always starts his

[35] "However, while the Death Instinct is never actually "given," it becomes an object for thought in the superego in sadism and for the imagination in the ego in masochism." (Deleuze, 129)

fantasy with a kind of "Il était une fois…" (111). Moreover, the relation between the death drive and the fantasy takes a particular form. Indeed I would like to argue that for Deleuze, the death drive in the masochist fantasy comes to be evocated through the mother, and a specific one, the oral mother: "la mère orale, mère des steppes et grande nourrice, porteuse de mort. Cette seconde mère peut aussi bien apparaitre en dernier, puisque, orale et muette, elle a le dernier mot. "[36] (49). For Deleuze, the oral mother is a mute bearer of death. The description by Deleuze echoes how the mother in the novel is a bearer of death. When Pierre describes the lightning, a key symbol of the mother, he connects it to death, thus showing the proximity between the mother and death itself: "The thunderbolt blazing in the sky is the brightness of death itself. My mind raves in the sky. Never does the mind rave so well as in its dying." Death and the lightning are referred to as brightness, which echoes how the mother in the novel cannot be looked at. As I have argued, she can only be approached through a detour; there is no possibility for direct witnessing. Echoing this idea, I would recall what Kristeva wrote about the mother being a focal point in the novel: "As the other, the mother, is impelled by a libido that is less Eros than Death, she provides us with the *focal point* of that subjective and discursive dynamics."(370) The mother in the novel and masochism, is a focal point, a point from or through which all the rays of light converge. However, Pierre shows in the novel that it is impossible to look directly at this focal point, at the origin of light.

For Kristeva and Deleuze, the mother is linked to death, particularly the death drive. The death drive is sometimes understood as different from the libidinal force of desire: *Eros*. However, Deleuze argues that the death drive is not a different force that

[36] "The oral mother, mother of the steppes, great nourisher, bearer of death. This second mother can appear in last, as oral and mute, she holds the last word." (131)

would operate counter to Eros. It is the foundation of Eros. If Eros binds the individual to objects or other individuals, it is also always accompanied by a force of unbinding, of separation. Without the undoing of the binding to eroticized objects, how would Eros be a succession of binding? Every binding call for a mysterious unbinding. There is in this unbinding the necessity to speculate the existence of a more foundational force. A force of unbinding needs to govern each binding. However, the problem with this foundational force for Deleuze is that it is not a clear foundation; it is more like a bottomless abyss. Indeed, if the logic of the repetition of Eros is the repetition of its unbinding, then Deleuze believes that we are faced with an endless problem. If another repetition explains repetition, the explanation only creates a bottomless pit. There is no ending to this transcendental search. By referring to Musil, Deleuze gives a very vivid representation of the absence of foundation created by the concept of the death drive:

> Puissance terrible de la répétition, dit Musil, terrible divinité! Attrait du vide qui vous entraine toujours plus bas comme l'entonnoir d'un tourbillon dont les parois s'écartent… On le sait bien à la fin: ce n'etait que la chute profonde, pécheresse, dans un monde où la répétition vous mène un peu plus bas de degré en degré.(98)
>
> Musil wrote: "What fearful power, what awesome divinity is repetition! It is the pull of the void that drags us deeper and deeper down like the ever-widening gullet of a whirlpool . . . . For we knew it well all along : it was none other than the deep and sinful fall into a world where repetition drags one down lower and lower at each step. (114)

The death drive only repeats the problem, yet it is also inevitable to postulate this force of repetition that unbinds the connections created by Eros. We find that if the mother is to hold the place of the death drive in the novel, as indicated by Kristeva, it is to be this void. Like in the mother's case in literary theory, the mother in masochism occupies a space that escapes comprehension, a point where thought finds its own undoing.

In *My Mother*, we find that the mother is at the crossroad of different representations of an absence of foundation. By staging an impossibility to read the mother by the son, Bataille displaces this scene. It is no longer the scene of reading that de Man and Chase deconstruct. It is because what is at stake in the novel is transmitting this lack of foundation as an experience registered in the body. As we saw, the body of the son is marked by this impossible which cannot be uttered. In that sense, the trembling marks what has been passed on. This is not the transmission of an object but of the lack of foundation of language itself, the undoing of its origin. As Bataille enacts this transmission between a mother and a son in his narrative, he highlights how this lack of foundation is about the origin. It shows how the impossible in language is rooted in the impossibility of figuring its origin.

Then how to transmit this impossible? How could language still be necessary for transmitting what it cannot say? I would argue that it is by perpetuating in writing this movement of "tourbillon," "swirl," evocated earlier by Deleuze. What is at stake, as Bataille wrote, is to make this lack of foundation a liberation. However, the risk of this liberation is that it has no stable foundation. It could fall apart at any time.

Vertigo and the Impossible

Maybe the most striking resemblance between Deleuze's description of the writing of Sacher-Masoch and Bataille's novel is the repetition of this sense of vertigo in the face of the impossible. Indeed, Pierre concludes that since there is something in

the mother that he cannot know, he is suddenly freed from this search. Language is no longer bound to the search for this cause of her desire. It creates in him a very specific affect, a sense of vertigo:

> Dans ce calme silence et dans ce bonheur à nous-même inintelligible, je regardais ma mère. Mon Bonheur m'étonnait d'autant plus que le désir me portait moins au déchainement effréné que j'avais connu dans la solitude, qu'a la contemplation d'un vice parfait que, comme une drogue, mais avec une lucidité cruelle, m'ouvrit le vertige de la possibilité infinie. (100)
>
> In this calm silence and in this happiness unintelligible to our own selves, I gazed at my mother. Happiness at which I doubly marveled, for desire was leading me less towards the frantic outburst I had practiced in solitude than towards contemplation of a perfect depravity which, like a drug, but with cruel lucidity, unfolded for me the dizzying prospects of infinite possibility. (67)

As Pierre gazes at his mother, he is suddenly affected by vertigo as he can now contemplate the "possibilité infinie." This infinite possibility is what language renders possible, as it opens the possibility for an endless chain of writing[37]. Almost immediately after noting these endless possibilities, Pierre confesses that he is less interested in the bodily pleasures than he is fascinated by this "objet associé aux désordres de ma mère." Although responsible for the mother's disorderly acts, this object remains an enigma to Pierre. While this enigma could be the end of the search, the realization that nothing can be said about it creates a sense of freedom. However, it is a dangerous form of freedom.

Pierre also notes that vertigo is a kind of rapture and at the same time a dangerous attraction toward a lethal falling. The vertigo is twofold, it is a moment of lightness

[37] I also would like to point out that vertigo a little bit earlier in the novel is produced by the witnessing of the obscene pictures in the library. In this scene, it is the effect produced by the witnessing of a series of pictures that creates the vertigo for Pierre. In that sense, vertigo is produced by the force of the enumeration, of the metonymic chain of representations:" Dans l'angoisse de la tentation, j'entrai dans la bibliothèque et, d'abord, je tirai deux photographies, bientôt deux autres, et lentement le vertige me prit. » (54)

when Pierre feels uplifted by the endless possibilities, and yet it also brings a sense of danger and a sense of vertigo which might provoke a fall:

> Son enjouement (la mère) m'éblouissait, mais ne devais-je pas reconnaitre que m'allégeant, il m'annonçait ce qui pouvait le mieux répondre à mon désir, d'aller au plus dangereux et qui me donnait le plus grand vertige. (65)
>
> Her playfulness dazzled me, but must I not all the same see that by rendering me carefree, it was the surest means to speed me towards my desired destination, the heart of danger, the vortex of joy? (49)

In this passage, the vertigo is still the same dizziness brought by the witnessing of the mother. What changes here is that vertigo is less the feeling of the power of language, of the possibilities it offers, than it is a force of attraction[38] toward the ground, a force that the subject does not control but that instead takes control over the subject. This is made very clear by the French expression: "être pris par un vertige," literally to be taken by vertigo. Pierre echoes this idiomatic expression when he writes: "lentement le vertige me prit " (54). The duality of vertigo must not be seen as two different moments, a rise and a fall. I would rather argue that vertigo is the word chosen by Bataille to encapsulate this paradoxical movement of both elevation and falling. A tension produced by the possibility and impossibility produced by language[39].

This tension is addressed most clearly by Bataille in his description of the myth of Icarus. In this myth, the sun is like an ambivalent mother, both as a source that attracts but that also rejects Icarus to the ground because of its excess of heat:

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[38] This force that takes control of Pierre, is it not the mark of a desire that works hidden from him? In that sense, is the vertigo not a figure of Pierre's desire? A desire that is defined by a force that attracts the body to its own fall and to its own potential death? It seems that here there is in Pierre a desire that would work against Pierre's own survival, a desire that could cost Pierre his life.

[39] The question of language as what allows to know more is bound, in Bataille, to find a void, the limit of knowledge, which results in vertigo. In *Guilty*, he writes: "The ultimate development of knowledge is questioning. We can't endlessly defer to answers ... to knowledge ... and knowledge finally opens a void. At the summit of knowledge, knowledge stops. I yield, and everything's vertigo." (89)

> All this lead one to say to say that the summit of elevation is in practice confused with a sudden fall of unheard violence. The myth of Icarus is particularly expressive from this point of view: it clearly splits the sun in two – the one that was shining at the moment of Icarus elevation, and the one that melted the wax, causing a failure and a screaming fall when Icarus got too close. (Selected Writings, 58)

I would argue that we can read the movement of Icarus as the movement of Pierre's language around his mother. Language can elevate him closer to her enigmatic object through the endless possibilities it creates. Yet, these endless possibilities are also conditioned by the fact that language cannot name this object that animates the mother, which means that it is always "falling." In that sense, Pierre's vertigo is like the elevation of Icarus toward the sun. However, while in the example of Icarus, it means a certain death, for Pierre, it was the opportunity to inscribe this tension between rising and falling into writing. What is at stake is how to inscribe in the text *My Mother* the tension existing both in the mother and Pierre.

The Writing and Transmission of the Impossible

Pierre's writing is an attempt at marking the place of the mother[40] for him after she died. We could say that the text works in a certain sense, like an epitaph on a tombstone, where it commemorates the mother's past life. However, what kind of text does Pierre write? It is, to a certain extent, a recollection of the last moments with his mother as she transmitted to him an encounter with the impossible. I resist calling this transmission the passing on of an experience, as it is not exactly something that Pierre seems to be able to experience. The impossible appears to be felt through trembling and

[40] « Elle a toujours dans mon esprit la place que marque mon livre. » (125)

vertigo, two feelings for which the object cannot be known. Both trembling and vertigo in Bataille's thought are not to be associated with an object of knowledge but rather with the undoing of knowledge, the impossible. In *Guilty*, he writes:

> Clearly, I'm bound to tremble if the object of my fear isn't limited by reason. (6)
>
> The more inaccessible the object of desire, the more it communicates a feeling of vertigo. (158)

Following Bataille's writing in *Guilty*, I would argue that the transmission concerns something inaccessible, and as such, it is the transmission of something that cannot be experienced. And yet, passing on this inaccessibility opens the infinite possibilities that Pierre sees before him. It is thus important that what Pierre does after this transmission from the mother is to write about it. Writing appears as a necessity, as the only way to approach the impossible object is through the opening of infinite possibilities. It is because the object does not exist as such. The impossible object is what escapes language because of its limits, of its absence of foundation. Yet, the presence in Bataille's writing of that object, as in *Guilty*, indicates that his writings both validate and invalidate the impossible as an object.

In *My Mother*, words liberate Pierre by allowing him to write about a mother bigger than life, about what in her and him can solely be grasped by the evocative power of literature. It allows Pierre to amplify, in the narrative, the mother's figure as if language could swirl higher and higher toward the impossible. What happens in the text is that the mother is not solely present through Hélène, but is actually being dispersed, multiplicated in different figures in the novel. In that sense, Pierre creates multiple figures to get closer to what he couldn't grasp in the mother. And yet, as Pierre does so, the mother becomes less visible to the reader and becomes lost among a multiplicity.

And at the end, we must wonder if the writing does not destroy the foundation of the text, the mother. In that sense, by trying to write the impossible, the text, like Icarus, is bound to fall, to fail in its attempt to reach its sun. Readers then lose certainty about the story they read. Where is the mother exactly? Is the text representing the mother, or does it create a vertiginous fantasy? Where nothing is a representation of events, but rather the creation of fantasy to figure out the impossible object?

This Icarus-like movement of the text can be seen through multiple figures. I would like to focus first on Rea, the mother's main acolyte. How can we make the argument that Rea comes to redouble the mother? First, the names of the two are linked to Greek culture. While Helene evokes the names of the people from Greece (Ἑλλην), the name Rea is very close to the Greek titan named Rhea[41]. She was a titan considered to be the mother of the Olympian gods. There is, in that sense, precedence given to Rea, who, while Helene introduces her, actually in the myth precedes her, precedes the Greek culture. Thus, we see here a very important element, Helene in the novel becomes a figure that is not the origin; Rea precedes her. This means, as I will continue to argue, that while Pierre turns to his mother as an origin with which he wants to be reunited, the mother instead introduces Rea, who takes precedence over her, displacing the point of origin. But it does more than displace the origin; it renders it unsustainable. Now the origin becomes indiscernible. Thus, the choice of the name Rea and the moment of her introduction in the novel go in opposite directions regarding Helene. The origin is blurred and rendered unlocatable[42].

[41] Here Bataille omits the H, as if to show that Rea and Helene are two parts of the same one figure, here torn apart.

[42] It is also immediately after Rea's introduction and through her encounter with Pierre, that he will feel once again completely lost, caught in a new falling.

To continue this argument, I would like to add that Rea and Helene also form opposing poles. While one is related to the sun, the other is associated with the earth. Indeed, Rhea is known in Greek mythology as the mother earth, while Helen has been associated with the sun in the Greek tradition. This is only reinforced in the text by the fact that Pierre's sexual interaction with Rea is with her behind, with the anus[43]:

> Je me répétais gâteusement : "le derrière de Réa », qu'elle avait en langage des rues offert à ma virilité. (85)
>
> Dotingly, I repeated to myself 'Rhea's behind', that being the part – but more vulgarly designated by her – which she had offered to my young virility. (59)
>
> Je la bénissais du risible cadeau qu'elle me ferait quand, au lieu du front pur de ma mère elle tendrait ce qu'il était dément de tendre à mon baiser. (86)
>
> I blessed her for the ludicrous gift she would make me when, rather than my mother's pure brow, to me she would present what it was craziness to present to my kiss. (59)

Here the mother is thus not one but two, both face and behind, pre-hellenic and Hellenic. Where there should be a clear origin, we find a double. As Jean-Luc Nancy has argued[44], the search for an origin, for an origin of language, always requires the creation of a myth, and yet this myth then always creates the need for a new myth. Bataille's novel creates a similar destabilization when the reader realizes that Helene is not the only one to figure out the mother in the novel. The writing appears to be less about the representation of the mother as it is about the creation of a narrative that would approach the impossible. It is made even clearer when we notice that there is more than

[43] Helene/Rea is here a representation of an important figure in Bataille, *The Solar Anus*: "The solar annulus is the intact anus of her body, at eighteen years to which nothing sufficiently blinding can be compared except the sun, even though the anus is the night." The mother cannot simply be associated to Helene, it would miss how the text, as an erotic text, destabilizes the individual, only in order to make of it a pure fiction. From this fiction, Bataille identifies in *The Solar Anus* a blinding, just like in *Ma Mère*.
[44] See Jean-Luc Nancy « Le mythe interrompu » in La Communauté Désœuvrée, 1986.

Rea, who repeats the mother. By creating several repetitions, the texts create a swirling movement, quite like the swirling toward the void described by Deleuze.

In a certain sense, the mother becomes bigger than life in the novel. As I have argued already, she is also represented by the storm, the lightning, as well as the sun, and the earth. Through all these figures that come to create an enumeration, we can wonder what the narrative is. Although the text is contextualized as the son's writing on his mother, this writing is the undoing of the mother. Although the reader starts with the belief that the mother is represented in the text, in the end, it cannot be so easily asserted. The mother slowly disappears: her unity is violently attacked by the multiplication of figures.

Thus, the readers are caught in the sense of vertigo, as the foundations of the novel are undone by the multiplications of the figures. The text can no longer be read as a recollection of the events that preceded the mother's death. While it starts as a recollection, it slowly repeats the mother in other characters and then to all the surroundings, the earth, the sun, and the storm. The readers are facing an unfolding of events that disrupts the novel's beginning; the movement forward is also a destruction of the foundation on which this movement is based. The reader is like Icarus; while the end could allow a conclusion, the creation of knowledge, it is the contrary. The unfolding of the narrative is a disappearance of the certainty of knowledge. But in doing so, is the text not allowing the transmission of the impossible? Is it not by undermining language that the text can destabilize readers and allow them to open for themselves the void and feeling of vertigo described by Pierre?

By choosing a first-person narrative in which the narrator is the one who receives the impossible, it undoes the certainty in the narrator. While Bataille could have used an omniscient narrator, the first-person narrative makes the narrative less trustworthy. But this loss of trust and certainty regarding the nature of the narrative is also an exciting opportunity. It opens the possibility of passing the impossible to the reader. The stakes of the impossible are less in knowing it and more in passing it along. Rather than creating a narrative about the impossible, Bataille creates a narrative animated by it. It shows how literature is a particularly important space to transmit the impossible. It allows building a story undermined by itself as it undoes its foundation. As readers, are we not facing the risk of trembling like Pierre? In the face of a text not limited by reason. Accepting the impossible in the text, its self-destruction, is facing its infinite possibilities. It offers a kind of liberation which is never too far from anguish. Making way for the impossible requires accepting a liberation by a headless force whose intent remains unknown. In the face of this force, I would argue that literature allows putting this liberation to work, perpetuating it through this tension between the infinite possibilities and the impossible.

CHAPTER 3

Marguerite Duras' *Le Vice-Consul* and The Muse of Oblivion

Introduction

Marguerite Duras wrote her novel *Le Vice-Consul* in 1966. Situated in twentieth-century India, sometime before the 1947 independence, we follow the lives of several French and English diplomats stationed in Calcutta. As diplomats interact with one another at the French Embassy, they appear disconnected from the implications of colonialism in India. Nonetheless, their neutral presence is inscribed within the colonial order in the novel. While the novel does not question their economic role in the oppression of the people in India, it creates a clear spatial distinction between them and the indigenous population. Between the French embassy and the city of Calcutta, large walls and grilled gates separate the French diplomats from the city.

