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Writing the Unseen:
Envisioning the Face in the Works of Marguerite Duras and Hélène Cixous

By

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French

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By

Noelle Christin Giguere

B.A., Smith College, 2000

Advisor: Elissa Marder, Ph.D.

An abstract of
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Abstract

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By
Noelle Christin Giguere

The word *visage* features prominently in the works of Marguerite Duras and Hélène Cixous; yet, their texts contain relatively few descriptions of physical faces. Instead, the anonymous and indistinct *visage* dominates these twentieth-century and (in the case of Cixous) twenty-first-century authors' diverse bodies of work. For both Duras and Cixous, this unstable and intractable image motivates the act of writing. Their texts seek to encounter the face of the other—both cultural and psychological—even as these same texts reveal the *visage* to be ephemeral, fleeting, and ultimately unrepresentable.

In their novels, plays, and essays, the *visage*, that which by definition should be available to vision, is unseen. Each author incorporates different visual arts, including film, painting, and photography, in her work in order to explore how the *visage* constantly escapes sight and creates the possibility of vision beyond what is seen. The elusive *visage* is central to each author's understanding of how literature not only questions received ideas about sight and representation, but also (in terms of the feminist and postcolonial aspects of their work) unmoors societal and cultural constructs of identity.

The fundamental distinction that the unseen face disrupts is the separation between self and other. As explored by scholars such as Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot, the *visage* does not just define a self; it is proof of otherness or alterity at the conception of selfhood. The paradoxical image of the face is central to how works by Duras and Cixous reinterpret the power exercised in the gaze, the relationship between the self and other, and the generic conventions of fiction and autobiography. Writing in different eras where the face is either hyper-visual and available or fragmented and vacant, Duras's and Cixous's texts develop around the elusive *visage*, an image both desired and adored in its inaccessibility.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Echoing Arthur Rimbaud's famous statement "je est un autre," both Marguerite Duras and Hélène Cixous explore the collapse between *je* and *autre*, two seemingly opposed terms, in their autofictive works. These twentieth- and, in the case of Cixous, twenty-first-century authors, reshape Rimbaud's celebrated words to reveal the permeable textual boundaries through which the self becomes other. Gazing upon herself in a mirror, the narrator of Duras's most famous autofictive text, *L'Amant*, comments, "Je me vois comme une autre" (20). In the only text that somewhat resembles an autobiography in Cixous's work, *Photos de racines*, Cixous explains to Mireille Calle-Gruber, "L'autre sous toutes ses formes me donne *Je*…C'est l'autre qui fait mon portrait" (22-23). Significantly, both these comments are made in reference to a surface—a mirror and a portrait—that could potentially convey the image of a face. Of course, the word *potential* is operative here because the instability between the limits of the self and the other makes it impossible for the two figures to come face to face. The question of how to approach the other's face, as I will show, is a catalyst for writing in Duras's and Cixous's texts. Not only does this attention to the face situate each author in a larger twentieth-century debate about the dominance of sight and representation, but it also defines their distinctive textual productions.

Unlike the face in a conventional literary portrait, which designates a character by revealing both her external features and internal emotions, the face in the works of Marguerite Duras and Hélène Cixous is often indistinct and anonymous. Despite the fact that the word *visage* features prominently in their works, there are very few descriptions of actual faces. The *visage* in these texts, therefore, presents an anomaly: that which

should be eminently available to sight is unseen. The word *visage*, from the Latin *visus*, seems to proclaim the visibility of this image, as does the Greek *prosopôn;* the *visage* is before the eyes of the other. Yet, as we will see in the work of Duras and Cixous, the *visage* is an elusive and shifting image, one that is not necessarily dominated by vision. [1] As Maurice Blanchot explains in *L'Entretien infini*, the *visage* is intractable: "Le visage—mais, je le reconnais, le nom fait difficulté—est au contraire cette présence que je ne puis dominer du regard, qui toujours déborde la représentation que je puis m'en faire et toute forme, toute image, toute vue, toute idée où je pourrais l'affirmer, l'arrêter ou seulement la laisser être présente" (77). Much of what Blanchot expresses in the above passage embodies Duras's and Cixous's approach to the faces in their writing. Indeed, the face does seem to "overflow" its representation's boundaries in their work. Both Duras's use of photographic and filmic imagery and Cixous's exploration of painting support, rather than disprove, the paradox of the unseen and unrepresentable face. Their texts do not elide or efface the *visage*; rather, they explore different ways of encountering the face other than the objectifying and destructive conduit of sight. Throughout these two different bodies of work, narrators and characters constantly realize that the face before them is one that they cannot and—as I will explain in my chapters—do not want to see.

The complexity of the word *visage* is perhaps most noticeable in its relation to two other French words that supposedly have the same meaning: *face* and *figure*. Unlike the *visage*, the *figure* is concrete and tangible. *Figure*, from the Latin verb *fingere* or *to model*, implies a constructed and concrete image, a representation shaped by an external

[1] In his essay "Formule Charnelle," Jean-François Lyotard discusses the non-coincidence between the viewer that looks upon a work of art and the work of art that looks back: "Tout est visage dans le monde de la vision. Faire voir, la passion de peintre et d'écrire, ne consiste pas à faire voir le visible tel qu'on le voit, mais ce visible en lui qui te voit, c'est-à-dire le visage" (173).

force (Bonnefis 156). Form and structure: the *figure* is made. The word *face*, as well, implies a fixed idea or concept, in contrast to the word *visage*. Commonly used to describe only the surface (and thus the appearance) of things, the *face* is always before the other, hence the expression *face à face.* Moreover, the *face* can only present one idea and one image whereas the *visage* is multiple and mutable. *Face* can refer to the sacred, "Sainte Face," or the profane "face de rat," but never to both at the same time. In other words: ""Face" est noble ou ignoble. Ou bien tout l'un, ou bien tout l'autre" (Bonnefis 150). Of the many ways that the French language designates faces, the *visage* is the most intangible and the most fluid, remaining just outside the bounds of representation.[2] There is no comparable word for *visage* in English because the word *face* does not quite communicate the unfixed and changing qualities of the *visage*. Nevertheless, throughout this dissertation I will refer to the English *face* as an equivalent for the French word *visage*.

My task of examining these two authors side by side (and emphatically *not* face to face) is made possible by the prominence, or rather the prominent intractability, of the *visage* in their works. As we will see, Duras's oeuvre is perhaps more marked by the "voix sans visage" than her famous "visage détruit." In Cixous's "[v]oyages du visage," the face is always on the point of arriving or at the point of departing and rarely where we expect it to be.[3] I do admit, however, that it seems strange to propose the *visage* as the central point of comparison between these two authors. After all, their works seem to

[2] I am indebted to Philippe Bonnefis for this understanding of the subtle differences between *visage*, *figure*, and *face* found in his book *Le Cabinet du docteur Michaux* and his essay "Visage se dit."

[3] Cixous's texts present an impossible image of the *visage* that is very similar to the fleeting and transforming *visages* in the works of Henri Michaux.

reflect the same concerns: their colonial childhoods, the early deaths of their fathers, their constant need to revisit the same stories, their interest in the relationship of image to text, the distinction of their writing as *écriture féminine* and the ensuing debate as to whether or not we can categorize their work as *écriture féminine.* Yet, despite the many similarities between these authors, their texts move in entirely different directions, departing from a common understanding of the *visage* as that which is *unseen*. This incommensurability is noticeable even when paging through their novels. Duras's economy of language contrasts with Cixous's overwhelming barrage of constantly slipping and changing *mot-valises*. Whereas Duras creates permeable boundaries in her texts in order to impoverish certain words and certain images, to empty her "ombre interne" onto the page, Cixous attempts to collapse limits in order to follow her writing as it escapes "par galops."

Duras's use of the image of the face in her work propels, in particular, her erotics of writing. [4] As Leslie Hill explains, desire in Duras's work "is always already founded on a recognition of the prohibition that makes the object of desire remote and unattainable" (43). Circuitous, errant, oblique, and finally destructive, the movement of desire transgresses limits but never achieves its goal. The face, without being a fixed and representable object, is what allows desire to circulate in the text. In the text/film *Le Navire Night*, the narrator describes a liaison between a man and a woman that only takes place by telephone, explaining that they stay on the phone together night after night, sleeping and waking: "C'est un orgasme noir. Sans toucher réciproque. Ni visage. Les yeux fermés" (31). When the woman sends her photograph to the man, he rejects the

[4] I thank Elissa Marder for helping me arrive at the words *erotics* and *ethics* for a broad and general idea of what is at stake in each of these authors' oeuvres.

image: “Il est trop tard qu’elle ait un visage” (52). Desire is directed toward the other’s *unseen* face. The image kills this desire.

Cixous’s use of the face, however, is a catalyst for her ethics of writing. The central ethical question in this author’s works is how to write about the other. On the one hand, this question deals with the problem of translation, of making the other different from oneself. On the other hand, writing about the other might reveal his or her secrets. In an interview with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, Cixous and her interlocutor discuss writing as a transgression of an “11th commandment”: “Tu n’écriras pas.” Writing is not only the revelation of a possible secret, however. It is also the action that gives life or death. The possibility of one text is always the death of another: “Je pense au livre que je n’écris pas. A force d’y penser ce livrequejen’écrispas devient mon compagnon inconnu mon ombre invisible mon allié secret mon tout sans visage mon invivant sans mort, à moins qu’il ne soit le livre laissé pour mort par chaque livre que j’écris au prix d’un livre que je n’écris pas” (“Le Livre” 233). A faceless figure haunts writing, and the text is both an attempt to give the other this face and protect this image from being unveiled. In other words, Cixous’s writing is always “dans la direction du visage adoré irrattrapable” (*Osnabrück* 65).

Despite divergent aims, both authors imagine their writing as an encounter between the self and the other through the problematic image of the face; this similarity in their work is also indicative of the context in which their writing takes place. Perhaps one of the reasons why the face is so integral to both authors’ examinations of the self and the other is because of this image’s importance in twentieth-century cultural and political discourse. Following from a nineteenth-century legacy, the acceptance of

pseudo-scientific claims that classified and categorized the "defining" characteristics of different races and ethnicities extended into the justification for the institutionalization of racist and discriminatory practices of the twentieth century. In the context of black and white relations in the colonial and postcolonial worlds, Frantz Fanon's *Peau noire, Masques blancs* describes how these destructive and naturalized stereotypes function by means of the gaze: "Je suis sur-déterminé de l'extérieur. Je ne suis pas l'esclave de "l'idée" que les autres ont de moi, mais de mon apparaitre" (95). Because of social constructs, racial difference marks the encounter with the other's face. This fact is certainly one that resonates in both Duras's and Cixous's oeuvres, and they address the problem of the perpetuation of the face as a visible and superficial site of difference in their works. Duras develops—and to a certain extent subverts—the image of "whiteness" in the colonial landscape of her different texts. Many of Cixous's novels and essays also address the problem of appearance, most notably in terms of the veil that separates this author's narrators from the Algerian world in which they live.

The face's general absence in their texts can also be explained in terms of the political, theoretical, and artistic discourses of the twentieth century. This century, in many ways, was marked by the loss of the face. In the wake of the century's horrifying and dehumanizing wars and genocides, theorists and artists began to portray and remember the victims of these violent events as anonymous and faceless. Literature of the Holocaust, for example, describes the unimaginable sufferings of concentration camp prisoners through their non-faces. In perhaps one of the best known survivor accounts, *Survival in Auschwitz,* Primo Levi relates his memory of the anonymity of dying camp workers: "They crowd my memory with their faceless presences, and if I could enclose

all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of a thought is to be seen" (9). In this description, the "faceless presences" no longer have identities except in relation to the apocalyptic violence of the age. Certainly, Duras and Cixous both directly and indirectly allude to this genocide. Duras, primarily in her *Aurélia Steiner* texts, reveals that the protagonist has no discernible face. Cixous's allusions to this history little resemble Duras's because they are related to elusive memories of family history; in novels like *Osnabrück* and *Benjamin à Montaigne*, the narrator's mother remembers her deported family members, and these figures haunt the texts. Although the way in which Duras and Cixous deal with the memory of genocide is radically different, their allusions to this traumatic event seem to both relate to how the face is a problematic and enigmatic image in the era in which they write.[5]

In this respect, both authors' works reflect the theoretical and philosophical discussions that stemmed from the loss of the face in the twentieth century; these discourses redefine and reexamine this image's visible and invisible limits. For example, various writers and theorists explored how the face, through its absence, could resist objectification and destruction, specifically in terms of the self's relation to the other. Emmanuel Levinas's many discussions on the ethics of the face to face encounter move beyond face as representation to examine the face as a site of moral obligation. Seeing the

[5] Both art and literature witness this paradigm shift in how the human figure, either destroyed or invisible, is presented. Authors like Rilke, Artaud, Bataille, and Michaux reveal the multiplication, effacement, and destruction of this image while other authors like Robbe-Grillet elide the face almost entirely. In painting, as well, artists explore the changing representation of the facial image, from Malevitch's blank faces to Bacon's tortured images. Despite the different ways that these texts address the face's representation, however, most (if not all) of them subvert the idea of mimesis in the textual and visual portrait. Sylvie Courtine-Denamy explores this history in her book, *Le Visage en question*.

other *is* seeing a face, and this other is able to penetrate the self's image: "Regarder un regard, c'est regarder ce qui ne s'abandonne pas, ne se livre pas, mais qui vous *vise*: c'est regarder le *visage*" (*Difficile* 20). In this encounter with the other, the idea of the self is destabilized as the other inhabits the self's own gaze. One of the reasons for this instability, and consequently for the impossibility of having power through the gaze, is that the face is not visible. Ultimately, this face is unseen, and Levinas articulates this seemingly contradictory quality of the face in a discussion of how the *visage* manifests the imperative "Thou shall not kill": "Le visage, lui, est inviolable; ces yeux absolument sans protection, partie la plus nue du corps humain, offrent cependant une résistance absolue à la possession, résistance absolue où s'inscrit la tentation du meurtre : la tentation d'une négation absolue. …Voir un visage, c'est déjà entendre : 'Tu ne tueras point'" (21). The sacrosanct and unprotected face cannot be possessed, and its nakedness, rather than making it vulnerable, affirms its transcendence. Moreover, this *visage* speaks rather than provides a representation to be seen. The self *hears* the other's face rather than *sees* it.[6] Levinas's discussion ruptures the totalizing concepts of self and other, and it is precisely this irreducibility of the relationship on which Duras's and Cixous's works focus.

While my project certainly addresses issues that many critics have discussed in both authors' works, the importance of my endeavor lies in isolating how the face is a source of writing for both Duras and Cixous. The "visage détruit" in Duras's *L'Amant* has been explored in many rich and important critical works, but there are no detailed

[6] Much of my understanding of Levinas's *Difficile liberté* and *Totalité et infini* comes from a reading of the chapter "The Invisible Face of Humanity" in the book *The Philosopher's Gaze* by David Michael Levin and the article "Visage, Figure: Reading Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*" by Jill Robbins.

examinations of how the face resonates throughout all of her works and indeed influences a slightly different reading of *L'Amant*.[7] The image of the *visage* in Cixous's work, specifically, has not been the object of critical discussion; yet, many of my observations and conclusions align with the excellent articles and books that have been published on the subjects of painting and portraiture in her work. The visage is a significant image to study in these authors' works, first and foremost, because it allows for an innovative discussion of their oeuvres, certainly with regard to Duras's writing of erotics and Cixous's writing of ethics. Moreover, my discussions of the face enable me to explore both authors' significant positions in the eras in which they write, specifically in terms of feminist and postcolonial questions. In many ways, my interpretations contribute to a larger discussion of how literature can represent and encounter the cultural and psychological other in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. Finally, through my attention to the relationship between text and image in Duras's and Cixous's works, I propose that the paradox of the unseen face allows the encounter between literature and the visual arts. Rather than defining and representing the face, the works of Marguerite Duras and Hélène Cixous are defined by the elusive and indescribable *visage*.

[7] I do want to signal a fascinating article by Marie-Annick Gervais-Zaninger, "Marguerite Duras ou la fabrique d'un visage," that investigates the image of the face in several works by Duras, but to different ends than my own.

Chapter One: TRANSPARENT LOOKS

"A travers la transparence de son être incendié, de sa nature détruite, elle m'accueille d'un sourire."[8]

I. RESEMBLING NOTHING

The most noticeable similarity between Lol V. Stein, Anne-Marie Stretter, and Aurélia Steiner—three recurring characters in Duras's oeuvre—is the repeated *st* in their names. A blended sound, the combination of *s* and *t* conveys both fluidity and inflexibility because in this pair, both letters are pronounced. In some ways, their names contrast with these three rather indistinct and elusive women. Despite the hardness conveyed in the sound and even in the meaning of their names (*stein* being the German word for *stone*), they are not set or frozen in their texts. In fact, their names indicate a movement towards the outside in their foreignness and in their connection to Duras's own name, *dur* meaning *hard* in French. In fact, these women are the opposite of concrete; their names indicate an untenable and fluid state of being. In *Les Parleuses* (1974), a book-length interview with Xavière Gauthier, Duras explains: "Tout est pareil. Toutes mes femmes. Elles sont envahies par le dehors, traversées, trouées de partout par le désir" (232). Duras's comment pre-dates the creation of Aurélia's character in 1979; yet, the above passage suggests a characteristic that all of these women share. Namely, they lose their identity to their own desires and to the desires of others. This desire is indeed sexual, but more broadly it is a desire for the expropriation and dissolution of the self. The movement of desire in Duras's texts is what creates these simultaneously central and peripheral characters in her texts. The most striking description of these women is

[8] Duras, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* 113.

that they are invaded by the exterior, opened, and crossed through. Lol, Stretter, and Steiner subvert the conventional means of a character's representation; instead of being shaped by a tension between their interiority and exteriority, these women are shaped by the way that they permeate the text and the text permeates them.[9] In this sense, there is no boundary between exterior and interior, only a constant shifting between the two.

These women appear and reappear throughout Duras's oeuvre, in both word and image, almost as if they continuously escape the texts' attempts to fix them as identifiable representations. To a certain extent, Duras's use of different genres and mediums echoes the fluidity and porosity of her characters. She explains in 1977, "Je ne sais rien de la différence entre lire et écrire, entre lire, voir et entendre. Je n'aperçois plus rien de différent entre le théâtre et le cinéma, le cinéma et l'écrit, le théâtre et l'écrit" (Pinthon 46). Duras passes from image to text, from play to novel, because she claims that she does not *perceive* the difference between these forms. If we maintain strict definitions of genre, Duras's manipulation of diverse textual and visual elements creates an unrecognizable and unclassifiable oeuvre. Discussing the response of critics to her work, for example, she explains in *Écrire* (1993), "la plupart du temps j'étais sensible au fait qu'on y disait que *ça ne ressemblait à rien*" (31). By stating that her work bears no resemblance to anything else, she infers that her work escapes categorization.[10] In the

[9] While I do not have the space to explore this idea completely, each woman is closely associated with a place or places (S Thala, Calcutta, Venice, Melbourne, Vancouver, and Paris). In this sense, the place stands in for a kind of face in that neither the face nor the place has boundaries in the text, thus rupturing the process of identification.

[10] In a certain sense, this subversion of established genres ironically situates Duras in another category: le Nouveau Roman. This kind of twentieth century text eliminates borders between genres, such as fiction and theory, and between texts themselves as shown by the emergence of the discussion of intertextuality at this moment in literary history. For an in-depth discussion of this topic see Celia Britton's description of certain characteristics of the Nouveau Roman in *The Nouveau Roman: Fiction, Theory and Politics*.

same way, Duras's characters resist definition even as they remain archetypical characters in her work as a whole.

Sight, therefore, is not a means of understanding the world in Duras's work, and paradoxically, the textual and visual image that best conveys this idea is the face. The face has a troublesome place in these texts because of its simultaneous importance and elusiveness in the work. In her article on the relationship of photography and writing in Duras, Susan Cohen proposes that the "visual blanks" or moments of non-vision in Duras's narratives are what allow this author to transgress generic boundaries in her texts. Cohen continues, "If Duras' texts pass so easily from one genre to another, it is largely because of the inherent transportability of these blank "screens," which enables the author to favor the verbal even in essentially visual media" ("Fiction and the Photographic Image" 58). In many ways, the face in Duras's oeuvre is also "inherently transportable" because of how it does not offer up an image to sight. Cohen's cinematic metaphor highlights the duality of these screens: they obscure vision but they also serve as a site for projection. This marker of visual absence both manifests the impossibility of representation in visual media and offers a limitless site for representation by serving as a conduit for writing. In Duras's works, the face has these characteristics, not as a site of projection, but as a porous and transparent blankness. Duras's characters remain unseen because of their faces, and it almost seems as if the constant movement between textual and visual works is meant to draw attention to these imperceptible images. However, the similarities between characters and between texts do not result in an all-encompassing sameness. Rather, the resemblance between characters and texts is due to the fact that they problematize the reader's and the viewer's sight.

Movement between texts and genres is necessary to follow these indefinable women; their unseen faces generate writing. Each woman, however, has a slightly different effect on how the text takes shapes around their relative invisibility. Lol V. Stein's madness and "absence" collapses textual boundaries from the novel *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (1964), to the poetic text *L'Amour* (1971), and finally to the film, *La Femme du Gange* (1973). Her story is told and re-told because it can never be communicated in language. Anne-Marie Stretter's character, introduced in relation to Lol, and then resurfacing in *Le Vice-consul* (1965) and the film/play/text *India Song* (1973 and 1975), erases the difference between desire and death. The dissolution of her identity subverts hierarchies of representation, most notably in terms of the colonial landscape in these texts. And finally, the faceless Aurélia Steiner, perhaps Duras's most indeterminate figure, communicates the simultaneous destruction and creation that takes place in the written texts and film, *Aurélia Steiner (Melbourne)*, *Aurélia Steiner (Vancouver)* and *Aurélia Steiner (Paris)* (1979). Aurélia, more than the other two women, is aligned with writing. She seems disconnected from Lol and Stretter in this sense, but the reemergence of all three women in the void between word and image in *Les Yeux verts* (1980) reveals how foundational their imperceptible faces are to Duras's oeuvre.[11] Despite their similarities, each character provides a different understanding of how the text takes place in the dissolution of their images.

[11] Duras transforms the use of recurring characters from the kind of textual migration that Balzac creates in his *Comédie humaine*. Unlike Balzac, Duras does not create the idea of a "real" world in her characters' appearances. Instead, Duras's recurring figures expose inconsistencies and ultimately difference in her texts. Moreover, as she explains in an interview with Bettina Knapp: "Dépeindre un caractère en son entier, comme faisait Balzac, est révolu. J'estime que la description d'un *signe*, d'une partie seulement d'un être humain, ou d'une situation, ou d'un événement…est beaucoup plus frappant qu'une description complète" (655).

