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SCREAMING WITHOUT SOUND

Writing isn't just telling stories. It's exactly the opposite. It's telling everything at once. It's the telling of a story, and the absence of a story. It's telling a story through its absence.¹

Marguerite Duras

One expects water to freeze at 0° Celsius. Just as one might expect misery to be miserable, a scream to be audible, or a communist to believe in communism.² One expects a woman to suffer if betrayed by her fiancé (*The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*) or a disgraced diplomatic official to tender his resignation (*The Vice-Consul*).³ If a family cannot pay their water bills, *ought* they not to expect that the water will be cut off? “An oak in every acorn.”⁴ Such is the case... *for the most part*.

When expectations are met, when the affairs of life unfold in accordance with “that celebrated ‘thread of the story,’” to quote Robert Musil’s *The Man without Qualities*, one utters a sigh of relief.⁵ “Lucky the man who can say ‘when,’ ‘before,’ and ‘after!’” Lucky the man, in other words, that can appeal to a “narrative order,” for “the basic law of this life, the law one longs for” is that of a sequence *that makes sense*, that allows one to plot out a course of action, which is to say, represent “the overwhelmingly manifold nature of things” within a “unidimensional order.” This is the metaphysical function of the “thread of the story.” It guarantees a sense of direction, a promise of completion, in short, a sense of wholeness.

Most people relate to themselves as storytellers. They usually have no use for poems, and although the occasional “because” or “in order that” gets knotted into the thread of life, they generally detest any brooding that goes beyond that; they love the orderly sequence of facts because it has the look of necessity, and the impression that their life has a “course” is somehow their refuge from chaos.

Having a likely, or better, a necessary story to tell allows one to forget life’s elementary uncertainty “as an actor who forgets the scenery and his makeup, and believes that he is really living his part.”⁶

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle defines the story (*muthos*), which he claims is the ground (*archê*) and soul of poetic art, as “the composition of the things done.”⁷ Events that “seem to have happened as if by design,” he claims, make for better, more wondrous and “more beautiful” stories.⁸ The foundational function of the story guarantees that what happens does not happen by “chance or luck” but in accordance with an end. This end is guaranteed if and only if the story accords with what is natural, which is to say, what happens for the most part.⁹ Unlike the historian who speaks of “things that have happened,” the “work of the poet” is to speak of things that “might happen and the possibilities that come from what is likely or necessary [*tò eikòs è tò anankaïon*].”¹⁰ The story is not merely a sequence of actions, but a composition that makes out of them a whole.¹¹ The meaning of this whole may indeed be obscure and difficult to comprehend, but it is not itself in question.

Yet, literature, or what Marguerite Duras often prefers to simply call *writing*, begins when the *part* leveraged to determine the *most* gives way. It no longer holds. The story comes unhinged. It becomes unbearable. One can no longer make sense of things, because one’s sense of expectation must forgo an expected sense. One finds oneself like Musil’s Ulrich bereft of “this elementary, narrative mode of thought.” Ice does not form at 0° Celsius.

To write, for Duras, is a matter of pitting oneself at the heart of this calamity, reaching that point when misery is no longer miserable:

The wonderful misery is perhaps that torture, that entreaty which allows no respite, that uprooting of self which leaves you forsaken and lost when it ends with the book. You know too. To be the object of one’s own madness and not to go mad, that could be it, the wonderful misery. All the rest is beside the point.¹²



Duras likens the loss of the feeling of being whole to watching a poorly dubbed film that lacks even the semblance of a plot.

You never know, in life, when things are there. You can’t grasp them. You were saying the other day that life often seems as if it were dubbed. That’s exactly what I feel: my life is a film that’s been dubbed – badly cut, badly acted, badly put together. In short, a mistake. A whodunnit without either murders or cops or victims; without a subject, pointless. It could have been a real film, but no, it’s a sham. But who’s to say what one would have had to do for it to be otherwise? I suppose I should have just stood there in front of the camera without saying or doing anything; just being looked at, without thinking about anything in particular. Yes, that’s it.¹³

Life without a story to make of it a whole falls mute. Duras posits something like a fundamental lack of synchronization at the heart of being.¹⁴ Words and things

are fatally partnered but mismatched. Life is thus hopelessly awkward, lopsided. It limps. “A reality that’s ragged and hollowed out.”¹⁵

Duras might occasionally fantasize about such literal muteness. Just as she dreams of a book that would have no *raison d’être* other than the meandering drift that she calls the motorway of the word: “I’d like to write a book the way I’m writing at this moment, the way I’m talking to you at this moment. I’m scarcely conscious of the words coming out of me. Nothing seems to be being said but the almost nothing there is in all words.”¹⁶ However, Duras recognizes that such a book is strictly speaking “impossible.”¹⁷ A book about nothing,¹⁸ without a story or direction, a book that like a motorway goes “in all directions at once” is no book at all. “The only alternative is to say nothing. But that can’t be written down.”¹⁹ So the writer’s conundrum is how to *write* down nothing, the nothing that cannot be said.