The relationship between the colonizers and the population of Calcutta has been a central aspect of the discussion among literary critics. What has received particular attention is the discourse of the colonizers and how the indigenous population is represented in their discourse[45]. Critics argue that the colonizers' discourses reduce Indians to an undefined multitude, all seeming to be plagued by leprosy. In the literary criticism written on the topic, the colonizers are criticized for objectifying the figure of the other. One colonizer who has received particular attention is the character Peter

[45] McNeece:" In le Vice-Consul, Duras exploits the European's fascination with Asia's aura of sensual mystery in order to dramatize the consequences of the West's neocolonial discourse upon its subjects." (McNeece, 49)

Morgan. This Englishman, who recently arrived in Calcutta, is an emblematic representation of the appropriation of the indigenous population by the colonizers. Through a *mise-en-abyme*, Duras gives him the role of writing the story of a Cambodian woman lost among a crowd of lepers. Through this retelling, critics have seen an attempt by Duras to criticize the position from which colonizers see the colonized:

> With an abrupt mise-en-abyme structure, this novel asks whether and how a white male colonist, Peter Morgan, can account for the traumatic exile of a colonized woman, the Cambodian beggar. (Knuutila, 133)

The story of the Cambodian woman is not told by someone who can know anything about her. This fact reflects how the European colonizers' capacity to speak about the "others of Europe" is based on a blindness to the other. Critics have also noted that this objectification is linked to a gender dynamic, where a man writes about a woman[46]. Thus, it seems that Duras exemplifies a common critique of colonialism. However, while I subscribe to the underlying critique of these authors, I would like to argue that Duras avoids the trap of essentializing the other and putting her into the category of the "oppressed other." Indeed, although Peter Morgan writes her story, in the main narrative, she is also described as a figure marked by an absence, by an "abolished memory." Thus, for Duras, the beggarwoman is already caught in a situation where she is deprived of something to say. This particular position is the position that Spivak has called the position of the subaltern.

[46] See in particular the discussion by Borgomano on the representation of madness by the male colonizers:" Nous constatons aussi que ce sont des hommes qui parlent la folie, ou l'ecrivent: ce sont eux qui l'enferment dans des discours, des mots - ou des asiles! - eux qui se laissent fasciner ; mais en dehors du cas exceptionnel du clochard - (victime d'un traumatisme physique grave) ce sont des femmes qui la vivent, cette folie, la vivent et ne la parlent pas. » (Borgomano, 213)

In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak disavows interpretations of the subalterns as individuals whose voices could be recuperated if the oppression was lifted. She criticizes this understanding as a “nostalgia for a lost origin.” In opposition to that essentialist perspective, she argues that what prevents the subaltern from speaking is that she is caught between the subject's position and the object. This position prevents her from occupying a position of enunciation from where to speak:

> Imperialism's (or globalization's) image as the establisher of the good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as *object* of protection from her own kind. How should one examine this dissimulation of patriarchal strategy, which apparently grants the woman free choice as *subject*? (52)

For the Indian woman mentioned here by Spivak (the case of the sati), there is an impossibility to speak that is not just related to a muting of a voice, but more to an aporia, to a contradiction that both gives and takes away the ability to speak at the same time. However, I would like to ask, could this position of muteness be a position from where a transmission can be enacted? Could the beggarwoman be the actor of a transmission rather than the object of Peter Morgan’s writing? Yet, what would it mean to be simultaneously caught in a state of muteness and yet be able to be heard? For Spivak, the muteness is not a literal absence of a voice but more an aporia, what she also called at the end of her essay a “trace-structure (effacement in disclosure).”[47] Thus, I ask, what if this aporia, this effacement in disclosure, could be the mean through which there could be a transmission between the subaltern and the one who hears her? Moreover, how would the transmission of this paradox transform the one who receives it? I want to develop the consequences of this hypothesis in this chapter. Through the discussion of this novel, I want to show how for Duras, transmission is the passing on

[47] See Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak*, (65)

of a *force of forgetting,* which creates in the addressee the risk of its disappearance. However, this disappearance is also a force of liberation, opening up a possibility to destabilize the modern western subject. In this chain of transmission, the position of the subaltern is critical, as it is her, through the experience of her disappearance, who can unsettle modernity.

Before turning to the study of the novel, I would like to situate Marguerite Duras in the historical period in which she was writing. In the 1960s in France, there were two main representations of India: immemorial tradition and radical modernity. In the writings of Andre Malraux or the films of Louis Malle, one can see an immemorial culture and a backward country still stuck in an agrarian age. On the other side is the fascination for the 1947 independence and the jump into modernity that it heralds. Caught between two metaphors, India occupies no space of its own. I would argue that, in her writing, Duras finds a different way to give space to this Other of Europe. Indeed, by creating a space within her writing to transmit an experience of absence, she situates her proposition outside the binary of tradition and modernity. Through her representation of the transmission from a subaltern to a colonizer, she unsettles the modern subject without reifying India. Thus, in her novel, Peter Morgan represents the opposite of another westerner who wrote about India: Le Corbusier.

With the 1947 independence, India seemed to be leaving behind its traditional past and the colonial era. India exemplified a radical departure from its previous history. This was exemplified by the creation of a new city: Chandigarh. The vision of Le Corbusier guided its design and construction. His ideas were to create new foundations for India and develop his vision of modernity. In his eyes, India was a white page on

which he could write his dream of a new beginning. What interests me here is that this gesture is the one that has been associated with Peter Morgan in *Le Vice-Consul*. For critics, Peter Morgan wrote on the white page representing the Cambodian woman's absence of memory. By exploring the discourses on the foundation of Chandigarh before turning to *Le Vice-Consul*, I want to show how Duras' texts differ from the imposition of Western Modernity on India.

Chandigarh: The Dream of a Space for Modernity

Le Corbusier was commissioned in 1950 by Nehru, the prime minister of India, to build a new city in the north of India. As a result of independence, India split and lost the city of Lahore to Pakistan. To compensate for this loss, a new city needed to be built. It would represent the entry into modernity for India. For Nehru, in 1947, India awoke from the past and entered its future:

> At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance. (Prakash, 5)

Nehru made this declaration at midnight on 14-15 August 1947, when India became independent[48]. The project of Chandigarh embodied this turn toward the future. At the inaugural ceremony, Nehru declared:" Let this be a new city, unfettered by the traditions of the past, a symbol of the nation's faith in the future." However, Nehru does not address that Chandigarh's inception was related to the past. The decision to build this new city in the region of Punjab was based on the loss of the city of Lahore to Pakistan.

[48] See Prakash, 2002, (5)

During the partition of Pakistan and India, Lahore was left to Pakistan. In doing so, the region of Punjab ended without a capital, and none of the cities left in the area were worthy of the city that had been lost. It is in this context that Chandigarh was built. However, Chandigarh was not presented as Lahore's replacement; it was seen as a new and unique city. As indicated in archives, the motto of the first group of engineers and architects who were first assembled was the following:" Like the rising of the Phoenix from the ashes of its own fire." The figure of the Phoenix shows how the ashes are not even the loss of Lahore but rather produced by the very fire of creation. Thus, in the representation of Chandigarh, its fire, its force of creation, also produces its own past, its own ashes from which it originates. This paradox shows how there is no place for the lost city of Lahore. Even the ashes, from where the Phoenix originates, are the result of the fire of the Phoenix. This endless loop disconnects the Phoenix and Chandigarh from history and also from the possibility of mourning Lahore[49]. Chandigarh represents the erasure of the possibility of mourning, the creation of a city that leaves no space for mourning and for loss.

Le Corbusier saw Chandigarh as a radical departure from the past, the metaphor he used to do so was that of the blank slate: "Une page blanche," a text he wrote in 1951, at the beginning of the construction of Chandigarh:

> Dans le domaine qui m'occupe – l'architecture – l'Inde, ayant mis le cap sur les temps modernes, voit s'ouvrir devant elle une page blanche. (….) La page tournée sur le passé, il reste à installer dans la réalité et la vérité, la geste machiniste avec sa syntaxe implacable et sa poésie assurée… (63)

[49] Jacques Derrida, in *Cinders*, associates the figure of the Phoenix with the absence of mourning, but also with the absence of a *space* for mourning:" There is rebellion against the Phoenix and also the affirmation of the fire without place or mourning." (41)

> In the field that concerns me – architecture – India has set its sight on modernity and is seeing a blank page opening before it. (…) With its past behind it (*la page tournée sur le passé*), we must now make the machine epic part of reality and truth, with its implacable syntax and indubitable poetry… (62)

Here Le Corbusier echoes Nehru's vision for India, which would turn away from its traditional past. Le Corbusier's text does not mention Lahore; his architectural project is opposed to the immemorial times that the Himalayans mountains and the agrarian villages inspired in him. Le Corbusier's Chandigarh is battling against immemorial and agrarian humanity, a more backward society that needs to fully enter what he equates to the age of the machine[50]. In this case, we see the enactment of Spivak's formulation:" White men save brown women from brown men." Here it is a European man who comes to save the Indian people from a state of backwardness. At some point in his writing, Le Corbusier is baffled by the fact that people ignore the existence of chairs[51] in India, and he concludes that nothing in this country exists to fit modern life. Here Le Corbusier enacts a modern gesture identified by Homi Bhabha, who argued that colonial space is the land to educate, on which the dream of modernity can be enacted without any restraints:

> The colonial space is the terra incognita or the terra nulla, the empty or wasted land whose history has to be begun, whose archives must be filled out; whose future progress must be secured in modernity. (246)

[50] In that sense, Le Corbusier gesture is emblematic of a more general relation between Europe and Asia. Even if India is seen as this potential for modernity, it remains a modernity that originates from Europe itself. Guillaume Bridet summarizes it as follow: "Certes les nations d'Asie seraient sur le point de s'affranchir des puissances coloniales européennes, mais c'est l'Europe et plus largement l'Occident qui détient l'exclusivité de la modernité. Leur émancipation ne se ferait donc pas au nom d'une tradition autochtone ou même d'une modernité propre qui constitueraient des alternatives à l'Europe, elle se fait au nom de modes de production, d'une organisation politique et de valeurs qui sont le fait de l'Europe elle-même." (Bridet, 122)

[51] See Le Corbusier:"Ce peuple (comme aussi bien les Maharadjahs jusqu'ici) s'assied sur ses talons et ignore la chaise. » (p.65)

Le Corbusier's planning received some very strong criticism even before it was finished. In 1968, a few years after the partial completion of Chandigarh, the American scholar Norma Evenson wrote a scathing critique of Chandigarh's planning. She argues that the city is ill-fitted for Indian society. It follows European planning rules, with geometrical forms and spaces with a well-defined role that does not fit the traditional organization of space in Indian towns. Thus, space and its organization represent a conflict between tradition and modernity and a representation of the conflict between the West and India. In opposition to this logic, there is for Evenson the need for a change, for a departure from the western and modern planning of Chandigarh:

> If Chandigarh is ever to become a true city, however, it will be only when its people have given it a history, when it has become free of its planners to acquire a destiny of its own. Ultimately the people of Chandigarh must achieve the city they deserve. (99)

Following Evenson's argument, it would make sense to advocate for a shift in how Indians relate to Chandigarh. Rather than occupying a passive position as those who receive a space dictated by the West, could they not reinvent this space and take control of their destiny? The problem we can identify here is that India remains the object of a fantasy, the fantasy of a true modern gesture. Moreover, we see how Indians are caught here in the subaltern position. While for Le Corbusier they are only the *object* of his modernist urban project, in Evenson, their liberation can only come from their possibility to occupy the position of a western *subject*, the autonomous position of the subject. To develop this argument on modernity and autonomy, I would like to turn to Jean-Francois Lyotard. I wish to question the real emancipatory power of Evenson's proposition. As Spivak argued, the subaltern cannot just occupy the subjective position of the oppressor.

Modernity and the Refusal of the Address

In a series of interviews, Lyotard discussed how modernity could be understood in terms of autonomy and self-determination. For Lyotard, one element has dominated the concept of modernity: the autonomy of the subject of enunciation. Going back to Rousseau and Descartes, he identifies an "enunciative ability."[52] This ability to speak as an autonomous subject is based upon the capacity of the subject to enunciate its laws, and to create its own rules. In *Au Juste*, he wrote:

> Le principe donc est celui de l'autonomie, de l'autonomie de la volonté, c'est-à-dire de l'autonomie du sujet qui énonce la loi, et qui même quand il lui obéit reste autonome parce qu'il en est l'auteur. (61)
>
> The principle here is that of autonomy, the autonomy of the will, that is, the autonomy of the subject who states the law, and who remains autonomous even when he obeys it since he is its author. (31)

Thus, the modern gesture of rupturing with the past, of not being influenced by a tradition, is rooted in the ability of the subject to enunciate its laws, to speak from a position of autonomy, a position that would be free from any prescription other than the one dictated by the subject. We identify this dimension in Evenson's plea for a new relationship between Chandigarh and its inhabitants. It is more than just coincidental that Evenson's language also develops a dimension of justice, of a just relation between the city and its people. Indeed, she ends her book with this sentence:" Ultimately, the people of Chandigarh must achieve the city they *deserve*." What do the people of Chandigarh deserve? They deserve a city that will be just to them, following their rules

[52] See Lyotard, *Au Juste* (60-61)

rather than those dictated by the western planners. However, in doing so, Evenson reiterates a common thread of modernity, its reliance on the mastery of the subject of enunciation, an ability to enunciate its laws. Here I am not criticizing the possibility for a people to attempt to define itself, but rather how, within Evenson's discourse, the people of India become the face of the modern subject. Their emancipation is also the reinscription of their disappearance. Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, argues that by not considering the site of enunciation, one risks maintaining the position of authority that is criticized:

> …without a transformation of the site of enunciation – there is the danger that the mimetic contents of a discourse will conceal the fact that the hegemonic structures of power are maintained in a position of authority through a shift in vocabulary in the position of authority. There is for instance a kinship between the normative paradigms of colonial anthropology and the contemporary discourse of aid and development agencies. (242)

Although Evenson does not represent India as a backward country like Le Corbusier, for her, the Indians must liberate themselves by embodying the attributes of the modern western subject. Similar to the shift from colonial anthropology to development agencies described by Homi Bhabha, there is the repetition of the silencing of the other. This is why we need to question the "site of enunciation." By turning to Lyotard, I want to show that enunciation can be destabilized by an address that precedes it.

When Le Corbusier, Nehru, and Evenson write or speak, they aim to do it autonomously. For Le Corbusier, in particular, it necessitates the figure of a "white page." Doing so extracts Le Corbusier from history; he becomes the hand that escapes the storyline, which can enact a change in history without taking part in it. In opposition to that perspective, I would like to follow Lyotard's argument to show that by

considering the subject as an addressee, one reconsiders the project of modernity. For Lyotard, the address has been repressed by western philosophy as it goes against the autonomy of the subject:

> Le saisissement par l'adresse qui m'est faite d'un discours, ce saisissement qui est une obligation, qui fait que je suis mis en mouvement, l'assimiler à la servitude c'est la manière dont l'Occident refoule, rejette et calomnie le privilège accorde au pôle destinataire, comme il crache du reste, au passage, sur les juifs, c'est sensiblement la même chose. (73)

> To assimilate with servitude the hold placed upon me by the discourse's address, a hold that is an obligation, that puts me into movement, this the West's way of repressing, rejecting, and smearing, the privilege granted to the pole of the addressee, quite in keeping the West's way of spitting on the Jews. (38)

The West has repressed the position of the addressee. Behind this is the rejection of passivity as a state in which the subject could be put by the other. Here, it is important not to equate passivity and being socially oppressed. With the example of the transmission of stories, Lyotard argues that there is the transmission of a force, the gift of a movement, of energy:

> … à savoir que les récits sont animés de mouvements, et que quand ils passent sur toi, il faut que tu transmettes le mouvement. J'en ferais une affaire de métaphore cinétique : c'est une sorte de transmission énergétique. Mais évidemment cette transmission se fait sur le mode d'une prescription. Il y a du mouvement à transmettre. (70)

> …the fact that stories are animated with movement and that they pass over you, you must pass the movement on. I would make it the subject of a kinetic metaphor: it is a kind of energy transmission. But this transmission obviously takes place in the mode of prescription. There is movement to be passed on. (36)

There is a prescription in the transmission that does not position the subject in a complete state of freedom from the other. However, this prescription creates the necessity of action, of a movement in the addressee. Lyotard's discussion of obligation

and prescription[53] is too vast to be summarized here, and I can only refer to his book *Le Differend*. Nonetheless, for what interests us, I would like to bring Lyotard's argument on the relation between obligation and the site of enunciation[54].

The other's address does not follow the same laws as the one decreed by the "I." This difference obligates the subject since what is received obeys a different order than the one from the subject. This means for Lyotard that the obligation reminds the "I" that it should not be there, that it should not occupy this position of stability and mastery ("de se rappeler qu'il ne devrait pas être là"). This "not being there" is very important; it shows that the address unsettles the site of enunciation described by Homi Bhabha. The "I" who enunciates is moved to the position of the addressee[55], and the "I" becomes a "you." Thus, the obligation creates a change in the subject; there is a movement produced by the other. That is how we could understand this notion of kinetic energy that Lyotard mentioned in the interview cited earlier.

What is almost counterintuitive in Lyotard's argument is that obligation is more than an address that constrains the self into a pre-defined movement. The prescription, which is related to the language of obligation for Lyotard, does not entail a constraining causality. For him the "you must" ("tu dois"), which defines obligation, does not imply

[53] For a discussion of the relation between Lyotard and Levinas on the question of obligation and prescription see the article "Lyotard and Levinas: The Logic of Obligation" written by Darren Ambrose.
[54] Lyotard develops his argument by way of Levinas : « L'obligation dont il s'agit dans la pensée de Levinas ne résulte pas d'une autorité préalablement légitimée par moi ou par nous. Si je suis obligé par l'autre, ce n'est pas parce qu'il a un droit de m'obliger, que je lui aurai accordé directement ou médiatement. Ma liberté n'est pas la source de son autorité : on n'est pas obligé parce qu'on est libre, et que ta loi est ma loi, mais parce que ta demande n'est pas ma loi, parce qu'on est passible de l'autre. L'obligation par liberté, par consentement, est seconde. Elle présuppose une passibilité, une fêlure dans la forteresse du moi : « Que cette fermeture n'interdise pas la sortie hors de l'intériorité. » Une aptitude à la transcendance ? Transcrivons : la capacité pour le destinateur déplacé sur l'instance destinataire de se rappeler qu'il ne devrait pas être là. » (Jean-François Lyotard *Le Différend,* 185)
[55] Lyotard, Le Différend :"en accueillant la demande, je pars loin de chez moi, en otage, sans habiter jamais chez toi, ni être jamais ton hôte, puisque tu n'as pas de demeure, mais aussi j'accomplis ainsi ma vocation qui est de cesser d'être chez moi. » (190)

a clear course of action, but is rather an open-ended future:"On dira que *Tu dois* attend une suite, obéissance ou non, et dessine ainsi un possible à venir, un futur" (207).

Lyotard then invites us to think of the address from the other in the context of the transmission of stories. Storytelling is not an invitation to repeat the same stories over and over; it is paradoxically an attempt at remembering. Thus, the prescription to continue the storytelling is less about the accumulation of knowledge than it is about the enactment of a *forgetting* and a *remembering.* In *Au Juste*:

> La tradition, c'est ce qui concerne, non pas le contenu, mais le temps. Et ce que l'Occident veut dans l'autonomie, l'invention, la nouveauté, l'auto-détermination, c'est l'inverse, c'est-à-dire oublier le temps et conserver, pour acquérir et accumuler les contenus. (…) Au contraire, dans le cas de ces traditions populaires, (…), on n'accumule rien, c'est-à-dire qu'il faut tout le temps répéter les récits, parce qu'on oublie tout le temps. (67- 68)
>
> Tradition is that which concerns time, not content. Whereas what the West wants from autonomy, invention, novelty, self-determination, is the opposite – to forget time and to preserve, acquire, and accumulate contents. (…) On the contrary, in the case of popular traditions, and I think that this is universal and not something limited to the Cashinahua, nothing gets accumulated, that is, the narratives must be repeated all the time because they are forgotten all the time. (34)

Tradition and the transmission of stories for Lyotard are not an accumulation but rather the facing of a forgetting that is part of human life. The belief in an accumulation of knowledge is built, as Lyotard argues, on a forgetting of time, which is a way to avoid confronting how forgetting marks human experience. In that sense, telling stories and their transmission dramatizes this characteristic of human existence.