II. LOL V. STEIN: THE MISSING FACE

Lol's story, in many ways, is not her own story, and as the narrative progresses the reader realizes that the character embodies the possibility of absence and emptiness in a written text. One reason for Lol's nebulous identity is the importance of two other women in the novel: Tatiana Karl and Anne-Marie Stretter. The novel explores Lol's earlier failed relationship—her fiancé abandoned her for Stretter— through Lol's involvement in the romantic relationship between Tatiana and the novel's narrator, Jacques Hold. In the very beginning of the novel, the narrator recreates the traumatic event of Lol's desertion by her fiancé, Michael Richardson, a moment that took place ten years before at a dance in the seaside town of T Beach. Lol's place is not only taken by another woman, but this title character also takes the place of subsequent women. Even before the harrowing event of Michael Richardson's betrayal, however, Tatiana describes Lol in terms of what she is missing: "il manquait déjà quelque chose à Lol pour être—elle dit: là" (12). Despite placing herself in the position of the other, Lol is never able to become the other; instead, she is designated by a "mot-trou": "ce mot, qui n'existe pas, pourtant est là" (48). Lol's place in the text is nebulous because language cannot qualify her; any distinct textual representation of Lol will never coincide with this character. Ultimately, she is absent in language as well as in the narrative and the text continuously highlights that the reader does not necessarily have access to this character and to her history.

Another reason why Lol remains on the margins of the text despite being the central figure is that her story is related by another character who admits that he is lying. The story is in the hands of Hold who introduces himself as "l'amant de Tatiana Karl"

(75) one-quarter of the way into the novel. Furthermore, Hold admits at certain points in the narrative that he is unsure about Lol's story and that much of what he relays to the reader is "invented." Hold's repeated statement in the novel, "j'invente," interestingly indicates two specific aspects of Lol's effacement in the text. To begin with, the text links this invention to sight. In one six-page section of *Le Ravissement,* Hold relates Lol's wanderings through S Thala and he repeats twice, "Je vois ceci" (53, 55). Yet, this construction shifts in the final part of the section with Hold adding "J'invente, je vois" and then finally "J'invente" (56). The conflation (or perhaps the revelation) of seeing as inventing underscores the absence of Lol's image in the text.[12] Inventing becomes a synonym for marking the voids in the text, and as we will see later in my discussion, destruction. Moreover, Hold's inventions imperil the possibility of anything being true. If Duras were a writer concerned with the ethical, Hold's inventions would be lies, but in terms of the economy of Duras's texts, the imaginary and incomplete is the only possibility for representation. Hold's obsession with Lol's non-image reveals how desire functions in the text; despite his constant invention of this woman's story, she is not present in the narrative where he supposedly gains control.[13]

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[12] *Le Vice-consul*, which I will examine in detail in the next section, includes a very similar discussion between the title character and Anne-Marie Stretter's husband, the French ambassador. The ambassador attempts to advise the vice-consul on his diplomatic career, whether the younger man should stay in or leave India and finishes, "Si on reste, comme on ne peut pas voir les choses en face, il faut…inventer, oui, inventer une façon de les regarder, trouver, comment…" (119). The inability to see things "face on" necessitates their invention.

[13] Susan Cohen describes this relationship between the male narrator and his female infatuation as the infinitely delayed possession of the female object, explaining that "Lol's impenetrability guarantees at once knowledge and mystery, possession and the chase" (*Women and Discourse* 36). Certainly, this tension motivates the text; yet, instead of exploring how Lol is "impenetrable" my interests lie in showing how Lol's impossible face reveals both this character's porosity and permeability and her ability to penetrate others.

Throughout the novel, one specific element in Lol's rather indistinct character portrait consistently reveals her nonappearance: her gaze. The theme of the "regard" in Duras's work has been taken up by many different scholars, in particular in response to Jacques Lacan's essay "Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras, du ravissement de Lol V. Stein," which originally appeared in *Les Cahiers Renaud-Barrault* in 1965. Lacan's argument, stemming from his theory of the mirror stage[14] and its importance in creating a subject, is that Duras writes characters who reveal the problems inherent in this fantasy of looking. In the novel, Lol is constantly placed and puts herself in the position of onlooker; her acts of looking are an attempt at fantasmic self-completion. The narrator examines Lol's relationship to absence in terms of a cinematic apparatus when he describes her constant looking as "le cinéma de Lol V. Stein." Yet, even though Lol might constantly be placed before an image as an on-looker, this action of looking is ultimately what unmoors her subject position. Duras's text shows that the gaze is destructive, negating, and fragmenting, not in how it imposes itself on an object, but in the way that it collapses the dominance of sight as a means of possession and domination. Lol's gaze is, as one of the characters in the novel describes it, "immense, famélique" (78). This description communicates Lol's ceaseless need to look as well as the impossibility of her gaze ever filling the void or the blank around which her character is constructed. In step with Lacan's discussion, Sylvie Loignon comments on the gaze in this novel: "Le regard est toujours ce manque, cette perte qui nous regarde, l'insaisissable par excellence—on sait que, dans le fantasme, l'objet est précisément le regard" (*Le*

[14] The scene that best conveys the validity of this interpretation is when Lol lies in a field, looking into the hotel room where Tatiana and Hold meet for their liaison. The window acts as a framing device for the image of the two lovers, and Lol, the insufficient subject, projects herself into the position of what she imagines she sees.

Regard 13). As Loignon explains, the empty gaze is all encompassing in the novel, even to the point that it creates absence in the fabric of the text. In this sense, Lol's character is what introduces the blanks and voids in Duras's work.

The fact that the gaze is directed towards an object it cannot possess, furthermore, opens to the larger question of how characters can relate to one another in *Le Ravissement*. Lol's lack of coincidence with her narrative does not merely manifest itself in her gaze, but also in the impossible image of her face. Rather than there being a clear trajectory between the destructive gaze and the impossible face (in other words, a cause and effect structure), there is only a strange link between the empty gaze and the absent, intangible face. The very first scene of the novel, Hold's imagining of the night that Lol witnesses her fiancé's desire for another woman, attests to the complexity and importance of this image. His gaze transfixed by Stretter, the fiancé never again *sees* Lol: "Michael Richardson se passa la main sur le front, chercha dans la salle quelque signe d'éternité. Le sourire de Lol V. Stein, alors, en était un, mais il ne le vit pas" (21). Paradoxically, Lol's smile is what Richardson no longer sees. Even though the story repeatedly suggests that Lol hides herself behind a row of plants, and this is perhaps the reason why he does not see her, the allusion to the smile highlights the face's disappearance. The Cheshire cat grin that emerges at several points in Duras's works is the vestige or trace of the invisible face. And here the smile works to indicate that there is a disjunction between "le regard et la chose regardée" (Saporta 49).[15]

[15] In Marc Saporta's "Le Regard et l'école," he examines how this kind of focus on the gaze in Duras's work does and does not align her treatment of this issue with other Nouveau Roman authors, especially in the way that Duras troubles subject/ object relations in terms of this gaze.

The novel's decidedly vague descriptions of Lol, specifically of her hair and eyes, suggest the impossibility of her ever being seen, and they also point to moments of rupture when the narrative cannot sustain Lol's representation. Even though these features are specific and seem to function as separate from the face, the novel actually imbues them with the invisible face's characteristics. For instance, Lol's most dominant attribute is her blond hair; yet, rather than being a trait that defines her, her blondness is something that makes her less visible as a character. When Lol admires Tatiana's thick, dark tresses, the narrator adds, "Il ne sera jamais question de la blondeur de Lol, ni de ses yeux, jamais" (79), but later in the text he says to Lol, "Vous avez les yeux parfois si clairs. Vous êtes si blonde" (114). Hold seems to dismiss Lol's appearance, certainly in relation to Tatiana, but there is something equally entrancing about Lol's indescribability. Hold's subsequent recognition of the lightness of Lol's hair is almost simplistic. He does not compare her looks to anything else; rather, he states the seemingly obvious. Lol's appearance is striking because it escapes depiction, thus highlighting the character's duality: visible because of what makes her invisible. The clarity of Lol's hair and her eyes contribute to her effacement in the text.[16]

Lol's eyes do not simply render her invisible; they also lend this attribute to what they gaze upon. The complexity of Lol's gaze becomes clear in the above citation where Hold notices Lol's "visage…sans regard." Lol and her husband have joined Tatiana, her husband, and Jacques Hold for a party, and Hold asks Lol to dance. At one point in their

[16] A further image of Lol's eyes reveals the same balance between light and dark, sight and blindness. At one point in the text, Hold describes her eyes as "poignardés par la lumière: autour, un cercle noir. Je vois à la fois la lumière et le noir qui le cerne" (105). One could potentially construe this description as a kind of chiaroscuro effect; the light and dark highlight one another. Yet, as my discussion demonstrates, Duras's constant use of these elements reveals a collapse between their meanings.

time together he explains to the reader: “je l’écarte un peu pour voir ses yeux. Je les vois : une transparence me regarde. De nouveau je ne vois pas…La transparence m’a traversé, je la vois encore, buée maintenant, elle est allée vers autres chose de plus vague, sans fin, elle ira vers autre chose que je ne connaîtrai jamais, sans fin” (155). In the instant when Hold looks into Lol’s eyes, his sight fails because of Lol’s transparent gaze. Hold sees that he cannot see. Lol’s eyes neither reflect his gaze nor return it; instead, his own gaze never meets its intended object. Not just resisting sight, Lol’s transparent eyes strangely make absence visible and thus remove her from the power and scrutiny of Hold’s gaze. Lol’s eyes can pass through others and be passed through. The tense of the above passage also echoes this contradiction, moving from present tense to past tense and crossing the temporal limits of the narration. More importantly, however, her gaze collapses the boundaries of her defined being as Lol V. Stein. Hold articulates this with his ambiguous use of the feminine definite article *la*. In the moment where Hold “unsees” Lol, his words confuse this female character with “la transparence.” When he states “je la vois encore,” he could be referring to the transparency or to Lol, but ultimately they are the same thing. In this moment that I believe resonates throughout the rest of the narrative, Hold notices the elusiveness of Lol’s character. Her eyes mark her face as the mutable boundary between being and non-being.

Due to Lol’s transparency, the face to face moment in *Le Ravissement* is unattainable; however, the text also presents a different way of seeing the other. Relationships in Duras’s novels never evolve between two people only; a third character always mediates the relationship between a pair of individuals. The most famous reading of this triangular structure is in Lacan’s essay on *Le Ravissement* in which he describes

the novel's different ternary formations. These structures manifest the impossibility of a character ever being a discrete and separate entity because identity constantly shifts; the onlooker can only establish his or her subject position through the projection of the self into an exterior image. This projection allows Lol to interact with the other characters. Lol looks on Tatiana and Hold in order to fantasmically place herself within this relationship. Of course, Lol's spectral place in the sexual relationship between Tatiana and Hold subverts the seemingly fixed geometry of the triangle. The free-circulation of devastating desire eliminates any kind of set position within this relationship.

The evidence of this unmooring of terms is in the failure of sight and the disappearance of the face in the liaisons between Tatiana and Hold, which Lol "watches." When Lol observes the two lovers from outside of the hotel where the couple meets for their liaisons, Hold imagines Lol in the room: "La voici, Tatiana Karl nue sous ses cheveux, soudain, entre Lol V. Stein et moi…Comme un aveugle, je touche, je ne reconnais rien que j'aie déjà touché" (116). In this scene, Tatiana begins to take on Lol's characteristics, specifically in that Hold can no longer see Tatiana. Even though she is naked and eminently available to Hold's sight, Hold describes himself as blind. With Lol haunting the scene, something about Tatiana becomes impossible to look upon. Later, when Hold recounts the liaison with his mistress to Lol, the face is not simply elided; it is cut from the text. He explains, referring to himself in the third person, "Il cache le visage de Tatiana Karl sous les draps et ainsi il a son corps décapité sous la main" (134). Karl's "decapitation" could allude to the myth of Medusa, certainly in the way that this mythical character embodies both death and desire. The gaze is indeed destructive in Duras's texts, but I want to underline the fact that her texts to not seek to place this gaze back under

control. Instead, looking is an expression of desire precisely because in *Le Ravissement*, it does not fix and petrify. In order to use Tatiana as a way to "face" Lol, Tatiana can no longer have a face; in this way, Hold's mistress resembles Lol. Lol's response "Ce n'est pas moi, n'est-ce pas, Tatiana sous le drap, la tête cachée ?" (136), unanswered by Hold, indicates the uncertainty that Lol introduces into the novel in terms of how individuals and identity can be defined through sight. Moreover, despite the fact that the novel seems to work constantly towards Lol's effacement from the text, Lol never fully disappears.

Further works by Duras reveal a need to reexamine Lol's enigmatic story and character.[17] The first text that reprises Lol's story is *L'Amour*, published in 1973. This novel takes place in a beach town called S Thala, a place that resembles T Beach of *Le Ravissement*.[18] A traveler, perhaps Michael Richardson, returns to S Thala and finds a mad woman, a person who might be Lol V. Stein, on the beach. A third character, an unknown man, also mad, walks the beach. The traveler wanders around the town, at one point entering a large white building with a ballroom, potentially the same site where Lol's story begins in *Le Ravissement*. At the end of the novel, a fire burns down the town, most likely set by the woman, possibly Lol. The novel is and is not a rewriting of *Le Ravissement*. One of the most famous passages from the text, and indeed one that Duras calls "la plus belle phrase de ma vie" (Duras, *La Vie* 34) exhibits the nebulous boundaries of the narrative. Describing the town to the traveler, the madman in *L'Amour* obliquely explains "Ici, c'est S Thala jusqu'à la rivière" and then continues "Après la rivière c'est

[17] Michel de Certeau's "Marguerite Duras : On dit" explains that the theme of absence in Duras's works parallels the use of repetition in her works : "Un événement qui n'a pas de lieu est gardé là, où se redit ce qu'il n'est pas. La répétition transforme le récit en un travail de l'absence qui le hante" (257).

[18] Yet, in her later interviews, Duras only mentions Lol in relationship to S Thala.

encore S Thala" (19-20).[19] The man's comment has a double impact on the text. On one level, the description conveys the boundlessness of the novel's setting.[20] The limitless site of S Thala reflects the never ending quality of the sea that faces the town. On another level, the chiasmus in the two lines points to the resemblance between the two sentences as well as to their inequality. Even though the two sentences perfectly mirror the word "rivière," the words "c'est" and "S Thala" change position one sentence to the next.[21] In a sense, the imperfect mirroring between the two different sections embodies the relationship between the texts about Lol, which are both reflections and revisions of the original story.

L'Amour magnifies certain elements from *Le Ravissement*, and the indistinct boundaries of S Thala seem to echo forcefully the problematic visual boundaries that the image of Lol's face presents. The subsequent transformations of *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* continue to establish Lol's appearance in her invisibility. *L'Amour* inscribes Lol's ambiguous character in the way that the madwoman seems to be like Lol even though this character is never named. The introduction of this character in the text conveys her elusiveness: "Elle est dans la lumière obscure, encastrée dans le mur. Yeux

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[19] S Thala sounds like the Greek word *thalassa* or *sea*. In one sense, this connection suggests that there is no difference between S Thala and the sea; yet, the name of the town confuses the order of letters in the Greek word. Once again, reflection and resemblance do not provide perfect coincidence between terms.

[20] Elissa Marder has suggested to me that the name of the town "S Thala" embodies Lol's absence through its name. "S Thala" sounds like "est-ce tu es là?" This connection between place and the missing character is particularly convincing because, throughout Duras's oeuvre, boundaries dissolve between the scene and the character. Florence de Chalonge examines this idea in her book *Espace et récit de fiction: Le cycle indien de Marguerite Duras*. As Chalonge illustrates, Lol's description of herself as "La morte de S Thala" in *L'Amour* indicates that the character's destruction has a metonymic link with the destruction of the town in the end of the novel (53).

[21] In the article "Faire rêver la langue: style, forme, écriture chez Duras," Bernard Alazet discusses how this particular chiasmus and its structure show how writing and rewriting resonate in Duras's whole body of work (54).

fermés./ Ne ressent pas être vue. Ne sait pas être regardée./ Se tient face à la mer. Visage blanc... (10).[22] The above passage emphasizes several contradictions. The oxymoron that begins the passage situates the character's position in an in-between space, between light and dark. Moreover, the pronoun drops away as the depiction continues. It is a description of a character with no subject; with the lack of a subject pronoun, the character becomes both anyone and no one.[23] The woman is also both passive and strangely active: she seems to receive action as indicated by the combination of the infinitive *être* with a past participle, but she does not *feel* the gaze of the other and she does not *know* that she is being looked upon. In this sense, the other's gaze does not reach her. This non-subject holds herself facing the ocean whose vast emptiness reflects her face, and her "visage blanc" echoes the blanks in the grammatical structure of the preceding sentences without subject pronouns. The reader is both given a sense of what her face looks like and denied this information.

Considering the emphasis on the unseen in the two novels, it would seem that a film about Lol would be impossible; yet, Duras creates Lol's story once again in *La Femme du Gange*, a film that still maintains the original text's ambivalence towards the image. Of course, the woman in the film, only referred to as L.V.S. in the script, may or may not be Lol. In fact, the whole film seems to be created around setting up expectations for what will be seen and then undermining these expectations through the formal

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[22] A further description of this character reveals her face's disappearance. At one point in *L'Amour*, the woman smiles and this action renders her face unrecognizable, "Le sourire s'est collé en plein visage. Dessous, le visage devient méconnaissable. Elle sourit toujours" (82). As discussed in *Le Ravissement*, the smile is evidence of an impossible yet necessary face in Duras's text.

[23] In her interview with Xavière Gauthier, Duras explains that the missing "elle" in the description of the woman in *L'Amour* creates a blank space in the text: "C'est des blancs, si vous voulez, qui s'imposent…c'est des blancs qui apparaissent, peut-être sous le coup d'un rejet violent de la syntaxe" (12). Language cannot maintain the description.

elements of the film. The most noticeable visual absence in the film is the title character, the woman of the Ganges. Nothing in the film alludes to this woman, neither in text nor in image. I delay an in-depth discussion of this specific character because her unseen presence is much more evocative in the texts concerning Anne-Marie Stretter, certainly in terms of a postcolonial reading. In *La Femme du Gange*, however, this woman's radical absence (not merely imperceptible) aligns with the film's project of destabilizing representation.[24] As in the previous two texts, this film privileges the gaze only to reveal that this gaze misses the image.

The formal elements of the film including the stillness of the camera and the monotonous landscape suggest the disjunction between gaze and image. With regard to *La Femme du Gange*, Duras explains in *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras* that there is no difference between the characters and the landscape, describing all the visual elements of the film as "un matériau uniforme" (84). The monochromatic sand, sea, and sky as well as the dark clothes of the characters combine to make the characters blend into one another and into the setting around them; yet, their white faces stand out against the dark shadows. The blank faces do not convey images, but they do suggest that something is not being communicated between character and audience. The impoverishment of the images is also due to the lack of camera movement in the film. The static shots certainly

[24] In her article "Negative Prints: Marguerite Duras' *La femme du Gange*," Lucy Stone McNeece explores the relationship between the politics and the aesthetics of Duras's work in the subversive formal elements of the film. McNeece explains: "Duras radicalizes film language to a point where its connection to politics is paradoxically less obvious in order to address the viewer at the root of his structures of belief" (3). The manipulation of the image in *La Femme du Gange*, McNeece continues, provides a visual reminder of how "dominant culture suppresses diversity." What I find interesting in McNeece's argument, in particular, is her description of the film as a "photographic negative upon a screen" (2). She does not elaborate on this comparison, but she presumably refers to the way in which Duras inverts the traditional role of the image to reveal what is invisible rather than what is visible, illuminating the desire for but impossibility of a transparent representation in her film. Continuing McNeece's description of the film as a projected negative, the effect of this inversion makes the faces in the film even more unrecognizable. Negative film, unlike a normal image, blurs the features and expression of the individuals in the frame.

highlight the fact that the viewer cannot see beyond the frame and contribute to the homogeneity of the images; yet, more importantly, the camera's stillness brings the viewer's attention to the act of looking rather to the images that are looked upon. Duras explains her reason for manipulating the camera in such a way in her interview with Gauthier, "la caméra ne remplace jamais le regard. Elle le filme, elle le regarde, elle regarde le regard mais elle ne peut pas le remplacer. C'est pour ça que mes films sont très maigres, c'est qu'il faut que le regard soit là" (92). Duras insists on the incongruity that the camera can look at the gaze, but cannot replace the gaze. And this seeming contradiction influences the way that the spectator can interpret her filmic texts, aware of the distance between herself and the image.

Perhaps the most unusual aspect of the film, however, is the use of off-screen voices. The film begins with a blank screen and the viewer hears Duras explain "*La Femme du Gange*, c'est en quelque sorte deux films: parallèlement au film qui se déroule en images, se déroule un film purement vocal non accompagné d'images...." The disjunction between the voice and the image is often quite clear. For example, the voices rarely describe the scene as the viewer sees it. At one point, the actress in the film wears a dark dress, and the voices discuss a woman in a white dress. Yet, these voices take the place of sight; they are *voix* that *voient*.[25] The "seeing" voices continue to convey to the reader the idea that she does not and cannot see everything in the image. The implementation of off-screen voices in Duras's films is one that has become synonymous with Duras's work, but at the time she was making *La Femme du Gange*, it was a new aspect of her filmmaking. In the preface to the scenario of the film, Duras claims that she

[25] Similarity in Duras's work is always already a difference as demonstrated by these words that sound the same but have different meanings.

had not conceived of the film in terms of the voices until the images had been taken. She explains that the film for the voices, “est arrivé une fois le film de l’image monté, terminé. Il est arrivé de loin, d’où ? Il s’est jeté sur l’image, a pénétré dans son lieu, est resté” (103). The voices are active in that they penetrate the fixed film; sound becomes a way to destabilize the image.

Even though the spectator never sees the individuals speaking off-screen, the reader finds a description of them in the first page of the text. Not only does the spectator not see what the voices see, but Duras also describes these voices as looking away from the spectator: “On les voit yeux fermés: elles sont dans cet espace noir—périmètre illimité—entre l’image et son spectateur, perchés, formes blanches mais détournées, visages inaccessible tournés vers l’image regardée, d’une autonomie marine, irradiante” (105). Interestingly, the voices do have faces, but they are only perceptible in darkness, behind the spectator’s closed eyes. These inaccessible *visages* mark a limitless boundary between the spectator and the image, simultaneously establishing the spectator’s vision of these voices and undermining her expectations. Yet, the final part of the above description suggests something about the faces actually pictured in *La Femme du Gange*. The image that the voices gaze upon is “d’une autonomie marine,” or “of an autonomous seascape,” and despite the phrase’s ambiguity, the reader is able to make a connection between the invisibility of the faces and the image of the sea in the film. In effect, the ever present movement and image of the sea is what absents the characters’ faces from their projected images on-screen. Facing the sea, the characters reflect the same kind of limitless boundary.

Duras never gives a face to Lol even though the film *La Femme du Gange* is ostensibly about Lol V. Stein, and the author explains why this is the case in *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras*. She clarifies that unlike her other novels, she was unable to be a reader of her own text when writing *Le Ravissement*; the novel constantly escaped her during its composition and even into her revisions of the story. The reason for this constant inaccessibility was Lol:

> Je ne l'ai jamais vue, Lol V. Stein…vraiment…vous savez. C'est un peu comme des noyés dans l'eau qui reparaissent comme ça à la surface et puis qui replongent. C'est comme ça que je la vois, Lol V. Stein, elle apparaît à la surface des eaux et elle replonge. Mais je mourrai sans doute sans savoir exactement qui c'est. (99) [26]

This passage is revealing for two reasons: it conveys the reason why Lol haunts so many of Duras's texts, and it gives the reader an understanding of why this character is so elusive. Lol's face, as Duras describes it, is not entirely absent from the text, but its image constantly fluctuates because of movement like the ebb and flow of the ocean. In the text, the face's disappearance is not due to a radical absence; instead, the face inherits the limitless quality of the water that passes over it. The movement of the text causes Lol's image to surface and then to sink, but nothing directly controls her appearance.