Duras attends to this problem by listening to what remains unsaid or to that which is said but not heard: moments in which language loses its fluency and writing its polish. Born Marguerite Donnadieu, her decision to adopt the pen name Duras – the name of the village in Lot-et-Garonne where her father was born – with its pronunciation of a regionally specific “sibilant s,” as Rachel Kushner reminds us, acts as an insistent reminder of the importance of this positive lack of refinement.²⁰ Duras makes us hear the “s’s” silence. Her writing resonates with awkward silence, socially awkward presences...the kind of silences that social etiquette seeks to dispel or at least to smooth out. Duras’ “aesthetics of awkwardness,” as Julia Kristeva aptly formulates, consists in the manner in which she sheds the presumption that writing ought to minimize abnormality. As Kristeva stresses, this is not a result of Duras’ interest in formal concerns. “If there is a formal search,” she writes, “it is subordinate to confrontation with the silence of horror in oneself and in the world.”²¹ Duras’ singular distaste for polished writing is more visceral than intellectual, an almost physical disgust with the effort to eliminate imperfection and regulate life’s crippled cadence. Her writing preserves a certain untidiness that can make one question the veracity of a memory: is it Indiana Song or India Song, S. Thala or S. Tahla, Richard or Richardson?²² Her sentences are frequently mere syntactical fragments as if an incumbent meaning has been aborted. The overall effect is that of the carefully indefinite. Things are messy but not careless. The reader is thus in doubt as to *what* is being said, left with nothing but a residue, the remains, of a story.²³ “The longing for a story.”²⁴



Not a story but not not a story, Duras’ books are tasked with the contradiction of not *just* telling a story, but its opposite. The opposite of the story is not just life but life devoid of sense. What she terms “the fundamental futility of life.”²⁵ Writing that is equal to life’s futility proceeds without the assurance of a sheltering sky. The sky, rather, is “unwholesome-looking,”²⁶ as Duras describes the sky of Calcutta in *The Vice-Consul*. The lack of such assurance lends writing, like the “white residents”

of Calcutta, a liverish hue. It is sickly intelligent. Without a story to assure it, writing is dispossessed of an identity, haunted by an indigency just as the story of *The Vice-Consul* is haunted by the beggar woman from the village of Battambang.

She is a figure of absolute abandonment. A human living without the assurance of humanity. Destitute beyond anything one might expect. Nameless because she has forgotten her own name. A stranger amongst strangers, a Cambodian amongst the Calcutta lepers, sleeping along the banks of the Ganges river.²⁷ “She grows more and more confused, until at last, suddenly, all confusion ceases, because she no longer seeks to understand anything.”²⁸ She has become a cipher of life’s futility, of its scattered remains: “‘Meaningless utterances and profound silence,’ says Michael Richard.” All that is left of her in Calcutta is her laugh, “drained of all color” and the song, “the word ‘Battambang’ that she repeats incessantly.”²⁹ Prompted to speak of this “odd creature” by Charles Rossett, the Vice-Consul says: “Death in the midst of life...death following but never catching up.”³⁰ What is not *just* life but its opposite is not death, but, perhaps, death in the midst of life.

The character of Peter Morgan, a “young” writer – “Twenty-four years of age. On his first visit to India”³¹ – is the one whose ambition is to tell her story. “[D]runk on the sufferings of India,” he believes it is his task, the task of the writer, to become one with her suffering and to *explain* why the reader ought to be interested in her. To the question – “Why her in particular?” – he answers, “Because nothing more can happen to her, not even leprosy.”³² *The Vice-Consul* begins with his effort to *free and indirectly* enter the beggar woman’s story:

She walks on, writes Peter Morgan.

How to avoid going back? Get lost. I don’t know how. You’ll learn. I need some signpost to lead me astray. Make your mind a blank. Refuse to recognize familiar landmarks. Turn your steps towards the most hostile point on the horizon, towards the vast marshlands, bewilderingly crisscrossed by a thousand causeways.³³

Yet, to be precise, the novel does not begin with his effort. It begins, rather, inelegantly by marking a disjunction between two narrative positions, ensuring that the reader *read* his writing, position its story in relation to another writing, a different narrative voice. The story thus begins with a disidentification.

Peter Morgan wants to tell the *story* of her madness. He does not allow madness to *truly* enter into the *writing* of her story. His writing may speak about the hostile point of the horizon, but it fails to evoke it. And as he announces much later in the novel in a discussion with George Crown, Michael Richard, and Charles Rossett, he seems careful to avoid such a slippage: “I shall abandon her before madness overtakes her...that’s for sure; but all the same I need to understand the nature of her madness.”³⁴ I do not believe that Duras thinks that we should read him derisively. But we misunderstand what is at stake in the novel if we do not think the gap that

she institutes at the *book's* beginning. Duras' book thus has a delayed beginning. It begins with the interruption of Morgan's efforts.

It is this interruption that enables Duras to pose the problem of the novel, which touches on writing as such, namely the relation between the song of Battambang and the Vice-Consul's screams. We must attend to the inscription of the difference between what Peter Morgan knows – “This is what he knows.” – and how he imagines. By establishing this gap within the narrative, the reader is shown what he fails to grasp or take interest in: the relation between the Embassy and its outside, the Vice-Consul and the beggar woman. “Peter Morgan has followed her through the streets of Calcutta,” but he fails to see what is written, which only we readers are in a position to see: “There she is, opposite the residence of the former Vice-Consul of France in Lahore. In the shade of an overhanging bush, her dress of coarse sacking still sopping wet, she lies asleep.”³⁵ Whereas Peter Morgan is absorbed in India's miseries – “misery and yet more misery, he thinks” – Duras' novel poses the problem that only appears when this gaze is interrupted and the beggar woman is placed opposite the Vice-Consul.