One of the critical aspects of storytelling is the enactment of forgetting as the story is being told. This forgetting puts the storyteller in the paradoxical position of forgetting his or her identity as the story is being told. This puts the storyteller in the speaker and listener's position, as the story seems to be told by someone else. In telling

stories, there is the possibility to create a forgetting through the musicality of language: the rhythm and the music take the leading role over the storyteller's intent. It is as if the storyteller is listening to a story being told from a place where no subject of enunciation is needed[56]. This forgetting by telling the story is accompanied by a forgetting caused by the way stories are told. Indeed, the narrators start their story by defining themselves as the addressee from the story:" It has been told by X before me." Telling a story will allow them to give their names to the listener, but only after having spoken from a position of anonymity. Only after the story has been told can they be remembered by their name. In the moment of the telling, they do not hold an identity: they are a storyteller. This shows that the kinetic of transmission of stories is a process that contains an unsettling modernity. Not only does the address displace the "I," but the very telling of the stories also creates a gap within the "I," as it is now caught between the speaker and the listener's position.

What is interesting in Lyotard's argument is the notion of forgetting at the heart of telling. Marguerite Duras continues this exploration and interrogates the possibility of this forgetting to be passed on from one narrator to the next. While this is implied by Lyotard, as the next narrator will be caught in the chain of forgetting and remembering, could an experience of forgetting, an absence of memory, be transmitted? Thus, considering our discussion on the subaltern, could the subaltern be a narrator who would

[56] « C'est pourtant un savoir fort commun, celui des comptines enfantines, celui que les musiques répétitives ont de nos jours essayé de retrouver ou du moins approcher. Il présente une propriété surprenante : à mesure que le mètre l'emporte sur l'accent dans les occurrences sonores, parlées ou non, le temps cesse d'être le support de la mise en mémoire et devient un battement immémorial qui, en l'absence de différences remarquables entre les périodes, interdit de les dénombrer et les expédie à l'oubli. Qu'on interroge la forme des dictons, des proverbes, des maximes qui sont comme de petits éclats de récits possibles ou les matrices de récits anciens et qui continuent encore à circuler à certains étages de l'édifice social contemporain, on reconnaîtra dans sa prosodie la marque de cette bizarre temporalisation qui heurte en plein la règle d'or de notre savoir : ne pas oublier. » (CP, 41)

transmit the absence of a story? This would mean that the chain of transmission would be centered around the aporia, which stands for the subaltern's position, this effacement as disclosure described by Gayatri Spivak. By working around the limits of storytelling, Marguerite Duras demands us to consider how the subaltern can transmit an experience, even from the position of muteness she occupies. I will show how Duras develops a new dimension to the relationship between the other and the I through the one between the subaltern and the colonizer.

Le Vice-Consul: The Address from the Void

Peter Morgan, a young Englishman who just arrived in Calcutta, is fascinated by a Cambodian beggarwoman. He transcribes his fascination in a story through a *mise-en-abyme*. The novel's first line is: "She walks, writes Peter Morgan" "Elle marche, écrit Peter Morgan." For most of the first half of the book, it is through Peter Morgan's writing that the reader discovers the beggar's life, where she comes from, what happened to her, and how she ended up wandering in the streets of Calcutta. However, Peter Morgan knows almost nothing about her; the story is a fiction. Thus, while we read the story of the beggarwoman, she remains enigmatic. In the main narrative, where Peter Morgan is a character and not a narrator, almost nothing is revealed about the beggarwoman.

However, who is Peter Morgan? He is an English colonizer who arrived recently in Calcutta. His newness to India differentiates him from the other colonizers living there. While Peter Morgan is still trying to grasp the "sorrow" of India, the colonizers are more focused on diminishing their interactions with their environment. They remain

behind the fences of their home and the French Embassy and are consumed by their fear of rampant leprosy on the streets of Calcutta. On the opposite side of these fences, among the beggars, Peter Morgan sees and hears the Cambodian beggarwoman. He also hears tales about her through other characters, most notably through the wife of the French ambassador: Anne-Marie Stretter. She saw the young woman give away her baby to a white woman. Through these fragments, Peter Morgan will invent a story, and this story will be presented to the reader before the one that encapsulates it.

In her study of the novel, Mieke Bal focused on the relationship between the two different levels of narration and how they were linked to each other. The story written by Peter Morgan is inspired by the beggarwoman who exists in the main story, yet her enigmatic nature only leaves him with the power of his imagination. This indicates to Bal that the story of the beggarwoman is less about an account of her life as it is about the influence of the colonizers' universe on Morgan's narrative:"les deux recits s'infectent l'un l'autre." (82). However, the relationship between the writer and his story remains to be discussed in Bal's study. Indeed, rather than seeing two stories affecting one another, I would like to question how the writer's position within the story is ambiguous and displaced by the writing itself.

From the novel's first line, we are reminded of Lyotard's description of the pagan storytellers who are *told* by the story they *tell*:" She walks, writes Peter Morgan" Elle marche, écrit Peter Morgan." "Elle marche" precedes the writer's name, and at the level of the novel, Peter Morgan exists as a writer before existing as a character. There is a precedence of his writing over his identity. In the book's first half, Peter Morgan exists more as *writing* than as an *individual* for the reader. I would argue that in this novel,

the identity of the "I" does not precede the story it tells; it is only after the story is told that the "I" comes to be attached to a recognizable character. However, it is the writing that becomes the site of the effacement of Peter Morgan through the use of *discours indirect libre*[57] *(Indirect free speech)*. This form of writing makes it ambiguous who is speaking, thinking, or even writing. Indeed, the text following the first line shows a radical indeterminacy in the "I" and the "you":

> Comment ne pas revenir ? Il faut se perdre. Je ne sais pas. Tu apprendras. Je voudrais une indication pour me perdre. (9).
>
> How to avoid coming back? Get lost. I don't know how. You'll learn. I need some signpost to lead me astray. (1)

Who is this lost « I »? Is it Peter Morgan as a writer, trying to begin his work of fiction based on an enigmatic figure? Or is it the beggarwoman, a nomad who has been thrown away from her home? There is an interweaving between two levels of enunciations: inside and outside of the story. Through the story's writing, the writer is somehow caught in a quest to lose oneself, yet he does not know how:" Il faut se perdre. Je ne sais pas."

While knowing how to lose oneself seems to evade him, writing enacts that "getting lost." Through the ambiguity of the "I" and the *discours indirect libre*, there is a loss of the stability of the position of enunciation. For Peter Morgan, writing is the enactment of forgetting. A forgetting that one cannot willfully enact but that is realized through the act of writing.

[57] On the meaning of the *style indirect libre*, and on how it blurs the distinction between Peter Morgan and the beggarwoman, see McNeece (67-68).

The question of forgetting, which animates the writer as much as it animates the beggarwoman in the story, is at the heart of the encounter between Peter Morgan and the Cambodian woman in the main narrative. What we will explore now is how this forgetting not only originates from Peter Morgan's writing but also from the beggar's address:

> Peter Morgan voudrait maintenant substituer à la mémoire abolie de la mendiante, le bric-a-brac de la sienne. Peter Morgan se trouverait, sans cela, à court de paroles pour rendre compte de la folie de la mendiante de Calcutta. (71)
>
> Peter Morgan is forced to resort to fragments stored in his own memory. To fill in the blanks in the beggarwoman's forgotten past. Otherwise, Peter Morgan would be at a loss to explain the madness of the beggarwoman of Calcutta (54)

Here literary critics have pointed out that Peter Morgan's invention is the enactment of silencing. The beggarwoman is deprived of a voice and fetishized as a silent other[58]. While Marguerite Duras herself has argued that her novel criticizes the deafness of the colonizers[59], her text pushes the postcolonial critique further. Indeed, Peter Morgan here acknowledges that the absence of memory from the beggarwoman gives him the words to write the story about her madness. I would argue that Peter Morgan's ability to write does not come from himself but surprisingly from the *absence* of memory of the beggarwoman. In the previous quote, the condition of Peter Morgan's writing is the woman's radical forgetting, without which he would be out of words:" a court de paroles." Thus, the beggar's absence of memory incites him to write. His

[58] Here I strongly disagree with the analysis made by Glassman: "If Peter Morgan has free reign to represent her exile and madness, he must supply a language that she no longer possesses, and this language, like the imagination that Morgan must also employ, can be none other than his own." (Glassman, 66)

[59] See *Les Parleuses* : « Oui, l'étanchéité entre le monde de l'Inde blanche et ce monde-là est dénoncée à chaque instant dans le livre. »

writing is not a covering up of forgetting; it is paradoxically a writing made out of forgetting.

I want to emphasize here the distinction made in the text through the "sans cela." Although this might seem anectodical, the choice of words matters, as this "sans cela" in the sentence indicates what conditions Peter Morgan's ability to write. "Cela" in french is often opposed to "ceci"; both of these demonstratives refer to an element in the previous sentence. "Ceci" is used in order to refer to the element which directly follows the new sentence, here: "le bric-a-brac de la sienne," while "cela" refers to "la mémoire abolie de la mendiante." Thus, what conditions the ability to write is not filling the absence but the absence itself. It is not because Peter Morgan can use his memories, his position as a white colonizer, that he can write about her.

On the contrary, he is confronted with an emptiness as the beggarwoman gives him nothing. Rather than embodying an autonomous position, Peter Morgan writes because he is an addressee; because the emptiness from the beggarwoman interpellated him. Peter Morgan's words are born by and out of this very "emptiness" that composes the radical forgetting of the beggarwoman. To use the metaphor of the white page given by Le Corbusier, Peter Morgan's words cannot be easily dissociated from the white page on which they are written; they are made out of the "blankness" of the page, of this empty memory from the beggarwoman.

However, what does it mean that emptiness is what constitutes his writing? This formulation is slightly misleading here. Indeed, the transmission from the beggarwoman to Peter Morgan is not the transmission of an emptiness but a *force of emptying*. Yet, from where does this force come? Moreover, how is it transmitted? Transmission occurs

through hearing a song from the beggarwoman, which is how Peter Morgan mainly encounters her.

The beggarwoman is always singing the same song and the word "Battambang," the place where she comes from. The word "Battambang" contains a musicality that will help us better understand a transmission occurring through an emptiness. I would like here to discuss the succession of the alliterations "B"/"T"/"M"/"B"/"G" The succession "B"/"T"/"M"/"B"/"G," could sound like the percussions on a drum, a "tambour" in French, which is an instrument whose sound is transmitted through the empty space that creates resonance. The text itself hints at the connection between a drum and the musicality of the word "Battambang":

> Les trois syllabes sonnent avec la même intensité, sans accent tonique, sur un petit tambour trop tendu. Baattamambbanangg" (21)
>
> The three syllables boom tonelessly, as though rapped out on a small, over-stretched drum. Baattamambbanangg. (11)

The sound of the drum is propagated through the empty space within the instrument, and this drum is a metaphor for the beggarwoman's pregnant belly. The particularity of this pregnant belly is that it signifies an emptiness rather than a fullness in the story. However, how can a belly with a baby signify emptiness?

For the beggarwoman, the baby instantiates a perpetual hunger, thus representing a *force of emptying*; the hunger can never be satiated because it is not even the beggarwoman's hunger but one from another. The pregnant and distended belly thus represents an emptiness that can never be filled, not even by feeding it. The text creates a very interesting disconnection between fulfilling a need and the impossibility of fulfilling that need since it is mediated by another instance in which one has no control.

The possession by the other renders the fulfillment of the task impossible, making it both impossible and yet inevitable. In that sense, the beggarwoman transmits to Peter Morgan a force that is not her own, a force of emptying that comes from the other, the baby:

> …nuit et jour l'enfant continue à la manger, elle écoute et entend le grignotement incessant dans le ventre qu'il décharne, il lui a mangé les cuisses, les bras, les joues — elle les cherche, il n'y a que des trous là où elles étaient dans le Tonlé-Sap —, la racine des cheveux, tout, il prend petit à petit la place qu'elle occupait, cependant que sa faim à elle il ne l'a pas mangée. (18)
>
> …night and day the child continues to devour her. She feels and hears it nibbling incessantly in her belly. It erodes her body. It devours the flesh of her thighs, her arms, her cheeks. She touches them, and finds hollows where there used to be plumpness in the days of the Tonle-Sap – The child has devoured everything, even the roots of her hair. Little by little it is elbowing her out. The only thing it has not taken from her is her hunger. (8-9)

For the beggarwoman, her belly is the site of a force that sucks her body away. Her pregnancy is the experience of an *emptying* that actively makes her body slowly disappears. This force of disappearance then resonates through the beggarwoman's distended belly. Furthermore, this emptying passes from the beggarwoman to Peter Morgan when he hears her sing. This emptying is an active force of disappearing, creating an endless hunger and an endless search for something new. This metaphor allows us to grasp better the relation between Peter Morgan's writing and the emptying that inhabits the beggarwoman. Indeed, his writing is animated by the same force of emptying that animates the beggarwoman. As we saw, his writing is the enactment of his disappearance as a character and an "I." Yet while writing is a force of disappearance, it is also a force of creation. After all, in his text, the beggarwoman's narrative is a fiction. By transmitting this *emptying*, the beggarwoman shares her fate

and force with Peter Morgan. This force became for Peter Morgan the condition of his writing and the danger of his disappearing.

Walter Benjamin, in his essay on Charles Baudelaire in *Illuminations*, argues that what passes on in the telling of a story is not just the transmission of knowledge but also the transmission of the experience of the storyteller:

> A story does not aim to convey a happening per se, which is the purpose of information; rather, it embeds the event in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the trace of the storyteller, much the way an earthen vessel bears the trace of the potter's hand. (161)

Between the beggarwoman and Peter Morgan, what gets transmitted is not a piece of information, but an experience, the experience of emptying and forgetting. Moreover, as Benjamin wrote, the story's writing "bears the trace of the storyteller," and here, the trace is a forgetting transmitted from the woman to the writer[60]. As I have argued, Peter Morgan cannot decide the act of forgetting:" Comment ne pas revenir. Il faut se perdre. Je ne sais pas." However, this forgetting, inscribed in this writing, is also something that the writer seems to fight as he is writing: "Non, non je n'oublie pas, je suis ici ou sont mes mains." The writer fights against this force within the text that makes him lose his position of enunciation, the stability of the "I." Indeed, even this statement, caught in the story told by Peter Morgan, is ambiguous and points both toward him and toward the beggarwoman. However, this force is also what animates the writing itself. Thus, we must understand Peter Morgan's text as the site of tension, of a contradiction, between a force of creation and disappearing[61].

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[60] In The Storyteller, Benjamin follows the same line of argument:" Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel." (92)

[61] McNeece in her reading of the novel points also to the place of the eating and vomiting at stake in the beggar's life representation by Peter Morgan: "As a vessel into which others' meanings may be decanted

The duality of this creation and disappearing is also what is at stake in storytelling, according to Benjamin:

> For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. It is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to. The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory. When the rhythm of work has seized him, he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling them comes to him all by itself. This, then, is the nature of the web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled. (91)

Benjamin argues that there is the forgetting of the self at the heart of the listening experience. Benjamin describes even the memory of the story as coming back on its own ("retelling them comes to him all by itself"), thus the listener who becomes the speaker is not active in the retelling; the speaker lends the voice to the memory, which speaks instead of him or her. Only by going through this forgetting will the listener be gifted the ability to tell the story. That is the gift of the beggarwoman to Peter Morgan, the gift of self-forgetting. Then, is this gift of storytelling the ability for Peter Morgan to testify to the subaltern position occupied by the beggarwoman? I would argue that his writing is now caught in the paradox of the position of the subaltern, of the "trace-structure" (effacement in disclosure) that Spivak discusses. Thus, Peter Morgan, as I have argued, does not fill the void from the beggarwoman but rather writes by enacting the same "trace-structure" that defines her position as a subaltern. To give a voice to the subaltern is to be caught in the undoing of the site of enunciation. As Duras shows it, this takes place through a scene of transmission, through the affection of the colonizer, of a tension between forgetting and creation, the gift of the subaltern.

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in an endless process of filling and emptying, the beggar is a figure for the differential rather than the referential function of the sign."(McNeece, 63) In both my reading and the one done by McNeece, we recognize the presence of a tension which puts the text into work.

Through the first half of this chapter, I have tried to show that the position of the subaltern, although deprived of an ability to speak, can nonetheless enact a transmission. In doing so, I have tried to offer a new perspective on the work of Gayatri Spivak. This makes me conclude differently than Peter Hallward in his analysis of her work:" …the subaltern, in other words, is the theoretically untouchable, the altogether-beyond-relation: the attempt to "relate" to the subaltern defines what Spivak will quite appropriately name an "impossible ethical singularity"[62] Through my reading of Duras, I would argue that there is still a transmission that is possible even from the "untouchable" beggarwoman who roams around the lepers of Calcutta. However, this transmission can only happen if the listener participates in a chain of storytelling or writing. To listen is to abandon the position of the "I" and to be *told* by the story rather than simply *telling* it.

Writing is the space of the subaltern and the transmission of her existence if we understand her existence as an "effacement in disclosure." This means that the space of the subaltern is not stable. On the contrary, like Peter Morgan's writing, it is a site of tension, expressed in the novel through the figure of *walking*. Walking in the novel is embodied by the beggarwoman, and through this embodiment, it is a way for her to "speak," like the subaltern in Spivak's text[63]. Her walking is the site of a tension between a force of departure and a force of return. Even though she flees from her home, the force that pushes her forward, her hunger, is not entirely hers. As we saw, it comes from her baby, but more importantly, it also comes from her mother. Thus, what gives

[62] See Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial*, (30)
[63] "Bhubaneswari attempted to "speak" by turning her body into a text of woman/writing "Gayatri Spivak, Can the Subaltern Speak? , (64)

her the strength to walk is a force that reinscribes in her a ghost from the past, her mother.

The uniqueness of this tension needs to be considered in relation to its social and historical context. As I will show, this form of walking is not legible for the colonizers; it goes against their belief in mobility as an ability to leave without returning. For them walking away is a figure of forgetting; it allows an individual to escape a looming madness or a situation of boredom that might bring an existential crisis. Duras opposes in *Le Vice-Consul* the forgetting as a decision to walk away and the walking of the beggarwoman. As I will try to show, the walking of the beggarwoman inscribes in her body a force from another that can enact a self-forgetting in the beggar. Thus, the body becomes the site of the presence of another, whose very presence creates the risk of the disappearance of the self.

This tension within the body of the beggarwoman can be traced back to Duras' biography. As she retells in her autobiography, she tried to run away from a mad Cambodian woman when she was young. However, as we will see, this running away paradoxically brought the Cambodian woman even closer to Duras. By turning to this episode before *Le Vice-Consul*, I would like to show how the beggarwoman is being repeated in Duras' text as the site of this tension between departure and return and between transmission and modernity.