[26]For a further discussion of this specific image, see Marie-Annick Gervais-Zaninger's "Marguerite Duras, la fabrique d'un visage."

III. ANNE-MARIE STRETTER: FACING DEATH

Just as Lol disappears into the sand and sea of S Thala, Stretter "appears" in the dark night of Calcutta.[27] The characters' undefined boundaries reflect the vast and limitless qualities of the world around them. Similar to S Thala, Stretter's Calcutta is almost an entirely imagined place.[28] Duras's choice of India as a location for the novel *Le Vice-consul* (1965) and the play and film versions of *India Song* (1973, 1975) is significant for several reasons. [29] On one hand, this place allows Duras to "analyze European fantasies about the Orient rather than provide a realistic critique of French colonial policies" (McNeece, *Art and Politics* 17). And as we will see, Duras's development of seemingly stereotypical colonial figures, the white woman and the beggar woman, allows for this analysis. On the other hand, however, India is a fictional site of origin for Duras. She explains in *La Couleur des mots*: "Moi, c'est tout. Moi, c'est Calcutta, c'est la Mendiante, tout, c'est le Mékong, c'est le poste. Tout Calcutta. Tout le quartier blanc. Toute la colonie. Toute cette poubelle des colonies, c'est moi. C'est évident. J'en suis née. J'en suis née et j'écris" (68). Duras's description of this "poubelle des colonies" not only places her "birth" in the context of the failure and devastation of

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[27] In a previously mentioned interview with Gauthier, Duras describes how each character is inseperable from her environment: "Les sables blancs de S. Thala ou se dissout L.V.S. Le noir, la mousson de Calcutta où se "fait" Anne-Marie Stretter. Tout est pareil" (232).

[28] Panivong Norindr describes Duras's imagined and exotic colonial cities in terms of Barthes' concept of "la dérive" from *Nouveaux essais critiques*. One of the descriptions in Barthes' text has a striking similarity to *all* of the places in Duras's texts: "La ville est alors une sorte d'eau qui à la fois porte et emporte loin de la rive du réel : on s'y trouve immobile (soustrait à toute compétition) et déporté (soustrait à tout ordre conservateur)" (184).

[29] Anne-Marie Stretter also seems to have a connection to the anonymous woman in black in *La Femme du Gange*, and her character plays a role in yet another filmic interpretation of her story, *Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert*. I choose, however, not to address these two films in relation to Stretter because I feel that while they support my argument, they do not add any additional elements to my discussion. It is of interest to note, however, how Jane Winston interprets *Son Nom de Venise* as the film in which Anne-Marie Stretter is "killed off" (35).

colonialism, but also her work as a writer. One cannot miss Duras's vehement critique of the colonial world, its oppressive systems of representation. Duras's use of India as a site for Stretter's story is strangely also part of the author's fantasy of freeing herself from fixed and delineated identities. In this sense, Duras creates fantastical and fetishized India, not only to subvert repressive structures of categorization, but also to rethink the self in relation to this puzzlingly hyper-real and hyper-imaginary place.[30]

One of the first ways to understand how Stretter functions in Duras's overall textual project of invention and destruction is in the mythical genesis of this character. In many different interviews, Duras explains the origins of this figure. Stretter, the author explains, is based on Elizabeth Streidter, the wife of the colonial governor in Vihn Long, Duras's childhood home in Indochina. Speaking with Noguez in 1984, Duras explains that she saw this woman as a maternal figure. Streidter had two young daughters, and Duras fantasized about this familial position for herself. More importantly, however, Stretter is also a "donneuse de mort" (64). Thus, the author's original fascination with this woman and the subsequent creation of Stretter's character in her texts stems from this paradoxically maternal destruction. Detailing specifically how Stretter is a figure of death, Duras explains to Gauthier that she was fascinated by the woman's alleged involvement with a young man who eventually committed suicide. Duras describes her attraction to this figure: "Elle, c'était une femme rousse, complètement décolérée qui ne se fardait pas, qui ne *paraissait* pas…Cette femme invisible, tu vois, qui ne se remarquait pas et qui, moi, m'attirait à cause de cette espèce de décoloration de la figure, des yeux, eh ! bien j'ai appris qu'elle avait un pouvoir comme un pouvoir de mort" (*Marguerite*

[30] I will explore this issue, Duras and the fantasy of colonial identity, in more detail in my next chapter.

Duras 83). Notably, in her description of "elle," Duras explains that what drew her to this woman was precisely what constituted this figure's non-appearance: the lack of color in the woman's face and eyes. In this sense, Stretter's whiteness is not only important in terms of her relation to the cultural other, but also in relation to embodiment of death. Desire for the "original" Anne-Marie Stretter ended in someone's destruction, and it seems as if Duras locates this power in the visual unavailability of the woman's face.

Stretter, as this indistinct mythical figure, remains inaccessible throughout *Le Vice-consul,* specifically in her relation to other characters in the novel. The very structure of *Le Vice-consul,* for instance, distances the Stretter from the reader by foregrounding two other characters: the beggar woman and the vice-consul. The novel begins with the beggar woman's tale as imagined by another individual, Peter Morgan, a British attaché. Thrown out of her family home because she was pregnant, the beggar woman wanders through Southeast Asia, along the Mekong, into India. Her imagined story bookends the novel, as does the vice-consul's ambiguous tale. This second elusive figure is referred to as the vice-consul throughout the text, and even though at one point he is given a name, Jean-Marc de H., his anonymity is still kept. Dismissed from his post in Lahore for reasons related to his disturbing activities such as shooting at himself in a mirror and firing at lepers in the Shalimar Gardens, this character arrives in Calcutta and develops an obsession with Stretter.[31] The novel brings Stretter and the vice-consul together in the key scene of the embassy party, and the beggar woman is, to an extent, also present in the moments where the conversation revolves around her and in the inferences that she is wandering in the embassy park. At the party, the vice-consul breaks

[31] Duras describes the relationship between these actions as the vice-consul attempting to destroy "suffering" (Knapp 656).

down and begs Stretter to let him stay with her. His entreaties are ignored, however, and Stretter leaves Calcutta soon thereafter with her coterie of lovers.

As critics have noted, these three characters are similar because of their state of exclusion and exile,[32] and the reader is privy to all of the other characters' theories of where these three characters come from and about the scandalous stories that surround them; yet, their resemblance also extends to the way the novel cannot *face* these characters.[33] While the impossibility of seeing the beggar woman is an issue that I will discuss in relation to the film *India Song*, the most prevalent "missing" face in *Le Vice-consul* is the title character's own. Other characters in the novel either do not tolerate looking at him or are unable to see him. One of Stretter's would-be lovers, a young French man stationed in Calcutta, first perceives this quality. The narrator explains, "Charles Rossett essaie d'imaginer le visage lisse du vice-consul et s'aperçoit qu'il n'en a plus le pouvoir" (50). Maintaining a face to face position to the vice-consul is impossible, and this character even seems to recognize this problem. In the only moments where the reader learns directly about the vice-consul's past, in his conversations with an older gentleman in Calcutta, the vice-consul asks the other character to look him in the face: "Le vice-consul se tourne vers le directeur du Cercle. Il se montre du doigt.—Regardez mon visage, dit-il./ Le directeur détourne le regard" (77). The vice-consul then insists, "—Comment est mon visage, dites, directeur ?" and his confidant responds, "—

[32] Leslie Hill discusses how the characters' states of exile do not connect them in a positive, universal, and humanistic way but in "a rhetoric of metonymic contagion," specifically through the constant references to decay and leprosy in the novel (99). Sylvie Loignon also examines this topic, specifically in relation to *La Femme du Gange* and *India Song* where she points to textual evidence that reveals Stretter and the beggar woman to be figures of "la mort dans une vie en cours" (49).

[33] At the end of the text, one of the men in Stretter's group poses the question, "Au fait, à qui ressemblait-il, le vice-consul de Lahore?", and Stretter responds, "A moi" (204).

Impossible encore" (78). The vice-consul's face cannot sustain a gaze, and moreover, his face creates a lacuna in the text. When the Europeans gossip about him, they consistently pause at the detail of his face: "On dit: comme il reste maigre, le vice-consul, tel un jeune homme, mais c'est le visage qui…" (98). In this moment of the text, the character's failure to describe the vice-consul ends the sentence in an ellipsis. In one respect, the ellipsis echoes the earlier discussion with the *directeur* where the reader has the impression that the vice-consul's face is a blank. Yet, this second moment in the text suggests that the unrelateable element in his face is something that contrasts his youth; he is such a young man, but his face reveals him to be the opposite. As the reader eventually discovers through Stretter, his face reveals death.

The only character who appears to look into the vice-consul's face is Stretter, and this moment paradoxically creates a blind spot in the text. As the two are dancing at the embassy reception, Stretter looks into the vice-consul's face, but the narrator cannot be sure of what the vice-consul sees when looking upon this woman: "Elle s'écarte et cette fois-ci le dévisage…Avait-on remarqué la transparence des yeux vert d'eau ? mais le sourire, oui, déjà, sans doute, lorsqu'elle est seule et ne sait pas qu'on la voit, sans doute. Pas les yeux puisqu'il tremble, lui, il n'avait pas vu les yeux ?" (125). In this moment, the face that the text questions is no longer just the vice-consul's but also Stretter's. The repetition of "sans doute" infers the narrator's imagination of the scene; he can only assume what "probably" happened in the conversation and what the two could have seen in each other's faces. The choice of the verb *dévisager* is significant because Stretter's steady gaze on the vice-consul finally confirms that his non-appearance, his seeming facelessness in the text, is linked to the destruction his face makes noticeable. After their

dance, Stretter rejoins her lover and he asks “Qui est-il?” Stretter responds, “un homme mort” (128). Her encounter with the vice-consul reveals just as much about her face as his own.[34] Mirroring this image, the narrative begins to link Stretter’s appearance with that of a dead woman. The narrator provides an image for the moment when Stretter pronounces the word “death”: “Mort. Gonflement des lèvres au passage du mot, lèvres humides et pâlies à la fin de la nuit” (129). Word and image interact to reveal an effect on Stretter’s face, her clammy and pale lips announcing the figure of death that she herself will become by the end of the novel.

Indeed, in the text’s last few scenes, Stretter’s face seems to transform, revealing itself as an image that focuses both death and desire. The narrator recounts what Charles Rossett notes in the alternately fixed and elusive quality of Stretter’s face. He notices as her beauty falls away: “Il la regarde longuement, elle s’en aperçoit, s’étonne, se tait, mais il continue à la regarder jusqu’à la défaire, jusqu’à la voir assise à se taire avec les trous de ses yeux dans son cadavre au milieu de Venise, Venise de laquelle elle est partie et à laquelle elle est rendue” (191). Much of the vocabulary in this citation echoes Duras’s description of all her women as “trouées…par le désir.” But here, the gaze that “undoes” her coincides with the revelation of her dead body; the gaping eye sockets indicate both the obscurity and the permeability of this dead woman’s face. In his hallucination of her skeletal figure, Rossett places her in her allegedly native home: Venice. Yet, the woman who left Venice, Anna Maria Guardi, has been replaced by Anne-Marie Stretter; Stretter, in some ways, only exists because of the annihilation of the earlier woman.

[34] Later in the text, the vice-consul’s description of Stretter to Rossett seems to imply a similar understanding: “Il dit qu’elle est belle, Anne-Marie Stretter, que lui la trouve belle, quel visage, dans sa jeunesse elle devait l’être moins que maintenant, c’est curieux mais il ne peut pas l’imaginer plus jeune, très jeune femme” (170). Here, the face is an image that cannot reveal youth. The vice-consul’s desire for this woman focuses on the implicit annihilation he sees in her face.

This fantasmic moment that unsettles the young man triggers a series of descriptions in the text, descriptions in which Rossett and the reader begin to understand Stretter's impossible position: between both death and life. At one point, Michael Richard and Rossett gaze down on Stretter and the narrator describes what they see: "Elle est plate, légère, elle a la rectitude simple d'une morte. Elle a les yeux fermés mais elle ne dort pas, c'est le contraire. Le visage lui-même est modifié, différent, il est ramassé sur lui-même, vieilli. Elle est devenue subitement celle que, laide, cette femme-là aurait été" (197). While this description seems to create a very fixed image of Stretter,[35] at other points in this same scene, the narrator also describes Stretter's face, wet with tears or with fluttering eyelids, as a focal point of desire. Emotions pass over her dead face, and moreover, Rossett is frightened by the longing he feels for this lifeless yet still living figure. The narrator explains that looking over Stretter, Rossett "se retient d'appeler. Qui? Elle sans doute. Quel est ce désir ?" (198).[36] It is only when Rossett begins to contemplate Stretter's face that he becomes consciously aware, albeit without comprehending, this unsettling coincidence between desire and death.

Notably, Rossett's hand replaces his gaze in the interaction with her face from that point on, and this shift emphasizes the impossibility of the gaze to have contact with

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[35] Elsewhere in the novel, for example, the narrator compares Stretter's eyes to those of a statue's: "Ses yeux sont trop clairs, découpés comme ceux des statues, ses paupières amaigries" (92). Visually, Duras echoes this comparison between the blank gaze of stone and the blank gaze of her characters in the film *Césarée* (1979), which features at several junctures a large stone statue's face.

[36] Perhaps the most important text in Duras's oeuvre that deals with this problem of death and desire is the play/novel and film, *Détruire, dit-elle* (1969). In this text that tells the story of a couple, Max Thor and Alissa, and their interactions with a Jewish writer named Stein and a woman suffering an emotional breakdown, Elisabeth Alione, desire begins to collapse the boundaries between the characters. The text's composition reflects this destructive desire in the many unanswered questions that move throughout the narration. As the characters' positions become more and more permeable Alissa cries that she no longer understands, "Peut-être que nous nous aimons trop ?...que l'amour est trop grand, entre lui et moi, trop fort, trop ?" (40). These questions seem to point to the incomprehensible nature of these Durassien relationships motivated by the desire for destruction.

the images it gazes upon. After becoming aware of Stretter's frozen and aged face, Rossett reacts by moving his hand towards her: "Il semble que Charles Rossett avance la main vers elle, que cette main se trouve happée, amenée sur le visage qu'elle aveugle" (198). This gesture seems to be an attempt not just to "blind" her face, but to erase her own gaze from the text. In fact, this gesture, somewhere between a caress and a denial of her figure, foreshadows a much more violent reaction that follows in the next few pages. After this scene where Rossett imagines Stretter dead, he sees her crying and the sight of this emotion once again prompts a response through touch—this time violent—rather than sight:

> Sa main se dresse, retombe, commence à caresser le visage, les lèvres, doucement d'abord puis de plus en plus sèchement, puis de plus en plus fort, les dents sont offertes dans un rire disgracieux, pénible, le visage se met le plus possible à la portée de la main, il se met à sa disposition entière, elle se laisse faire, il crie en frappant : qu'elle ne pleure plus jamais, jamais, plus jamais…. (203)

The moment's sexual import, however destructive, is implicit in Stretter's abandon.[37] In this scene, the distinction between face and sex organ, the high and the low part of the body, gives way; the transposition of one body part onto the other continues to challenge how sight functions in these texts. Stretter offers no resistance, but then again her passivity is precisely the frightening potential of the face in this work; the face offers no boundary or limit. Because sight fails as a means of objectification in the novel,

[37] Sexual violence *in L'Homme assis dans le couloir* (1980) also creates this link between the face as the focus of aggression and desire, the physical relationship to the face contrasting the face's position as an enigmatic image: "La main gifle la naissance des lèvres puis, de plus en plus forts, elle gifle contre les dents. Elle dit que oui, que c'est ca. Elle relève son visage afin de l'offrir mieux aux coups, elle le fait plus détendu, plus à la disposition de sa main, plus matériel" (34).

specifically at the perimeter of the face, the text turns to a physical encounter. In the moment of the beating, she becomes “organique, instrumentale” to Rossett’s hand.

The corporeal, physical face in *Le Vice-consul*, both in conjunction with and in contrast to the unseen and elusive face, reappears in a reinvention of the story, *India Song*. This later work, in its play and film versions, follows along the same plot lines of *Le Vice-consul* and with the same characters; however, the later versions of the story complicate the question of vision and blindness in the text through the juxtaposition of off-screen voices and the visual presence of the actors on-screen. On one hand, *India Song* allows the viewer to focus on its protagonist’s beauty. Delphine Seyrig plays the role of Anne-Marie Stretter, and the film highlights this actress’s exquisite face and body. On the other hand, the film and the play use faceless voices to question the visibility of the images in the film. Duras insists on the fact that these voices can have no locatable presence, explaining in the notes to the play version of *India Song*, “Des VOIX—sans visage—au nombre de quatre…parlent de cette histoire” (147). And, paradoxically, Duras explains that these voices are what enable *India Song* to “unveil” certain elements from *Le Vice-consul*: “Le fait qu’*India Song* pénètre et dévoile une région non explorée du *Vice-consul* n’aurait pas été une raison suffisante de l’écrire. Ce qui l’a été c’est la découverte du *moyen* de dévoilement, d’exploration, faite dans *La Femme du Gange* : les voix extérieures au récit” (10). Strangely, the voices make the film possible. The means of unveiling is ultimately more important than what is unveiled. For instance, the reader/viewer is in constant confusion as to whether or not the images reflect the voices’ statements. When Stretter first appears in the play, the stage directions read, “La femme habillée de noir, qui est devant nous, est donc morte” (17), and the voices relate the event

of this death: "Aux îles…Trouvée morte. Une nuit." The disjunction between the voices and the presence of the woman in the scene allow her image to remain in suspension; the voices could be describing Stretter and thus questioning what the viewer/reader sees before them, and the voices could also be describing something that is not on the stage, something that only the faceless voices can see.

The film version of *India Song* continues to explore the way that the face's image empties the film of the body's physical and corporeal on-screen presence. In the film, Stretter, dressed in a long black dressing gown, lies on the floor, her arm extended, and her face turned away from the viewer. Michael Richardson approaches and lies next to her, the whole while staring at her face, and when he touches her face she rolls over to lie on her back. This movement opens her gown so that her right breast is exposed.[38] Richardson and a second young man, who eventually enters the room during the very long static shot, lie in the same positions next to her, their chests exposed as well. The resemblance between the three is not in their faces, but in the way that their bodies lie open to the onlooker. More curiously, after several minutes, the long shot of the three bodies lying on the floor cuts to an extreme close up of Stretter's breast covered in perspiration. Unlike the play version where Stretter's face is covered with tears, her body becomes this surface through which desire visibly moves. The final image in this scene does, however, end with a face. As the camera switches back to a long shot, this time from behind a man looking over the three figures, the viewer realizes that someone else is gazing over the bodies. The camera then cuts to a medium-close up of this person, the vice-consul, and his face covered in tears. Despite the overwhelming sense of the body in

[38] McNeece provides an interesting account of this scene in *Art and Politics in Duras' "India Cycle."* She focuses, in particular, on how close ups of Stretter "[demonstrate] Duras' privileging of complex material signifiers over signifieds, of form over story" (147).

this scene, the stillness of the shot and the final image of the vice-consul's face insist on the fact that desire does not focus on the physical object; instead, it travels through these seemingly fixed images. Desire in this text does not converge on a discrete and contained being because this emotion negates and destroys the possibility of a limited physical entity. Duras explains in her interviews with Noguez, "C'est au-delà du désir. L'acte physique ne signifierait rien, là. Il est tout entier sublimé à un point mortel, si vous voulez. Mourir de désir, ce n'est pas physique" (72). The conflation of the body and the face in the scenes above reveals how the face is the unattainable focal point of desire.

The formal choices that Duras makes in the film highlight the simultaneous presence of death and desire in Stretter's face, specifically in the way that the film's construction places the reader in a position of constant questioning. One of the most telling indicators of this complexity is Duras's use of photographs in her film. Most of the film takes place in the interior of a decrepit manor house, and most of the film's static shots feature a piano and two large, open French doors to the right of the frame, and a large floor to ceiling mirror occupying the central point of the image. On top of the piano rests flowers, a lamp, and a black and white photograph. While the camera passes over at least three separate photographs during the duration of the film, the photograph on the piano is featured the most prominently. In one of the first scenes, a servant approaches the piano and lights incense by the photograph. In her "Notes sur India Song," Duras explains that the shots featuring the large mirror create two rectangle spaces in the film: "Ce double rectangle contenait la zone épicentrale de tout le film : la photographie de la morte Anne-Marie Stretter sur le piano avec les roses et l'encens à sa mémoire : l'autel" (19). Despite the fact that the flat, fixed photograph of the "dead Anne-Marie Stretter"

seems to provide a final and unchanging image, the double rectangle of the photograph both immediately before the camera and in the mirror's reflection allows this image to proliferate. Moreover, the photograph is not actually of the character playing Stretter, but of a young Italian woman photographed by Edouard Boubat. Duras explains in *La Couleur des mots*, "on ne dit pas que ces photos sont des photos d'elle. C'est un possible. Un des possible du film" (82). Rather than being proof of a final death, the elusiveness of the photograph's subject allows it to remain in a fluctuating position.

The photograph's image becomes unanchored from what it represents because it cannot be fixed through sight. Duras seems to allude to this point in *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras* when she explains the connection that the actress playing Stretter has to the photograph in the diegesis of the film: "C'est un autel, et Delphine Seyrig vient et regarde la photographie d'une femme morte…Elle va vers la photographie comme si elle était regardée par cette photographie; je vois un double regard, on ne se rapproche jamais de la photo de la morte de très près, elle reste peu lisible" (72). Duras's statement insists on two interesting aspects of the photograph in the film: the image of the woman is able to look, and it remains anonymous and unreadable. This "double gaze" of which Duras speaks seems to refer back to the earlier discussion of *La Femme du Gange* and the camera that looks at instead of replaces the gaze. While the scene in *India Song* might be replete with the act of looking, nothing is seen; there is a disjunction between the two gazes. After Seyrig, in the role of Stretter, gazes on the photograph, she lays her face down on the piano, effectively obscuring her own image and making it unreadable. The face, both in the photograph and in the film, escapes becoming an object that can be captured by the gaze.