It is this interruption that makes it possible for Duras to shift the problem of the book from the ambition to tell a story (the story of India) to the task of writing about a figure – Jean-Marc de H., the French Vice-Consul of Lahore – who has no story to tell. Peter Morgan talks *about* India and its suffering, about “the mad beggar-woman,” but he maintains a safe distance from his object, between himself and the immensity of India's suffering. The difference between the Embassy grounds and city of Calcutta is preserved despite spending his night following her through the streets. His interest in “the mad beggar-woman” blinds him to the conundrum of the Vice-Consul, his embarrassing and disturbing presence, to the “truth” that will “hit” Charles Rossett “blindingly”: “it's impossible, it's absolutely impossible to dwell on. . . the fact of his existence. . . How can one possibly feel human affection of any kind for the Vice-Consul of Lahore?”³⁶ For a storyteller like Peter Morgan, the Vice-Consul is, no doubt, too close to home, too disruptive to all and any *peace of mind*. To grasp the truth of the Vice-Consul is to grasp an I that has annihilated all distance from the suffering that surrounds it and within which it is immersed. This truth has to be blotted out in order for Peter Morgan to maintain his fictitious transgression, his fictitious journey outside the compound. Peter Morgan's declaration “That's enough of him!” is a bit too insistent.³⁷

The difference between writing and storytelling becomes the object of the novel only once Peter Morgan's fictional gaze is itself positioned as an object. We then glimpse that the “young” writer's desire “to shoulder the misery of Calcutta,” “plunge into its depths...to get it over, so that wisdom may start to grow out of bitter experience”³⁸ is itself fictitious and radically opposed to the Vice-Consul's altogether fundamental incapacity to shoulder the misery of Lahore. His inability *to get used* to Lahore finds outlet through an *unfathomable violence*: randomly shooting from his Embassy balcony into the Shalimar gardens. The Vice-Consul's screams are the screams of the writing of literature.

That which screams in writing is the silencing of sense. These silences mark a break-down in cohesion, in synchrony, a collapse of “the correlation between cause and effect”³⁹ that makes one question the story as such and as a whole. In all of Duras’ writing, the story turns around a resistant kernel.⁴⁰ Cause is absent: that essentially awkward man – “a man at a distance from other men”⁴¹ – the French Vice-consul of Lahore shoots at the lepers in the Shalimar gardens. The beggar woman from Tonle Sap emerges from a lagoon near The Prince of Wales Hotel with a live fish and bites its head off. “Laughing more than ever, she chews the fish head. The decapitated fish jerks in her hands.”⁴² In *L’Amante Anglaise*, Claire Lannes kills and dismembers her deaf-mute cousin, Marie-Thérèse. Where the head is hidden will remain a mystery. André Berthaud commits suicides. “Now as then, when the events took place, I see Berthaud’s gesture not as his only way out but as a refusal to take part in the deadly comedy staged by the police. In this instance his mental incapacity served him well: he chose his own death.”⁴³ Lol V. Stein at the ball in *S. Thala* forgets to follow the thread of her own story: “so carried away by the sight of her fiancé and the stranger in black,” as Duras puts it, “that she forgets to suffer.”⁴⁴ She forgets what we expect from the story of a girl in love. “She had forgotten the age-old equation governing the sorrows of love.”⁴⁵ Lol incarnates a gap between the story and its absence and “her whole life will unfold around that very loss, that very void.”⁴⁶ She is unable to forget this moment of forgetting. By forgetting her storyline, she forgets herself.⁴⁷

Duras’ stories are not stories, but stories born of their interruption, of the suspense of an expected sense:

Like a phenomenon related to the freezing of water. Water turns to ice at zero degrees, but sometimes, when the weather’s very cold, the air is so still that the water *forgets* to freeze. It can descend to minus five degrees and freeze only then.⁴⁸

Water too, like stories, can deviate from its script.



One begins to write, not when one begins to tell a story, but when one’s *sense* of expectation is absent. When water *forgets* to freeze. Such a deviation has its scientific explanations. It may be caused by the impact of an increase in barometric pressure on water’s molecular structure or may be the result of water being very pure and still. In such cases, ice crystals cannot form since there is nothing for them to bind to: no flecks of dust, no tiny vibrations, no impurities to catalyze the change. Yet, such explanations aid the cause of meaning. They explain the reason why water does not conform to our expectation. The form of expectation itself is thus not in peril. The explanation allows a sense of reality to be preserved. Yet, the event itself, water’s failure to conform to expectation, shows that reality is untenable. It is this untenability that fiction must respect. The suspense of water’s sense must become interminable.

Duras' metaphor, "water forgets...", is not an explanation. It fails to explain. The failed form of an explanation is substituted for the form of expectation. Water's forgetfulness forces us to ascribe an identity to water that it lacks. Water is itself absent minded. It forgets itself; it loses its sense. It forgets just as Lol V. Stein forgets to suffer. The metaphor seeks a language in the face of language's inadequacy to determine the loss of water's identity, of its relation to an expected sense.

Something unbecoming comes to pass. Water's awkward beauty. Water retains its form when it ought not to have. Perhaps, we can say that it is a form that has shed its identity. Forgetful of itself, it does not live up to expectation. For a brief spell water fails to register the fact that it *ought* to be ice. But it is not. And having lost the limits defining the stability of its form, water loses the assurance of its identity, haunted by the anomaly of this not. Within this suspended interval, as water dips below 0° without freezing, it encounters the loss of its sense. Shorn of its *sens* (sense and direction) and the end to which its story ought to conform, it must suddenly confront itself as nothing but a relation to this absence, as nothing but this forgetting. Water parts way with itself. "In a solitary confrontation with change."⁴⁹