The Beggarwoman as the Face of Madness

Marguerite Duras acknowledged that she never went to India before writing *Le Vice-Consul* in an interview[64]. While the depictions of Calcutta and the geography of southeast Asia are partially invented, the beggarwoman is a character from her childhood in Indochina. This event remained a traumatic encounter that kept on inscribing itself in her novels. Her biographer Laure Adler summarizes the strange event in the following terms:

> Half-man, half-woman, emerging from the frontiers of the night and running around in the Forbidden City of the whites, this beggar screamed words that heralded the apocalypse. As the day was drawing to a close, that was when the shrieking madwoman pursued Marguerite. For a few moments, that was all. But it was enough to have her shaking in terror. In the Vinh Long hose, at the end of the street, past the gate, in the dark, little Marguerite ran, then, the moment, she was through the door, dropped to the ground. Phew! Saved. The child was terrified of being touched. The madwoman was a smuggler and Marguerite could sense it. A smuggler of madness. All through her life Duras was afraid she might go mad, yet often she courted madness. (36)

For Duras, the beggarwoman represented an "other" that could break the unity of the individual by breaking sanity and letting Duras slip into madness. The interesting aspect of the story, retold by Laure Adler, is that madness (the beggarwoman) and sanity (to a certain extent, Marguerite Duras) are caught in a race. Will sanity always be able to maintain its "advance" on madness? Or will madness, at some point, catch up with it? I want to continue discussing running and its ambiguity by turning to a repetition of this episode in Duras' autobiographical work, *The Lover*. While the beggarwoman does

[64] Marguerite Duras, Les Parleuses : « Faut que je dise tout de suite que la géographie est inexacte, complètement. Je me suis fabriqué une Inde, des Indes, comme on disait avant..., pendant le colonialisme. Calcutta, c'était pas la capitale et on ne peut pas aller en une après-midi de Calcutta aux bouches du Gange. L'île, c'est Ceylan, c'est Colombo, The Prince of Wales de Colombo, il est pas là du tout. Et le Népal, il peut pas y aller non plus dans la journée chasser, là-bas, l'ambassadeur de France. Et Lahore est très loin, Lahore, c'est au Pakistan. Il n'y a que ces rizières, c'est juste, là, c'est dans le delta, c'est énorme, il n'y a que du riz." P.122 / Editions de Minuit

not catch up with Marguerite Duras in Adler's biography, she remains affected by the encounter, and the return of the madwoman in several of her novels clearly shows that Duras did not leave this event unharmed:

> That evening, like most evenings, the electricity breaks down. That's what starts it all off. As soon as I reach the street and the gate shuts behind me, the lights go off. I run. I run because I'm afraid of the dark. I run faster and faster. And suddenly I think I hear running behind me, and suddenly I am sure that someone's after me. Still running, I look around, and I see. It's a very tall woman, very thin, thin as death, laughing and running. She's barefoot and she's running after me to catch me. I recognize her, she's the local lunatic, the madwoman of Vinh Long. (…) (84)

The beggar's sight does not provoke the race between Duras and the beggarwoman; she starts running before the appearance of the madwoman. Thus, we have to ask, what is the status of this "running"? Here Duras is not running away from the beggarwoman; she is running away from the frightening darkness. As Duras runs, she is suddenly hearing the beggarwoman running behind her. However, who is heard here? Is she not hearing her footsteps? Moreover, how could we trust her vision when she pretends to see the beggarwoman in such darkness? Here, *The Lover* offers a very different story from the biography. What is at stake is not how the sight of the beggarwoman makes Duras run away but rather how the running creates the figure of the beggarwoman. In *The Lover,* the running alters perception and throws Duras into a state of madness. In Adler's biography, sanity kept its advance on madness. This meant that sanity existed as a state which predated madness, and madness would only occur if Duras were to be touched by the beggarwoman. However, in *The Lover*, the temporality is reversed; there is no chance of keeping its advance on madness, as the more one runs, the more the figure of madness appears. The critical difference between the two texts is that there is in *The Lover* a doubling of the self; there is the revelation within the self of

another presence, of a non-self that appears unannounced. This is the maddening effect of *fear*[65], which, as Lacan has described, brings individuals back from where they are trying to escape:

> … la peur, avec ce qu'elle a de particulièrement ambivalent et flottant, à savoir que, comme nous autres analystes ne l'ignorons pas, c'est aussi bien quelque chose qui vous pousse en avant et quelque chose qui vous tire en arrière, c'est quelque chose qui fait de vous essentiellement *un être double* (202)

Lacan expresses here how the feeling of fear is both a force that pushes away "pousse en avant" and a force that pulls you back "tire en arrière." The spatial metaphor indicates a temporal paradox that inhabits fear; the object feared is already present or has already touched the individual. Through the metaphor of "running," Marguerite Duras shows how fearing madness, a reasonable fear for a "sane person," brings madness forward. An escape is rendered impossible, as what allows one to escape is the reinscription of the feared object in the subject. For Duras, there is no possibility of forgetting the beggarwoman, as there is no possibility of escaping from her. The beggarwoman is the shadow that follows Duras.

Nevertheless, if running is an attempt at saving oneself, could we not also say that the beggarwoman is a figure of liberation for Duras? The appearance of the madwoman is not just a sign of a looming madness. It is also an act of creation, giving a face to something unknown and frightening. However, it is difficult to identify what is given a face. Indeed, the origin of the beggarwoman is overdetermined; she comes from the darkness, the memories of Duras, and Duras herself. This overdetermination renders the origin of her laugh ambiguous, the body of the beggarwoman is animated

[65] For a good introduction on fear and phobia in Lacan, see Vanier, Alain *De quoi avons-nous peur ?* In: *La peur: Émotion, passion, raison* [online]. Bruxelles: Presses de l'Université Saint-Louis, 2006

by an enjoyment that cannot be located. We know that this enjoyment follows Duras' fear like a shadow. Thus, fear and enjoyment are bound together in the scene we discussed. This enjoyment could show that precisely the fear of madness is ambiguous, that there is an enjoyment also at stake in the face of madness. Despite herself, Marguerite Duras would be attached to this madness, at least in her autobiography. This attachment is also an attachment to this beggarwoman, who, for Duras, is like a muse. The face of madness allows Duras to write through it and maybe to find a form of enjoyment in this facing of madness. For Duras, the beggarwoman is the site for her writing, the only figure standing between Duras and an "infinite void.":

> C'est quoi pour toi la mendiante ? Un état illimité de l'individu. Le Lieu de l'écrit sans fond, sans fin. Aussi bien, elle n'existe pas – elle est un maillon dans la chaine de la misère…. Elle est sans connaissance. Elle est sans passé, sans avenir, sans bêtise, sans intelligence. Sans repères. Sans identité. C'est l'instant… Ni tristesse ni joie… C'est comme…. Un état animal de l'humain… Donc elle est au plus près de l'idée[66].

What defines the beggarwoman the most is her absence of attributes; she lacks qualities. However, the enumeration of the "sans" indicates that, even though she is lacking, she is also what gives Duras the injunction to continue to write. Thus, the beggarwoman can be understood as a figure of liberation because she allows Duras to write in the face of madness and around this infinite void to which the beggarwoman gives a face. Facing her, Duras can do nothing else but run, which is also to write for her.

[66] Borgomano, citing *Marguerite Duras tourne un film,* in ″L'histoire de la mendiante indienne: une cellule génératrice de l'oeuvre de Marguerite Duras″*,* Poétique, 48 (1981), (482)

Le Vice-Consul, Modernity, and Walking

While Duras is caught in a race against the beggarwoman, Peter Morgan articulates his writing around her walk:" Elle marche, écrit Peter Morgan." In *Le Vice-Consul*, the walking woman becomes a figure for creation. In both cases, it would seem that there is a moving forward, yet I would argue that we should restrain from considering it as a departure. In a recent study of walking and modernity[67], the volume editors ponder the role of walking in modernity. As a movement that goes forward, it has become a figure of mobility and a representation of progress. This is exactly how some critics have understood the walking of the beggarwoman in *Le Vice-Consul*: walking away from a mother or being rejected by her:

> The name (Battambang) has a tone of a tight drum like the pregnant belly, which accentuates the bodily rhythm of walking away from the rejecting mother. (Knuuttila, 161)
>
> The beggar is expelled from her village and denied crucial ties to her family, reminding us that, in other areas of the world, cultural codes of conduct are rooted in a material basis, a reality often denied by Western bourgeois morality. (McNeecee, 62)

The beggarwoman was expelled[68] by her mother because she got pregnant with someone who remains enigmatic to the reader (incest with the father is not to be excluded). Both critics emphasize the separation that represents the walking of the beggarwoman. However, the mobility in Duras is very ambiguous, as we have seen through the figure of running. Running could be equated with a force of mobility stronger than walking. As such, it indicates a stronger will to separate oneself, to remain *one* and sane. However, for Duras, the intensity of the run, its force of motion, finds its

[67] See: Benesch, Klaus, and François Specq. *Walking and the Aesthetics of Modernity.*
[68] In french the verb is "chasser" which is more ambiguous than my English translation or the interpretation offered by other critics. I return to that distinction in the final section of this paper.

source in fear and thus deprives Duras of escaping. Through its kinship to fear, the force of motion is both a departure and a return. If we turn to *Le Vice-Consul,* we find a similar pattern in the beggarwoman herself, where the walking away from the mother who expelled her reveals itself to be more than just a separation.

In *Le Vice-Consul*, the question of mobility cannot be separated from its colonial context. The colonizers presented in the novel are almost all diplomats; they are the epitome of colonial mobility. Moreover, being wealthy colonizers, they can easily travel to mitigate the boredom of their lives. In that sense, they are animated by a strong belief in the possibility of changing one's situation through mobility. Whether by going from Europe to India or from Calcutta to the coastline, mobility is seen as the possibility of a beneficial change. This is particularly the case when they discuss the complicated case of the Vice-Consul (Jean-Marc de H.). The man, who gives his name to the novel, is a troubled diplomat who shot several lepers and dogs in the gardens of Shalimar. While he is in transit in Calcutta, the ambassador and the other diplomats try to find him a new place to live. They try to use mobility as a way to save him from himself:

> Les deux hommes cherchent quoi faire de Jean Marc de H. où l'affecter, dans quel climat, sous quel ciel, afin de le mettre à l'abri de lui-même. (42)
>
> The two men ponder the problem of what to do with Jean-Marc de H. Where should they send him? What surroundings, what climate would best protect him from himself? (36)

Here the French expression to "affect someone to a post" enlightens us about the stakes of traveling. Here travels and affection are intertwined in the French expression. Travel is a way to create a change in the individual. Thus, mobility is an attempt by the state to regulate individuals deemed unstable and to find a way to mitigate a looming madness. The underlying logic is that mobility can be a means to forget madness and

put it aside. A change in environment will bring a forgetting of harmful thoughts. This belief, however, does not work for the story of the beggarwoman. Even more importantly, we will see that the colonizers are blind to the consequences of the beggarwoman's walking.

Bodily Transmission and the Impossibility of Forgetting

The story of the beggarwoman is about the displacement of the colonizers' beliefs. This is why the nomadism of the beggarwoman from Cambodia to Calcutta should not be read as the story of a separation. It is rather an impossible separation, a departure that keeps being animated by a return to the origin. This walk thus becomes something alien to the colonizers and the willful departure from the past that constitutes modernity. Yet, here the beggarwoman is not the opposition to modernity but rather the site of tension between departure and return. Here, both gestures infect one another on the space opened by the walk of the beggarwoman and Peter Morgan's writing[69].

As a narrative created by Peter Morgan, the story of the beggarwoman starts in Cambodia, around the region of Battambang. In that place, the young woman is thrown away from her home by her mother because she was found to be pregnant. Repudiated from her home, she will walk to abandon her baby, ending up giving it to a white woman before arriving in Calcutta. What is striking is the central role of the mother[70]. Far from being a loving figure, she comes out as a figure of hate who bans her daughter from her

[69] For a discussion of the particular relation between literature and modernity through this temporal paradox, see Paul de Man, *"*Literary History and Literary Modernity,*"* in *Blindness and Insight*.
[70] On the relation between the beggarwoman and the mother, and on how the giving away of the baby could be read as a reinscription of the mother's gesture in the daughter, see Marini *Territoires du feminin*.

home. However, the “retelling” of the events by Peter Morgan questions the validity of this perspective:

> Il faut insister pour qu’à la fin ceci qui vous repousse, demain vous attire, c’est ce qu’elle a cru comprendre que sa mère disait en la chassant. (10)
>
> Only put your mind to it, and what repels you today, will appeal to you tomorrow. That is what she thinks she heard her mother say, before she drove her out. (1)

The mother does not expel the beggarwoman. She *chases* her from the house. While the English language distinguishes between to chase and to chase from, in *Le Vice-Consul,* Duras plays with the ambiguity of the verb “chasser” in French. By doing so, the mother is hunting her daughter and chasing her from her home. She is both pushing her and pulling her at the same time. Thus, considering that the whole story starts with the mother's decision, this decision is ambiguous. In reaction to this ambiguity, at first glance, we could read the walking of the beggarwoman as an attempt to turn this tension between two forces into a narrative. This would turn the mother’s contradictory demand into the movement of a dialectique:”Il faut insister pour qu’à la fin ceci qui vous repousse, demain vous attire.” This sentence transforms tension into a narrative, the transformation of a paradox into a story. What today is repulsive must be what one desires tomorrow. We could think that the nomadism of the beggarwoman is the enactment of this temporalization through space. First, she would walk away from the mother, only to return after. The hate would be turned into love. However, in Peter Morgan’s narrative, she does not return. Thus, the story of her nomadism is not this rationalization but rather the reinscription in her walking of the same tension present in the mother's act. This means that the daughter is not given the task of solving the

mother's enigmatic command but rather reinscribing it in her body. As she does not return, the mother is inscribed in her as a *force of hunger*:

> Tête baissée, elle marche, elle marche. Sa force est grande. Sa faim est aussi grande que sa force. (10)
> With bowed head, she walks, she walks. Her strength is great. Her hunger is as great as her strength (8)

> Sa mère lui a dit mange, ne va pas t'ennuyer de ta mère, mange, mange, mange. (14)
> Her mother said, eat. Don't go grieving your mother, eat, eat, eat. (11)

The daughter's walking force comes from hunger, but this hunger is trapped within the mother's order:" mange, mange, mange." Many critics have noted the connection between "mange" and "manque" in French. The mother inscribes within the daughter a lack that also becomes a force of survival while remaining caught within the grasp of the mother's order. The escape from the mother and the search for food that will animate her life from now on is rooted in the past. While there was a lack of understanding of what the mother wanted from her, the mother also inscribed a lack in her daughter. Here the body is inscribed by an imperative from the mother's language. Thus, the walking, which finds its force to go forward in hunger, is also the reinscription, in each step, of the mother's legacy, of a lack that the daughter now bears in her body. This legacy will then be borne by her child, who will eat her in return.

When Georges Crawn, another English colonizer, asks Peter Morgan about her, he specifically uses the enigmatic word used by Peter Morgan to describe how the mother expelled the daughter: "De la plus jeune? Demande Georges Crawn, de Celle qui a été chassée par sa mère, peut-être ? "(Le Vice-Consul) Yet, Georges Crawn will

not ponder on the ambiguity of his formulation, and he will try to read Peter Morgan's story as a clear departure, a clean cut with the past granted by complete forgiveness:

> Ce serait dans le Gange… en définitive que… qu'elle s'est perdue, qu'elle a trouvé comment se perdre il me semble, elle a oublié, ne sait plus qu'elle est la fille de X ou de Y, plus d'ennui pour elle – Georges Crawn rit – nous sommes là pour ça en principe. Jamais, jamais le moindre soupçon d'ennui. (177)
>
> I would single out the Ganges as the scene of her final oblivion. I would say that the Ganges taught her how to lose herself. She has forgotten who she is, whether she is the child of X or Y. Her troubles are at an end – Georges Crawn laughs – that's really why we're here. Never, never the smallest hint of trouble. (151)

Georges Crawn believes she could forget her past, origin, and mother. However, what he reads here, is his fantasy, his dream of fighting existential boredom by traveling, coming to India or the coastline of India for leisure:" nous sommes là pour ça en principe. Jamais, jamais le moindre soupçon d'ennui." Yet, what is missed in Georges Crawn's reading of the story is how the beggarwoman's forgetting, produced by her walking away, is the reinscription of the mother in her body. The body is the site of forgetting and remembering, departure and return.

Although the beggarwoman may forget the mother[71], the body does not forget, which is marked by this order from the mother: "mange!". This force of hunger does more than sustain the need for food; it is a force of destruction, a force that would create the disappearance of the beggarwoman. Subsumed by hunger, she would forget herself:

> Mais elle rêve, la faim un temps très court, très vite elle revient et écrase. La jeune fille est sous la faim trop grande pour elle, elle croit que la vague va être trop forte pour elle, elle crie. (19)

71 « Elle a tendance à oublier l'origine, qu'elle a été chassée parce qu'elle est tombée enceinte d'un arbre très haut sans se faire de mal, tombée enceinte »

> But she has dreams in which, very suddenly for a moment or two, hunger returns to crush her. The girl's hunger is too much for her. It is like a great wave threatening to sweep her out of existence. (15)

Here forgetting is not the erasure of the past, but a forgetting of the self, caused by transmission. Thus, in this chapter, we have encountered two different kinds of forgetting. For Le Corbusier or the white colonizers of *Le Vice-Consul*, forgetting is the possibility of freeing oneself from the past and starting anew; for them forgetting is a decision. However, for Duras, forgetting is a transmission; it does not come from the self and is rather the mark of the gift of the other. For both Peter Morgan and the beggarwoman in his story, forgetting results from a transmission. The transmission of hunger will submerge the woman and erase her. However, this erasing, this kind of destruction is also the possibility of entering into a chain of transmission. The subject is no longer an individual, an indivisible unity, but is rather the site of an effacement and of a disclosure. Moreover, if writing is animated by this force of effacement, of forgetting, then writing is an essential medium for this chain of transmission. To write for Duras is to listen and be caught in an address. If we recall, as Duras runs away from the beggarwoman in *The Lover*, she hears her laugh, and she cannot escape being addressed by this laugh[72]. This makes the beggarwoman a muse, a source of inspiration for the artist. This muse is the one who stands at the beginning of the novel *Le Vice-Consul*, as well as the film *India Song*.

[72] The beginning of the film India Song, starts with the singing of the beggarwoman, then followed by a laugh from her. This beginning seems to represent the musing of the beggarwoman. Just like in Le Vice-Consul, the beggarwoman is the figure of the beginning, a forgetting at the start of every beginning.