Despite the static shots of the camera and the unmoving, often expressionless characters, the face still allows the passage of desire, and this effect of passage is perhaps most noticeable in Duras's use of the mirror's reflection. The way in which Duras uses this mirror to define the composition of many of her shots does not focus on how the reflective surface *sends back* an image; instead, the mirror envelops and obscures images. For instance, as characters cross the room entering from the right, they first appear in the mirror's reflection and then as they move into the camera's view, they pass out of the mirror image. Duras describes the effect of the characters moving in and out of this double frame: "j'ai l'impression que Delphine est avalée et puis elle revient, elle revient ou elle ne revient pas, mais c'est d'une extrême jouissance, ça, l'apparition de Delphine si loin—on peut éloigner l'image à l'infini dans un miroir" (72). Duras's comment implies an understanding of the function of sight and desire in this scene. The sensual pleasure in this seemingly sight saturated moment occurs because the image dissolves in the mirror. This "jouissance" in relationship to Stretter's indeterminate image shows, to a certain extent, how destruction works concurrently with desire. Duras also describes how the image of the woman playing Stretter moves toward a vanishing point; both the mirror and the camera, because they do not capture the image, allow the image an infinite site of passage. Destruction is never final; it has no end.[39]

The importance of the *unseen* beggar woman in the film suggests a parallel but slightly different context for understanding how Duras's characters vanish into her texts

[39] Another interesting scene in which the film noticeably does not privilege the reflective quality of the mirror is when the vice-consul and Stretter begin to dance. The camera first films them in the mirror and then slowly starts to pan right, sweeping the room, and finally returns to the image of the two dancing. Even though they are no longer reflected in the mirror and are directly in front of the camera, the film does not distinguish between the frames of these two images.

rather than present a fixed representative identity. One of the first ways to understand this complication is in how the beggar woman's "visual absence" in the film relates to the figure of Anne-Marie Stretter. Like the voices, the beggar woman is only heard in the film, which opens on an image of a setting sun accompanied by the sounds of a woman chanting in Laotian and laughing. On one hand, it seems as if Duras gives this colonial other a voice. On the other hand, the woman's unintelligible speech is not and cannot be translated. Duras seems to highlight the impossibility of representation. Moreover, the use of "elle" in the narration at several points does not allow the viewer to understand if this pronoun refers to the beggar woman or to Stretter, most notably in the description "elle revient avec la nuit, elle." The beggar woman wanders around the embassy park at night, and the film emphasizes Stretter's connection to the darkness of night as well, "qu'elle est blanche, ne sortant qu'avec la nuit, fuit le soleil." In a series of interviews with the author and the cast and crew of her films, Duras explains: "Le personnage principal d'*India Song*, autour duquel tout était satellisé…c'était la Mendiante" (*La Couleur* 76). This assertion of the centrality of the beggar woman is somewhat different from Duras's discussion, several years earlier in "Notes sur India Song," of how the photograph on the piano of the dead woman is the focal point of the film. Yet, in both cases, the film revolves around an absence: the wandering woman is never shown on screen, and the manifestation of death in the film's images distances Stretter from the viewer.

As I have been arguing throughout this chapter, the face is the textual image that allows Duras's texts to subvert the construction of all fixed and delineated identities, and Stretter's white face in relation to the beggar woman's unseen face is no exception.

Despite the fact that it seems as if one identity is constructed in relation to the other, both figures ultimately dissolve into the text in the same way. Of course, the text's attention to Seyrig's whiteness certainly insists that the reader/viewer reassesses the dynamic of the colonizer and the colonized. Because of this emphasis, it seems as if Stretter's whiteness defines her as distinctly separate from the beggar woman. For example, the descriptions of Stretter in relation to the beggar woman consistently allude to Stretter's skin color, which separates her from this cultural other. As the film's voices begin to speak, one explains "A Calcutta, elles étaient ensemble" and the second asks, "la Blanche et l'autre?" The film's images, as well, emphasize Stretter's overall paleness. Moreover, the beggar woman, only suggested in shadow and in her unintelligible speech, embodies a stereotype of the dark, mysterious other. Yet, the distinctness between the two is always overrun by the fact that the character can never remain stable in Duras's texts; characters do not stay fixed in their representation.

Homi K. Bhabha's essay "The Other Question" provides theories that both complicate and clarify Duras's use of stereotypes in her work. Bhabha describes the stereotype as a fetish that "gives access to an 'identity' which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it" (27). The fetish, which in psychoanalytic discourse normalizes the subject's anxieties of the fear of castration and sexual difference, functions in a similar way in postcolonial discourse, masking the fears and anxieties of racial difference. Bhabha's argument resonates in Duras's texts because of the way that her repeating characters seem stuck within specific stereotypes. Yet, Bhabha also explains that "the stereotype is not a simplification because

it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (that the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the representation of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations" (27). I want to highlight in Bhabha's analysis the discussion of the "arrested, fixated" form of representation; Duras's works certainly recognize the danger of this kind of representation. And, in fact, I would argue that her use of seemingly fixed and stereotypical characters is what subsequently allows her to destroy these kinds of social constructs. In her novels, the face and its non-appearance establish this possibility. These two feminine figures, through their different kinds of visual absence, collapse boundaries between seemingly well defined and separate terms

The end of the film, in particular, presents an opportunity to explore how both women ultimately destabilize identity and escape representation in the text; Stretter's alleged suicide and the beggar woman's reemergence in the film's last scene complicate the viewer's understanding of who the film is about. In her extremely rigorous of examination of the contradictions and paradoxes of Duras's postcolonial engagement in *Postcolonial Duras*, Jane Winston explains that the implications of the choice to emphasize Stretter's race makes this character "the object of French colonial desire for a westernized and Aryan Asia" (61). According to Winston, Stretter's suicide then enables Duras to expel the "colonial object of desire" from her work, therefore overturning any power these colonial representations might have. And indeed, the final scene of *India Song* consists of the camera tracking over a map of colonial Indochina, tracing the beggar woman's path to Calcutta. McNeece notes that rather than being a document of colonial

power, this particular map's asymmetrical lines indicating rivers and boundaries appear more like Deleuze and Guattari's shifting "rhizomes." She continues "maps, designed to demarcate space according to colonial ideals of rationality and closure, are paradoxically images of the impossibility of containment and control" (149). The beggar woman's transgression of these boundaries and her free movement through the geography of the colonized areas illustrates the subversion of the map's use. While I certainly agree with McNeece's assessment that the film cannot contain the beggar woman's image, I would also argue that this is the same with Stretter. In the first place, in the economy of Duras's texts, death is desired; rather than being a final and fixed state, it is the moment where the self becomes entirely free and other.[40] Stretter might disappear from the text (in fact, the next film made in the cycle, *Son Nom de Venise Calcutta désert* does not picture any characters), but her suicide is not indicative of her position in terms of a politicized colonial narrative; instead, Stetter's death is her own (desired) dispersion into the text.

Even though Stretter's skin in *India Song* might mark her as a colonial construct of desire, different descriptions of Stretter's appearance indicate that her light skin, hair, and eyes do not simply function on this representative level. In fact, in many of Duras's descriptions of this character, the lightness and ephemeral quality of Stretter's face seems to parallel the impossibility of representing her.[41] Returning to one of Duras's earliest

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[40] I signal here Blanchot's discussion of *Détruire, dit-elle* in *L'Amitié*: "car s'il faut aimer pour détruire, il faut aussi, avant de détruire, s'être libéré de tout, de soi, des possibilités vivantes et aussi des choses mortes et mortelles, par la mort même. Mourir, aimer : alors seulement, pourrons-nous nous approcher de la destruction capitale, celle que nous destine la vérité étrangère (aussi neutre que désirable, aussi violente qu'éloignée de toutes puissances agressives)."

[41] Christiane Blot-Labarrère's book Marguerite Duras provides similar descriptions of Anne-Marie Stretter, including discussions of this character's spectrality. I note, in particular, Blot-Labarrère's examination of the "rayonnement" of Stretter through several works (145).

discussions of this character in *Les Parleuses*, she explains to her interviewer that Stretter is a character without an appearance and thus resists sight:

> Je ne vois pas le visage d'Anne-Marie Stretter. J'entends sa voix, je vois son corps, sa marche surtout…je vois la couleur de ses cheveux, rousse[42], elle a des cils clairs, ça, je le vois aussi. Des yeux comme un peu crevés, des yeux très clairs, tu sais, des yeux très clairs dans le soleil, tu vois ce que je veux dire, mais les traits et l'expression, je ne le vois pas. (171)

Duras can fix certain elements of this woman's image, but the face loses its distinctive traits in the blinding clarity of the character's *light* eyes. Later, in *La Couleur des mots*, Duras explains that this specific and all-encompassing feature simultaneously enables Seyrig to play the role of Stretter and prevents her from becoming a representation of Stretter. In a section where she is discussing how her film achieves the "dépeuplement" of the actor, the idea that the actors are never really there in front of the spectator, Duras adds: "Alors, Anne-Marie Stretter, moi, je ne l'ai pas représentée. Je donnais une sorte d'approximation d'Anne-Marie Stretter à travers Delphine Seyrig qui, physiquement, s'y prêtait. Qui jouxtait le souvenir que j'avais de cette femme, très blonde, aux yeux très pâles, très blond, presque lin-blond, avec des yeux, très clairs" (82). The memory and the image on screen can only meet in the face's luminosity and clarity, which is as unrevealing as it is evident.

One of the final images of the film insists on this ultimately elusive aspect of the woman, her face functioning as the final boundary between what can and cannot be represented. Switching from the shadowy and dark sequences of the cocktail party, the action of the film moves to an exterior setting, ostensibly the islands of the Delta, where

[42] Perhaps not coincidentally, the French term for a woman with strawberry blond hair is *blond vénitien*.

Stretter and her lovers go to escape the heat of the city. For the first time in the film, the camera cuts to a close up of Seyrig as Stretter, the image almost fading into white because of its overexposure. The unusually long duration of the shot (like most of the scenes in the movie) seems to suggest the frozen image as a sign of Stretter's death; she becomes the still, flat photographed image that was present in the earlier parts of the film. Indeed, these final scenes lead up to her death, which although not shown on screen is alluded to by the voices who inform the viewer that Stretter's black peignoir is found on the beach the next morning. Moreover, the moment seems to finally fix Seyrig's beautiful face as an object, secured by the viewer's gaze. Despite what this image suggests in its stillness, however, Seyrig's motionless face subverts its passivity, not by becoming an active and mobile agent, but by presenting her immobility as a visual unavailability; the clarity of this image, specifically of the eyes, is also what prevents the spectator's complete possession of the image.

Duras's further discussion of Stretter's light eyes in *La Couleur des mots* insists on the destruction of the film's image through the disappearance of the face's features. Duras asks her interlocutor:

> Tu te souviens du visage de Delphine, les yeux clairs, elle regarde une couleur, elle dit le nom d'une couleur : violette. C'est la lumière du delta…Tu vois, pour moi, c'est le cinéma ça. Tu montres un visage très rose, beau, les yeux clairs, clairs, clairs presque blancs, nacrés, tu vois, et tu dis qu'elle regarde une couleur violette. Alors le mot "violet" envahit tout. Et c'est le couleur du plan. La couleur du plan, c'est la couleur du mot. (100)

The translucence of Seyrig's eyes as one of the final images in the film speaks to Duras's cinematographic end textual project. As Leslie Hill suggests in *Marguerite Duras: Apocalyptic Desires*, the colors green (eye color) and violet (the color of the Delta) signal a "kind of cinematographic vision in which sight and sound are not joined together under the command of a voyeuristic gaze" (61). Although this color is not seen in the image itself, Seyrig's image still conveys the possibility of obscurity, this darker violet color, in her luminous and transparent face. Violet, the color of the word and also a word that hints at violence, causes the disjunction between the image and the spectator's gaze. Anne Cousseau, in *Poétique de l'enfance chez Marguerite Duras*, notes the importance of this color throughout Duras's work, pointing out, in particular, the connection between the color purple and the theme of destruction in these texts. Cousseau cites a moment towards the end of *Le Ravissement* where Lol looks out over the ocean at T Beach : "Dans la hauteur du ciel, au-dessus, il y a, suspendue, une brume violette que le soleil déchire en ce moment" (346). In this citation, it is the sun's rays that "tear" the violet fog, but in Duras's discussion of Seyrig's face, the violet color invades the image. These colors indicate a mutual penetrability, and even though they destroy one another the coincidence of these colors creates a space in the text for potential meaning

In *La Vie matérielle*, Duras explains the omnipresence of light eyes in her work : "Ce que je n'ai pas dit, c'est que toutes les femmes de mes livres, quel que soit leur âge, découlent de Lol V. Stein. C'est-à-dire, d'un certain oubli d'elles-mêmes. Elles ont toutes les yeux clairs" (32-33). Light eyes are not just an important image in Duras's work; they are a necessary part of her textual (both written and visual) fabric. The reader's encounter with the text is always mediated by these eyes that allow the passage of meaning through

the text, but create the impossibility of seeing these women. In the case of Lol and Stretter, and indeed all of the female characters in Duras's work, their light eyes do not mark them as a single and delineated self but as a constantly shifting signifier. These women "flow" from Lol, indicating the fluidity and limitlessness of their beings. The "oubli" of which Duras speaks is precisely what unmoors these women from their own alleged stories; in this respect, these three women subvert conventional ideas of narrative because the texts divorce them from their stories rather than fix them to specific histories. The constant process of forgetting that these women's light eyes signal undoes these characters and also establishes the possibility and potential of Duras's images and texts.

IV. *LES YEUX VERTS* AND AURÉLIA STEINER: FACING THE IMAGE

Duras's 1980 *Cahiers du cinéma* issue, *Les Yeux verts*, is perhaps the most important text in Duras's oeuvre in terms of how it reveals the extent to which the face, its blinding clarity, operates in the creation of Duras's visual and written works. Written after the release of Duras's films, *Aurélia Steiner (Melbourne)* and *Aurélia Steiner (Vancouver)* (1979), as well as a third Aurélia text, *Aurélia Steiner (Paris)* that was never made into a film, *Les Yeux verts* focuses on the figure of Steiner. Duras's attention to this character flows through the rest of the discussions in the text, which consists of diverse observations about Duras's films and novels and topics such as writing, politics, cinema, and current events. The composite nature of this *Cahiers du cinéma* issue, however, is not just limited to its seventy-two titled and distinct written sections. The images in *Les Yeux verts* are also a mix of different formats and perspectives, among them photographs and stills from Duras's plays, films, and personal collection. Unlike the different sections of

text that announce their content through their titles, there is no immediate and apparent explanation for the seemingly random assortment of faces and the occasional image of an object or place. There are no captions. In fact, the sources of the photographs are not even cited until the 1987 revised edition of *Les Yeux verts*. On one hand, some of the images are immediately recognizable, certainly the photographs of actresses who figured into French film culture of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s like Delphine Seyrig and Jeanne Moreau and certainly the images of Marguerite Duras herself. On the other hand, interspersed among these famous faces are unidentified portraits, portraits that are not familiar to the reader. The construction of *Les Yeux verts* places the reader in an unsettling position with reference to both the images and the text. The hybrid text defamiliarizes its content, complicating the way in which the reader can recognize both what she reads and what she sees.

Within the seeming incoherence in the text, women's faces appear to be the only evidence of continuity. The majority of the images are close-ups of women. Duras does not refer directly to any of the images accompanying the text, but at one point she does reference the photographer, Edouard Boubat, of one of the portraits in the text. Separated as they are by twenty pages, however, Duras's reference to this artist does not serve as commentary for the photographs taken by Boubat found the text. Instead, Duras's discussion seems to give the reader a way to begin interpreting the images in the *Cahiers du cinéma* issue. She writes:

> La photographie de Boubat—en particulier celle des femmes—opère toujours dans un champ qui dépasse celui de sa représentation. Tandis qu'elle témoigne d'un visage, du plus irremplaçable de son identité, elle témoigne du même coup

> de la fragilité de celle-ci et de son ordre mortel. De ce qui n'est pas remplaçable et qui cependant se perd dans une morphologie universelle. Lorsque Edouard capte la singularité inéluctable d'un visage il semblerait que ce soit toujours au moment même où il s'y attend le moins, celui où le visage quitte son identité pour se perdre dans ce qui existe en même temps que lui, près ou loin de lui, ailleurs, ou à côté, ou perdu, ou mort. (78)

Here, Duras writes of images that transgress their fields of representation. In these photographs, the face, that which serves as a means of identification is also something amorphous without a fixed referent. Duras's choice in this passage to write of "un visage" rather than "le visage" demonstrates the possibility of one face, no matter how singular or distinct, to merge or "lose itself" in its surroundings. The only way that Boubat "captures" a face is in the moment that it no longer indicates an identity. Significantly, in the above passage, Duras does not write about looking or seeing this face in the photo. Rather, she describes Boubat as witnessing these faces. The face in Boubat's photography has the capacity to function beyond its limited definition as that which demarcates an individual. In these photographs, the face itself does not disappear, but it does lose its specific representative and definable role.

Duras's observation about Boubat's photography seems to reflect the function of the nameless faces in *Les Yeux verts* and how the color of these eyes makes the face unrecognizable in the text. By examining the title of the *Cahiers du cinéma* text, one begins to understand how green eyes can complicate the process of delineation and identification. Eye color is a physical trait normally used to identify an individual, but here "green eyes" designate a text. The reference to this facial characteristic, then, creates

the expectation that the *Cahiers du cinéma* issue is some kind of portrait. Yet, the abundance of images in the work, combined with the fact that the photographs are black and white, never makes it known to whom the green eyes might belong. Furthermore, the title itself refers simultaneously to a whole and a part: to the entire work and also to one of its shorter sections entitled "Pour Jean-Pierre Ceton, Les Yeux verts." An analysis of this particular section, a one-page dedication to Ceton, and of the image that lies opposite to the written words, a photograph of Delphine Seyrig from Duras's film *La Musica* (1967), illustrates how the title's green eyes do not designate and define. The textual segment describes two individuals watching while night falls over a city. The narrator implores the other person to look with her: "regardons venir la nuit, l'autre versant de la vie." She finishes the passage, however, by directing the gaze of her interlocutor and that of the reader to the figure of an approaching woman. The narrator describes her:

> …elle est celle de l'autre versant, écoute, regarde la, elle vient, elle est celle qui vient, elle, la perte du monde, regarde, la voici, tu la reconnais, elle est notre sœur, notre jumelle, elle vient, salut, on lui sourit, si jeune elle est, si belle, habillée de peau blanche, les yeux verts. (45)[43]

In one sense, "she" is the personification of the approaching night, but Duras also qualifies "elle" as "la perte du monde." The repetition of this pronoun underlines the fact that it has no clear antecedent.

Seyrig's visually available and radiant photograph in *Les Yeux verts* lures the reader into making a connection between the text and the image, but this link is only

[43] The narrator's invitation to the other to listen as night approaches echoes Baudelaire's poem "Recueillement": "Entends, ma chère, entends la douce Nuit qui marche" (l. 14). Duras's texts echo Baudelaire's extensive use of synesthesia.

tenuous. The narrator's description, "si jeune elle est, si belle, habillée de peau blanche," certainly seems to match the actress's appearance. Because of the black and white of the photograph, her blond hair and white skin have an ephemeral glow, and Seyrig's luminescent face appears to provide an image for "elle" in the text. This actress's gaze crosses over the divide of the book's spine: she is "the one from the other side." However, even though it looks as if Seyrig's image literally "faces" the text, the reader cannot entirely confirm this connection. There is no way to tell if the description does refer to the image because of the ambiguous pronoun "elle" and also because of the black and white photograph that does not reveal if Seyrig has green eyes.

In *Les Yeux verts*, through the conflation of Lol V. Stein and Aurélia Steiner, Duras further communicates how all light eyes, both blue and green, dissolve a character's limits.[44] Much of the *Cahiers du cinema* issue focuses on Aurélia Steiner, the blue-eyed protagonist of a cycle of films and texts. In a section of *Les Yeux verts* entitled "Aurélia Aurélia Deux," the narrator confuses her two characters by describing Aurélia in S Thala, the beach town where Lol's story ends and begins. Replacing Lol, Aurélia walks along the beach at S Thala: "Le grand balcon du casino de S Thala, face au couchant, est vide. On entend le bruissement très doux de la mer d'hiver. Parfois passe Aurélia. Elle regarde les sables et la mer. Oui, ces yeux sont bleus" (66). Aurélia has light eyes; yet, more importantly, Aurélia's blue eyes are not her own: "those eyes are blue." The lack of a possessive article relates the fact of having blue eyes to the lack of a contained identity. Continuing this description of Aurélia's eyes in a later section of *Les Yeux verts*, the narrator explains: "Il n'y a pas de différence entre les yeux d'Aurélia et la mer" (90).

[44] The obvious similarity in their names is one of the ways that Duras begins to undermine the proper name by unmooring how it can signal a discrete identity.

Aurélia's eyes seem to take on the sea's qualities, specifically its boundlessness. Duras more directly addresses the transparency of light eyes and how they complicate vision in *Les Parleuses.* Duras comments: "Vous ne pouvez pas regarder des yeux bleus. Ça n'offre pas prise au regard. On traverse des yeux bleus. On regarde des yeux sombres. Le sombre arrête le regard. Il offre une résistance. L'œil bleu, non. C'est sans regard, bleu" (13).[45] In other words, light eyes do not merely resist the gaze, as do opaque, dark eyes that impede the gaze; instead, blue and green eyes radically transform vision. They do not look, and moreover, the gaze of others passes through these eyes and thus never reaches the face.

Aurélia's eyes indicate the fluidity of her character's position, and the narration of the three eponymous texts echoes this volatility. The texts do not make any allusions to Aurélia's blue eyes until the last page of the last work, but the narrators in the first and second versions constantly imagine the blue eyes of the person they address in the text. This *vous* is at times a lover and at other times a father, who, the reader learns, died in a concentration camp.[46] The name "Aurélia," as well, simultaneously refers to more than one character: the dead mother and the young woman speaking in the texts. The texts are written in the first person, but the "je" is not stable. In *Aurélia Steiner (Vancouver),* the title character is a young woman living on the coast who narrates the events surrounding her violent liaison with a sailor; yet, as this narrator explains, this is also the name of her mother who died in Auschwitz. Aurélia Steiner is, furthermore, the name of the narrator

[45] Even though Duras discusses light eyes in relation to dark eyes, there are no dark eyes in her textual universe. In this sense, the light eyes do not function in opposition to dark eyes. Rather, light eyes, in their capacity of dissolving the subject, are the only eyes in the texts.

[46] In the next chapter, I will further explore Duras's allusions to incest.

in *Aurélia Steiner (Melbourne)*, and it also refers to the narrator, her mother, and a young Jewish orphan in the third installment of the cycle, *Aurélia Steiner (Paris).* The shared name indicates a collective historical and traumatic memory: the Holocaust.[47] In *Les Yeux verts*, Duras describes this relationship between the character and a larger community: "Aurélia Steiner, comme tous les juifs d'Israël ou d'Europe, à travers ses parents et ses grands-parents est donc survivante des camps, un oubli, une généralisation de la mort" (77). Aurélia's fragmented position in the text stands in for the "unrepresentable" event.[48] In the text *Aurélia Steiner (Vancouver),* the character even refers to the diffusion of her own character, at one point describing herself in the third person.[49] She defines her name: "ce nom sans sujet: Aurélia Steiner" (146).

Aurélia's absence in her text is due largely to the connection that Duras makes between this "name without a history" and certain violent events in the history of the twentieth century[50], but Aurélia is important because of how she fits into and inspires Duras's artistic and textual projects. Despite being a title character of both films and

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[47] The color of Aurélia's eyes also places her within this larger collective. In Duras's works, this author uses blue eyes as a trait to describe Jewish characters such as in the 1970 novel *Abahn Sabana David*. This novel blurs the boundary between its Jewish characters through the description of blue eyes. This eye color is a stereotype, but as discussed earlier, the use of this stereotype serves to question social constructions.

[48] Some critics have examined how this insistence is problematic on Duras's part. As Martin Crowley suggests, Aurélia's embodiment of what cannot be represented "risks the further silencing of survivors who may well importantly demand the right to speak from a position uncompromised by such supposed displacements" (161). As a potential response to this problem, Crowley proposes that Duras's texts invite her readers "to rethink our identity on the basis of such fragility, precisely so that the specific suffering of the victims of trauma should not be reduced, limited to something in which we are not all intimately implicated" (162)

[49] The titles themselves refer to a kind of dispersion of the characters in the novel because of the different geographical locations that indicate the Jewish characters' places of exile: Vancouver, Melbourne, and Paris.