Water remains water but has shed the expectation of its form. It occupies the hollow place of an absent sense. Having lost a relation to its signification, it becomes nothing but a shell of a word. A block of signifying material: w-a-t-e-r. The metaphor here directs the mind to an absent sense. Water can only *forget to freeze* in language. But the metaphor prompts language to say nothing: "Nothing seems to be being said but the almost nothing there is in all words."⁵⁰ Duras' metaphor stresses that the event that could indeed so easily go unnoticed befalls language, specifically the sense that accrues to the word water. Its signification is held in suspense. It is presently absent. The word's non-sensical place is substituted for the word's signification. Water is not water by retaining its form when it ought not to. When it no longer aligns with what we expect from its physical properties, the word persists without sense. In forgetting to freeze, water for a brief stint forgets what it is: a word that has a meaning. It becomes a mere thing in relation to a word whose sense can no longer seize it. Such a seizure is after all what we expect from language. It ought to mean something,⁵¹ but language here fails to act as it ought. And Duras suggests as much through a violation of its meaning: water is too cold to freeze. A proposition whose truth does not make sense.

In *The Lover*, Duras describes a scene while sitting with her mother in which she suddenly loses her sense:

I looked at my mother, I could hardly recognize her. And then, in a kind of sudden vanishing, a sudden fall, I all at once couldn't recognize her at all. There, suddenly, close to me, was someone sitting in my mother's place who wasn't my mother, who looked like her but who'd never been her. She looked rather blank, she was gazing at the garden, a certain point in the garden, it looked as if she was watching for something just about to happen, of which I could see nothing. There was a youthfulness about her features, her expres-

sion, a happiness which she was repressing out of what must have been habitual reticence. She was beautiful. Dô was beside her. Dô seemed not have noticed anything. My terror didn't come from what I've just said about her, her face, her look of happiness, her beauty, it came from the fact that she was sitting just where my mother had been sitting when the substitution took place, but that that identity irreplaceable by any other had disappeared and I was powerless to make it come back, make it start to come back. There was no longer anything there to inhabit her image. I went mad in full possession of my senses. Just long enough to cry out. I did cry out. A faint cry, a cry for help, to crack the ice in which the whole scene was fatally freezing. My mother turned her head.⁵²

Just as the event of water's failure to conform to what we expect of its sense is not a concern of water as such but the language tasked with its signification, here it is Duras, the I of the narrator, who "goes mad in full possession of her senses." Speech fails her and the only response to her mother's substitution is a cry. To write this cry is to substitute its silence, the muteness of the word, for its demand to be heard. A silent cry cannot be heard, but only read.

"Screaming without sound."⁵³ This is one of Duras' formulas for writing. The anomalous event of water's forgetting to freeze demands that its relation to lack, the void of its identity, be exhibited. Language's sense falls silent. The writer has to exhibit water that has forgotten to freeze. But to do so, he or she must produce a silent scream.



"A writer is an odd thing," Duras writes. "He's a contradiction, and he makes no sense. Writing also means not speaking. Keeping silent. Screaming without sound."⁵⁴

Writing positions the voice as absent. Written words do not speak but are spoken. When one speaks words are animated by a voice which always lends whatever has been articulated a singular inflection. Aristotle defines the voice (*phônê*) as "a sound belonging to something with a soul." Yet, sound need not be meaningful. Speech itself, which is to say, speech about something, can always be obliterated by the voice when it, for example, is screamed. To describe writing's contradictory relation to sense and speech, to *logos*, as screaming without sound suggests that writing is overloaded by the voice's absence, by this absence's amplification. Speech can always be upset by the voice: in screams, cries, or laughter. One might think here of the Vice-Consul's "curiously toneless delivery, the voice pitched a fraction too high, as though he were with difficulty restraining himself from shouting."⁵⁵

A certain kind of writing, which reaches its fulfillment in bureaucratic writing, the writing of officialdom, opposes the written not simply to the voice but its absence. It does not want us to hear what has been evacuated. It believes that writing can be

the compliment of a perfectly measured voice, geared toward frictionless communication. This is to confuse writing, according to Duras, with “good form, in other words the most banal form, the clearest and most inoffensive.” “Good form,” for Duras, can only result in “prim books...charming books, without extension, without darkness. Without silence. In other words, without a true author.”⁵⁶

Duras insists on writing’s abnormality. Not only the writer but writing itself is “odd.” Writing is abnormal. This is something that everybody who has *learned to write* knows, but promptly forgets. A forgotten knowledge that returns insistently, however, each time one must confront its beastly difficulty.⁵⁷ Such forgetting is requisite for learning how to write *tout court*, let alone to write *well*. “Well” meaning the kind of writing that makes it possible to believe that one can indeed make oneself understood, that missives and other communiqués can meet their mark. Such “writing” strives toward a conformity between the object represented (what one wants to say) and its means of expression (how it is said).

For Duras, however, this has nothing to do with writing, true writing, “the writing of literature.”⁵⁸ Strictly speaking, one never learns to *write*. As soon as one learns *it*, something else is substituted in its place which domesticates it, turning an altogether “savage” practice into the most normal thing in the world.⁵⁹ Writing is something that can only be unlearned. It makes of the written a thing that always will have been abnormal.

Writing, then, restores to the written its oddness, that all too material reminder that language is not one with the sense of what is uttered. Something that is so palpable in those who write poorly, those who feel betrayed by language, who do not, as Duras puts it, have a way with words. Lack of facility always makes one feel in the wrong, “the typical, incurable attitude of the poor.”⁶⁰ This feeling is most acute when one is summoned to explain oneself, to give an account. Duras is interested in those who refuse to explain themselves. Figures like André Berthaud or Claire Lannes, as already mentioned, but also figures like Simone Deschamps who “has nothing to say, because the court forces her to say it in its language.”⁶¹ Like Christine Villemin⁶² or the nameless, “backward” women described in “The Cutter-off of Water” who decides with her husband after their water has been shut off by some bureaucrat to take their two children and lie down on the tracks of the high-speed train line.