The Muse of Oblivion

As we have seen through the address from the beggarwoman to Peter Morgan, forgetting does not mean the impossibility of telling or writing a story. In that sense, the novel by Marguerite Duras offers an original understanding of storytelling and transmission. In his text "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin argues that the origin of storytelling is the figure of the muse Mnemosyne. Stories and novels both originate from the Greek epics for Benjamin. He situates at the source of the epic the mythical figure of Mnemosyne:" Mnemosyne, the rememberer, was the Muse of the epic art among the Greeks." (97). For the storytellers, the actualization of Mnemosyne takes the form of a feminine figure that allows them to remember a story. Benjamin, in his text, takes the example of the figure of Scheherazade:

> In the first place among these is the one practiced by the storyteller. It starts the web which all stories together form in the end. One ties on to the next, as the great storytellers, particularly the Oriental ones, have already shown. In each of them there is a Scheherazade who thinks of a fresh story whenever the tale comes to stop. (98)

The figure of Scheherazade exists both within the storytellers and their stories. From within the story itself, there is the presence of a muse who will allow the storyteller to start a new story through the voice of this feminine figure. In Marguerite Duras, the muse is the figure of the beggarwoman. However, instead of being the descendant of Mnemosyne, we should consider her to be the descendant of Lethe, the muse of oblivion. Rather than allowing Peter Morgan to remember, she gives him the gift of self-forgetting, and it is from oblivion rather than a memory that the story is created. Writing and telling stories are the sites of tension between forgetting and telling or writing. Rather than being the repetition of a form of a story, transmission is the reinscription of

a tension between disappearance and creation. Here it would seem that we find an opposition between Duras and Benjamin, as while Duras is using the muse Lethe, Benjamin is using the muse Mnemosyne. However, we should not oppose them too quickly. Indeed I would like to argue that Duras extends an understanding of storytelling that is already present in Benjamin but is not wholly articulated.

As I presented earlier, Benjamin identifies in telling stories a self-forgetfulness in the listener. He also argues that the transmission of stories is the passing on of experiences:" experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn." (84). The metaphor of the body in Benjamin takes a more literal turn in Duras. For her, the body is the site of the passing on of an experience, of a forgetting. It brings a new dimension to the understanding of the transmission of experience in Benjamin. Duras shows that forgetting is what is passed on and what allows for the one who receives it to be caught in the chain of transmission. As one forgets, one is also caught in an imperative to sing or to write. Like an energy that would be passed on, forgetting gives the listener a movement that must be passed on; it cannot just be kept for oneself[73]. This movement is always caught in the possibility of bringing the destruction of the one who bears it. The walking of the beggarwoman, which is also the writing of Peter Morgan ("Elle marche, écrit Peter Morgan"), contains in itself the risk of forgetting, so extreme it would destroy the individual. In *Le Vice-Consul*, this is a danger risked by the beggarwoman in Peter Morgan's story, but for him as well ("Non, non je n'oublie pas, je suis la où sont mes mains.").

[73] For a discussion of the gift as something that cannot be kept, that needs to circulate and to be passed on, see Marcel Mauss, *Essai sur le don*.

An Ethic of Destruction?

Three years after writing *Le Vice-Consul*, in 1969, Marguerite Duras made a film based on her novel *Détruire, dit-elle*(Destroy, She Said). During the shooting of the film, she was interviewed and made the following statement:

> Je suis pour qu'on oublie l'Histoire, l'histoire de France, l'histoire du monde. Complètement. Qu'il n'y ait plus aucune mémoire de ce qui a été vécu. C'est-à-dire de l'intolérable…. Tout casser. (enregistrement audiovisuel)
>
> I am promoting the forgetting of History, French history, and world history. Completely. That there remains no memory of what has been experienced. That is, of the intolerable… Breaking everything. (My translation)

Without knowing *Le Vice-Consul*, it would be easy to misread her statement as a manifesto for modernity. Yet I would argue that Duras is situated elsewhere, where forgetting is not something that one can decide but a gift from the other. The gift puts the subject in the position of the addressee, a position where the place of the "I" is left empty. For Duras, this gift is marked on the body of the one who receives it, as shown by the beggarwoman. Thus, she differs radically from how the modernist Le Corbusier understood transmission:" Nothing is transmissible but thought (…) Thought alone, the fruit of labor, is transmissible."[74] For Duras, the body is an essential aspect of transmission; through that, she offered a destabilization of modernity and the western project in India. For it to happen, the body is defined in *Le Vice-Consul* not as an organism but as writing. Like writing, the body is animated by a force coming from the other, and like writing, this force erodes the self and its memory, bringing it to a state of oblivion. For Duras, the state of oblivion, of destruction, is the site of a disponibility of the human being, what we could call a new way of listening and addressing each

[74] Le Corbusier, *The Final Testament of Père Corbu*, 83

other. For Duras, this disponibility exists in the marginality of the human being, which I read as an iteration of the subaltern position in Spivak. A position that I have tried in this chapter to define as a position from where a transmission of forgetting and of this subaltern position is enacted:

> Nous nous tenons dans cette disponibilité marginale de l'être humain, cette disponibilité à aimer tout le monde et chacun en même temps. Cette disponibilité qui ira dans l'avenir, à mon avis, en s'agrandissant toujours. C'est là la forme de mon optimisme politique. (Enregistrement audivisuel)
>
> We stand in this marginal disponibility of the human being, this disponibility to love everyone and each of us simultaneously. This disponibility will only, I believe, grow in the future. This is the form that takes my political optimism. (My translation)

CHAPTER 4

The Passing on of The Last Breath in Glissant's *La Case du Commandeur*

Introduction

The reader of Edouard Glissant's novels can notice the recurrence of a theme: a search for a lost origin. In most of Glissant's novels, such as *La Lezarde*, *Le Quatrieme Siecle*, *La Case du commandeur,* and *Le Tout-Monde*, the stories focus on the complicated past of Martinican families. Within these families, what does not cease to resonate in each generation is an enigmatic past that is forever cut away from them, inaccessible. This inaccessible past is linked to a critical event in French Caribbean History: The Middle Passage. It names the passage of slave ships from Africa to the Caribbeans and America[75]. This event marks a rupture for the descendants of enslaved people in French Caribbeans. It cuts them from their lineage in Africa and sets a traumatic event as what founded their existence. Thus, what reveals itself to be traumatic for the descendants of the Middle Passage is not only the horror of the event but also how this event was a severing of a link to a past, a history, and a culture.

In Glissant's novels, none treat this traumatic event, which resonates in each generation like *La Case du commandeur*. In his study of Glissant's work Peter Hallward argues that the novel distinguishes itself by its radical approach to the past: "Although *La Case du commandeur*, like *Le Quatrième Siecle*, is structured as a genealogical excavation of the past, the search for origins now only fades away into an ever-greater

[75] See in particular Sowande' M. mustakeem *Slavery at Sea* (2016) . See also Christina Sharpe *In the Wake* (2016). On the question of the impact of the transatlantic trade on literary texts, see u particular the interview with M. Nourbese Philip:"Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive" (2008), see also M. Nourbese Philip *Zong!* (2008)

obscurity, into the 'hole of time gone past.'"[76] Indeed, what stands out in *La Case du commandeur* is a confrontation with a past that is "represented" as a hole, an unfathomable abyss. It is the radicality of this position by Glissant which is of utmost interest for the question of the transmission of trauma. Indeed, although ungraspable, this "hole of time gone past" is not completely lost, it haunts the generations of the Celat Family in *La Case du commandeur*. Thus, the paradox that Glissant explores in this novel is how can a lost past be transmitted. And for Glissant, the thinker of *Relation*, it also questions how a relation can be created around an unsayable, around a hole that cannot be named.

The novel *La Case du commandeur* follows the lives of several Martinican generations through the Celat family[77]. The novel explores how each generation is marked by the presence of a past that has been cut from them and remains ungraspable. Yet the novel does not start from the beginning but rather through the birth of the last descendant: Marie Celat, in 1928. This beginning is quickly put aside as the narrator keeps returning to the past, each chapter allowing for the discovery of a previous generation of men and women. One of the oldest ancestors and the first to bear the name of Celat is Anatolie Celat[78] (1820 -?), Marie's great-great-grandfather. Anatolie Celat

[76] Peter Hallward, 92

[77] Regarding the Celat family in Glissant's writing, see also Valerie Loichot: "Orphan Narratives" (2007). See also Dominique Chancé : "Edouard Glissant, Unnce Traité du Déparler. " (2002). For a study of the relation between family narratives and the traumatic past of the French Caribbean see Thomas, Bonnie: "Connecting Histories*"* (2017)

[78] His family name refers to the name that was given to one of his sons by one of his many love conquests, Hermancia. Hermancia named her son *Ceci*, a deictic which destabilizes the idea of the proper name, thus destabilizing its quality of being proper to a person. And this destabilization of the proper name is taken again by Anatolie when he decides to name himself Celat, where this very repetition with a difference shows the instability of the family name in Glissant's novel. Nevertheless, this name will stick, and be passed on from one generation to the next until Marie Celat. What the name Ceci and Celat refers to is precisely not clearly known, but according to the narrator Hermancia named her son Ceci as a reference to Anatolie, who was always "par-ci par-la" and doing "ceci cela." it means that Anatolie was always

was not given a family name, yet he chose it. This name, coming from a deictic (cela/that), shows a disturbance of the proper name, where a family name refers to an outside that remains unclear (cela). But what seems even more critical in this name is how it echoes the novel's structure. Indeed, the novel starts with the last descendant and then goes backward in time. The naming of Anatolie Celat follows that reversed temporality. His name comes from the name given to his son: Ceci. Thus, the son's naming here allows a family name to be established retroactively. I would argue that this reversed order of temporality is crucial in the novel and the question of the transmission of trauma. The absence of a name or an event is approached only retroactively from the position of the son or daughter. Thus, in doing so, Glissant shows how the ancestors both precede and follows their descendants. It is because, as we will see, the past is an irrecuperable absence, creating a paradox: a non-origin at the origin.

By focusing on the Celat family and their relationship with the abyss, I would like to show how Glissant unravels the complexity of the transmission of trauma. There is in his work a gender difference at play within this transmission. While men are trying to articulate this trauma through a myth about the past, the women are marked on their bodies by a force from the past. The women are the ones who bear something that cannot be turned into a narrative. By unfolding the story of this family, I would like to show how Glissant dramatizes the impossibility of representing the transmitted trauma. However, he does not glorify the perpetuation of an unsayable, a truth that would remain outside the representable. Instead, Glissant shows, much like Davoine and Gaudillere in their work on trauma, that what is necessary is a *chronicler*. A chronicler is an agent

here and there, doing this and that. The underlying meaning of this vague description is that Anatolie was always from one woman to another and after the next sexual encounter

who creates a gesture, who acts rather than simply recording or representing. In order to understand how this chronicler changes the relation to the trauma, I show how the Celat family in *La Case du commandeur* is rooted in past trauma. To do so, we need to be introduced to how the Celat family comes to be marked by the presence of a hole in their stories and their bodies.

The Celat Family: The Hole as the Foundation of a Family

Anatolie Celat, the first to bear the name Celat, is presented as a man who spends his time in women's beds. However, in the company of these women, he does more than have sex with them; what sets him apart is the tale he tells them. He does not give them a complete tale, only fragments of it. Each woman gets a different fragment. Later, they all meet as a kind of community of lovers and storytellers, and they try to put the pieces back together in a joint enterprise to find the tale's beginning and end. Yet, this fragmented tale remains elusive to them, probably because it is elusive to its storyteller. Indeed, when Anatolie would meet the women again, he would ask them to retell him where the tale had stopped. In that sense, Anatolie would continue the tale by being retold the previous fragments, his storytelling spurring from what the women could remember. This also means that he speaks from a place of forgetting, he does not tell chosen fragments. The story can go on thanks to his forgetting and what the women can remember. His lack of memory questions if there is a complete tale in the first place. It is this question that one woman wished to elucidate: Liberté Longoué.

Liberté Longoué has the same name as her uncle Liberté Longoué. Her father, Melchior, a famous maroon, named his daughter after his brother, who dreamt of

freedom but died on the plantation. Her name is thus what the narrator calls both a "program" and a "memory." Although her name is a repetition, there is a change in this repetition; the wind of freedom that animated her uncle has somehow been fixated on her body[79]. While Melchior's brother was called the "inspired of the wind" ("L'inspiré du vent"), Melchior's daughter is said to have been contrasting this airy movement with a "concentration of the body" ("une concentration du corps de Liberté"). Thus, she bears an unfinished dream, something other than a name, the wind of an unaccomplished desire through her body. In that sense, the matriarch of the Celat family is marked in her body by a wind from the past, a force that, although it got interrupted, is repeated in the descendant's body. This inscription of a lost parent on her body guides Liberté in her questioning of Anatolie.

Liberté Longoué is the one who confronts Anatolie with the fact that his story has no beginning, that something is missing and cannot be recuperated. Unlike the other women, she shows Anatolie that the obscurity of a past may be a force that pushes one forward rather than holds one back:

> Mais le début tombait dans un trou sans fond, ou plus personne n'était lisible. Anatolie se fâcha, cria qu'il préférait son manège auprès des femmes ; que l'obscurité n'était rien : tant qu'on la projetait *devant* son corps. Liberté répondit que la mémoire était plus chaude quand on la gardait ronde ouverte ; que l'obscurité nourrissait le corps quand on la sentait là-derrière vous comme un Grand Commandeur du Passé (106)

> But the beginning dropped into a bottomless pit where you couldn't see anyone at all. Anatolie became angry, shouted that he preferred his little game with the women; that obscurity was nothing as long as it was a darkness projected in front of his body. Liberté replied that memory was keenest when you kept it all around; that obscurity fed the body when you felt it, dark there behind you like the Great Overseer of the Past. (102)

[79] "Que Melchior pour ainsi dire avait voué la fille au recommencement du frère : ce qui avait selon l'apparence bien réussi, quand on observait la dure concentration du corps de Liberté la fille, qui faisait contraste (et entrait par conséquent en suite logique) avec les effarements aériens dont avait fait montre Liberté le frère)." (120)

In" this passage, we discover that Anatolie does not want to look toward the beginning of his tale and face the fact that there might be no beginning. Thus, following what Peter Hallward mentions, Anatolie's story has a hole that echoes a hole in the history of the French Caribbean, a lost past. Anatolie and Liberté are striking in how they relate differently to the bottomless hole that represents the absence of a beginning to the tale. For Anatolie, the obscurity, the unknown, should be thrown in front of the body, and the text emphasizes it through the italicized *devant*. But what is Anatolie throwing in front of him? It seems that what Anatolie wants to put in front of him is his women's conquest "il préfèrerait son manège auprès des femmes." Could these women be something other than sexual conquests? While he flees from the confrontation with the hole in his tale, he keeps returning to feminine figures each time he asks them to repeat the story he told them. Thus, for Anatolie, the solution seems to evade the hole in his story by asking a woman to say to him a tale. Each encounter with a woman allows Anatolie to avoid facing a hole in his story. He replaces this dreadful experience with a scene where he listens to the women and where the women take the place of that hole; they replace the hole with their voices and the fragments they give back to him. In a sense, the women are the faces that replace an absence. While these women seem to allow Anatolie not to face the lack of beginning, they are nonetheless the echo of the person who told him this very tale: his grandmother Eudoxie. "Anatolie stupéfié se souvint qu'il les avait entendus de la bouche d'Eudoxie la manman de manman" (106) ; "Dumbfounded, Anatolie remembered that he had heard them from the mouth of his mother mother's mother, Eudoxie."(102). In *La Case du commandeur,* telling stories is so predominantly the task of male figures that finding an echo of the grandmother here

is noteworthy. It is a woman who gave him this unfinished tale. The grandmother, by providing a tale without a beginning, gives her grandson an abyssal beginning, that is, a beginning that was never there, which could not be remembered or inscribed in history.

However, when Anatolie faces Liberté for the second time, she does not repeat the fragments she heard but instead makes him face the absence of the beginning of the tale. Anatolie encounters a woman who does not bulge from the lack of beginning, from the rupture at the beginning of the tale. But her language is also different from Anatolie's; while he offers to put the obscurity in front of him, she accepts to have it remain behind her body and thus out of sight. What could it mean to accept to have this obscurity behind oneself? For her, it means accepting that it pushes her from somewhere out of sight. This force from the past cannot become an object of knowledge that one could put before one's eye. In that sense, what Liberté offers to Anatolie is an attempt at building something other than an object of knowledge. She offers him a kind of "savoir-faire" or "know-how" that cannot be turned into theory and that must be rooted in an experience, rooted in the acceptance of this force that pushes one forward.

Significantly, Liberté Longoué is then the one who asks Anatolie to create a progeny. The establishment of a family through their union is a movement forward. This movement leads to the perpetuation of living even when what is pushing them forward is a mysterious force from the past. Liberté asks Anatolie when they are in one of the most dreadful places of Martinican history, a former cell for enslaved people. In this place of emprisonment and death, Liberté asks him to engender a line with her :"… elle le fit entrer, à l'écart de toute vie, dans un de ces vieux cachots a demi enterrés qui avaient servi à mater les récalcitrant; ils plongèrent à quatre pattes dans son abime. (…)

Liberté lui offrit de revenir en cet endroit pour engendrer leur descendance." (107-108)" She made him go inside, away from any living thing, into one of those old half-buried dungeons that had been used to subdue recalcitrant people; on hands and knees they went down into its abyss." (103) There is a determination in Liberté's behavior, a refusal to turn away from the past, even if this past is a dark cell from which no stories can be recuperated. Even more than facing it, Liberté asks Anatolie to make it the place where they will create a progeny, a line that would spur from this hole.

As Liberté tells her son that he comes from this hole in history, she transmits to him a hole that preceded all of them:" Elle dit à Augustus qu'il était né dans plus qu'un bois, dans un trou du passé. Il comprenait l'annonce. Melchior l'avait regardé. Liberté avait soufflé au premier jour dans le trou de sa tête. » (110); "She told Augustus that he had been born in more than one forest, in a hole in the past. He understood the sign. Melchior had looked at him. Liberté had breathed into the hole in his head the first day." (106). The hole of the past is passed on to Augustus as he now has a hole in his head, a hole on which Liberté breathes. Through this breathing, Liberté echoes the gesture of Anatolie's grandmother, who also "breathed" through her mouth[80] the tale with a hole to her grandson. These two feminine figures pass on to their male descendant a hole, an element that remains an enigma for these men. But Liberté went further than Anatolie's grandmother; she inaugurated a line at the heart of the hole. By conceiving her child in the cell of formerly enslaved people, Liberté Longoué intertwines her family's history with Martinican History. The act of creation is rooted in the act of transmission.

[80] "La bouche d'eudoxie"

The inheriting of trauma from the past is the question that is raised at the beginning of Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*. I want to turn to this work to better grasp a key element in transmitting trauma *in La Case du commandeur*. How can we understand the importance of this wind that pushes Liberté Longoué? And how important is the fact that she passes on a breath to her son, a kind of "souffle" ("breeze")? I would argue that we can understand this metaphor by reading *Poetics of Relation*. By putting the novel and the theoretical work into dialogue, I want to show that Glissant's thinking on the transmission of trauma circulates between a theory and a poetic.