[50] Duras's most famous text that deals with death, desire, and an unspeakable traumatic history is the scenario she wrote for the film *Hiroshima, mon amour*. Much like in *Aurélia Steiner*, the narrative universe of the work contemplates the global suffering of a world event in the text's silence and blanks. A discussion of the connection between these works would require a very careful and lengthy analysis.

novels and of several different sections in the *Les Yeux verts*, Aurélia Steiner seems to be missing from her narratives.[51] The name without a subject is one that constantly displaces its signification and meaning. The curious visual and aural content of the *Aurélia Steiner* films reflects this woman's subjectless condition. First and foremost, these two films interrupt the link between sound and image by employing a narrator who is never seen in the film; yet, Aurélia is not entirely faceless. In *Les Yeux verts*, Duras points out a rare moment in one *Aurélia* film that suggests how important the face is to establishing Aurélia's paradoxical position in the text:

> On a tourné Aurélia Melbourne à contre-jour. Les visages sont gommés, on ne voit que leur forme, la caméra les avale, le fleuve les prend. Je crois qu'Aurélia est sur un pont, à un moment donné. A gauche de l'image, il y a une silhouette de jeune fille avec de longs cheveux blonds. Le visage est comme les autres, effacé. Elle a une très belle forme, longue, mince. Aucun trait mais un sourire alicéen. Du visage on ne voit que ce sourire. Oui, je crois que c'est elle aussi, Aurélia, elle ne le saura jamais. Elle est là ou ailleurs. Elle est cassée, disséminée dans le film. Et intégralement là en même temps. (75-76)

The only visible aspect of the woman that *might* be Aurélia is her "sourire aliciéen," alluding to the Cheshire cat's unique disappearing act in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and as discussed in an earlier section, this smile points to the face's invisibility. Notably, Duras uses the adjective "effacé" to describe these faces, insisting, not on the face's radical absence, but on its erasure. Duras discusses faces in the context of these films only to the extent that these faces have been erased or blotted out. In

[51] Aurélia shares a name with the haunting title character of one of Nerval's texts: *Aurélia*. Both title characters, moreover, are indistinct and have nebulous limits.

particular, Duras draws the connection between the impossibility of a recognizable subject and the image of water. *Aurélia Steiner (Vancouver)* consists of still and traveling shots of the Normandy coast, and *Aurélia Steiner (Melbourne)* is made up of images taken from a barge on the Seine River. Each film's images of water, the Atlantic Ocean and the Seine, merge to distort and ultimately dissolve the image of the face.[52] The backlit form, the silhouette, which Duras describes above, points to the face as the site of the subject's dispersion. The spectator only perceives the disappearance of Aurélia Steiner: a name without a face and without a subject, absent in the film yet still integrally there at the same time.

Throughout Duras's novels, plays, and films, references to eyes, both blue and green, allude to this kind of dispossession, a phenomenon that extends to the author's own position. Light-colored eyes blur the distinction between fiction and autobiography. In a short non-fiction piece that Duras wrote for the collection *À ma mère: 60 écrivains parlent de leur mère* in 1988, Duras begins the article with a description of her mother's green eyes. Three years later, in the fictional yet suggestively autobiographical text, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, the narrator explains that the protagonist's green eyes are a trait of both her father and her mother. The protagonist has "des yeux vert clair striés de brun. Ceux, on dit, du père décédé" (24). In the same novel, this young French woman hears a description of her mother, and the individual giving the portrait begins with the memory of the mother's green eyes. Green eyes are a shared trait, and as seen in the

[52] The narrator, ostensibly Aurélia, describes this kind of image when she looks on herself in the mirror, "Dans la glace de ma chambre, droite, voilée par la lumière sombre il y a mon image. Je regarde vers le dehors" (140). The parataxis in this description gives no relation between the first sentence and the second sentence, thus leaving the reader with the impression that looking in the mirror is also looking towards the exterior.

above example, they do not belong to the narrator herself; they are her father's or her mother's. Light eyes simultaneously belong to many and to nobody in Duras's narrative universe.[53] In *Les Yeux verts*, perhaps because of these ambiguous yet omnipresent green eyes, Duras is able to place herself into the economy of the text. Writing of the relationship between Aurélia and Lol in *Les Yeux verts*, Duras writes herself into this process of substitution and replacement with her comment: "Aurélia. Enfant. Mon enfant. Le bal de S Thala est de nouveau béant. C'est Aurélia qui le regarde. Aurélia est sortie du corps massacré de L.V.S. Aurélia m'a remplacée. Remplacée" (66). Duras complicates the process of distinguishing between characters by inserting herself into this system. She writes, "Aurélia has replaced me," thereby situating Duras, the author, in Lol's and subsequently Aurélia's position.[54]

Photographs of Duras in *Les Yeux verts* further intensify how she breaks down boundaries between herself and her characters, between the author and the text. Not only does Duras coyly suggest in interviews and essays that that she is interchangeable with these fictional women, but she also accomplishes this visually, through placing her personal photographs in the circulation of images in *Les Yeux verts*. In the first edition of this work, these images are of Duras as a young woman. In the second edition, however, Duras replaces the picture of an anonymous woman with a photograph of herself as an older woman. In this three-quarters profile image of the author, her face is turned towards

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[53] Duras does not describe characters with dark eyes. In many respects, this elision seems to suggest how Duras only places versions of herself in her works.

[54] In Michèle Manceaux's book, *L'Amie*, she gives an account of a conversation with Duras, where Duras aligns her subject position with that of the character Lol. Manceaux quotes Duras as explaining: "Je n'ai rien inventé. J'ai simplement inventé le prétexte de raconter. Alors, tout est vrai aussi. Il n'y a qu'une personne qui n'est pas vrai, c'est Lol V. Stein. Je pense que Lol V. Stein, c'est moi, donc je ne pouvais pas l'inventer… La seule chose qui n'est pas vraie, c'est moi. Le problème depuis le commencement de ma vie, c'est de savoir qui parlait quand je parle et s'il y a invention, elle est là" (118).

the text on the opposite page. Interestingly, the section that she faces is entitled “Woody Allen Chaplin.” This positioning seems to be a reflexive gesture. Duras’s image looks on a text about two directors who created their own iconic images in their films. Perhaps in the same way that the reader is tempted to make a connection between Seyrig’s photograph and the section “Pour Jean Pierre Ceton, Les Yeux verts,” Duras’s gaze on this written section about Chaplin and Allen seems to incite the reader to use the text to inform the image or vice versa. In this segment, she argues that whereas Allen’s character remains separate from the filmic space around him, this space actually reflects and embodies Chaplin: “L’espace de Chaplin, dans *Les Lumières de la ville*, est tout entier habité par lui. Il résonne de Chaplin tout entier” (27). Duras notes how Chaplin (both actor and director) becomes indistinguishable from the text he inhabits, and it seems as if Duras incorporates herself in her texts in a similar way. The placement of Duras’s photograph in relationship to this text serves to redefine her position as author. As stated in the preface of the book-length edition, “Cette nouvelle édition en livre des “Yeux verts” reprend la totalité des textes de Marguerite Duras publiés dans le numéro de juin 1980 des Cahiers du cinéma, en respectant la mise en page qu’avait voulue l’auteur…” Despite the fact that the mix of images and texts makes it problematic to read them together, the placement of these images is purposeful. However, by placing her image in circulation, Duras also loses control of this image. In this sense, even the author’s face participates in the rupture of how faces can indicate identity.

Duras’s image in *Les Yeux verts* suggests that as author she has the same function in her texts as many of her other characters, and she confirms this link through her specific connection to Aurélia: both of them are writers. When the texts reveal the fact

that Aurélia writes, it also implies how necessary this is to the character's being. For example, a passage repeated in all three texts indicates that writing is inseparable from the character's ambiguous state of being: "Je m'appelle Aurélia Steiner./ J'habite Vancouver où mes parents sont professeurs./ J'ai dix-huit ans./ J'écris" (165-166). This strange moment where the narrator seems to claim some kind of identity is in conjunction with her act of writing. With the exception of the name of the city, every *Aurélia* text ends with the lines cited above. And moreover, the first two works begin with the narrator announcing that she is writing to another. While the first *Aurélia* begins, "Je vous écris tout le temps, toujours ça, vous voyez. Rien d'autre que ça. Rien" (117), the second starts with the description, "Je suis dans cette chambre où chaque jour je vous écris" (139). What is noticeable in the above citations is the insistence on the continuous act of writing performed by the narrator, as if this character exists through writing.[55] And indeed, Duras makes this connection in her own discussion of *Aurélia*. *Les Yeux verts* marks the end of a ten-year period where Duras was almost exclusively making films or writing texts for films, and Duras explains in a section entitled "Aurélia Aurélia": "L'écrit, je le retrouve avec Aurélia. Elle est partout Aurélia, elle écrit de partout à la fois. Après *Aurélia Steiner*, je ne peux plus écrire, je perds l'écrit. Si je ne parle pas avec cette survivante, je perds l'écrit" (10). Duras's description of Aurélia as a survivor is significant because it alludes to how the character's name indicates both the "living" Aurélia and those who died in the Holocaust; the written name itself is what enables these

[55] This idea, as we shall see, reflects Duras's discussion of "écriture courante" in reference to *L'Amant*.

characters to collapse into one another. The distinction between life and death gives way in the word, "Aurélia."[56] Writing is capable of passing between these two states.

Considering the importance of writing in these works, to the character and allegedly to Duras, it seems curious that two of the *Aurélia* texts became films; yet, the dissolution between text and image communicates the way that writing suspends death. The image that perhaps best addresses this seeming incongruity is the white sheet of paper that appears three times during the film *Aurélia Steiner (Vancouver).* Among the shots of the sea, sky, rocks, tree, abandoned military bunkers, desolate train stations, and the few interior shots of a bare home, the image fades to black and when it fades back in, the viewer sees a white piece of paper with the name "Aurélia" written upon it. After another fade out, the paper appears again, this time the last name "Steiner" is shown in the paper. In another moment, a number appears on the page, perhaps a number that one of the Aurélias had tattooed on her skin while a prisoner of a concentration camp. The white blank of the page invites writing; yet, this image is also a sign of death. In the texts, the image of "le rectangle blanc" dominates Aurélia's quasi-memory of her father's death. Aurélia, the narrator, imagines the white rectangle of a concentration camp courtyard where her father was hanged. In these films, the blank space is associated with the unrepresentable memory of the Holocaust, but it is also associated with the possibility of that memory in writing, regardless of what shape that memory takes or to what extent that memory can be envisioned.

[56] In fact, at the beginning of the entire text beginning of LYV starts with a letter "A l'origine d'Aurélia Steiner, il y a une lettre adressé à quelqu'un que je ne connais pas…J'ai oublié son visage. Je connais sa voix. J'ai écrit cette lettre, tout à coup, j'ai recommencé à écrire" (4). In the letter, Duras writes: "Quand j'écris je ne meurs pas."

As it has been discussed earlier in this chapter, this white space appears throughout Duras's oeuvre, in the gaps between her paragraphs and sentences, in the descriptions of her seascapes and landscapes, and in the blank faces of her characters. In many ways, Aurélia Steiner is the character who communicates this emptiness the most vividly. The films that bear her name create a portrait out of these alternately creative and destructive voids.[57] For this reason, this faceless character is at the center of Duras's text on cinema. In perhaps one of the most famous passages of *Les Yeux verts*, Duras explains that her relationship to the image is a murderous one:

> Je suis dans un rapport de meurtre avec le cinéma. J'ai commencé à en faire pour atteindre l'acquis créateur de la destruction du texte. Maintenant c'est l'image que je veux atteindre, réduire. J'en suis à envisager une image passe partout, indéfiniment superposable à une série de textes, image qui n'aurait en soi aucun sens, qui ne serait ni belle ni laide, qui ne prendrait son sens que du texte qui passe. (49)

While Duras discusses the cinema as a way to destroy the image, this destruction is unique in that rather than being definitively erased, the image is reduced to the point where it can be disseminated among any number of texts. The neutrality of the image, in fact, allows the passage of the text. The "image passe partout" of which Duras speaks could operate either as a master key or a frame, encouraging the reader to move through the text but also to look. One could imagine that faces in *Les Yeux verts* function in the

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[57] *Les Yeux verts* provides other examples of Duras's ideas on the connections between writing and cinema: "Je parle de l'écrit. Je parle aussi de l'écrit même quand j'ai l'air de parler du cinéma. Je ne sais pas parler d'autre chose. Quand je fais du cinéma, j'écris, j'écris sur l'image, sur ce qu'elle devrait représenter, sur mes doutes quant à sa nature. J'écris sur le sens qu'elle devrait avoir. Le choix de l'image qui se fait ensuite, c'est une conséquence de cet écrit. L'écrit du film—pour moi—c'est le cinéma" (48-49).

same way as this image. As we have seen, the face marks the character's dissolution into the text, and it is also the permeable screen through which desire (and ultimately death) passes. Faces in Duras's whole oeuvre are not meant to be recognized, identified, or read in and of themselves; instead, they are there to facilitate the reading and the writing of the disparate and diverse text.

Chapter Two: DESIRING FACES

"[C]'est le visage de cette femme-là qu'il aime finalement, ce visage à qui s'adresse son désir."[58]

I. MEDIATED FACES

Although the face serves as a nexus of meaning throughout Duras's entire oeuvre, perhaps the most well-known use of this image is in *L'Amant* (1984), a later novel that opens with a description of, ostensibly, the author's face. In many of the initial critical responses to this novel, reviewers pointed to this face as proof that the text created a transparent link between the work and the author's life: "enfin Marguerite Duras raconte Marguerite Duras."[59] As I have already discussed in the previous chapter, however, the visage in Duras's works is distinctly *not* a site of identity and identification. Subsequently, the famous "visage détruit" of *L'Amant* does not merely challenge autobiography's pretention to creating a true portrait, although this effect is certainly important. Instead, the allegedly autobiographical "destroyed face" provides a further, and perhaps more complicated, understanding of the centrality of the face in Duras's works, certainly in connection to Lol's, Stretter's, and Aurélia's indiscernible faces. While Duras might create her face as a permeable boundary between identity and non-identity like the *visages* of her female characters, Duras's autofictive works focus more on how the corporeality and physicality of the face can still contribute to its dissolution in the text. Unlike the three women of the previous chapter, Duras's autofictive characters' faces emerge in the equalization of interior and exterior forces.

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[58] This quotation is taken from the interview "Duras toute entière…" in *Le Nouvel Observateur*.

[59] In "Une femme sans aveu," Marcelle Marini examines the critical reception of *L'Amant*, citing many sentiments that echo the one used here (4).

I say that the face in *L'Amant* renders the entire discussion of image and representation more complicated because of the way that, throughout her career, Duras constructs a specific of image of herself in her interviews, both televised and written. As I will show, Duras's presentation of herself in the media does not make the face entirely visible or attainable even as the author might place this "mediated face" in front of the spectator's eyes. In Duras's careful orchestration of her image, it paradoxically manages to resist objectification. I begin my discussion of the importance of the *visage* in Duras's autofictive texts with the most seemingly indisputable and autobiographical elements of her work: the author's interviews and photographs. I will then move from a discussion of the author's face and how she creates a complex public persona in her televised appearances to a close reading of *L'Amant* and its "revision," *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. In the connections between the seemingly anchored and monolithic author's image and the textual space of the two novels, it becomes clear that the face is a source of writing rather than a set and discrete representation that corroborates constructed social identities. The face, as a problematic threshold for the gaze and for desire, ultimately disappears into Duras's texts because of its fundamental significance to the work.

An examination of Duras's image and public persona serves as an entry point into the complicated status of the face and how this image unmoors what it means to see and be seen in the later discussion of *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. The overwhelming number of Duras's appearance in assorted interviews and articles both before and after the publication of *L'Amant* offer Duras's image to diverse interpretations. Assessing the broader implications of Duras's media presence over her career reveals a complicated image that is both marked by its visibility and invisibility,

invention and destruction. From 1964 to 1996, Duras participated in over 100 television programs. Among these programs, many of them enriched the understanding of Duras's oeuvre and even stood out as works in their own right.[60] More profoundly, Duras used this media to construct a paradoxical identity that parallels the creation of her fictional characters. Even though one could argue that the media itself constructed the identity of the author on the public scene, Duras was acutely aware of this process.[61] For instance, in her 1986 interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Duras responds to a question about the popularity of *L'Amant* with a somewhat off-handed and joking comment about her interviews in general: "Tout ce que nous disons, là, va être joué. C'est déjà arrivé dans plusieurs théâtres" (57).[62] In a sense, all of Duras's interviews are performances that do not reveal her identity or self as much as they fabricate a possible image of the author.

In one of the four hour-long sections of the 1988 program "Au-delà des pages," Duras explains to her interlocuter, Luce Perron: "il n'y a pas de différence entre ce que je dis dans les interviews et ce que j'écris en général." During her interview with Perron, Duras continually refers to "M.D." as the author of her works, stating "Elle écrit M.D..

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[60] In his article "L'identité télévisuelle de Marguerite Duras," Noël Nel provides a systematic investigation of how Duras's identity developed and transformed through her participation in different television programs. He isolates around fifteen televised productions that function as either metatext (Duras's commentary on own works) or paratext (Duras's autobiographical confessions and opinions): interviews or television shows with Pierre Dumayet (1964, 1966, 1968), Michelle Porte (1976), François Mitterand (1984), Jean Mascolo and Jérôme Beaujour (1981) Bernard Pivot (1984), Jean-Luc Godard (1987), Luce Perrot (1988), Bernard Rapp (1991), Michel Field (1993) and Laure Adler (1996).

[61] I agree with James Williams's description of how Duras manipulates her media image: "Duras's face, her image, her writing: all is being rhetorically controlled through the montage of delicate self revision. It is as though Duras has reappropriated for herself the trope of irony usually associated with fetishism, the Freudian male perversion par excellence, and made it endlessly displaceable, somewhere between the caress of her glasses and the cut between frames." Williams discusses this mediated image in his essay "The Point of No Return: Chiastic Adventures between Self and Other in *Les Mains negatives* and *Au-delà des pages*" (90).

[62] The narrator in *L'Amant* makes a similar comment: "écrire ce n'est que publicité" (15).

Elle dit n'importe quoi. Elle dit n'importe comment" (Cousseau, "Le discours" 556) or "Elle écrit, M.D., elle fait ça et rien d'autre" (Williams, "No Return" 123). Beginning in the 1980s, the initials "M.D." stood in for the name Marguerite Duras, further streamlining Duras's media personality. [63] Perhaps it is not a coincidence that in transcriptions of most of Duras's interviews, her words are indicated with these initials. In a way, Duras's words become representative of her character, who she is in the public eye, an image that represents her but that also takes over her identity. Although Duras constantly refers to M.D. as a writer, this character is not just textual but also visual. Duras directly addresses the construction of this character in *La Vie matérielle*. In a section entitled "L'uniforme MD," Duras discusses her mode of dress or the "Look Duras" (a blazer, straight skirt, and turtle neck sweater) and how it allegedly created a fad and was emulated by designers in their collections. Through the example of a somewhat trivial topic, clothing, she examines how the persona of "MD" is one mediated between how she creates herself and how her viewers and readers create her: "La recherche de l'uniforme est celle d'une conformité entre la forme et le fond, entre ce qu'on croit paraître et ce qu'on voudrait paraître, entre ce qu'on croit être et ce qu'on désire montrer de façon allusive dans les vêtements qu'on porte. On la trouve sans la chercher vraiment. Une fois trouvée, elle est définitive. Et elle finit par vous définir" (75). The significance of this uniform is two-fold: the word implies the homogenization of an individual identity and it also implies a constructed identity. It would seem that the uniform mediates between interior and exterior ideas of the self. Yet, there is also an implicit understanding that whatever the uniform fixes and determines is only imaginary, between what one

[63] As we will see in the last two chapters, this gesture is similar to Hélène Cixous's discussions of "H.C."

believes and what one desires: “ce qu’on croit être et ce qu’on désire montrer.” Despite the uniform’s visibility, it still only fixes an entirely imaginary and unique conception of being. The uniform creates an identifiable image even as it makes this image anonymous.[64]

Interestingly, Duras’s iconic face becomes part of this uniformity through her participation in her own films, situating her image between the visible and the invisible. In the 1970s, Duras wrote and directed several films for which she also provided a voiceover. In these films, of course, the spectator does not see Duras reading the lines; however, in the 1977 film, *Le Camion*, Duras appears on camera reading the script. Her participation in *Le Camion* is similar to her voiceovers in that she does not necessarily “act” the role. This film is about a middle-aged woman hitchhiking on a highway in an industrial area. A trucker picks her up, and during the ride she narrates her story: the story of a woman hitchhiking. The action and images of the film, however, do not seem to present any reenactment of the story. The film consists of images of Duras and Gerard Depardieu, in the role of the truck driver, sitting across from each other reading their lines from a script. Unlike her voiceover work in other films, Duras has a visible role in *Le Camion*. As Duras reveals in an interview with Michelle Porte (an interview that appears in the published volume of *Le Camion*) the role of the hitchhiker was originally to be played by a well-known actress. But Duras explains that if the role had been played by a recognizable actress, the nameless woman in the film’s scenario would have lost her potential to be like the many anonymous individuals people meet on any given day. Duras explains to Porte: “Dans un film, où elle n’est pas personnalisée, elle existe avec

[64] I believe that Duras’s constant allusion to uniformity contributes to the way that she questions stereotypes in her work. Sameness and difference are not mutually exclusive.

infiniment plus de force" (100). The woman in the film is meant to be a character who could be anyone: "Elle est tout le monde." In a strange gesture, Duras chooses to play this role in order to prevent giving a fixed representation of the woman in the film.

Perhaps one of the reasons why Duras takes on the role of the woman is because "la dame du Camion" in the scenario is described as having no visible image. Duras, narrating the film, reads the lines: "Petite./Maigre./Grise./Banale./ Elle a cette noblesse de la banalité./Elle est invisible" (65). One might imagine that by i*nvisible*, Duras means *unremarkable*; yet, Duras's further descriptions of this woman show that she is indeed not visible because she serves as a conduit for the gaze. In describing one of her projects for the film, Duras explains her relationship to this anonymous woman:

> Je suis tournée vers elle. Elle, non, elle est tournée vers l'extérieur…Elle, tournée vers le dehors : Regarde. Moi, tournée vers elle. La regardant. Télescopées toutes les deux dans la direction de l'extérieur. C'est par elle que je vois…Je regarde ce qu'elle regarde…Elle, je ne la vois pas, je ne vois toujours pas son visage. Quand le film se termine, je n'ai toujours pas vu son visage. Mais ce qu'elle regardait m'éblouit: le film. (78-79)

Despite the active position that Duras takes to see the woman's face, the face can never be seen. Looking is an interminable action in Duras's conception of the film. And the woman has no perceptible face because she has the power to look away. In the above citation, the character's gesture of turning towards the outside curiously marks her as both passive and active; on one hand she resists her onlooker, but on the other hand she enables her onlooker to see. Duras describes herself looking at the woman looking, and furthermore this author implies the reader in this relationship as well when she asks the

reader to look. Duras, then, intimates that she becomes like the woman in the *Camion*; conveying images that move into an infinite space away from the viewer and prevent the image, including the character, from being looked upon.