They all died together. Just a hundred yards to go. Lie down. Keep the children quiet. Sing them to sleep perhaps.

People say the train stopped.

Well, that’s the story.⁶³

The journalists that report on this story attend to the functionary’s actions and statements, the family’s sensational response, even the fact that the woman in the interim went into the village with her two children and into café. But they pass over what does not make sense to tell, because the woman herself left it unsaid.

They focus on just the story and fail to mention what Duras calls “the incident.” “By incident I mean what happened when she went out with the two children after she decided the whole family must die. When she went off for some reason we don’t know, to do or say something she had to do or say before she died.”⁶⁴ In this interval, a second story unfolds populated by words that nobody remembers and nobody cares to remember, because they are deemed irrelevant to what is to come: “the implementation of death.” These are words consigned to silence. Yet, Duras claims: “Whatever she said to the owner of the café,” – even if only a remark about the heat – “her words said everything.”⁶⁵ These banal words become the equivalent of the silence to which her life had been consigned.

To attend to these words is to hear a scream that cannot be heard: a scream that would have warned those who heard them of the “unfathomable violence” to come. These words, screamed silently, even though uttered by a woman “who everyone said was retarded” contain the whole intelligence of literature: what Duras calls the “illness of intelligence.”⁶⁶ She grasps with extreme lucidity her own utter and complete abandonment:

she knew she couldn’t count, now any more than ever, on anyone’s helping her and her family out. She knew she was abandoned by everyone, by the whole of society, and that the only thing left for her to do was to die. She knew that. It’s a terrible, fundamental, awful knowledge. So the question of her backwardness ought to be reconsidered, if anyone ever talked about her again. Which they won’t.⁶⁷



Jean-Marc de H., the French Vice-Consul in Lahore, is the embodiment of such a “terrible, fundamental, awful knowledge.”

“What sort of a man is he?”

“Oh! A dead man.”⁶⁸

In his “written statement regarding the *incidents* in Lahore” (my italics) he too refuses to explain himself:

I cannot go into the reasons for my conduct at Lahore, nor explain why I feel obliged to remain silent on this subject. I do not believe that anything I could say would be of interest either to the Department or to any outside agency. I trust that my refusal to speak will not be misunderstood. I suspect no one. I condemn no one. I can do no more at this stage than simply assert that I find it impossible to give an account, in terms that would be understood, of what took place in Lahore.⁶⁹

He neither explains nor resigns. The Ambassador, the husband of Anne-Marie Stretter, does not know what to do with him, with this “unhappy business,” with his awkward, ungainly presence, nor does anybody else. What to do with a man

who nobody can stand: "It's a terrible thing to say, but I just can't stand him."⁷⁰ His mere presence destroys everybody's peace of mind.⁷¹ Like the death of a fly, he is death unhinged from any significance.⁷²

In the essay, "Writing," Duras claims: "The Vice-Consul is the one I believe in. The Vice-Consul's scream, 'the only true politics.'"⁷³ With this qualification of his scream, she links this scream to *Le Camion* and the woman's declaration: "Let the world go to ruin. It is the only politics." It is a statement that in my view attempts to unhinge what we expect from an expected sense. Ruin here is unhinged from ruination, happy from happiness. Despair loses its sense just as misery is not miserable. Duras speaks thus of *the path of joyful despair*. The Vice-Consul himself links his utter despair to hope.⁷⁴ As he tells Anne Marie Stretter as they dance: "Lahore was also, in a sense, hope."⁷⁵ Yet, the Vice-Consul's hope appears *unexpectedly*. She writes,

As one might pray each day, he screamed. It's all true: he yelled very loud, and in the Lahore night he would fire on the Shalimar Gardens in order to kill. Kill anyone, but kill. He killed simply to kill. So long as "anyone" was all of India in a state of decomposition. He screamed in his home, his Residence, and when he was alone in the dark night of deserted Calcutta. He's mad, the Vice-Consul, mad with intelligence. Every night he kills Lahore.⁷⁶

The Vice-Consul's struggle is at once naïve and revolutionary.⁷⁷

The Vice-Consul is declaring the end of the world with the shots which he directs at the lepers, at leprosy, at himself, at his mirror image. With these shots he wants to, above all, kill killing, to kill that difference between those who kill and those killed, those who have the power to kill and those who can be killed indifferently without consequence. He kills because he quite simply cannot bear the world's very existence. He is thus trying to kill in himself the demand that the world itself have a meaning and the belief that we can make sense of the difference between life that is killable and life that ought not to be killed. "We've been taught from childhood on," according to Duras, "that all our efforts ought to go toward finding the meaning of life we lead, of the one offered to us. We must find a way out. And it should be joyful."⁷⁸

The Vice-Consul is a catastrophe to the story as a whole, to stories as such. As Anne-Marie Stretter answers Charles Rossett's query after her dance with Marc de H.:

"Is he the catastrophe?"