The Middle Passage and The Wind from the Abyss

The transmission of the trauma from the Middle Passage is, for Glissant, not just a question of bearing witness to the horrors of the past but maybe even more importantly, the possibility for new relations to be built on this groundless foundation. As we saw, Liberté Longoué does not shy away from this traumatic past; she decides to establish her family in the place of the "hole" of the abyss that stands in the place of the history of the descendants of the enslaved people. In *Poetics of Relation,* Glissant develops his understanding of this groundless foundation through the event of the Middle Passage. He refers to this event as an abyss ("un gouffre"), for which he identifies three instances spread across time and yet all connected. First among them is the slave ship itself: "Le ventre de cette barque-ci te dissout, te précipite dans un non-monde où tu cries. Cette bark est une matrice, le gouffre-matrice. Génératrice de ta clameur. " (18); " … the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out. This boat is a womb, a womb abyss. It generates the clamor of your protests..." (6). Here

the abyss is a matrix, a womb: it generates a voice. In that sense, like an infant coming out of the mother's womb, the abyss gives birth to a scream ("une clameur"). Yet the abyss for Glissant also encompasses the movement of drowning this voice deep into the ocean. Indeed, the abyss is not only the boat, from where a clamor is thrown, but the ocean itself where slaves were thrown off board with chains at their feet: "Aussi le deuxieme gouffre est-il de l'abîme marin. Quand les régates donnent la chasse au négrier, le plus simple est d'alléger la barque en jetant par-dessus bord la cargaison, lestée de boulets." (18) ; "The next abyss was the depths of the sea. Whenever a fleet of ships gave chase to slave ships, it was easiest just to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains. "(6). Here through the association of these two descriptions, we see how Glissant both describes the event as the production of a clamor, of a voice, and at the same time as the drowning of this voice. By encompassing these two events into one, the figure of the abyss creates tension between the birth of a voice and the drowning of this voice in the ocean.

The third and last abyss is the one that dwells in the next generations:"… qui (*the abyss*) ne se retrouvera pour des generations que dans les savanes bleues du souvenir ou de l'imaginaire, de plus en plus élimés."(19); "Paralleling this mass of water, the third metamorphosis of the abyss thus projects a reverse image of all that had been left behind, not to be regained for generations except-more and more threadbare-in the blue savannas of memory or imagination." (7). In Glissant's poetic language, the representation of the abyss is a space where land comes to merge with the ocean in what he calls the "blue savannah." In this fantastical representation, the ocean and its traumatic past inhabit the dunes of the island's beaches, the land of the inheritors. The

convergence of these two spaces through poetic language shows the attempt by Glissant to create a shared space, a space where several abysses (the womb abyss, the ocean abyss, the "inherited" abyss) could be connected. Yet, what are these watery dunes made of? Of memories or projected imaginations? Is this language a means of transmission from the past to the present or the realization of a rupture with it, where the next generations are solely left with the necessity to imagine what cannot be known?

The relationship between the present generations and the traumatic past is continuous and discontinuous[81]. Glissant's writing attempts to figure out this paradox through a specific figure: a wind coming from the abyss. This wind gives a force to the next generation when, at the same time, because of its very nature as air, it remains ungraspable and invisible and yet still makes an impact:

> Les peoples qui se constituèrent alors, quand même ils auraient oublié le gouffre, quand même ils ne sauraient imaginer la passion de ceux qui y sombrèrent, n'en ont pas moins tissé une voile (un voile) avec quoi, ne revenant pas à la Terre-d'Avant, ils se sont élevés sur cette terre-ci soudaine et stupéfaite. (…) Et cette voile insoupçonnée, qui à la fin se déploie, est irriguée du vent blanc du gouffre. Et ainsi l'inconnu-absolu, qui était la projection du gouffre, et qui portait en eternité le gouffre-matrice et gouffre en abime, à la fin devenu connaissance. (20)

> The populations that then formed, despite having forgotten the abyss, despite being unable to imagine the passion of those who foundered there, nonetheless wove this sail (a veil). They did not use it to return to the Former Land but rose up on this unexpected, dumbfounded land. (…) And this undreamt-of sail, finally now spread, is watered by the white wind of the abyss. Thus, the absolute unknown, projected by the abyss and bearing into eternity the womb-abyss and the infinite abyss, in the end became knowledge. (7-8)

The next generations are left without any memory of the abyss's trauma and the ability to imagine its horrors. Yet, Glissant describes in his metaphor the creation of a sail, a receptacle capable of harnessing the force of a wind coming from the abyss. Thus,

[81] "L'expérience du gouffre est au gouffre et hors de lui. Tourment de ceux qui ne sont jamais sortis du gouffre : passés directement du ventre du négrier au ventre violet des fonds de mer. Mais leur épreuve ne fut pas morte, elle s'est vivifiée dans ce continu-discontinu : la panique du nouveau pays, la hantise du pays d'avant, l'alliance enfin avec la terre imposée, soufferte, rédimée. » (19)

even where memory fails and where the horror is indescribable, for Glissant, there remains a wind, a force that pushes the next generation forward. This figure of the wind is enigmatic. Its force can be seen in its effects on the sail, but the wind remains an invisible force. The wind creates in Glissant's text a kind of continuity between the traumatic event and its inheritors. Still, this continuous link is also marked by a rupture, the impossibility of remembering or imagining the horror of the event.

The figure of the wind echoes a breath, especially in French, where the term "souffle" (breath) is both the "breath of the wind" and also "the last breath." This wind is thus marked by the event of the Middle Passage, as it is a kind of perpetuation of the last breath of the enslaved people. More specifically, this wind appears as the last breath that could be not a voice; the wind creates a lingering of the voicelessness of the dead, of the fact that the Middle Passage drowned the enslaved people's voices before they could be heard. What the figure of the wind allows us to understand about the transmission of trauma is that while it cannot be seen, the wind can nonetheless carry you away. The descendants can feel the effect of the trauma, like the sails that encounter the force of the wind. The use of French with "voile," meaning both sail and veil, shows that dimension of the transmission of trauma as a force that remains veiled but felt.

The other meaning of the "breath," which is also very present in Glissant's work, is the idea of a "souffle poétique," a poetic inspiration. In *Soleil de la Conscience*, Glissant articulates the figure of the wind as poetic inspiration and creation[82]. At the beginning of the inspiration to write a poem, Glissant posits outbursts from the wind:

[82] For a discussion of the relation between Glissant and Heidegger and how this relation plays out in Glissant's understanding of poetry see Alessandro Corio "*Le lieu tremblant du poème-monde chez Glissant et Heidegger"*

> Éclats du vent : chacun rêve, enfant, du Seul Poème. Être poète, le devenir, c'est peut-être épuiser ce rêve, l'avoir renié. C'est assurer un manque éternel, celui de la connaissance. Pour quoi le poète, cet inconnu, est en effet par son poème le connu dans sa totalité, son allure mêmes. Cet ancien rêveur désespère, il a une fois pour toutes désespéré de savoir. (34)

At the beginning of Glissant's discussion of poetry, there are outbursts of wind. These outbursts are linked to a dream of writing a "unique" poem. Behind this dream lies the idea of finding a single poem that properly represents the wind, the force of inspiration that ignites the poem's writing. But how could words catch these outbursts of winds, this ungraspable force that cannot be seen? There is, for Glissant, a dream that needs to be relinquished as knowledge itself is lacking:" un manque éternel, Celui de la connaissance." By phrasing the inability to turn the wind into a poem through a lack inherent to knowledge, Glissant argues here that language in itself is insufficient, that its limitation inhabits it. The force of inspiration is unsayable because language is crippled by a lack that cannot be filled. Glissant's idea here is very close to the one discussed in another iteration of the "souffle poétique" in Derrida's "La Parole Soufflée" [83]. In Derrida's article he shows how the French writer Artaud is obsessed by the notion of "impouvoir" (unpower), and how this "impouvoir" is inspiration itself, something that Derrida summarizes as:" force d'un vide, tourbillon du souffle d'un souffleur qui aspire vers lui et me dérobe cela même qu'il laisse venir à moi et que j'ai cru pouvoir dire en mon nom." (263) "… the force of a void, the cyclonic breath (souffle] of a prompter (souffleur) who draws his breath in, and thereby robs me of that which he first allowed to approach me and which I believed I could say in my own name. (176) As Derrida discusses this "cyclonic breath," we see that for him, this force of inspiration,

[83] See "La Parole Soufflée" in *Ecriture et Difference*, Jacques Derrida.

which rather than being owned by the poet, is coming from elsewhere, from another. It is thus the question of a relationship between the self and another which is at the center of the force of inspiration, of the wind that breezes in the ears of the poet.

I would argue that Glissant's work points in a similar direction. It points to the presence of another scene from where the wind comes. In *Poetics of Relation* and *Sun of Consciousness*, Glissant writes about this figure of the wind as a figure of a force that originates in an "elsewhere." In *Sun of Consciousness*, Glissant finds at the origin a primordial chaos, to which he abandons himself, an elemental dimension made of sun, beaches, and winds[84]. In *Poetics of Relation* we have discussed how this wind comes from the abyss, that is, from the last breath of the slaves who died and left no records behind them. Here I would concur with the analysis of Alessandro Corio. He argues that there is in Glissant an attempt at thinking together the void created by the history of slavery and the void at the origin of artistic creation. However, this void is a force and not just a radical absence. Thus, the question is not simply how to represent the void but what are the effects of its force? This allows us to approach why Glissant relates his thinking of this wind to his concept of Relation. Indeed, it is not inconsequential that sails harness the wind and that these sails are what allow for new encounters.

In *Poetics of Relation*, the force coming from the abyss leads to an encounter rather than to a knowledge of the abyss itself. The wind allowed the new generations to be carried away to what he calls in the citation above "cette terre-ci, soudaine et stupéfaite." a new land as surprised as them by their arrival. This personification of the

[84] "Chaos premier. Ce que l'on vit est derisoire tant que la pensée ne l'a point corrigé. (…) Je m'abandonnai à l'élémentaire." (35) This quote is followed by a poem called "Elements," in which the poet abandon himself into the elements, where we find again the presence of a wind. But this wind and the elements in it, do they not point to the impossibility to name this force of inspiration?

land is the creation of a relation with the land that differs from a subject-object relation. Rather than being the land's new owners, they encountered an otherworldly entity. In the dispossession that marks the enslaved person and their descendants, the possibility of a relation appears, where ownership is not the structure that organizes the relation. The other is not turned into an object; it remains beyond the possibility of being grasped and comprehended. Thus, while the trauma of the past cannot be transformed into memory or a representation, the force it bears on the next generations opens the possibility for a relationship to be established with the land, but also potentially among the people who are carried away by this force. The knowledge that can be created from the abyss is thus not about the abyss in itself[85], but rather about the effects of its force, knowledge about what it is to relate.

The knowledge resulting from this encounter is about *Relation*[86], the central concept Glissant develops in *Poetics of Relation*. The idea of relation for Glissant takes as a point of departure that the relationship creates entities that interact and are not predefined terms. A "knowledge" ("un savoir") of this mode of relating can be "lived" through the encounter with the trauma from the Middle Passage. In the following quote, Glissant argues that the knowledge which results from the abyss opens to a knowing of *Relation*:

[85] The use by Glissant of the term "voile" which he writes as both "une voile" (a sail) and "un voile" (a veil) (20) shows that the sail is also occulting. In that sense the receptacle of this force both reveals the presence of the wind, but also operates as a veil, as a limit that separates from the abyss.

[86] The concept of Relation for Glissant is an opening up of a field of possibility. Nesbitt summarizes this Glissantian perspective in Caribbean Critique: "Relation, the universal fact of being-in-the-world that Glissant will eventually name the tout-monde, is thus a pure multiplicity of beings (Glissant throughout his work uses the standard French translation of the Heideggerian Seiendes or 'beings': les étants), one that deploys the powerful resources of singularization and becoming in withdrawal from all domination of the One." (239)

> Non pas seulement connaissance particulière, appétit, souffrance et jouissance d'un peuple particulier, non pas cela seulement, mais la connaissance du Tout, qui grandit de la fréquence du gouffre et qui dans le tout libère le savoir de la Relation. (20)
>
> Not just a specific knowledge, appetite, suffering, and delight of one particular people, not only that, but knowledge of the Whole, greater from having been at the abyss and freeing knowledge of Relation within the Whole. (8)

Here Glissant uses both the term "connaissance" and "savoir" as he elaborates on the abyss's impact on his concept of Relation. Glissant rejects the idea that one can formulate a theoretical knowledge about *Relation*. Although he recognizes that it is impossible to escape a theoretical language, he argues that this theoretical language is always destroyed by the lived experience, "la relation vécue." Thus, the oscillation here between "connaissance" and "savoir" shows that *Relation* is a concept caught in a perpetual cycle of "destruction/creation." Thus, it is the experience of the wind from the abyss that disrupts, both for the inheritor of the Middle Passage and for the poet, a knowledge that would have pre-existed these experiences.

In *La Case du commandeur,* we have discussed how the Celat family is marked by the hole in history, by the rupture that marked the beginning of the history of the enslaved people in the French Caribbean. Liberté Longoué's gesture of inaugurating a new family from an abandoned slave cell marks the family more than the rest of the Martinicans. Her breathing on the head of her son Augustus marks her descendant with a breeze, with a wind. The reader will be able to see this marking reappearing in each generation.

The problem encountered in the novel by the descendants is that the wind from the abyss creates a split between men and women. While the men are trying to turn the wind into a tale, the women are marked in their bodies by the force of the wind. While

the men try to transform the hole in history into a narrative, the women bear its meaningless force on their bodies. The characteristics of these effects of the wind on the Celat Family are that they are not felt in solitude but rather shown to the people around them. The stories are told to the community, and people around them see the wind traces on the bodies. Yet, the community does not want to be as close to the abyss as the Celat family is. They look away from the women's bodies; they do not listen to the silence at the heart of the men's stories.

The Celat Family: Storytelling and Community

What sets apart the Celat family from their community in the novel is their kinship to an abyss, an ungraspable origin. While this abyss also marks collectivity, they do not have the same relation to it. The collective tries to turn away from this obscure origin:

> Car pour n'être pas obsédés par le problème des origines, du moins dans cette partie de nous - l'apparence excitée - que nous gardions si soigneusement à l'écart de toute profondeur et a l'abri de tout examen, nous n'en étions pas moins portés à nous moquer avec affection de tout sujet qui eut risqué de nous rapprocher - dans nos ravines angoissées - d'un tel souci. (54)
>
> For though not obsessed by the problem of origins – at least we wouldn't like to seem excited by it, carefully keeping a part of ourselves isolated from deep matters and protected from examination – at least we still had a tendency to make fun affectionately of any subject that dared connect us (in our agonized ravines) to a concern of that sort. (46)

Although the collective relates to the past marked by anguish ("nos ravines angoissées"), there is nonetheless a refusal to face that anguish. The language used by this collective voice turns anguish into a minor problem: "un tel souci" (a worry). This minimizing of the abyss's role in this collectivity's lives is the opposite of what the kinship to the abyss creates in the Celat family. In the family, this abyss is unavoidable.

Even more than blood or law, what unites this family together is this abyss and its disruptive impact on each generation. Through the unavoidability of the abyss *lived* by each generation, their contemporaries encounter it, and the possibility emerges for them to become a "us" around this abyss.

There is a pattern in which men in the family approach the abyss by trying to make sense of it through narratives. The Celat men are storytellers trying to articulate a certain myth of the origin. They are just like Augustus, the son of Liberté, marked by a hole in their head, in their psyche. However, the *com-prehension*, the attempt at "grasping" that lost origin, never succeeds. Nevertheless, these tales through their telling, and through the crowd gathered by the Celat men gather, allow for a collective space to be built. The tales, although they fail at grasping a lost origin, create in their failures something different. Rather than recuperating lost time, they seem to create a space. In its enunciation by these men, the enigma of the Middle Passage repeats an irresolvable rupture with the past while simultaneously allowing a fragile collective to be constituted. But this collectivity, built around the men's tales, is more a collectivity of sleepers than awakened individuals:

> Et c'est ce bercement de la voix qui nous constitua d'abord, comme si nous devinions que Pythagore non plus ne voyait pas ce qui avait engendré le cataclysme primordial d'où nous étions issus, ni même s'il y en avait eu un, et qu'il ne faisait que partager avec nous une ignorance et un désir dont il avait été - on ne savait pas pourquoi - désigné pour porter la marque comme une brulure sur l'épaule gauche ou la joue droite. (29)

> And it was the way his voice rocked us that first formed us, as if we guessed that Pythagore couldn't see any better than we whatever had generated the primordial cataclysm from which we stemmed, nor even whether or not there had ever been one, and that all he was doing was sharing with us an ignorance and a desire that he – no one knew why - had been chosen to bear like a brand he might have had on his shoulder or his right cheek. (18-19)

Pythagore is here like a soothing caretaker whose voice constitutes the "us." This "us" is not formed around a shared history but around hearing a voice that bears an ignorance of their shared history. The fact that even the "cataclysme primordial" is not a given ("ni même s'il y en avait eu un") shows the impossibility of finding a common historical ground for the "us". However, in our case, the collective voice is not constituted by a shared history but by an address that constitutes them as the audience of the tale about this absence of common ground, about this abyss. Although the tales of the Celat men are fragmented, elusive, and bear an ignorance. They nonetheless allow for the possibility of constituting a collective. But this constitutive address, as indicated by the word "bercement" / "soothing," is also putting the collective in a state of sleep. The constitution of the "us" is coextensive of a soothing of the anguish of the past ("nos ravines angoissées"). This anguish is made more livable, but isn't it also a turning away from the hole within the tale?

Although the question of the origin soothes the collectivity, they do not want to face the consequences of this question and the potential answer that might lie beyond it:" C'est que nous ne voulons pas connaitre la réponse. Nous voulons nous etourdir de la question" (28); "Because we don't want to know the answer. We want to be amazed at or carried away by the question itself."(17) What they do not want to share with Pythagore is the remaining silence at the origin of the tale, this radical absence that even Pythagore's tale cannot fill with a recomforting presence, with a recomforting story of the origin:"Mais on ne partage pas tout à fait ce silence" (28); "But we don't entirely share this silence." (17). This silence about the origin can never be filled with discourse in *La Case du commandeur* and resonates in each of the men's tales.

Women in the Celat Family: An inscribed obscurity

If the men of the Celat family are storytellers and soothers like Pythagore, it is not the same for the women. What is striking about the women of the Celat family is their mysterious origin. While the men can be traced back to Liberté and Anatolie, the women who arrive in the family have an undefined lineage. Adoline, who is Augustus' partner, has for mother the woman who is called "the nameless woman" ("la femme sans nom"). This particularity indicates that there seems to be an origin that cannot be integrated into a genealogy on the feminine side. But this is not just the case for Adoline. Indeed, an obscure origin is a defining trait of each woman in the Celat family. Following Adoline, Ephraise Anatheme's origin is never discussed. However, in the novel, it is Cinna Chimene whose absence of origins takes a central stage. She was found under a tree and later adopted by Ephraise and Ozonzo. Ozonzo is obsessed with the origin of Cinna Chimene, only to never find an answer to his questions about where she might come "from:" L'enfant trouvée ne dit pas mot de ce qu'on aurait pu, si quelqu'un s'en etait inquieté, appelé son origine. Seul Ozonzo s'echinait à eclaircir la chose." (54); "The foundling said not a word about what they might have called her origins if anybody worried about such a thing. Only Ozonzo worked his tail off trying to throw some light on it all." (45). The women in the Celat family exist at the limit of filiation, and this limit of filiation is combined with darkness. This darkness is disturbing for the men of the Celat family, as Ozonzo is precisely trying to "éclaircir la chose." But "la chose," the enigmatic origin, is also the obscurity of the women's bodies, the shadow they bear.