While *Le Camion* can be read in terms of its discussion of class and sexual difference, this work is also about the act of reading and writing and thus about the author herself. Duras is both writer and reader, and through her participation in the film, these acts become interchangeable. The anonymous woman of the narrative is, to a certain extent, also a creator of the text; the film describes this woman, her eyes closed, telling her story to the truck driver. As the narrator explains: "Elle chante. Elle ferme les yeux et chante" (21). The stage directions also indicate that the scenario is a scene for reading, not just writing. Describing the film's set, a room with drawn curtains and a table at the center, Duras adds, "On peut appeler ce lieu: CHAMBRE NOIRE, ou chambre de lecture" (11).[65] In the photographic metaphor that Duras creates in this scene, writing develops in a dark room. Taken in its immediate context, Duras's reference to the "darkroom of reading" seems to indicate that the film purposely collapses the distance between word and image. This image of the "chambre noire," however, resonates throughout her whole work, specifically in the interview with Porte where Duras relates the connection between writing and "l'ombre noire." Even though this darkroom seems exterior to the author, as Duras's discussion of *Le Camion* continues, this reference to darkness transforms into an interior characteristic. She explains that writing originates in

[65] Elsewhere in Duras's work "l'ombre interne" finds its equivalence in the author's discussion of other images of emptiness, darkness, and obscurity: the "image noire" of her film *Le Navire Night* (1979), the "chambre noire" that she discusses in both in *Le Camion* (1977) and in *L'Été 1980* (1980), her collection of articles written for the newspaper *Libération*, and finally the "bloc noir" that drives her discussion of writing in *La Vie matérielle* (1987). For a further discussion, see Aliette Armel's article, "La force magique de l'ombre interne."

an internal darkness that then struggles to translate onto the page: “Ce qui est douleureux, la douleur—le danger—c’est la mise en œuvre, la mise en page, de cette douleur, c’est crever cette ombre noire afin qu’elle se répande sur le blanc du papier, mettre dehors ce qui est de nature intérieure” (124). An early instance of this kind of discussion is in Duras’s 1975 interview with Gauthier. Duras explains that writing is the attempt to empty one’s self of an internal shadow. She describes the effects of this kind of writing: “Je me mutile de l’ombre interne, dans le meilleur des cas. J’ai l’illusion que je fais de l’ordre alors que je dépeuple, que je fais de la lumière alors que j’efface” (50).[66] This interior shadow is unreadable and attempting to translate it in language causes its disappearance. The “ombre interne” represents the self, and even though this self might be exteriorized, it is still impossible to picture.

Duras’s use of her own image in *Le Camion*, then, undermines its visibility through its connection to what the film actually portrays, namely the dark interior shadow. With this in mind, the author’s decision to open her ostensibly autobiographical novel, *L’Amant*, with an image of her own face is a complicated gesture. Both salient and obscure, this face serves as a paradoxical focal point for this particular novel and, perhaps, for Duras’s whole oeuvre.

II. LE VISAGE DÉTRUIT DE *L’AMANT*

Ostensibly, *L’Amant* relates the story of Duras’s childhood and adolescence in French occupied Indochina, her violent and volatile relationship with her mother and two

[66] Of the centrality of this dark shadow in her work, Duras comments in *Les Parleuses* “L’écrit est déjà dans la nuit. Ecrire serait à l’extérieur de soi dans une confusion des temps: entre écrire et avoir écrit, entre avoir écrit et devoir écrire encore, entre savoir et ignorer ce qu’il en est, partir du sens. L’image du bloc noir au milieu du monde n’est pas hasardeuse” (30).

brothers, one adored and one reviled, and her liaison with a much older Chinese man.[67] More important than the autobiographical *je* in the text, the first image that strikes the reader in the text is that of the narrator's own face, "le visage détruit," destroyed, devastated, and cut through with wrinkles. Despite its seeming correlation with Duras's own image as an older woman (due to her interviews and television appearances, readers were familiar with her distinctive countenance),[68] the face that opens *L'Amant* reveals the complexity of Duras's alleged autobiographical project. *L'Amant* belongs to a unique subgenre of autobiography that could be termed autofiction. As a result, Duras's novel shares many of the same elements of works by Nouveau Roman authors, such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Claude Simon, and Nathalie Sarraute (Armel, *L'Autobiographie* 28).[69] Among several defining characteristics, the autofictive narrative confuses chronology and refuses to fix the identity of the narrator. Duras's *L'Amant*, for example, does not indicate the names of its characters or the dates of certain events, and it also switches between narration in the first person and in the third person. The narrator herself announces "L'histoire de ma vie n'existe pas" (134). Because her life story does not exist,

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[67] Even though *L'Amant* was considered Duras's first "autobiographical" text, several book-length interviews published in the 1970s including *Les Parleuses* (1974) with Xavière Gauthier and *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras* (1977) with Michelle Porte not only revealed elements of Duras's life in writing but also in photographs.

[68] The dissemination of Duras's image as part of the publicity campaign for *L'Amant* encouraged readers to assume that the face in the text was none other than the author's herself. Her portrait was not on the cover of the novel; however, a photograph of Duras gazing upon her image in a mirror was distributed to book stores, reinforcing the idea that the novel was indeed a reflection of the author's own life. Almost every article published about the success of *L'Amant* included an image of Duras, an image of her "destroyed face." Televised appearances also helped forge an evident link between the textual face and Duras's own face, the most noteworthy being her interview with Bernard Pivot on his show "Apostrophes." The conventional editing of a televised interview, switching from a medium close-up of Duras to a medium close-up of Pivot, privileges the face to face discussion between not only the interviewer and the interviewee but also between Duras and the spectator. In his discussion of the first two pages of the novel, the sections that describe the narrator's face, Pivot pauses to comment "C'est intéressant parce que là, les téléspectateurs voient votre visage."

[69] As we will see, the face problematizes the possibility of autobiography in Hélène Cixous's work as well.

autobiographical work is necessarily an *invention* of that life.[70] Paradoxically, the destroyed face, works in conjunction with this narrative's creation.

While I examine, to a certain extent, the relationship between invention and destruction in my first chapter, this link becomes more complex and even more revealing in the autofictive text. In the first pages of *L'Amant*, the narrator highlights the material devastation of the face: "J'ai un visage lacéré de rides sèches et profondes, à la peau cassée. Il ne s'est pas affaissé comme certains visages à traits fins, il a gardé les mêmes contours mais sa matière est détruite. J'ai un visage détruit" (10). One of the first ways to understand this violence is through Paul De Man's influential work on autobiography in romanticism, "Autobiography as De-facement." Duras's supposed use of her own image demonstrates the ways that autobiography is always a work of deforming its author. De Man writes "Our topic deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, figure, figuration and disfiguration" (926). As tempting as it is to see the destroyed face as a consequence of this kind of defacement, however, Duras's work does not fit entirely within the scope of De Man's essay because the autofiction of *L'Amant* does not presuppose that its story stems from a truth or a life that is then deformed. The disfigured face is not actually connected to an autobiographical text.

One might also assume that the face's devastation presents a text to be "read," and this reading would potentially reveal the reason for the cut and broken face. In the citation above, the face does indeed seem to stand testament to a violent event. Unlike other faces that seem to collapse into themselves, "s'affaisser," as they age, the narrator's

[70] This declaration is one that Duras echoes to the journalists Pierre Bénichou and Hervé Le Masson after the release of *L'Amant*: "L'histoire de votre vie, de ma vie, elles n'existent pas, ou bien alors il s'agit de lexicologie. Le roman de ma vie, de nos vies, oui, mais pas l'histoire" (56).

face changes as the result of exterior forces. The opening of the novel, which appears to be an incipit to the text, suggests that there might be a history that makes sense of the facial damage. In the first lines, the narrator gives an account of a meeting between the narrator as an older woman and a man who approaches her at a social function with the comment: “j’aimais moins votre visage de jeune femme que celui que vous avez maintenant, dévasté” (9). It seems that between these two images there lies an occurrence that ages and destroys the face. And the narrator’s own interest in this image corroborates this thought. The narrator explains that rather than being horrified by her face’s destruction, she examines the transformation that the face undergoes. She alludes to an event that suddenly ages her face at the age of eighteen and explains: “Au contraire d’en être effrayée j’ai vu s’opérer ce vieillissement de mon visage avec l’intérêt que j’aurais pris par exemple au déroulement d’une lecture” (10). The narrator’s interest in her image potentially infers that the face’s features can reveal a history.

Several factors, however, undermine this particular metaphorical link between text and face. First, the narrator’s position makes her no longer the subject of the life-changing event; rather, she creates the writing self as an on-looker. Even though at the end of this section she claims this face for her own using the first person, “J’ai un visage détruit,” the narrator’s examination of the face makes it impossible for her to coincide with this appearance. By placing herself in an outside and more or less emotionally detached position, the narrator acknowledges that the self is always already an other. Second, reading the face ultimately proves a problem in that the narrator is not, and perhaps can never be, specific as to the event that caused this destruction and devastation. While one might imagine that the face in is meant reveal a hidden experience, the novel

systematically undoes the possibility of reading this image. For example, the narrator presents the possible reasons for her face's transformation such as the misery of her childhood; yet, she refutes these possible explanations only referring to the event as "ça."

Duras's repeated use of the demonstrative pronoun *ça* designates an event that remains untellable and unknown despite the fact that many different theories for this destruction are advanced in the novel.[71] The deictic *ça* seems to indicate an event in the text, but the immediate context of the sentences does not reveal what this might be. In this sense, the pointing motion of the demonstrative pronoun is like the gaze. It is present in the text; yet, its object is not available and is not seen. The elusive face, then, would suggest an event that can never be known or communicated. In her article "Pleasures of Self-Portraiture in Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant*," Julie Solomon explains that even though the novel appears to contain the narrator's confessions, "there always remains the sense of a non-narrated and *unnarratable* event, a silence, a threshold she cannot cross:…And the "event" of facial alteration survives as an hysterical symptom, the body speaking of that which cannot be acknowledged" (107). Solomon's interpretation of the face in *L'Amant* posits that Duras does indeed have recourse to a kind of *écriture féminine:* the body signifies where language fails.[72] The event that marks the face remains untellable.

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[71] Even in her interview with Pivot, where the interviewer continuously asks for verification, Duras does not provide an answer for the sudden ageing of the face. Citing certain moments in the text, Pivot links the face's destruction to Duras's alcoholism and to the physical hardships in her life. Duras, however, insists that the devastation of the face immediately visible to the viewing public was not just an effect of aging and substance abuse, but also due to the relationship with the Chinese lover and the toll that writing had taken on her. Duras's response takes Pivot's comments and directs them from a concrete register to an imaginary one. Moreover, she remains elliptical as to the importance of this face in the novel itself commenting, "Je ne sais pas pourquoi j'ai écrit là-dessus."

[72] I use the term *écriture feminine* in order to discuss how writing moves through the body and not to suggest that Duras creates a transcendent idea of the feminine in her work.

Yet, as we have explored, destruction has a paradoxically generative role in Duras's work; by breaking down narrative borders, between the past and the present, and a subject's limitations, between the self and the other, the destroyed face designates an unconstrained and unlimited means of artistic creation. In other words, the seeming finality of the face's wreckage is conversely what localizes the desire to write. In these terms, the face is less a symptom of a traumatic event than a kind of origin in and of itself. For example, the narrator describes the destruction of her face as "prémonitoire": "J'avais à quinze ans le visage de la jouissance et je ne connaissais pas la jouissance" (15). While here the narrator infers that the event is one of desire and sexual pleasure, something she will experience with the Chinese lover, this sentence also suggests to the reader that the face can indicate a history outside of a normal conception of time. The face's ruin always predates the events that might have caused its devastation. Even before the traumatic event, the narrator explains, she is subject to what will happen: "Très vite dans ma vie il a été trop tard. A dix-huit ans il était déjà trop tard" (9). As a result, the face might indicate a missing narrative, but it will never be able to translate this event. In her article, "Ruine, dégradation, et effacement dans *l'Amant* de Marguerite Duras," Madeleine Chirol examines the temporal inversion of this face that announces its ruin before the fact. She also explores how this reversal questions the visibility of a devastation that seems so spectacular. In her discussion, Chirol quotes from Jacques Derrida's *Mémoires d'aveugle: l'autoportrait et autres ruines,* and what she quotes has particular importance in terms of how both the reader and the narrator perceive the face in Duras's work. Speaking in terms of painting, Derrida argues that the *autoportrait,* as an image of the painter's face, is a ruin from the first moment the artist sets his eyes upon

it. Even though the artist might want to preserve his image in a present moment, his action of creating a representation of himself establishes his own image as a ruin. The artist jeopardizes his presence through this image: “Ruine est l’autoportrait, ce visage dévisagé comme mémoire de soi, ce qui *reste* ou *revient* comme un spectre dès qu'au premier regard sur soi une figuration s'éclipse. La figure alors voit sa visibilité entamée, elle perd son intégrité sans se désintégrer” (72). The act of painting the self, and in Duras, writing the self, reveals that the original subject has never been there. The act of self-portraiture is one that does not just erase the self’s image, but also makes its erasure a founding element of the represented being.

While the first descriptions of the devastated and destroyed face in *L’Amant* seem to prove the reality of this face, its existence and its connection to a narrated life, the narrator’s final direct references to this *visage* place its visibility into question. In the novel’s last reference to this face, closing out the introduction to the text, the narrator seems to articulate the possibility of coinciding with a face that represents her. In the same paragraph, the narrator describes “this” face three times, and her choice of this demonstrative adjective indicates that the face is separate from her own position: “Ce visage prémonitoire”, “Ce visage de l’alcool” and finally “Ce visage se voyait très fort. Même ma mère devait le voir. Mes frères le voyaient. Tout a commencé de cette façon pour moi, par ce visage voyant, exténué, ces yeux cernés en avance sur le temps, l’*experiment*” (15-16). In its hyper-visibility, this too visible and too evident face is not available to sight because its functions is to attract the reader’s gaze even though there is nothing to see. If anything, this “visage voyant” is the closest image to a mask that one finds in Duras’s novel. This face projects or foretells an image, one of

alcoholism and one of sexual pleasure before the child has known them. In this passage, the narrator uses the verb *voir* in different ways and ultimately questions the visibility of the seemingly concrete face of the first pages. However, "voyant" can also refer to the face's own capacity for looking. Less than an object that undergoes a transformation or a material entity that experiences disfiguration, the face in *L'Amant* is a threshold for the act of looking. By page sixteen of the novel, "the visage détruit," the image that seems to establish the credibility and authenticity of the autobiographical project transforms. This image changes from being a metaphor for how writing about one's life causes the author's figural defacement and disfigurement to being the catalyst for how the text destabilizes what it means to see and be seen.

Duras questions sight throughout her works, but *L'Amant* complicates her discussion of the gaze and appearance with this text's promise to speak of what has been hidden in the narrator's life. Early in the text the narrator explains, "Avant, j'ai parlé des périodes claires, de celles qui étaient éclairées. Ici je parle des périodes cachées de cette même jeunesse, de certains enfouissements que j'aurais opérés sur certains faits, sur certains sentiments, sur certains événements" (14). The events that the narrator describes in *L'Amant* are inherently unavailable to representation. The narrator might "speak" of the hidden moment in her life, but the text will never be able to reveal them. Duras echoes this idea in her supposedly enlightening televised interview with Bernard Pivot where the writer and her text seemed to align. While she might claim that *L'Amant* is the only novel that she has written that is not a fiction, she also admits to Pivot that the subject of her life remains a mystery. She explains with regard to the novel: "là,

j'avançais dans l'inconnu…c'était plus fort que moi."[73] More provocatively, however, Duras communicates the idea that she has no control over the text: "Je dis des choses comme elles arrivent sur moi, comme elles m'attaquent, comme elles *m'aveuglent*."[74] Duras uses the noun "choses," a word in and of itself that obscures meaning, to describe the memories that came to her in writing the text. Moreover, these thoughts that then translate into writing are blinding.

The face in *L'Amant* suggests that it will make events in the narrative visible even though it embodies what cannot be seen, and because of this disjunction, Duras's multiple allusions to photography in the novel take on a very specific meaning. In the first fifteen pages, the narrator uses the word *visage* over a dozen times; yet, this image disappears from the text and the narrator turns her focus on an equally impossible image, a photograph that could have been taken but never was. Within one page, the narrator moves from her discussion of the "visage voyant" to the account of the river crossing where she meets her lover and the lasting yet unrepresentable image she has of the crossing. The narrator describes this moment in terms of a kind of reverse photography:

> C'est au cours de ce voyage que l'image se serait détachée, qu'elle aurait été enlevée à la somme. Elle aurait pu exister, une photographie aurait pu être prise, comme une autre, ailleurs, dans d'autres circonstances. Mais elle ne l'a pas été…cette image, et il ne pouvait pas en être autrement, elle n'existe pas. Elle a été omise. Elle a été oubliée. Elle n'a pas été détachée, enlevée à la somme. C'est

[73] She announces a similar idea in *La Vie matérielle*, "En écrivant *l'Amant* j'avais le sentiment de découvrir: c'était là avant moi, avant tout, ça resterait là où c'était après moi j'aie cru que c'était autrement, que c'était à moi, que c'était là pour moi" (31).

[74] My emphasis.

> à ce manqué d'avoir été faite qu'elle doit sa vertu, celle de représenter un absolu, d'en être justement l'auteur. (16-17)

The un-photographed image of this scene addresses Duras's unique relationship to representation on several levels. For instance, nothing about the description of this potential image implies that it is mimetic. The image could have been "detached" and "removed," but instead it was forgotten. The omission of this instant has two repercussions: it is no longer analogous to, and thus a representation of, a lived moment. This description implies that even though forgotten, the image is still changing, still transforming, and ultimately still generative.[75] As Danièle Méaux explains in his article "Ecriture et photographie dans l'œuvre de Marguerite Duras," Duras's use of the untaken photograph highlights the impossibility of an immediate link between memory and photographic image:

> Dans *l'Amant*, ce rapprochement, sitôt avancé, est retiré pour que s'affirme la différence entre prélèvement photographique et représentation mentale; le souvenir composite, fluctuant et irradiant, n'a pas de support matériel. L'évocation—doublement déceptive—de la photographie absente traduit le vertige qui accompagne la tension vers un passé toujours se dérobant. (150)

The moment of the river crossing is defined by the fact that its photograph could never exist. As a result, the image that the narrator discusses in the text is one that originates in its omission. The text disrupts any link between a referent and its potential image because the image creates itself rather than being created.

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[75] The earlier discussion of the "chambre noire" resonates in *L'Amant* because of the important place that photography eventually takes in the narrative. The dark room is the site where the image develops; yet, in Duras's novels, plays, and even her films, this image continues to translate only its disappearance and impoverishment.

Like the *visage* at the beginning of the text that the narrative continually fails to connect to any identifiable and representable event, the text also divorces the image of the river crossing from a remembered and complete past. Both the *visage* and the inexistent photo direct the reader's gaze and allow the narrative to continue, but ultimately they do not unveil the narrator's life. Perhaps it is for this reason that with the description of the inexistent photograph, the narrator's face disappears from the text. In fact, the rest of the novel questions the very possibility of seeing this face, specifically in the narrator's description of herself at the time in her life of the river crossing. The narrator describes her dress, her hat, her shoes, and it is through this clothing that she establishes her nebulous subject position in the novel. For instance, in the portrait she gives of herself on the ferry, her clothes take precedence over any image of her face. The narrator describes the dress she is wearing in terms that highlight the disappearance and the near invisibility of her character: "Je porte une robe de soie naturelle, elle est usée, presque transparente. Avant, elle a été une robe de ma mère, un jour elle ne l'a plus mise parce qu'elle la trouvait trop claire" (18). Even the most visual elements of this portrait of the young woman on the ferry, the narrator's clothing, complicate the reader's vision of this character. On one hand, the worn dress suggests the narrator's immodesty; the dress is see-through. On the other hand, the transparency of the dress echoes the immateriality of the non-existent photograph; one of the reasons why the photograph was never taken, the narrator adds, is because "L'objet était trop mince pour la provoquer" (16-17). Throughout the description of the first meeting with the Chinese lover, the narrator uses words that infer how insubstantial this memory is and how resistant it is to being anchored in the text and to a referent.[76]

[76] My understanding of this scene (perhaps the most discussed in Duras's oeuvre) has been informed by the

The narrator's memory of this moment moves from the description of the dress to an explanation for the wide-brimmed, rosewood colored hat that she is wearing, and it becomes even more apparent that the narrator elides the face from this image. The narrator explains: "L'ambiguïté de l'image, elle est dans ce chapeau" (19). Despite the fact that the narrator describes this hat as a way of giving an image of herself on the ferry, the reader learns that this particular hat is one that allows her to become something other than herself. In a sense, the hat makes it impossible to assign an identity to the narrator. The reader understands this ambiguous import of her clothing when the narrator recounts the purchase of the hat. She explains that when trying on the hat, she looks into the mirror and instead of seeing her reflection, sees something beyond her own image: "Soudain je me vois comme une autre, comme une autre serait vue, au-dehors, mise à la disposition de tous, mise à la disposition de tous les regards" (20). Certainly, this moment of looking upon the self resembles the narrator's examination of her face in the first few pages of the novel. In both instances, the narrator takes an exterior position to herself, looking upon herself as if she were separate from this entity. Unlike the first self-observations, however, here the face remains unaccounted for in the establishment of the narrator's character.

The opening of the novel might seem revelatory in its first description of the face, but as the text continues, this revelation becomes less and less visible and more and more ironic. Even though the narrator writes about seeing her reflection as she tries on the hat and imagining how she *would be* seen, the narrator constantly questions and complicates

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many excellent analyses of this text including Danièle Méaux's article "Ecriture et photographie dans l'œuvre de Marguerite Duras," Susan Cohen's discussion in her book *Women and Discourse in the Fiction of Marguerite Duras*, Carol J. Murphy's "Duras' *L'Amant:* Memories from an Absent Photo," Maryse Fauvel's "Photographie et autobiographie: *Roland Barthes* par Roland Barthes et *L'Amant* de Marguerite Duras," and Aliette Armel's discussion of this scene in her book *Marguerite Duras et l'autobiographie*.

the images that the reader might seize upon. As the novel progresses, there seems to be something incongruous in the narrator's invitations to the reader to look upon her image. For example, as the narrator continues to give more and more minute details of her appearance, these bits of information lead the reader to question the verisimilitude of what the narrator presents. When describing her gold, high-heeled shoes, the narrator defends her memory of this particular accoutrement by explaining that it is the only pair of shoes she remembers from that period, so she must be wearing them: "Je ne vois rien d'autre que je pourrais porter ce jour-là, alors je les porte" (19). The very specificity of the items she wears puts her certitude in doubt. The way the narrator implicates the reader in this creation of her portrait also puts the exactness of the memory into question. Exploring her youthful appearance, the narrator instructs the reader to examine how she looks: "Sur le bac, regardez-moi…Quinze ans et demi. Déjà je suis fardée" (24).[77] To a certain extent, the detail that she is wearing make-up adds authenticity to the portrait of this young, audacious girl. By focusing on the make-up, not to mention the earlier attention to the clothes, however, the narrator continues to highlight the absence of the face that was so "definitive" in the telling of her autobiography at the beginning of the text.