"Yes. Admittedly, it's the central concept of classical drama, but none the less true for that. No need to look any further."⁷⁹

The Vice-Consul is a catastrophe, as he suggests during their dance, not simply because "there is nothing that he can say about Lahore, nothing," but that it is of *necessity* that there is nothing to say, because his actions had to take an unforesee-

able course. He could no longer do what was expected of him, namely adjust to misery. *Get used to it*. In Lahore, the Vice-Consul finds himself trapped within the confines of his own story with the expectation that he would adjust himself to the circumstances, to the climate, to the poverty, to the Colonial context, that he would do his job like the cutter-off-of-water. It is this plot that he destroys.

He finds himself in a situation not unlike the situation of the old woman that Duras describes in her treatment of Charles Laughton's *Night of the Hunter*. Tasked with having to defend the group of orphaned children from the murderous figure of the father (played by Robert Mitchum) with insufficient means, whilst beset with a character whose typology bars her from killing; "classed with goodness and love in the American myth," as Duras suggests, she is forced to *improvise*. "The old woman improvises by singing 'Moses'."⁸⁰ She sings the tune that the "killer-father" so ominously whistles. And as he begins to sing along, he sheds, if only for the duration of the Night, his murderous identity. He forgets himself. He forgets that he is there to kill the children, to commit a crime. So the *crime forgets to kill*, just like water forgets to freeze. Unhinged by the song, which erects "an insurmountable barrier for the crime," he is dis-identified, and the crime begins to drift from its expected place: "it will be distracted, forgetting to kill, and relieving the criminal for a moment of the weight of his insanity. So that he will leave it alone for the time of a night."⁸¹ Duras describes this as a "miracle" that serves to derail the story from its expected sense:

What is suddenly established among these people is a connection which up to then is impossible to predict and which escapes all classification, all analysis. First it's a question of a way of behaving that the old woman invents and the criminal then repeats. These people, so different, suddenly agree to take the film in hand and decide its fate, as if an author were finally getting into the act and, liberating the movie, carrying it off, free. Suddenly, we don't know anymore what we are seeing, what we have seen. So accustomed are we to seeing in the same way. Suddenly there's a switch. All the narrative elements of the movie appear to have put us on the wrong track. Where are we? Where is the good, the bad? Where is the crime? The movie progresses with no morality. It ceases to be the classic fiction of fifty years of American cinema. It has no predetermined outcome, we have no indication of the way it's going to go. We no longer know what we are supposed to think of what we are seeing...⁸²

This is writing's promise which promises nothing. One gets nothing in return for one's losses. Nothing in return is not something, but is not nothing. It is the almost nothing in all words. If the despair of the Vice-Consul is also hope, it is not because he has something to hope for. It is only when he has nothing to hope for, in the pit of despair, that he can hope without being hopeful. He finds love without either being lovable or demanding that he be loved. Writing's silent scream touches upon song: sound without sense. Such an account is not blind to the hell in which we

live, but we ought not to think of it as tragic. As Jean-Marc de H. tells Anne-Marie Stretter: “It may help you to see the man who is waking up as a clown.”⁸³

Notes

1. Marguerite Duras, *Practicalities*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Grove Weidenfeld Press, 1990), 27.
2. In a late interview, Duras states, “I’m still a communist who doesn’t recognize herself in communism. To join a party, you have to be more or less autistic, neurotic, deaf and blind. For years, I stayed in the party as a branch secretary, without realizing what was happening, without seeing that the working class was a victim of its own weakness, that even the proletariat was doing nothing to overcome the limitations of its own condition.” Marguerite Duras, *Suspended Passions: Interviews with Leopoldina Pallotta della Torre*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Seagull Books, 2016), 28.
3. “‘I was expecting he would tender his resignation,’ says the Ambassador, ‘but he hasn’t done so.’” Marguerite Duras, *The Vice-Consul*, trans. Eileen Ellenbogen (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968, 27).
4. Marguerite Duras, *L’Amante Anglaise*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), 110.
5. Duras cites this passage from Musil’s novel in a conversation with Leopoldina Pallotta della Torre to illustrate her following claim: “In my films I don’t gloss over or suppress those things that are not functional or organic to the expressive unity of the fiction – they are made up of a material that’s lacerated, superimposed, offset in time; there are gaps and breaks – that whole imaginary that is meant to render the heterogeneity and irreducibility of life” (*Suspended Passion*, 100).
6. Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike (London: Picador, 1995), 709.
7. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2006), 1450a 2-3.
8. Aristotle gives the following example in the *Poetics*: “An instance is the way the statue of Mityls in Argos laid out flat the person responsible for Mityls’s death, when it fell on him as he contemplated it, for it seems that such things have not happened randomly; and so necessarily stories of this sort are more beautiful” (1452a 8-15).
9. Aristotle defines what occurs for the most part as what is likely (*to eikos*). In a note to chapter 7 of his translation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Joe Sachs writes, “what is likely (*to eikos*) is explained above, in the account of beginnings, middles, and ends, as what happens naturally, when it does so not by invariable necessity but for the most part. In the *Physics* (198b 34-36), Aristotle treats the latter criterion as sufficient evidence that nature is at work. Likely sequence in the story, then, is an image of some aspect of nature working itself out in human action.” See Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2006), note 20, 31.
10. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451a 38-40.
11. Aristotle also claims that unlike history which speaks “of things that are particular,” poetry “aims at” what is “universal”: “the sorts of things that a certain sort of person

turns out to say or do as a result of what is likely or necessary [*tò eikòs è tò anankaïon*]” (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451b 8-10). Poetry grasps the causes of actions and the effects they produce. Jacques Rancière argues that Aristotle’s distinction between poetry and history is fundamental for grasping his conception of *mimêsis*: “Aristotle asserted the superiority of invented logical sequences over the unfolding of empirical events.” *The Politics of Literature*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011), 174.