Although their genealogy remains unknown, the women of the Celat Family are not deprived of kinship, as they were all molded by a kind of darkness. This darkness is often related to the night and the forest, as described by Adoline: " Et aussi de l'apparition des femmes, comme pétries dans la nuit des bois, qui n'avaient jamais le droit de pratiquer les *Puissances* mais supportaient tout de l'ignorance d'alentour. " (83); "And also about how women arrived, women steeped in the darkness of the forest, who never had the right to practice the *Powers* but could stand anything produced by the ignorance around them." (78). There are several mentions in the novel of this relation to the darkness of the forest or the darkness of the night. The women are not deprived of kinship; only this one is not a filiation. They are related to obscurity to a kind of darkness like the forest night where even the moonlight would be obscured, a kind of absence of light in which the women are shaped and molded ("pétries"). This molding implies a materiality, a body that this darkness has produced and might even be constituted by it. By emphasizing the materiality of their bodies, is the text not implying that it is their bodies that are bearing ("supporter") the "weight" of the abyss, of the hole in history? Is it not this body that bears, maybe even without the full consciousness of it, the weight of the past?

The woman whose body bears remnants of the Middle Passage in a striking fashion is Ephraïse Anatheme:

> Ephraïse Anatheme était comme le fil de la couture. Sa figure en triangle mincissait encore quand elle criait après les enfants, et c'était un spectacle qui pétrifiait que celui de ce corps absolument vide de chair et qui devant vous trouvait moyen de s'étrécir à plein œil quand il était ravagé de fureur sèche. Le plus courant de l'activité consistait à *ne pas voir* Ephraise (54)

> Ephraïse was like a piece of thread. Her triangular face got even thinner when she yelled at the children. The very sight of her was petrifying; that absolutely fleshless body ravaged by cold rage managed somehow to become narrower right before your eyes. The children spent most of their time avoiding the sight of Ephraïse. (40)

Its triangular form connects this body to the trauma of the Middle Passage in a striking manner. It echoes the route ("tracé" in French) of the ships, from the harbor of Nantes or Bordeaux in France to West Africa and then to the Caribbeans: The Triangular Trade. But the triangle is also the shape of the sails, and the thinness and description of her body as "fil de la couture" figures her as a sail. Thus, while her body takes the shape of this triangular trade that took the lives of so many men and women, it is also shaped like the sails that, as we saw in *Poetics of Relation*, might harness a wind that could lead elsewhere to the possibility of new relations. Yet, this body is too frightening to look at. The thinness of her body might bring the onlooker too close to an experience of the void, of this unfathomable abyss that Glissant uses to figure the trauma of the Middle Passage. Indeed, as described in the passage, what defines Ephraise is her thinness and how her anger makes her look thinner and thinner. She is at the limit of the void, at the edge of the abyss. Although Ephraise might bear the traces of a traumatic force in a way that no men in the Celat family could, the children cannot look at her; the next generation turns away from the sight.

Cinna Chimene, Ephraise adopted daughter, will also be marked in her body by this trauma from the past:

> Pythagore se réveillait parfois (mais il était sans doute le seul) quand le hasard de l'installation le rapprochait de Cinna Chimène et il restait longtemps a pressentir dans le noir la forme du corps de la petite fille, tout empli de ce renflement de l'ombre qui lui rappelait à chaque fois le premier moment de surprise sous le quenettier. (62)

> Pythagore would sometimes wake up (but he was probably the only one who did) when the luck of the sleeping arrangements put him close to Cinna Chimène; he would lie there a long-time sensing through the darkness the form of the little girl's body, and filled completely by the bulging shadow that reminded him of the first moment of surprise under the guinep tree. (47)

The body of Cinna Chimene, is filled with what is described as a "renflement de l'ombre." The shadow engulfs her body like the wind engulfs a ship's sails. "Renflement" is used in French to speak of this convex form created on the sails by the force of the wind against them. Thus, Chimene's body, even when Pythagore cannot see it, radiates the effects of this force from the shadow that fills her body. She becomes, through this metaphor, the receptacle of a force that comes from elsewhere as the transmission of the abyss marks her body. But what can be the meaning of these bodily inscriptions that happen when there is no filiation? What is the kind of lineage and transmission that is occurring here? How can we grasp the difference that occurs between the voices of men and the body of women?

Diverging Discourses and Converging Wind

What we see at stake in the men and women of the Celat Family is a different impact of the abyss. The men's discourses are circling an absent origin, a silence, while the women are marked by a force that engulfs their bodies that shapes them. Do these two different paths show the truth about the transmitted trauma? I would argue that both of them ask about the possibility of creating a recording of this force.

The men attempt to circle an event that would have been lost. Their tales exist because meaning has been lost and could be recuperated. The representation of the abyss is not impossible; it is somewhat hidden. In the case of Pythagore, we can notice how

even though the wind makes itself felt, its force is ignored, as Pythagore prefers to look for a tangible object that would fill the absence: the missing link between Africa and the French Caribbean. I want to illustrate this point by showing in a concrete example how this takes place for Pythagore.

At one point in the novel, Pythagore hears two men shouting about the existence of a man from Guinea, called the King of the Negroes, who would have arrived in Martinique around 1900. For Pythagore, this shouting match is a revelation, a moment when his vision is blurred by the excitement of potentially finding a missing link between Africa and the French Caribbean:

> Et Pythagore à ce moment avait compris de quel inimaginable personnage il s'agissait dans ce conte. Il fut pris d'un vertige de connaissance qui se fondit au roulis du yac, car on débouchait sur la pleine mer de la Cochée du Lamentin, face au vent. L'air marin se superposait par tranches aigues aux épais relents de la mangle et du canal jaune. Pythagore entendait avec les oreilles du vent, dans le battement des vagues montantes. Les deux importants ne devinaient pas qu'ils ancraient la plus qu'un rêve, l'échouage en pleine mer d'un pèlerinage sans nom. Ébloui du sang qui montait à ses yeux, Pythagore gardait assez de poids pour s'étonner de son manque d'esprit ; qu'il n'eut pas songé plutôt à cette manière si simple de raviner son problème. (37)

> And at that instant Pythagore understood what incredible person was the subject of this tale. Suddenly his comprehension merged dizzily with the rolling of the ferry, because they were coming out into the open sea from the Bay of Lamentin, straight into the wind. Sea air in bitter bands piled onto the thick stenches of the mangrove and the yellow canal. In the bang and splashes of the mounting waves Pythagore heard with the ears of the wind. The two notables had no idea that they were sinking more than one dream there; it was the wrecking of a nameless pilgrimage on the high seas. His blood rose dazzling his eyes, but Pythagore kept enough wits about him to be amazed at his lack of brains: he should have thought of this very simple way of plowing through his problem. (25)

Hearing the discussion between the two men provokes in Pythagore a vertigo of knowledge as if he could suddenly gaze at the final resolution of his search for a missing link. As Pythagore hears the conversation between the two men, he is sliding into the

dimension of sight. This is confirmed by the next blinding moment ("Ébloui du sang qui montait à ses yeux"). The possibility of knowledge is here inscribed in the language of vision, which roots his search for the lost king in the field of vision:" Et Pythagore, a l'autre bout de la même baie, la ou l'eau verte vient buter dans le recur jaune du canal, *vit* son roi, décida de le suivre." (39); "And Pythagore, at the other end of the same bay, there where the green water collides with the exhausted yellow of the canal, saw his king and decided to follow him." (27) The way to find the lost link between Africa and the French Caribbean is here again described through a moment of sight. To find the past, one has to see, and it is only by seeing that Pythagore can discover the truth. Although what provokes the search is a scene of hearing, it is followed by a search that is rooted in sight.

This difference between sight and hearing is essential. In this scene of hearing, one element persists even when Pythagore is fascinated by his visions: the wind:" Pythagore entendait avec les oreilles du vent, dans le battement des vagues montantes." Here Pythagore and the wind are surreptitiously overlapping, as the ears are both made of Pythagore and the wind. The wind here brings the ability to hear through a different instrument. What would it mean to hear through the "ears of the wind"? Maybe it could mean that Pythagore might hear the gap between the two men.

Indeed, during the shouting match between the two men, what Pythagore does not hear is that the abyss might reside in the in-between of the two discourses, in the gap between the two interpretations of the past. Oblivious to a wind that breezes in his ears, Pythagore is also oblivious to the gap between the discourses. It is noteworthy to note how the French language also names a "wind" as what corresponds to an absence

of response, that is, to a silence (expression: “se prendre un vent”). Pythagore does not perceive this invisible and silent force that resides between the two shouting men, this absence that creates a tornado of speech and ideas. What is missed at this moment is the possibility to do like the poet in Glissant’s *Sun of Consciousness*, to enter in relation with the gap, to create when one hears the bursts of the wind.

For the women of the Celat family, there is a force that cannot be looked at (Ephraise Anatheme). This force echoes a past that has been lost, a wind that leaves a trace on bodies (Cinna Chimene). As the women come from an obscure place, from an unknown origin, they bear the obscurity, the fact that the abyss and its force cannot be seen. This creates in the women a strong rebuttal against the men’s attempts at turning the abyss into a narrative. Although the wind marks both men and women, they cannot share this experience. They are both the recipients of the wind, yet they are at odds with each other. The men are looking for a lost meaning, and the women are animated by a forceful refusal of this solution. The description of Pythagore Celat and Cinna Chimene is, in that sense, very clear; it is the gap in history that resonates in both of them that kept pushing them apart:

> Ni Cinna Chimène ni Pythagore ne se demandèrent ce qui avait grandi entre eux comme un champ d'épines. La vie était ainsi. Ce n'était même pas à se poser des questions. L'auraient-ils fait qu'ils n'eussent pour autant jamais deviné que le champ d'épines recouvrait le souvenir impossible (qui avait pris corps dans l'épaisseur tremblante d'un four à charbon ou s'était éparpillé au vent comme un brulis d'avant les labours) d'une catastrophe dont le mot Odono résumait l'écume frêle et révocable; que leurs discours en apparence contradictoires signifiaient un identique malaise, et qu'ils avaient peiné à vivre ensemble pour la raison qu'ils ressentaient la même brulure, portaient le même trou dans la tête. (40)

> Neither Cinna Chimene nor Pythagore questioned what had grown up between them like a field gone to briars. That's how life was. Certainly nothing to question. Anyhow, even had they done so, they might have guessed that the field of briars was covering up the impossible memory (that had taken shape in the flickering depths of a charcoal kilnor had been scattered to the winds like stubble burned before plowing) of a catastrophe whose fragile, revocable foam was summed up in the word Odono; that in their words, apparently contradictory, were signs of exactly the same disquiet, and they had struggled to live together because they both felt the same burn and carried in their heads the same empty hole. (31)

Although their "discourses" are both marked by the abyss, they cannot understand each other. However, despite an apparent contradiction, there is also an underlying common ground: the traumatic past. In that sense, we see that on the level of the discourse, they cannot coincide, but a common influence marks them. This influence, as we saw, is this wind, this force that exists between the words of Pythagore and within the body of Cinna Chimene. But without the possibility of creating a common language about this traumatic past, their discourses diverge, and a contradiction appears. Thus, the relation between Pythagore and Chimene reveals that the abyss, although making itself felt, only creates discord.

Francoise Davoine and Max Gaudillere, in their work on trauma, have discussed how in the clinic of trauma, there is often this pattern of repetition across generations that needs someone to harness in a different way the traumatic force that keeps reinscribing itself. For them, there is the need for a chronicler, for one individual to record the trauma that is passed on:

> Pieces of history hitherto cut off from transmission thus burst into daylight in forms that may be extravagant or minimalist but are always shocking until they find the "annalist," the chronicler who keeps the records of a "geste" that has been silenced (28)

Davoine and Gaudillere situate the chronicler's work around recording a "geste." A "geste" is: "a movement of the body, perceived as expressing a way of being or

doing.[87]" Davoine and Gaudillere's argument shows the perpetuation of a force, from a traumatic force to a bodily force (a movement). This element is also accompanied by an attempt at ex-pressing, bringing this force outside and toward the other. This combination of body and expression keeps failing in the generations of the Celat family. As the men are addressing the community, and as a traumatic force marks the women, there is no moment when these two elements are combined. While the men's tales address the community, they do not transmit the force of the abyss, which is also why the women refuse these tales. They are not enough; the formalization through a tale cannot represent and put at peace the force they feel from elsewhere. But the women are also trapped in the bearing of a force from elsewhere that they cannot share. I want to show how the daughter of Pythagore and Chimene will be the chronicler of the abyss where her parents and her family failed. This chronicling comes through a "geste," as Davoine and Gaudillere call it. It spurs from both the body and language through an act[88].

Marie Celat and the Stakes of the Act in Glissant

Marie Celat, the daughter of Chimene and Pythagore, is an inheritor of the wind that marked each generation. Yet, from the outset, Marie Celat goes beyond the distinction between men and women we identified. She is situated at the crossroads of

[87] "Mouvement extérieur du corps (ou de l'une de ses parties), perçu comme exprimant une manière d'être ou de faire (de quelqu'un). » (https://www.lalanguefrancaise.com/dictionnaire/definition/geste)
[88] For a discussion of how the act is situated between the body and language, I would refer to Shoshana Felman's *The Literary Speech Act*:"If the problem of the human act thus consists in the relation between language and body, it is because the act is conceived—by performative analysis as well as by psychoanalysis—as that which problematizes at one and the same time the separation and the opposition between the two. The act, an enigmatic and problematic production of the speaking body, destroys from its inception the metaphysical dichotomy between the domain of the "mental" and the domain of the "physical," breaks down the opposition between body and spirit, between matter and language". (65)

the body and language. It is from this crossroad that she feels the presence of this wind: "Marie Celat n'entendait que ce vent qui battait dans sa tête. Ce vent venu du plus loin, qui déracinait les mots et fouillait le grand silence. » (164-165); "Marie Celat only heard the wind churning in her head. A wind blown from far away, uprooting words and searching through the great silence."(167). The wind here is simultaneously a scene of listening but also the scene of an impression, of a repeated churning in the head ("battre" in French). Thus, while the women of the Celat family were solely receiving a mark from the wind in their bodies, Marie Celat can also hear it. However, this scene of hearing does not translate for Marie Celat in the search for a tale to tell the origins. Marie Celat is in the search for an act, not for words:"… toujours plus soucieuse non de mots, mais d'un acte."(173) ; "… and always more careful not with words but with action."(147). The act differs from words; I think it entails a particular meaning for Glissant. For him, the act distinguishes itself from discourse as it involves embracing a responsibility toward the change one attempts to enact in the world. This might be what failed in the narratives of the men in the Celat family, they told them, but they did not assume the hole at the heart of their stories; they did not assume its weight on their bodies as the women did. But the women also did not assume the weight as their own; it always existed as a force from elsewhere[89]. As I would like to show, for Glissant, the act is a matter of responsibility.

[89] I would here refer to two studies that could highlight the dimension of this force in women's bodies. Lucie Cantin in her study of mysticism shows that taking responsibility for this force (jouissance) that inhabits a body can be a site of creation and liberation. Cantin, L. "Femininity: From passion to an ethics of the impossible". *Topoi* **12,** 127–136 (1993). Another study tries to create a link between mysticism and Edouard Glissant: An Yountae. *The Decolonial Abyss: Mysticism and Cosmopolitics from the Ruins.* First edition., Fordham University Press, 2017.

In the *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant discusses the idea of the act ("passage à l'acte" in French) through the figure of Frantz Fanon. Glissant argues that Fanon is an outlier and stands out from the rest of the Francophone Caribbean thinkers because he did not just formulate a theory; he also acted. To state, as I do, that he "acted" is very vague, yet I think that this vagueness is essential in the original text written by Glissant. Glissant writes: « Parce que de tous les intellectuels antillais francophones il est le seul à être véritablement *passé à l'acte*, à travers son adhésion à la cause algérienne. » (56) In contrast the English translation writes : « Because, of all the French Caribbean intellectuals, he is the only one to have *acted on his ideas*, through his involvement in the Algerian struggle."(25). The English translation specifies that he acted on his ideas, but it loses the ambiguity of the original French text and its "passé à l'acte.". The continuity between the idea and the act is not clear in the French text, especially if we read both figuratively and literally the expression "passer à l'acte." This expression can mean to enact something, like ideas. In that sense, the English translation is relevant. Yet, it misses here the other meaning, that Fanon has moved to another realm, that he passed to the realm of the act. Thus while the English translation creates a continuity between the ideas and the act, the original French text keeps the ambiguity and thus maintains a potential fundamental difference between the realm of the act and the realm of ideas. There is in the "passé à l'acte" a radical difference that precisely sets Fanon apart from the others:" Il est difficile pour un Antillais d'être le frère, l'ami, ou tout simplement le "compatriote" de Fanon" (56) *"*It is difficult for a French Caribbean individual to be the brother, the friend, or quite simply the associate or fellow countryman of Fanon." (27)

Moreover, I would argue that the end of the passage on Fanon precisely situates the act as taking responsibility for a radical break, for a radical departure from his community but also from the domain of known ideas:

> Il est clair qu'ici *passer à l'acte* ne signifie pas seulement se battre, revendiquer, déployer la parole contestante, mais assumer à fond *la coupure radicale*. La coupure radicale est la pointe extrême du Détour (56)
>
> It is clear that in this case *to act on one's ideas* does not only mean to fight, to make demands, to give free rein to the language of defiance, but to take full responsibility for a *complete break*. The radical break is the extreme edge of the process of diversion. (27)

Glissant argues that an act is taking responsibility for a radical cut. This radical cut can be understood through his thinking of the "Detour" and how it differs from our common understanding of "retour"/ "return." The detour is different from a return to an origin:" Le Détour n'est ruse profitable que si le Retour le féconde: non pas retour au rêve d'origine, à l'Un immobile de l'Être, mais retour au point d'intrication dont on s'était détourné par force. » (56-57) "Diversion is not a useful ploy unless it is nourished by reversion: not a return to the longing for origins, to some immutable state of Being, but a return to the point of entanglement, from which we were forcefully turned away"[90] (26) The « Detour » is a turning away from the origin, but only if it is nourished by the return. How can we understand this statement? It can be grasped as a return to an origin that never existed, making it a paradoxical form of returning. It is because an absence of origin marks the French Caribbean society, and to use the "detour" is thus to thwart the logic of the return to grasp how the French Caribbeans can act from that radical

[90] The use of the of the passive form "we were forcefully forced away" seems questionable. It erases the dimension that is present in Glissant's thinking: repression. There is in the relation to the abyss a repression, there is a refusal to bear witness to it by the Martinican society. Thus, using the passive form here is both a mistranslation and the taking away of the possibility to take responsibility for the past and transform the relation that the Martinicans have with it.

absence. What defines the act is to take on oneself this radical absence. The "detour" is not about looking away; it is instead taking responsibility for what will not be recovered, for what will always exist as lost. As for Fanon, the act is more than the enactment of ideas; it is this responsibility that situates oneself apart from the other. No one else can take responsibility for this radical absence that marks the lives of the Martinicans. But for Glissant, the responsibility of the act is not a burden; it can be the site of a new form of expression, a site of creation.