It seems as if the more the narrator implores the reader to look, the more the figure of the young woman resists vision both in her disappearance and transformation. During the period of the inexistent photograph, the narrator begins to understand her

[77] In "Pleasures of Self-Portraiture in Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant*" Julie Solomon explores how the text manipulates desire through the subversion of feminine beauty. Her discussion of beauty as a construct in this text is interesting to my argument because of how Solomon describes the narrator creating a "non-identity between face and "self" (104). The face never coincides with an identity.

image not only as other but also as unfixed. Explaining the reason why she attracts the gaze of others the narrator reveals:

> Mais moi je sais que ce n'est pas une question de beauté mais d'autre chose, par exemple, oui, d'autre chose, par exemple d'esprit. Ce que je veux paraître je le parais, belle aussi si c'est ce que l'on veut que je sois…tout ce que l'on veut de moi je peux le devenir. Et le croire…Dès que je le crois, que cela devienne vrai pour celui qui me voit et qui désire que je sois selon son goût, je le sais aussi. (26)

The last sentence of this passage creates a link between the verbs *croire* and *voir*. Looking, in *L'Amant*, is not an act where one is able to fix a defined object with his or her gaze; instead, it is a process of believing that something is there, despite the object's absence. Individuals looking at the narrator never see *her*; they only see what she wants them to believe, and this explanation places the reader in an interesting position with regards to the images that the narrator constantly asks the readers to see. Duras discusses this more specifically in a 1984 interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur*. She explains that lived life is something that one never notices and thus the memories of these events are always illusions: "C'est par la mémoire, ensuite, qu'on *croit* savoir ce qu'il y a eu. Alors ce qui reste de visible est le superflu, l'apparence. Le reste de l'événement est gardé, farouchement, biologiquement, hors de portée" ("L'Inconnue" 52). In *L'Amant*, the narrator continues to provide the reader with these superficial details that hint at a deeper and forgotten memory, but as Duras explains in her interview with Le Masson, these memories are "farouchement, biologiquement, hors de portée." The reader will never have access to these events. Ultimately, the narrative links the face with the inexistent photograph not only because both put what is seen into doubt, causing the reader to

reassess how sight might function in this novel, but also because they both indicate a radically irretrievable memory.

The very genesis of the novel itself reveals how writing works to unmoor images. Duras explains in several interviews, including the interview mentioned above with Le Masson and in her interview with Pivot that *L'Amant* was first conceived of as a photo album. As Duras refined and revised the novel, the photographs were taken out of the text even though, as I will discuss below, certain descriptions of these photographs were left in the text. Even when the novel was intended to have images, however, the frame for the supposed autobiographical text was the untaken photograph from the river crossing. Both the inexistent photograph and the missing photographs make it clear that while the novel might focus on the theme of the gaze, it is only to the extent that the gaze is always blinded. In her article "Photographie et autobiographie: *Roland Barthes* par Roland Barthes et *L'Amant* de Marguerite Duras," Maryse Fauvel uses the term "visual silence"[78] to articulate the complexity of Duras's project with regards to vision. Fauvel's synesthetic description reveals that the text, its language, springs from the inability of sight to fix images. And moreover, her description implies that sight has to be thought of in terms of the other senses, a fact that will become more important later in my discussion.

Even though *L'Amant* contains no images, this fact does not prevent the narrator from continuing her description of these family photographs. Instead, the novel juxtaposes the photograph that could have been taken with images that were photographed in order to reveal a specific paradox within Duras's work: the visual

[78] "Les photos sous-tendent toute l'écriture de *l'Amant*, mais elles sont écartées. Le regard est ici essentiel, mais c'est un aveuglement, un "silence visuel," qui permet le dire" (Fauvel 197).

availability of a photograph undermines its memory. Every memory that has a fixed image is suspect. In *La Vie matérielle*, Duras speaks to the problems inherent in connecting photographs with life. She describes, in particular, her mother's relationship to photographs. Unlike Duras's texts that separate the image from its event, Duras describes how her mother confused the two: "La photo, sans laquelle on ne peut pas vivre existait déjà dans ma jeunesse. Pour ma mère, la photo d'un enfant petit était sacrée" (99). For her mother, the photograph is proof of existence, and indeed Duras describes the mother in *L'Amant* cherishing photographs more than her children: "Ma mère nous fait photographier pour pouvoir nous voir, voir si nous grandissons normalement. Elle nous regarde longuement comme d'autres mères, d'autres enfants. Elle compare les photos entre elles, elle parle de la croissance de chacun" (115). Through the example of the mother's devotion to the photographed image of her children, the narrative demonstrates the problem with investing images with the power of representation; once the link between the image and the object is established, the image ceases to develop and no longer is a potential site of meaning.

The narrator of *L'Amant* challenges what *voir* and *regarder* might mean earlier in the text when she describes the "visage détruit" and the non-image of herself on the ferry, but when discussing family photographs, these verbs begin to mean something much more threatening. In fact, the violent relationship between the family members seems to stem, in part, from the mother's penchant for photographs. In one of the narrator's descriptions, a description that uses a photographic vocabulary specific to *L'Amant*, she describes the painful lack of communication between individuals: "Tout reste, muet, loin. C'est une famille en pierre, pétrifiée dans une épaisseur sans accès aucun. Chaque jour

nous essayons de nous tuer, de tuer. Non seulement on ne se parle pas mais on ne se regarde pas. Du moment qu'on est vu, on ne peut pas regarder" (69).[79] This description stands out in the text because even though the narrator does not explicitly say that she is describing a photograph, her choice of words implies that it might be this kind of image. Her explanation of the image "dans une épaisseur sans accès aucun" contrasts with the earlier description of the image from the river crossing, which was "trop mince" to be photographed. At a distance from the onlooker, the portrayal of the family is fixed. Moreover, this image is violent. The people in the image do not face each other, but they face towards an on-looker; thus, they can be seen but not look. Objects of sight without the power of sight, Duras's description of the family does not just create them as frozen, but as dead. In both the above descriptions, looking is not what opens a space of fiction and creation (such as would be the case in Duras's discussion of "l'ombre noire"); instead, looking brings about the death of that image.[80]

One finds a further discussion of this topic, the connection between photography and death, in the section of *La Vie Matérielle*, "Les Photographies." Duras examines 20th century culture's need to preserve its images with photographs, or as she explains "cela pour exister d'advantage" (99). In disagreement with this impulse, Duras concludes, "la photo aide à l'oubli. Elle a plutôt cette fonction dans le monde moderne. Le visage fixe et plat, à portée de la main, d'un petit enfant n'est toujours qu'une image pour un million d'images dont on dispose dans la tête. Ça confirme la mort" (100). Notably, Duras makes

[79] Later in the novel, the narrator uses the same kind of vocabulary to discuss the photographs that her mother has taken of the family: "Les photos, on les regarde, on ne se regarde pas mais on regarde les photographies, chacun séparément, sans un mot de commentaire, mais on les regarde, on se voit" (115).

[80] Elissa Marder's discussion of photography in her essay "Flat Death: Snapshots of History" has greatly influenced my understanding of the photograph in both Duras's and Cixous's works, specifically in terms of how the photographic image fixes and kills its object.

a connection between the face and the photograph here; the face and the photograph are one and the same, both "fixed" and "flat." Rather than being a mode of remembering someone, the photograph facilitates forgetting. In the above passage, Duras focuses on how the image becomes an object: a small, flat surface that can be held in the hand. The photograph causes death because it takes away the pictured individual's characteristics, specifically what the face might communicate about the individual. One photograph, one face, means as much as any other. More importantly, however, the photograph is deadly. The photograph indicates that the individual, who once stood before the lens, is no longer.

As many critics have noted, Duras's position echoes that of Roland Barthes in his 1980 work on photography, *La Chambre claire.* The first among these similarities is this connection between the photograph and death. One of the well-known statements Barthes makes about photography in this text is that: "Avec la Photographie, nous entrons dans la *Mort plate*" (145). And indeed, throughout his study of photography he repeats the problem that the photograph poses to an on looker: "en attestant que l'objet a été réel, elle induit subrepticement à croire qu'il est vivant, à cause de ce leurre qui nous fait attribuer au Réel une valeur absolument supérieure, comme éternelle; mais en déportant ce réel vers le passé ("ça a été"), elle suggère qu'il est déjà mort" (123-124). Somewhat horrifically, the photographic image is one that gives living proof of something that is dead. For Barthes, as for Duras, one of the most frightening elements of the photograph is its fixedness. After introducing the idea of the photograph as "flat death," Barthes continues, "L'horreur, c'est ceci: rien à dire de la mort de qui j'aime le plus, rien à dire de sa photo, que je contemple sans jamais pouvoir l'approfondir, la transformer" (145). The

fatal permanence of the photographic image, the visual representation of something "that has been," arrests speech. The photographic image stops creation, whether in memory or in fiction.

The discussion of the photograph in *L'Amant* allows Duras to examine the impossibility of keeping another alive, or at least present in memory, through his or her fixed image. In *L'Amant*, the photographs that haunt the text allude, at multiple points in the narrative, to the mother's death. The first photograph that the narrator describes, "la photo du désespoir" (41), allows an examination of photography as death in different ways: textually, pictorially, and psychically. In her interview with Le Masson, for example, Duras insists that the novel originated from the inexistent photograph and not from "la photo de déséspoir" despite the appearance of this specific photograph of the mother in *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras*: "Le livre ne part pas de cette photographie-là, effective, mais il y revient chaque fois qu'il parle de la mère et de son désespoir" (52). It is significant that Duras claims that the text does not originate from the photo of despair because the actual photograph has no creative power; although the narrator can return to the photograph in her texts, the image itself cannot transform or create a narrative whereas the untaken photo from the ferry has this ability. The photograph also communicates the mother's mortality because it creates a visual image of the mother's figurative abandonment of life. In the photograph the narrator recognizes through the mother's stern and tired aspect and the disorder of her children's appearance, her mother's disappointment in life: "Ce grand découragement à vivre" (22).[81] Moreover, the

[81] The narrator continuously addresses the link between appearance and death in the discussions of the mother : "Notre mère ne prévoyait pas ce que nous sommes devenus à partir du spectacle de son désespoir…Mais, l'eût-elle prévu, comment aurait-elle pu taire ce qui était devenu son histoire même ? faire mentir son visage, son regard, sa voix ?" (70).

photograph is evidence of the father's death although he is not pictured in the image; the narrator wonders if the date of the photo coincides with the father falling deathly ill.

Later in the novel, the narrator contemplates a photograph of her mother taken shortly before the mother's death and notes the way in which, even at the moment it was taken, the photograph robs her mother of any kind of life: "Sur la photo elle est bien coiffée, pas un pli, une image" (118). In this description, the perfection of the mother's hair and appearance do not preserve her picture so that future generations will know her; instead, the flawlessness of this image makes it impossible for the mother to be remembered as anything other than image. The author continues to pursue this idea by comparing her mother's portrait to the photographs she knew from her childhood in Indochina, the native Indochinese who, paradoxically, had their pictures taken once in their lifetime when their deaths seemed imminent:[82]

> Tous les gens photographiés, j'en ai vus beaucoup, donnaient presque la même photo, leur ressemblance était hallucinante. Ce n'est pas seulement que la vieillesse se ressemble, c'est que les portraits étaient retouchés, toujours, et de telle façon que les particularités du visage, s'il en restait encore, étaient atténuées. Les visages étaient apprêtés de la même façon pour affronter l'éternité, ils étaient gommés, uniformément rajeunis. (118)

The above passage, which appears towards the end of the novel, contrasts the earlier image of the destroyed face. Unlike the narrator's face, the mother's pictured face is smooth and curiously youthful. Yet, this perfection of the photographed face actually

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[82] I discuss the significance of the mother following an Asian tradition later in this chapter and the reason why the narrator notes "Les indigènes aisés allaient eux aussi au photographe, une fois par existence, quand ils voyaient que la mort approchait" (118).

confirms that the destroyed face is a site of creation and invention while the face in this photograph reflects a final death. Namely, the narrator's focuses on the similarity of the photographed faces reveals how there is no possible escape from this eternally fixed position. Rather than preserving a loved one's memory, the photographic image robs the person represented of any kind of singularity; they are erased. Even though these photographs give the individuals a more youthful aspect, the photograph does not immortalize them so much as it depicts their mortality. In this sense, the narrator's assertion that the individuals use the photograph to face, "affronter," death is particularly significant because the images give death a representation.

L'Amant, however, presents the reader with two kinds of death and this duality seems to stem from the desire to see and the need *not* to see. L*'Amant* proposes the impossibility of its own images, and this understanding paradoxically allows their communication to the reader through writing. The narrator speaks explicitly of this when she claims that the only reason why she can write about members of her family, and particularly her mother, is because she can no longer remember them:

> Ils sont morts maintenant, la mère et les deux frères. Pour les souvenirs aussi c'est trop tard…Je n'ai plus dans ma tête le parfum de sa peau ni dans mes yeux la couleur de ses yeux…C'est fini, je ne me souviens plus. C'est pourquoi j'en écris si facile d'elle maintenant, si long, si étiré, elle est devenue écriture courante. (38)

Strangely, death and forgetting allow the narrator to write about her family and to give them, in a manner of speaking, a new life as "écriture courante."[83] Despite the narrator's

[83] Duras explicitly discusses this kind of writing in her interview with Pivot: "Je disais que l'écriture courante que je cherchais depuis si longtemps, je l'ai atteinte. Maintenant j'en suis sûre. Et que par écriture courante, je dirais écriture presque distraite, qui court, qui est plus pressée d'attraper des choses que de les dire, voyez-vous. Je parle de la crête des mots, c'est une écriture qui courrait sur la crête, pour aller vite,

assertion “c’est fini” and the fact that this kind of writing proceeds from forgetting, the narrator presents this strategy as the only option for any kind of representation that does not kill its object. Moreover, in this hazy visual incarnation, the narrator imagines that she cannot actually picture her mother’s physical traits. In order to create the narrative and to present these images to the reader, the narrator must create a blind and inaccessible space in the text.

Barthes’s discussion of the photograph also addresses the possibility of an invisible space in the seemingly visible image, and one finds this somewhat contradictory notion in Duras’s own work. Barthes introduces the prospect of something in a photograph that escapes death, the punctum. This element of the photograph allows the image therein to escape the fixity of what-has-been: “Lorsqu’on définit la Photo comme une image immobile, cela ne veut pas dire seulement que les personnages qu’elle représente ne bougent pas; cela veut dire qu’ils ne *sortent* pas; ils sont anesthésiés et fichés, comme des papillons. Cependant, dès qu’il y a *punctum*, un champ aveugle se crée” (90). The punctum is thus the unfixed element of a photograph that constantly creates meaning. Barthes continues his description of the punctum as “une sorte de hors-champ subtil, comme si l’image lançait le désir au-delà de ce qu’elle donne à voir” (93). While Barthes couches this specific description in terms of a discussion of erotic versus pornographic images, the term *desire* is also a general one. Because the punctum is both beyond what the photograph allows the viewer to see and also integrally part of the photograph, the viewer has the simultaneous sense of recognizing what is in the image and desiring to see more.

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pour ne pas perdre. Parce que quand on écrit, c'est le drame, on oublie tout tout de suite et c'est affreux quelquefois.” Susan Cohen also suggests that *écriture courante* can refer to common speech, *courant*, and fluent speech, *parler couramment* (“Fiction” 58).

Duras's use of images in *L'Amant* (and, of course, elsewhere in her work) creates this kind of unseen space in the inherently visual image, and moreover, the space between the visible and the invisible is precisely where Duras situates the face in her work. From the first images of the narrator's destroyed face, the novel works to dissolve this image. This face disappears in the narrator's discussion of the untaken photograph from the ferry crossing and continues to vanish through the rest of the novel, specifically in the narrator's relationship to the older Chinese lover. Like the narrator's face, the lover's face is never entirely visible because the *visage* in *L'Amant* is anonymous, without a distinct identity. The novel's title suggests that the narrative will give a portrait of the lover, but his face is among the most indistinct images in the novel. The narrator declares at one point that she will never forget her first liaison with this older man, even if the face is forgotten, "je me souviendrais toute ma vie de cet après-midi, même lorsque j'aurais oublié jusqu'à son visage, son nom" (56). And, indeed, she refuses to assign an identity to the face that she sees in her memory: "Je revois encore le visage et je me souviens du nom." The narrator's avoidance of possessive pronouns throughout the novel and especially in the above quotation indicates that the face of which the narrator speaks is not any particular face. Just as in the inexistent photograph that does not freeze the image, Duras's text refuses to fix not only the identity but also the image of the face that circulates in her novel.[84] In an interview with Marianne Alphant at the time of *L'Amant*'s publication, Duras informs her audience: "Quand je parle de mon amant, je ne dis pas que

[84] One of the first drafts of the novel was called "L'Amant: Histoire de Betty Fernandez" (Adler 517). While Duras does describe her in one short section of *L'Amant*, this interest in the other woman shows how portraits are hidden in the text. Moreover, the portrait of this collaborator indicates how Duras's writing cannot be entirely assimilated by different political discourses. More than one specific political or social agenda, Duras subverts the power of vision and forms of dominant representation.

je revois *son* visage, je dis que je revois *le visage* et que je me souviens du nom. C'est rendu à l'extérieur. À vous. Je vous le donne" (29). Duras's insistence that the definite rather than the possessive article be used speaks to the way that the face is never seen and possessed in her novel. By insisting that the face is not connected to any one entity, Duras proposes that this image remains out of the kind of sight and objectification that kills. Like the narrator's discussion of the "visage détruit," this description of the lover's anonymous face is from a fixed and deadly position, and this allows for the image's circulation.

III. LE SANS VISAGE DE *L'AMANT DE LA CHINE DU NORD*

The tension between what is seen and unseen in *L'Amant* is is perhaps more pronounced in Duras's *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, particularly because this 1991 novel was published a year before the release of Jean-Jacques Annaud's 1992 film version of *L'Amant.* After the success of *L'Amant*, Duras began writing a script for a film version of the novel, but eventually sold the film rights to the work after a long period of illness and several creative disputes with Annaud. Duras then decided to rework the script into another novel, which went through several transformations.[85] In interviews conducted around the time of the release of the novel, Duras insists that the second version is the most important account of the story. She says to Jean-Louis Ezine in an interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur*, "L'Amant n'a été que le brouillon de "L'Amant de la Chine du Nord"" (54). Moreover, she maintains that the novel that initially grew out

[85] Laure Adler details this process in her biography of Duras. Adler explains that before Duras settled on *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, the novel was called *L'Amant dans la rue*, *L'Odeur de miel et du thé*, *Le Cinéma de l'amant*, *Le Roman de l'amant*, and *L'Amant recommence* (563).

of her attempts to write a film opposes any kind of previous cinematic project. She makes this sentiment clear in the novel's preface stating, "Je suis redevenue un écrivain de romans," and continues to echo this idea when she speaks about the novel's creation. In her televised interview with Bernard Rapp in 1991, Duras repeats that the book has no relationship to its cinematic precursor: "le livre a marqué ma rupture definitive avec le cinéma." Duras's discussion of Annaud's film characterizes this rupture, revealing that the split between her novel and the film emerges from the different way each work approaches what can be made visible. In an interview with *Le Monde*, for example, Duras insists that there is no relationship between the film of *L'Amant* and her new novel: "Le film n'aura rien à voir avec *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord,* qui maintenant est pour moi le véritable *Amant*" (Frodon 18). Duras's choice of the idiomatic expression "rien à voir," literally "nothing to see," suggests that her novel is indeed unlike Annaud's film because the written text does not allow the reader to see everything that transpires in the story between the young woman and the Chinese lover. Duras's text questions the possibility of spectacle while Annaud creates this spectacle.

Interestingly, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* contains cinematic elements, as we will see, but Duras opposes the concept of this text ever being a film. In her conversation with Rapp, Duras makes it clear that what she objects to in the idea of a cinematic version of the text is how the filmic version would make elements of the story visible. Duras remarks in her interview: "face au livre, le film quel qu'il soit,… était obscène" (Borgomano, "L'Amant" 526). Although Duras does not explicitly mention Annaud's film in her interview with Rapp, one can understand how the film version of *L'Amant* stands in stark contrast to *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, specifically in her terms of a

film version being "obscène." On one hand, Duras's word choice seems associated with the problem of filming the sexual liaison between the young protagonist and her older lover, explicit scenes that Annaud does include in his film. On the other hand, Duras's use of this word also has a much broader implication. Duras objects to what Annaud's filmic images make available and accessible to the viewer. In a footnote to *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord,* for example, Duras comments:

> Dans le cas d'un film tiré de ce livre-ci, il ne faudrait pas que l'enfant soit d'une beauté seulement belle. Cela serait peut-être dangereux pour le film…Une sorte de Miss France-enfant ferait s'effondrer le film tout entier. Plus encore : elle le ferait disparaître. La beauté ne fait rien. Elle ne regarde pas. Elle est regardée. (73)

In Duras's discussion with Rapp, and in the above footnote where she cautions against using a "beautiful" actress for the role, Duras implies that if the film were only spectacle, this display would shatter the film, destabilize it to the point that it would crumble. Her final remark in the quotation clarifies how the failure of the film would be due to how it focuses the gaze. The beautiful actress pictured in the film would be seen, but not be able to see. In this sense, the film would not be an examination of the gaze, but the process of objectifying the images in the frame. It seems, then, that Duras does not protest the potential images of the novel; rather, she struggles with how the spectacle of the film would simplify the act of looking, objectifying and fixing the image on screen. The film would not be able to develop in any dark, unknown, and secret space like "la chambre noire."[86]

[86] Once again, this counters Annaud's impulse to create spectacle in the film. Annaud himself published a book of the film entitled *L'Amant*, complete with images from the film's production. In this same book,

The rupture with cinema of which Duras speaks in her interview with Rapp is not as clearly defined as it may seem.[87] In fact, throughout the novel, Duras relies on an imaginary cinematic apparatus to contrast what can be seen and what cannot be seen in the novel. An early section of the novel begins: "C'est un livre./ C'est un film./ C'est la nuit" (17). The three short sentences, each their own line of text on the page, imply that both reading and viewing will take place in darkness. This constant questioning of what is visible continues in the narrator's placement of a movie camera in the first few pages. The camera follows a girl, "l'enfant," through the streets of a colonial outpost in southern Indochina. Not only is this figure's back to the camera's lens, but she eventually walks out of the frame: "L'enfant sort de l'image. Elle quitte le champ de la caméra" (21). The narrator constantly describes what the camera cannot see and even elaborates on the disappearance of what is available to the camera's gaze. Once the young woman vanishes from view, the camera is left to examine her absence, "Il n'y a plus rien à voir que la disparition du Mékong, et la rue droite et sombre" (21). Even the structure of this six-page section of the novel reflects this visual absence; between each few lines of text, Duras adds an equal amount of blank space on the page. Both image and text are removed from the reader's sight. The reader is, in effect, blinded by the writing, and this blindness seems to be inherent in the text itself. The narrator continues: "La voix qui parle ici est celle, écrite, du livre. Voix aveugle. Sans visage" (17). Echoing the faceless

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Annaud reveals his project of privileging vision in his reinterpretation of Duras's novel. He explains that the goal of his film is "lead[ing] spectators to the spectacle of pleasure, and making them love without reservation the image of desire, the image of love" (Winston 84). Instead of being an impulse that destroys and moves through its intended object, this focal point of desire is made manifest in Annaud's spectacle.

[87] And here, I agree with Madeleine Borgomano's assessment in "L'Amant de la Chine du Nord : chant de deuil pour un film absent": "Hors texte, il est présenté par son auteur comme "rupture définitive avec le cinéma", choix du "roman", donc de "l'écrit". Mais, à bien le lire, il apparait au contraire, comme manifestation exemplaire du désir de cinéma, comme texte superlativement "hybride" où s'exaspère le conflit entre écriture et cinéma" (520).

voices of Duras's films, this textual voice is also "sans visage." The blind voice is the medium through which the text is conveyed. At this point in the novel, the narrator only alludes to faces to point out that they are impossible to see.