12. *Green Eyes*, 129.

13. *Practicalities*, 125. For the new edition of *Green Eyes*, published in 1987, Duras chose this passage from *La vie matérielle (Practicalities)* as the epigraph.

14. This is certainly akin to Friedrich Hölderlin’s notion of a “categorical reversal,” in *Notes on Oedipus*, where “the beginning and the end by no means rhyme.” In “The Caesura of the Speculative,” Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe interprets Hölderlin’s notion of caesura and of categorical reversal as an interruption of the dominance of Aristotle’s treatment of *catharsis* within the tradition. *Catharsis* is what allows for the resolution of the story. It is important in this regard to also mention Julia Kristeva’s suggestion that Duras’ writing leads to a “*noncathartic* literature.” “Lacking recovery or God, having neither value or beauty other than illness itself seized at the essential place of its rupture, never has art had so little cathartic potential...We are in the presence of the nothing of meaning and feelings as lucidity accompanies them to their dying out, and we bear witness to the neutralization of our own distress, with neither tragedy nor enthusiasms, with clarity, in the frigid insignificance of a psychic numbness, both the minimal and also ultimate sign of grief and ravishment.” *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 228.

15. This how Duras describes the reality captured in *Le Camion* and *Son Nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert*. See *Suspended Passions*, 102.

16. *Practicalities*, 125.

17. *Practicalities*, 8.

18. In Jacqueline Risset’s obituary, she suggests: “Perhaps Marguerite Duras was the one to fulfill, better than other writers of the twentieth century, Flaubert’s desire to “write a book about nothing,” to submit the possibility of the act of writing to the utmost scrutiny, to define what might be called the primary cell, the atom of literature.” *Suspended Passions*, n. 3, 161.

19. *Practicalities*, 8.

20. In her introduction to a collection of Duras books, Rachel Kushner writes, “The language of Gascon, from which this practice of a spoken ‘s’ derives, is not considered chic. More educated French people not from the region might be tempted to opt for a silent ‘s’ with a proper name. In English, one hears a lot of Duraaaah – especially from Francophiles. Duras herself said Durasss, and that’s the correct, if unrefined, way to say it.” *The Lover, Wartime Notebooks, Practicalities* (New York: Everyman’s Library, Alfred A. Knopf, 2018), vii.

21. Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 225.

22. In *The Vice-Consul*, the song that Jean-Marc de H. whistles and whose sheets of music are on his piano is called Indiana’s Song. In the film and the play *India Song*, this is forgot-

ten or altered. In *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, one read S. Tahla and the name of Lol's lover is Michael Richardson. In *India Song* the "son" is preserved. However, in the novel *L'Amour* S. Tahla is spelled S. Thala and in *The Vice-Consul*, Michael Richardson becomes "Michael Richard."

23. This is taken to its extreme in *L'Amour*. The characters in the novel do not have proper names. All we have to work with are the impersonal pronouns "he" and "she." However, one can infer through cross-referencing of her work that the three "characters" are Lol V. Stein, Michael Richardson, and Anne-Marie Stretter. In the "Afterword" to the English translation of the novel, Sharon Willis writes, "Reducing characters to figures as residues, remnants, fragments, this book produces a textual relay that becomes its own internal memory and dissolves its narrative frame, substituting its memory of the previous texts for the reader's own, implanting memories in us. But like the dead dog on the beach to which *L'Amour* returns with unsettling frequency – as if this corpse structures the narrative space – these are figures in the course of deterioration." Marguerite Duras, *L'Amour*, trans. Kazim Ali and Libby Murphy (Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2013), 101-102.

24. *Suspended Passions*, 53.

25. In an interview with Jacques Grant and Jacques Frenais about *Le Camion*, she says: "Cinema has never been equal to the fundamental futility of life. The viewer wants someone to tell him a story about this life in such a way that the inanity on which the story is based is never apparent. It has to be far away, camouflaged, inaccessible, separate. But progress has come, terrible and terrifying: the whole Earth is more and more apparent. We know its shape, its dizzying spin. We have seen it from the moon. It's in everyone's imaginary. That Earth, that new Earth and its fundamental futility across the dead planets. I have the impression that I showed in *Le Camion* that there is no more sky above the land we see, just interstellar space, the new sky." "An Act Against All Power" in *Duras by Duras*, trans. Edith Cohen and Peter Connor, San Francisco: City Light Books, 1987, 112.

26. "An unwholesome-looking sky in the morning ensures that white residents, unused to the climate of Calcutta, will wake up looking liverish. He himself [the Vice-Consul] does, he notices, as he examines his reflection in the mirror." *The Vice-Consul*, 20.

27. "She sleeps among the lepers, and wakes every morning among them, untainted, still not one of them." *The Vice-Consul*, 124.

28. *The Vice-Consul*, 53.

29. *The Vice-Consul*, 146.

30. *The Vice-Consul*, 139.

31. *The Vice-Consul*, 122.

32. With allusion, perhaps, to Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*, Duras writes, "Peter Morgan laughs:

'I am drunk with the sufferings of India. Aren't we all, more or less? It's impossible to talk about such suffering unless one has made it as much a part of oneself as breathing. That woman stirs my imagination. I note down my thoughts about her.'

'Why her in particular?'

“Because nothing more can happen to her, not even leprosy.” *The Vice-Consul*, 124-125.

33. *The Vice-Consul*, 1.

34. *The Vice-Consul*, 147.

35. *The Vice-Consul*, 18.

36. *The Vice-Consul*, 155.