For Glissant, the act, operating as the "extreme edge" of Detour, should be understood as a way to make the "detour" a means of expression rather than a mode of survival ("technique indispensable d'existence"[91]). Thus, there is tension between a historical catastrophe and the possibility of creation. This is rendered possible by taking responsibility for this catastrophe. We see how the writings of Glissant on the Detour and Fanon repeat the same tension between historical trauma and the creative process. Indeed, we highlighted in our discussion of the wind how this force was both the force of trauma and the force of creation in Glissant's writing. The example of Fanon adds to this discussion of the wind: the necessity to have an act that takes responsibility ("assumer" in French). But here, I would like to let the French word allow us to go one step further in understanding this relation to the abyss. The verb "assumer", according to the CNRTL[92] means to:" Prendre ou accepter, mais sans le faire sien, c'est-à-dire se donner ou recevoir à titre d'hypothèse comme base d'une recherche d'un raisonnement"

[91] "Voici délimité un des objectifs de notre discours : rejoindre à fond ce que nous sommes, de telle sorte que le Détour ne se maintienne plus comme technique indispensable d'existence mais se réalise en mode d'expression. » (57). « Herein lies one of the objectives of our discourse: reconnect in a profound way with ourselves, so that the strategy of diversion would no longer be maintained as a tactic indispensable to existence but would be channeled into a form of self-expression." (26)
[92] https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/assumer

which could be translated as : “Taking or accepting, but without taking possession of it, this means to receive something as an hypothesis that serves as a foundation in the search for a logical statement.” In Glissant’s text, responsibility is toward an element that is not entirely grasped. It is not about owning this event but rather about inscribing one’s act as a consequence of this past. Thus, an act is not to be understood as a tabula rasa but more as the follower of a precedent event. While the abyss is an enigma, an event that always remains in suspension, it is by taking responsibility for this enigma that a new mode of expression can be uttered, that an act of creation can transform the trauma into something else.

Marie Celat: The Act between the Personal and the Collective

Marie Celat’s act voices out a suffering that ends in screaming. This act spurs from the grief after her second son’s death. But the cause of this screaming is ambiguous, does personal pain cause it, or could this scream bear with it collective suffering? This question emanates from Marie Celat's son's name: Odono. This figure is supposed to be one of the first who crossed the Atlantic and arrived as an enslaved person in the French Caribbean. By naming her son Odono, Marie Celat reinscribes in her child both the name of a potential ancestor and the historical context of the French Caribbean. But, while Odono did not drown in the ocean, Marie Celat’s son did. In that sense, he bears a striking resemblance to all the enslaved people who died at sea during the Middle Passage.

When Marie Celat lost her first son, Patrice Celat, she remained in a state of torpor, but this second death was unbearable. What created this unbearability? Is it the repetition of a son's death, Odono’s echo of the traumatic past, or both? The text creates

from the beginning an ambiguity: from where does the pain come? This question shows the difficulty here in distinguishing between personal and collective trauma; both are intertwined:

> Quand elle restait ainsi prostrée, demandant à chacun : As-tu vu Odono ? Nous étions quelques-uns à deviner qu'elle ne cherchait pas là son dernier-né, mais le premier d'une lignée sans déroulement, venu tout adulte depuis combien de temps dans le pays, et dont la trace s'était perdue hormis pour quelques tourmentés, dont elle était. (189)
>
> She stayed prostrate like that, asking everyone: Have you seen Odono? And some of us could tell that it was not her youngest son she was looking for but rather the first in a lineage that stopped short and never developed, someone who arrived as an adult ever so long ago in this country, someone whose trace, except for a few tormented people – of whom she was, everyone had lost. (195-196)

Through this combination of personal and collective trauma, Marie Celat embodies in her voice her pain and the pain of the French Caribbean people. In that sense, she takes on not just her pain but also the one related to the trauma of the Middle Passage, the drowning and death of all the enslaved people at sea. That is how her voice is a "passage à l'acte," as defined by Glissant. Her voice spurs from bearing the weight of her son's disappearance and the disappearance of all the dead enslaved people. This is also a new mode of expression as Marie Celat, the mother of Odono now becomes the mother's voice that was never there during the Middle Passage. Indeed, in Glissant's metaphor, the womb-abyss has no face; it is just a site of creation and destruction. But here, Marie Celat gives a face to the womb-abyss through her voice. But the womb abyss is not an existing figure; it is pure fiction, which is also why the voice of the enslaved people was forever lost; there were no mothers to cry for their death, to bear in their voice the existence of those who died. Thus, Marie Celat's trauma becomes the positing of a face where there were none, her voicing out here is an act of creation. I

would argue that Marie Celat goes to the extreme of the "detour"; she has passed on the other side, the side of the act.

In our discussion of *Poetics of Relation* and the *Sun of Consciousness,* we found that the transmission of trauma and poetic inspiration were both represented through the receiving of a wind. These texts figured both the descendant and the poet as a respondent, as someone responding to a force given to them from another scene. How, then, to understand Marie Celat's act and the responsibility she bears for the abyss of the French Caribbeans? I would argue that Marie Celat represents in Glissant's text the conjunction of the descendant and the poet. Indeed, I would say that Marie Celat, through her voice, creates a face where there was none before; she turns wind into a voice. Through this poetic act[93], the creation of a voice, Marie Celat allows for a chronicling of past trauma. Through this voice, there is also the creation of an address to her contemporaries. If Marie Celat is the chronicler of this voiceless wind, if through her trauma she gives a voice to a collective trauma, who can hear that voice and answer it?

Who Can Hear the Voice from the Abyss?

Following the death of her first son Marie Celat remained in silence, but then suddenly she screams at her neighbors: "Et un jour elle cria que nous avions depuis toujours tué nos enfants, que les mères les étouffaient a la naissance, que les frères trafiquaient les frères. C'était plus que le voisinage ne pouvait en supporter." (189) ;

[93] In *Ayai, Le Cri de la Litterature*, Helene Cixous uses prosopopeia to describe how literature and poetry can bear a world falling apart:"Prosopopée: "Moi", la littérature, en huit mot je relève le monde. *Fort, die Welt, ist, ich, dich, tragen, muss*. Avec huits mots, un tout petit poème, quelques syllables, un ensemble-monde. » (22)

“And one day she announced that we had always killed our children; mothers smothered them at birth; brothers sold their brothers. That was more than people around her could put with.” (196) Marie Celat refers to infanticides after enslaved women were raped by masters and refused to be the child's mother. She is also referring to the selling of slaves by Africans in Africa. The people around Marie Celat are caught off guard by the scream that is suddenly turned toward them:” Elle nous insulte maintenant. Nous ne sommes pas responsables de ce qui lui arrive.” (190); “Now she’s insulting us. We’re not responsible for what happens to her.” (196) This screaming is understood as an accusation by the people around her. But is Marie Celat accusing them? Rather than accusing her contemporaries, Marie Celat points to crimes that have left a mark; it seems that the French Caribbeans, more than guilty of a crime, are marked by a curse. Marie Celat points to the repetition through her use of the imperfect tense and her “depuis toujours.” More than an accusation toward her contemporaries, Marie Celat screams about crimes that keep repeating themselves from one generation to the next. She is screaming about continuity with the past, the repetition of a destructive habit of murders and betrayal. A self-destructive pattern marks the French Caribbean family. We can read between the lines of Marie Celat the consequences of slavery: the rape of the masters and the buying of the enslaved people in Africa. But in this history, slavery has no place in the French Caribbeans. Unfortunately, her neighbors cannot bear to hear it. They ask the authorities to put her in a psychiatric ward:”L’unanimité se fit contre elle, pour conclure qu’avec de telles idées la folie n’est pas loin. (…) Les plaintes s’accumulerent dans les bureaux” (191); “The turned against her unanimously, concluding that, with ideas like that, madness is just around the corner.” (197). By putting Marie Celat in a

psychiatric ward, they discharge her discourse of any truth and evacuate the possibility of bearing this past that has been cut away from them.

If Marie Celat's contemporaries cannot hear her demand to face their past, it is because the situation in the French Caribbean prevents it. For Glissant, there is a break ("une coupure") with the past in the French Caribbean. If Marie Celat can no longer be part of the social, and if she is accused of madness, it is because she opens the possibility for a bridge to be built with the traumatic past that has been lost. As the French Caribbeans are still part of France, this assimilation comes at the price of a cut with the past[94]. I argue that this cut creates a misunderstanding between Marie Celat and her contemporaries. They do not hear the continuity that Marie Celat demands; they only hear an accusation.

However, if society cannot listen to this sudden burst of truth, Marie Celat will find someone who will do more than just hear her in her daughter. She will enter a dialogue with her, and it is through this dialogue, by going to the end of each other's speech, that they will bear through their relationship the death of their breath. This dialogue allows them to live with the death of a breath, as the death of one's breath becomes the invitation for the other to speak.

The novel ends with Marie Celat returning to live with her only remaining child, her daughter Ida Béluse. Both start a dialogue that is animated by a breath, "un souffle"

[94] "Il semble en effet que pour favoriser ou accélérer la réussite de cette assimilation, une coupure a été rendue nécessaire avec le passé historique de la collectivité, passé d'oppositions, de luttes, qui toutes prenaient source dans l'ancien désordre de l'esclavage. Une coupure ou une manière d'opacité progressivement élargie. Ce que nous appellerions la mémoire de la tribu est dans ce cas écartelée, souffrante, incertaine de son ordre."Edouard Glissant, *Mémoire des esclavages*, 2007. (167)

that is repeatedly on the verge to die out. It is this short of breath status, "essouflement" which operates at the end of the novel, as a potential "savoir de la Relation":

> … proposant à Marie Celat qu'était venu le temps de laisser vivre, si on pouvait. Leurs conversations étaient soutenues de respirations coupées, d'éclats raides ; comme si, par une telle monotonie haletante de mots, qui semble une mélopée en plein soleil, nous ne cessions d'aller au bout de l'essoufflement. (202)

> … suggesting to Marie Celat that the time had come to live and let live if they could. Breaths cut short, abrupt bursts sustained their conversations; as if, by some such panting monotony of words, like a threnody in broad daylight, we were almost breathless. (209)

The dialogue between the two women is not described; the focus here is on its rhythm and how it is dictated by shortness of breath ("soutenues de respirations coupés"). Thus, at the novel's end, the question is not about the resolution of the signification of the wind from the abyss that has been felt across the generations. It is about how two women enter into a dialogue through the rhythm of their breathing. What is surprising in this passage is the focus not on regular breathing but on a state of breathlessness. Here, each woman answers to the last breath of the other. In that sense, their relationship is the enactment of a responsibility to the last breath of the other. There is, through their dialogue, the creation of a relationship that makes the event of the last breath the possibility for a new breath to start. This new breath is not entirely a new beginning, it answers to a breath that just died, and in a sense, it carries with itself this breath that died out. And through this rhythm, the two women are doing more than just conversing; they are creating a melody ("mélopée"). "Mélopée" comes from the ancient Greek word melopoios, which means song-maker and poet. Thus, the two women, in their dialogues, become a figure of the poet. A figure that is double and that lives through the existence between these two women of the death of a breath. To create is

here to receive the gift of the other, which is the gift of the death of its breath. Thus, the transmission of trauma and the poetic act of creation in Glissant results from inspiration. However, here inspiration is not a solitary act but rather always the breathing of an air that is not one's own.

Afterwords

The Writing Drive: Between Life and Death

I want to conclude by emphasizing how the transmission of the void in the texts comes to be enacted through a tension between destruction and creation. Either through the foreshadowing of death for a writer within the novel like Armand in *The Counterfeiters*, the fear of madness and disappearance in *Le Vice-Consul,* or the disappearance of Marie Celat's voice. While the relation to destruction is something that I have analyzed specifically in each of my chapters, I wanted to end by reflecting on how literature can respond to this force of destruction passed on in the transmission of a void. How could there be, in writing and literature, a force that could counter this destructive force? This question was particularly central to the chapter on the trauma of the Middle Passage. Indeed, how could writing be a site that harnesses the transmitted trauma? How could literature displace the repetition of a force of destruction into an act of creation?

The relation between destruction and artistic creation is at the center of a recent return to the concept of sublimation in psychoanalysis. While sublimation could be understood as the deviation of a sexual drive towards socially valued objects like art, new interpretations of Freud and Lacan have shown another understanding of sublimation. More than a transformation of the drive, sublimation is its continuation. To be more precise, it is the continuation of the death drive. Joan Copjec, in *Imagine There's No Woman*, argues:

> Contrary to the vulgar understanding of it, then, sublimation is not something that happens to the drive under special circumstances; it is the proper destiny of the drive. This alignment of the drive with sublimation clarifies a

> commonplace misconception about sublimation, namely, that it substitutes a more socially respectable or refined pleasure for a cruder, carnal one. (30)

For Copjec, the death drive is constituted by a structure that we also find in sublimation. What is this structure? If the death drive's aim is death, it is animated by a force that makes it miss its aim: “the death drive achieves its satisfaction by *not* achieving its aim.”(30). Thus, the drive aims to fail, remain inhibited, and not attain the object. Because the proper aim of the drive is its satisfaction, that’s how Copjec equates the logic of the death drive and sublimation, as both are: “the satisfaction of the drive through the inhibition of its aim” (30). To understand sublimation as inhibition is actually to get closer to the true logic of the death drive. However, we should not equate them, as Zupancic argues in “The Splendor of Creation: Kant, Nietzsche, Lacan”:

> (…) can we simply say that drive equals sublimation? (…) In reply to the first question, we could say that if the drive is a "headless" procedure, sublimation is not. Sublimation is a kind of "navigator" of the drives, and this is why it plays such an important role in society. (40)

The distinction between drive and sublimation is the distinction between headlessness and direction. I would like here to emphasize how direction in Zupancic is given the figure of the “head,” where her writing creates the echo between “head” and “heading towards.” We can use this formulation to pursue our inquiry further. As we saw in this dissertation, the face is the result of an act of language. Here sublimation can be equated to the creation of a head, of an intent that gives a direction to the drive. By bringing the concept of prosopopoeia into this psychoanalytic discussion, we can argue that sublimation is not just the creation of new objects. It is also the creation of a head where there was none before. Call it “intention,” “heading,” or “direction.” They all are effects of the face, of the presupposition of a subjective position orienting the work. The

need to postulate the face, to "make it up" almost, shows that the headless drive never completely disappears in sublimation; it always lurks at the border of the creation as the condition of its possibility/impossibility. Its presence persists in the fact that the foundation, the face, is not a true foundation. The abysmal death drive persists even in sublimation. The continuity between death drive and sublimation is the repetition of a tension between "headlessness" and face. This tension is between what is without an aim and what is with an aim or an intent. That is, to some extent, the distinction between a force animated by life and a force animated by something other than life. An oscillation between a life drive and a death drive. I would conclude by arguing that according to Derrida, there is an oscillation between the life and death drives in Freud. In Freud's speculation on the death drive, we can already identify the presence of a possibility for life.

Derrida, in a recently published edition of his seminars[95], turned to the question of the life drive and the death drive in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.* Freud postulates the death drive at the origin, but for Derrida, Freud also implies the necessity of a life drive:

> Freud nonetheless reproduces the observation of a relative failure: even if sexuality is late, secondary, the result of chance, it was able to arise and, especially, to become established only to the extent that some presexual life drive preceded it, virtually animated it, determined its end. So, it seems that the life drive is indeed always and indissociably coupled with the death drive. We now have — and this is the only progress that has been made — a hypothesis with two unknowns. We have not taken a single step forward since the beginning. (340)

[95] See Derrida, Jacques. *Life Death*. Edited by Pascale-Anne Brault and Peggy Kamuf. Translated by Michael Naas, University of Chicago Press, 2020.

Bound to the question of the death drive is also the question of the life drive. Both need to be posited to make sense of life. I would argue that Derrida identifies a tension intrinsically inscribed in the theory of the death drive. Freud's speculation of the death drive also implies a life drive. This allows us to hypothesize that in Freud, the death drive is not alone; it is accompanied by a force of life. This might explain how literature can harness this force. As a space where the enigma of the death drive and its repetition can be turned into a life force, literature has a unique role.

It is confirmed by Freud's own failure to conclude his theory of death and life drives. As Derrida notes, there is in Freud a moment of paralysis, as Freud faces two unknowns. Freud ends his work, his "démarche" in Derrida's text, by a suspension. What interests us here is that Freud turns to literature instead of finishing with a theoretical conclusion. As Derrida notes, the last two lines of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* are two lines of a poem. Maybe this presence of poetry at the end of a "foundational" text on the death drive indicates literature's importance. Literature continues where psychoanalytic theory is suspended, where its "démarche" is at a loss. Literature continues the work on the death drive and bears what theory cannot.

If Derrida keeps referring to Freud's theoretical work as "démarche," it is because Freud's citation of poetry refers to a figure of walking, a constrained walking, a limping:

> Was man nicht erfliegen kann, muss man erhinken.
> Die Schrift sagt, es ist keine Sünde zu hinken. (78)
>
> What we cannot reach flying, we must reach limping
> The Book tells us it is no sin to limp[96]. (78)

[96] See, Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The Standard Edition. Translated by James Strachey. (1961).

Derrida argues that this limping is a metaphor of Freud's own "démarche." As a citation, the lines of the poem are like a graft. The particularity of this graft is that in the text, it operates at the level of the voice of the writer/poet. Indeed, there is the use of a borrowed voice, the voice of a poet, to help the failing voice of the father of psychoanalysis. The prosthesis is not just what allows the text to continue walking; it also allows for a voice to persist. The combination of a "limping" and a borrowed voice shows how the literary text brings life, but a life that is altered, already caught between life and death. Where the walk of writing and the speaker's voice are failing, literature comes as a prosthesis, but this prosthesis is not a restoration of a full life. The gift of literature can bring back life in the face of a "headless force," but the life it gives is altered and diminished.

The transmission of a void, of an absence of foundation, creates devastating effects on the lives and bodies of the descendants. It operates like a destructive force. However, literature can harness this force because it is inhabited by a void, by a tension between destruction and creation. Thus, literature and sublimation do not allow us to overcome the tension between destruction and creation. What it might enable, however, is to abandon a fantasy of life as separate from the force of death. As such, literature and sublimation might allow imagining a different kind of life. A life that would come face to face with the dazzling void on which it rests. Fortunately, literary texts have been caught in the predicament of this absence of foundation before us. They might allow us to bear this void, like poetry allowed Freud to continue walking and writing, even if it was through a disappearance of his voice in the citation of a poem. In the case of Freud, it allowed transforming a silence brought by an impossible into a silence that is borne

through the transmission of a voice from another. In the last words of the poem, the voice of the poet bears the silent voice of the theoretician. While silence persists, this silence is transformed, it is given, and through this gift, it makes space for another voice. Even if this voice is like a "prosthetic," it brings with it a connection with another figure, the figure of a poet. My hope is that this example might allow us to better understand how literature has already been at work. How literary texts have already allowed descendants plagued with transmitted trauma to displace the enforced silence of the parents into a silence that inhabits the voice of literary texts.

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