37. *The Vice-Consul*, 123. Interestingly Peter Morgan’s desire to shift the conversation from the Vice-Consul comes as a response to Anne-Marie Stretter’s description of him as a person “who does not know where he’s going, or what he’s looking for” (122). In other words, the very thing, given how Morgan starts his tale about the beggar woman, that one would imagine would pique his interest.

38. *The Vice-Consul*, 18.

39. *The Vice-Consul*, 154.

40. “It’s true, all my books are born and move around a just such a point that’s always evoked yet always missing.” (*Suspended Passion*, 53).

41. *The Vice-Consul*, 102.

42. *The Vice-Consul*, 163.

43. *Outside: Selected Writings*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 79.

44. *Practicalities*, 27.

45. *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, 9.

46. *Suspended Passion*, 52.

47. Duras suggests “that all the women in my books, whatever their age, derive from Lol V. Stein. Derive, that is, from a kind of self-forgetting. They all see quite clearly and lucidly. But they’re imprudent, improvident. They all ruin their own lives. They’re very timid, they’re afraid of streets and public places, they don’t expect to be happy.” *Practicalities*, 27-28.

48. Marguerite Duras, *Practicalities*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Grove Weidenfeld Press, 1990), 27.

49. Marguerite Duras, *Green Eyes*, trans. Carol Barko (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 16.

50. *Practicalities*, 125.

51. As the Eleatic Stranger remarks in Plato’s dialogue the *Sophist*: “Whenever there is speech, it’s necessary that it be speech about something [*légein ti*], and impossible for it not to be about anything.” *Sophist or The Professor of Wisdom*, trans. Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, Eric Salem (Newburyport, MA: Focus Philosophical Library, 1996), 262e.

52. Marguerite Duras, *The Lover*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Alfred A. Knopf (Everyman Library), 2018, 61-62.

53. Marguerite Duras, *Writing*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 17.
54. *Writing*, 17.
55. *The Vice-Consul*, 97.
56. *Writing*, 23-24.
57. In *Green Eyes*, Duras speaks thus of the singular torment of writing: "Writings that seem the most polished are but very distant faces of what has been glimpsed, that inaccessible totality which escapes all understanding, which yields to nothing but madness, to what destroys it. But to give, give *yourself* – it's probably that too – this effort worked out in a dark room you do not enter but whose existence you have sensed, if only once, through the transports and ebbing of desire. The wonderful misery is perhaps that torture, that entreaty which allows no respite, that uprooting of self which leaves you forsaken and lost when it ends with the book. You know too. To be the object of one's own madness and not to mad, that could be it, the wonderful misery. All the rest is beside the point" (142).
58. "The writing of literature is what poses a problem to every book, to every writer, to every writer's every book. And without that writing there is no writer, no book, nothing. From there, it seems one can also tell oneself that because of this fact, there is perhaps nothing more." *Writing*, 75.
59. "Writing has always been done without references, or else it is...It is still as it was on the first day. Savage. Different." *Writing*, 20.
60. *Practicalities*, 103.
61. "Horror at Choisy-le-Roi" in *Outside*, 94.
62. Duras says, "I'm passionately interested in Christine Villemin because she can't put two sentences together; because like the other woman she is full of unfathomable violence. There's an instinctive behaviour in their two cases that one can try to explore, that one can give back to silence." *Practicalities*, 92.
63. *Practicalities*, 91.
64. *Practicalities*, 92.
65. *Practicalities*, 93.
66. *Green Eyes*, 143.
67. *Practicalities*, 93-94.
68. *The Vice-Consul*, 100-101.
69. *The Vice-Consul*, 26.
70. *The Vice-Consul*, 101.
71. *The Vice-Consul*, 155.
72. In *Writing*, Duras recalls a story of the death of a fly that she had told to Michelle Porte, the director of *Les Lieux du Marguerite Duras* (1976), and to which she compares writing: "When Michelle Porte arrived, I showed her the spot and I told her a fly had died there at

three twenty. Michelle Porte started to laugh. She couldn't stop laughing. She was right. I smiled at her to put an end to the story. But no: she kept on laughing. And when I tell you this story, plainly, in all truth, in my truth, it's what I just told you: what took place between the fly and me, which is not yet fit to be laughed at ... It's also good if writing leads to that, to that fly – in its death agony, I mean: to write the horror of writing" (30-31). It is also worth noting, as Dominiek Hoens reminded me, that Robert Musil opens the collection, *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, with a story titled, "Flypaper" in which he describes the final agonies of a fly caught in "[t]angle-foot flypaper" from Canada. See *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, trans. Peter Wortsman (Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago Books, 2006), 3.

73. *Writing*, 9.

74. "I've never gotten over the despair of politics. It's through this naïveté that I became a writer. For Sartre and the others, there was too little activism, you had to get there by teaching. To spread an idea, that's what works best because people are hungry for justifications. That's what naïveté is. Happiness is being aware of the fundamental dissatisfaction we exist in and also its unsolvability. It's a non-problem." Marguerite Duras, *Me & Other Writings*, trans. Olivia Baes & Emma Ramadan (Dorothy, a Publishing Project, 2019), 46.

75. *The Vice-Consul*, 99.

76. *Writing*, 9.

77. *Writing*, 42.

78. "The Path of Joyful Despair: An interview with Marguerite Duras by Claire Devarieux," in *Duras by Duras*, 105-106.

79. *The Vice-Consul*, 101.

80. *Green Eyes*, 93.

81. *Green Eyes*, 94.

82. *Green Eyes*, 91.

83. *The Vice-Consul*, 99.