More than the text not having a face, however, I would argue that the face is at the center of the novel's vanishing point. For instance, like *L'Amant*, the retelling of the lovers' story also begins with the memory of two faces, but in this later novel the narrator makes these faces impossible to see from the very beginning of the text. Duras writes in the signed and dated forward to the novel, "Cette fois-ci au cours du récit est apparu tout à coup, dans la lumière éblouissante, le visage de Thanh-et celui du petit frère, l'enfant différent." The narrator's invitation to look upon a face in the opening pages of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* is very different from Duras's revelation of a face in *L'Amant*. In the earlier text, the reader focuses on the details of the narrator's lined and worn face, however, in the later text, light obscures the other's face. In the "lumière éblouissante," the narrator and subsequently the reader cannot determine facial details. This blinding light continues to impede the gaze throughout the rest of the novel. As the blind camera follows the young, nameless protagonist, the narrator writes "Elle est devant nous. On voit toujours mal son visage dans la lumière jaune de la rue" (20). In this respect, faces are not missing from this work; instead, they allow for the circulation of the gaze in the text, but they cannot be seen.

To a similar degree, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* continues the first version of the novel's description and discussion of the problem of seeing faces. Many scenes in the two novels resemble one another, and among these scenes are the moments when each novel's protagonists come face to face with other characters in the texts. In both novels,

the face to face moment is one of violence, specifically in the confrontations between the mother and daughter. In *L'Amant*, the narrator describes a moment when she looks at her mother and as a result, the mother is entirely lost to her: "J'ai regardé ma mère. Je l'ai mal reconnue. Et puis, dans une sorte d'effacement soudain, de chute, brutalement je ne l'ai plus reconnue du tout…Rien ne se proposait pour habiter l'image" (105). In one sense, this moment of erasure is what makes the narrator understand her mother's madness. In another sense, this scene transposes the death and loss that the narrator describes when looking at a photograph to a moment in life. The fact that she does not recognize her mother is not what makes this moment frightening; instead, it is the fact that nothing fills this emptiness. The narrator continues, "J'ai crié. Un cri faible, un appel à l'aide pour que craque cette glace dans laquelle se figeait mortellement toute la scène" (105). She describes the image of this scene as if it were trapped, petrified, in the reflection of a mirror The threatening aspect of this face to face moment is that the two might never be able to escape from this encounter.[88] *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* also narrates a frightening moment when the protagonist comes face to face with her mother. After an altercation between the two early in the novel, the young woman moves to embrace her mother, but their stony, set faces belie the intimacy of this gesture: "Silence. Le visage de la mère est fixe, effrayé. Le visage de l'enfant est de même épouvanté. Elles sont raides toutes les deux face à face" (30). While these two scenes occur at different moments in each character's life, the scene in *L'Amant* taking place much later after the liaison with the Chinese lover, both use the same kind of vocabulary, words such as

[88] I cannot explore the importance of sound in this specific scene due to the fact that it is outside of the purview of this discussion of Duras's works; however, the inarticulate cry is an important detail in this author's texts. Sound serves as a marker for what cannot be said and what cannot be seen.

frozen and fixed, to express what happens when the protagonist simultaneously looks into her mother's face and is looked upon. Because the gaze actually meets (and annihilates) its object in these moments, death enters into the face to face exchange.

L'Amant de la Chine du Nord revisits certain scenes from *L'Amant* in order to move beyond the idea of the face as a final, dead image and to introduce the concept that the face is also an unfixed boundary, an image that never becomes an object. In a doubly reflexive moment, the protagonist of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* gazes upon herself in a mirror, and the scene combines the account of two similar moments that appear in *L'Amant*.[89] In the earlier novel, the narrator gazes upon herself at two different points in the text: the first when she examines her aged, destroyed face and the second when she remembers looking at herself in the mirror when purchasing her hat. In the later novel, these two scenes become one. This moment seems to comment on the text's questionable status as autobiography, of attempting to see one's self in a "miroir d'encre"[90]; yet, these mirror scenes also question the function of the mirror. When the protagonist looks upon herself in *L'Amant*, she sees herself as another: "je me vois comme une autre." The protagonist avoids the absolute destruction of a face to face to moment through acknowledging that she cannot see herself in the mirror; the elusive image that the mirror cannot entirely send back is able to continue to transform. The account of this event in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* amplifies the necessity in the narrative that the narrator not see herself:

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[89] In "Imaginary White Female: Myth, Race, and Colour in Duras's *L'amant de la Chine du Nord*," Kate Ince discusses Duras's self quotation and the subsequent creation of her own myth (116). This constant self-revision, rather than being a way to fix the image, allows the image to remain fluid and imaginary.

[90] I allude here to Michel Beaujour's use of this expression in his book *Miroirs d'encre* and his discussion of the obscure and compromised image reflected in the autobiographical text.

> Elle se regarde. Elle se voit. Elle le voit. Elle voit le chapeau d'homme en feutre bois de rose au large ruban noir… Elle se regarde elle-elle s'est approchée de son image. Elle s'approche encore. Ne se reconnaît pas bien. Elle ne comprend pas ce qui est arrivé. Elle le comprendra des années plus tard : elle a déjà le visage détruit de toute sa vie. (87-88)

In *L'Amant*, the narrative voice vacillates between the first person and the third person, but in the scenes of self-reflection the narrator refers to herself as "je." Conversely, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* is told entirely in the third person, and it seems significant that the text underscores this fact in the moment when the protagonist does not recognize what she sees in the mirror. One could imagine that in this moment where the protagonist understands that her own image will constantly escape her, the pronoun "elle" negates the first-person perspective taken in *L'Amant*. More than *L'Amant*, Duras's second novel about the adolescent girl's affair questions the possibility of reflecting on one's own face and the necessity, to the narrative, of not being able to picture a face. Seeing the face means arresting the images on paper. In order to become "écriture courante," to convey how words can flow and run like water, the text's image can never be held by the gaze.

Looking does not necessarily mean seeing in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, and this distinction repositions the face in the text. The text subverts the hierarchy implicit in sight, between subject and object, particularly in the way the relationship develops between the young woman and her lover. As the two become more and more intimate, they begin to look upon each other less and less. In the first scene on the ferry, the two exchange looks several times: "Il la regarde. Ils se regardent. Se sourient" (36). In fact, the pages that recount the first meeting are saturated with the verb *regarder*, and this verb

echoes several times in the same sentences, let alone the same paragraph: “Il la regarde regarder” (37). The repeated use of this verb stands out in relationship to another verb that could have been used, *voir*. The subtle difference between these verbs is that the first conveys the desire to see, the act of looking, and the second infers the ability to capture the visual image. The Chinese man watches the girl watching him, and this focus elides the fact of seeing *her*. This lack of sight that captures an image continues into the account of their relationship.

Unlike the first scenes in which they constantly direct their gazes towards each other, later scenes in the novel focus on how the two are unable to see each other: “Ils se regardent sans le vouloir. Alors ils baissent les yeux. Puis restent ainsi à se voir les yeux fermés sans bouger et sans se voir, comme s’ils se regardaient encore” (70). The text capitalizes on the ambiguous meaning of the gesture of lowering one’s eyes, which can be a sign of modesty, embarrassment, or respect. While their inability to look at one another certainly stems from the illicit and sexual nature of the relationship that develops between the two, the description of how looking transforms in the text indicates that there is some other reason for why their eyes no longer meet. Just as the narrator describes the story taking place at night, in the dark where the character’s face is obscured, the love story is also one that perforates any image it might create. Because the image operates within a structure of desire rather than a structure of optics, the image cannot be accessed. When the girl and the Chinese man part after their first encounter, for example, after he drives her to her pension in Saigon, the narrator explains: “L’histoire est déjà là,/ déjà inévitable,/ Celle d’un amour aveuglant,/ Toujours à venir,/ Jamais, oublié” (52). As the narrator explains, this story of desire is one that cannot be located in any point in time; it

is “déjà là” and “toujours à venir.” The destruction of any kind of temporal boundary places the story in an eternal present, and subsequently its images cannot be conveyed because this story cannot be *re*presented. This problem of representation echoes in the narrator’s description of this love as “blinding.” This love, and one cannot ignore here how *l’amour* nearly misses sounding like *la mort*, simultaneously compels and repels the gaze. As a result, the description of this relationship establishes that both the characters and the reader are, to a certain extent, blind, *non-voyant.*

Sight as an organizing principle disappears in the girl’s relationship with the lover, and the text continues to explore how the loss of this faculty transforms into a different mode of looking. One scene in particular that breaks down sight’s dominance in the novel is the journey from the ferry to the girl’s pension in Saigon. The man invites the young girl to ride in his car, and during the trip, they never have a face to face interaction. Rather than looking at one another, they are constantly looking away or at other objects. Both characters, for example, spend time looking out at the countryside: “Regardent ailleurs. Dehors, à perte de vue, les rizières. Le vide du ciel…Le soleil voilé” (41). The vast and empty landscape effectively situates how looking loses itself in the unlimited and unbounded space; “à perte de vue” is a telling expression because it infers the lack (or loss) of sight in the scene that follows. Describing the car ride, the narrator continues: “C’est cet arrêt de mouvement, de parler, ces faux regards, vers la monotonie extérieure, la route, la lumière, les rizières jusqu’au ras du ciel, qui font cette histoire peu à peu se taire” (42). Interestingly, the blankness surrounding them, the fact that nothing notable offers itself up to be seen, and more importantly the understanding that looking in and itself is not what it seems (as suggested by the narrator’s description of the characters’

"faux regards") has an effect on how their story will be told. The narrator uses images of the vacant exterior setting to convey the idea that certain elements of the story are untellable.

This particular scene triggers the disruption between the boundaries of different senses; the blinding love results in the inability of the story to be articulated, and elsewhere in the novel, other senses, like touch, continue to disrupt and replace sight. Even though the text describes the face to face with another as a violent interaction, the fact that the text conveys synesthetic experience enables the narrative to create different ways of perceiving the face. In the scene in the car on the way to Saigon, the girl's first physical interaction with the Chinese man is one that does not just elide vision, it substitutes touch for vision and vice versa. In the avoidance of each other's gaze, the young girl turns her attention to the man's hand as it rests beside her. She looks on the hand and examines its every detail: "Elle la tient comme un objet jamais vu encore d'aussi près: une main chinoise, d'homme chinois." The narrator's use of the adjective *Chinese* to describe the hand is interesting here considering that she does not look into his face. The examination of the hand stands in for the inspection of the face, which seems to question the face's traditional role as means of identification. Moreover, the face more than the hand would identify the man as Chinese. Rather than the face offering itself up to the gaze, the hand becomes the object of scrutiny. In a sense, the hand stands in for the exotic other's image; yet, the way she approaches him, essentially with eyes closed, indicates a desire to not fix his identity as a separate other. Further description shows how the girl's fascination with the objectified hand is one that complicates how characters see

in the novel: “Elle est émerveillée par la main. Elle la touche “pour voir”” (42). This “blind” character must “see” through her hands.

Even though the relationship evolves from its blinding quality, “un amour aveuglant,” this does not mean that face ceases to function in the liaison between the two lovers. For example, in several scenes between the young woman and the older man, hands take on the role of the eyes in the interaction with the face. The sense of touch becomes a sense of sight because looking can no longer be a medium of revelation; as a result, the characters use their hands to see. During the trip to Saigon, the man examines the young woman in a manner that confuses the sense of touch and sight, and as a result, redefines the position of the face in the novel. He asks her to close her eyes, and then he uses is hands to explore her face: “Sa main caresse le visage de l’enfant, les lèvres, les yeux fermés” (47). The face maintains its importance as a focal point of desire towards the other, even as the relationship between the looking subject and the desired object complicates the text’s definition of what it means to look.[91] The characters in the novel must approach the face through different senses. Certainly, the fact that their relationship eventually becomes sexual explains the importance of the body in their interactions; yet, the text constantly focuses on the importance of the face, in particular. The simple act of touching the other’s face is one that both the young girl and the lover repeat throughout the novel. In the following three quotations taken from separate moments in the novel, the text echoes with the description of how the hands function as a kind of face in the encounters between the two characters: “Avec ses mains, il dénude le visage de l’enfant

[91] Even though the text emphasizes his ethnicity in the constant allusions to him as the Chinese man, the narrator refuses to do this through sight. This gesture is not necessarily an elision of his difference, but as I will show below, it is a difference that the narrator recuperates in the establishment of her own image.

pour le voir dans son entier" (108); "Elle le regarde, elle prend son visage entre ses mains, le regarde, ferme ses yeux et regarde encore" (143); "Il la regarde de toutes ses forces. Avec les mains il dénude son visage pour la voir jusqu'au non-sens, jusqu'à ne plus la reconnaître" (220). In this last passage, the verb *denuder* is of particular interest because of what it implies in the action of touching as seeing. Unlike the gaze in these texts, which is unable to locate the image, touch strips or lays the face bare. Hands are not only a means of sight, but they create the potential of connecting to the other and of overcoming the distance between two subject positions.

The text extends the confusion between the function of the hand and the face, between the sense of touch and sight, to the way the characters encounter each others' bodies; after their first sexual encounter, the young woman looks on her lover's nakedness: "L'enfant. Elle est seule dans l'image, elle regarde, le nu de son corps à lui aussi inconnu que celui d'un visage, aussi singulier, adorable, que celui de sa main sur son corps pendant le voyage" (78-79).[92] Despite his visibility and vulnerability, the lover's nakedness shares the anonymity and obscurity of an unknown face. In this intimate moment, the narrative contrasts the immediacy of the lover's naked body, "*son* corps," with an ambiguous and unidentified face, "*un* visage." In this particular scene, the text contrasts the imaginary filmic text that it proposes with the literary text that it actually presents for the reader. Theoretically, if the image were a filmic one, the young woman would be the only character to appear. The presence of the lover would only be implied in the emotions that pass over the young woman's face until the camera cut to a

[92] Later in the novel, the narrator repeats that in looking upon the lover, he becomes anonymous and unknown; yet, she also quotes from *L'Amant*: "L'enfant le regarde. Elle retrouve "l'inconnu du bac"" (142). The novel creates a contradiction in how this "stranger" is still known so intimately by the narrator and also by the reader.

different shot or moved to include the lover in the picture. Even though the text then seems to superimpose the image of the lover's naked body over the figure of the girl, thus showing the reader what the girl sees, the overall description questions how it is even possible to see that body. In this moment, the reader only sees the lover's body through the figure of "l'enfant." In *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, as in *L'Amant*, the face serves as the primary site where different kinds of boundaries begin to blur: limits between the face and the rest of the body as well as what is visible and what is invisible.

Interestingly, as the novels conflate the body and the face, boundaries between the self and both the sexual and cultural other begin to collapse. In *L'Amant*, the lover tells the girl that she resembles an Indochinese woman, specifically because of her body. He explains to the girl, "Qu'elle a la finesse de leurs poignets, leurs cheveux drus dont on dirait qu'ils ont pris pour eux toute la force, longs comme les leurs, et surtout cette peau, cette peau de tout le corps qui vient de l'eau de la pluie qu'on garde ici pour le bain des femmes, des enfants" (120). *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* echoes this comparison when the lover in the later story directly tells the young girl: "Tu as la peau de la pluie comme les femmes de l'Asie. Tu as aussi la finesse des poignets, et aussi des chevilles comme elles" (85-86). Even though the lover describes several points of comparison, including the young girl's delicate frame, the similarity to which the text constantly returns is her "rain" skin. I will discuss below how the lover's comment fits into a larger discussion of race, but here the importance of the skin seems to follow from the conflation of touch and vision as described in this chapter's prior discussion of face and body. As the boundaries between different parts of the body dissolve, so too does the separation between the senses used to approach the other. Even though the narrator *sees* that the French girl

shares certain physical characteristics with Indochinese women, the most prominent quality that she shares with these other women is how her skin feels. Touch as sight, more than sight in and of itself, is able to subvert the way that difference is socially constructed through visual markers.

Furthermore, this similarity is not just shared between the girl and other women; it also links most of the primary characters in both of the novels, thus breaking down the boundaries between the self and the sexual other. For example, in *L'Amant*, one of the observations that the girl makes about her lover is the softness of *his* skin. The narrator describes the protagonist's fascination with this physical aspect: "La peau est d'une somptueuse douceur. Le corps. Le corps est maigre, sans force, sans muscles" (48). Within the economy of the novel, *L'Amant*, this description seems to result in the feminization of the lover. The above quotation connects the suppleness of his skin to the weakness of his body. It seems as if the text places the Chinese lover in a stereotypical role of the feminine Asian man; yet, this description does not place the girl in a more dominant position to the colonial other. More important than the system of domination that this description appears to put into place, is that this description results in making the lover more like the girl herself. Skin is not a marker of difference.

Moreover, in the transition from *L'Amant* to *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, this soft skin becomes less an indication of the nebulous boundary between sexes than between races. In the 1991 novel, the narrator clearly indicates that the Chinese man in this work is much more masculine than the man in the earlier novel. In the first moment where the girl sees her soon-to-be-lover, the narrator explains: "De la limousine noire est sorti un autre homme que celui du livre, un autre Chinois de la Mandchourie. Il est un

peu différent de celui du livre: il est un peu plus robuste que lui, il a moins peur que lui, plus d'audace. Il a plus de beauté, plus de santé. Il est plus "pour le cinéma" que celui du livre" (36). In addition to noting his more substantial presence, one of the first things that "elle" notices about the Chinese man is his skin: "Il a la peau blanche des Chinois du Nord" (36). His skin's color is important in the later text but not in the earlier one, and the narrator uses the description of his skin tone (and not the feel of his skin, which will come later) to introduce the connection between the young girl and her lover. What is noticeable in Duras's rewriting of the scene on the ferry with regards to the skin color of the two characters is that while *L'Amant* focuses on "l'enfant blanche" standing by the boat's rail, the later novel focuses on the white skin of the Chinese man.

The description of the Chinese lover's skin has a two-fold significance: this added information decreases the racial difference between the two characters, and it also redefines what "whiteness" signifies in the novel. In her article "Imaginary White Female: Myth, Race, and Colour in Duras's *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*," Kate Ince explores how the use of the description *white* not only allows a resemblance between the girl and her lover, but it also redirects the exoticization of the cultural other. As Ince explains, "Duras's 'autobiographical' and fictional texts, self-designations of whiteness and observations of the white skin colour of others seem, in a manner that deftly reverses most representations of the colonial Other, to attribute racial exoticism to whiteness rather than to the colour of the oppressed natives" (121). Thus, the novel designates the "fille blanche" as other as well.[93] In this sense, the text's allusions to the lover's white skin place him in the position of an exotic other because of his resemblance to the girl.

[93] Duras's statement to Bernard Pivot also relates this exoticization of herself. She explains in the itnerview, "Je suis créole. Je suis née là-bas." Rather than indicating her *créolité* in order to open herself to the other

In *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, the face ceases to operate in terms of identifying the other not only because of the way that touch becomes sight, but also because the novel creates a fantasmic racial identity that designates the girl and other characters in the novel. This complexity becomes most apparent in a later scene of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* where the Chinese lover visits the girl's home. Observing the girl with her family, the lover notes the similarities between the younger of the girl's two brothers and the girl and also between the brother and the sister and the young Indochinese boy who lives with the family:

> Le petit frère est là aussi, Paulo... C'est un adolescent beau à la façon d'un métis. Le Chinois et lui se sourient. Le sourire du petit frère rappelle celui de sa jeune sœur. A côté du petit frère il y a un autre jeune homme très beau, c'est le petit chauffeur de la mère, celui qu'on appelle Thanh. Ils se ressemblent avec le petit frère et la sœur sans qu'on puisse dire comment: la peur peut-être dans le regard, très pure, innocente. (130)

This passage presents some telling indications of how the novel does not create a discourse about visible racial difference. The likeness between the three adolescents seems to be located in the face. More specifically, their resemblance stems from the lack of a definite, pictured face. The narrator notices the similarity between the brother's and sister's smiles, and he also notices the similarity between the gazes of the three young people, two features that as we have seen render the rest of the face invisible.[94] Thanh

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(in terms of Glissant's definition of *créolité*, "un identité ouverte sur l'autre"(52)) Duras's statement seems more intended to position herself as an outsider to French culture.

[94] This moment echoes the description from the narrator's preface of "le visage de Thanh—et celui du petit frère, l'enfant différent."

can look like the brother and sister because of their missing faces. One could imagine, then, that the resemblance between Thanh, the brother, and the girl is not that they look similar. Even though the narrator uses the word *métis* to describe what the brother looks like, this word creates a link between the three young people because it describes something that cannot be seen.[95]

Resemblance crosses ethnic boundaries in the novel because of the way that this text creates an imaginary and fantasmic concept of *métissage*. The narrator describes the brother as "beau à la façon d'un métis" not because he physically looks like he might be Indochinese but because the brother's image aligns him with the dissolving boundaries of identity in the text. At this point in the narrative, *métis* is a word that has already been introduced in relation to the students at the girl's school, "des métisses abandonnées." The narrator notes, however, that the girl and her friend, Hélène Lagonelle, are unlike this community because "Elles sont de race blanche" (65), and they both have families. Duras's allusion to *métissage* seems to align in some ways to Edouard Glissant's discussion of this term in "Métissage et Créolisation." Glissant provides two ways of thinking about *métissage*. The first is a traditional literary definition: "le métis est un personnage bâtard" (47), like the abandoned *métisses* at the school. The second way that Glissant defines this term is in relation to the "lieux commun" that it creates as "une source possible de richesses et de disponibilités" (49). Duras's novel does not seem to

[95] A description of the girl herself echoes that this similarity is not seen: "Cette gracilité du corps la donnerait comme une métisse, mais non, les yeux sont trop clairs" (39). Her connection to some kind of *métissage* is entirely imaginary and fantasmic. She believes that she looks like a *métisse* even though this might not objectively be true. On one hand, her green eyes (a Western trait) support the idea that the narrator works within, rather than alters, the dominant colonial structure. On the other hand, as I have explored in my last chapter, "light eyes" are significant in Duras's works because of the way that they dissolve boundaries and allow for an unceasing passage through seemingly fixed and set representations.

illustrate the cultural exchange indicated in Glissant's definition, but Duras's fantasy of *métissage* opens up to possibility of an unbounded identity through the relation with the other. The narrator's use of this term does not only designate a marginalized individual without a family or a specific race (as it does in relation to the girls at the school) but it also creates a space in the text where the girl projects a fantasmic and imagined identity. In the economy of Duras's texts, the use of the word *métis* marks a desire to collapse boundaries that would otherwise define and delineate the opposition of characters to one another.

The protagonist imagines that she displays, like her brother, characteristics that complicate the separation between the self and the racial other. The novel does seem to show a fascination towards the cultural other; yet, this enthrallment begins in the narrator's fantasized notions of her identity and origin. Racial difference becomes less and less a factor in the novel because the girl creates a category of *métissage* for herself and for those who she believes are like her. In Duras's essay "Les enfants maigres et jeunes" (1981) one finds a way of understanding this fantasy. In this autofictive essay, Duras describes herself and her brother as other in relation to their own family:

> Comment est-elle notre mère, comme est-ce possible, mère de nous, nous si maigres, de peau jaune….Plus tard, lorsque nous avons quinze ans, on nous demande: êtes-vous bien les enfants de votre père? Regardez-vous, vous êtes des métis. Jamais nous n'avons répondu. Pas de problème: on sait que ma mère a été fidèle et que le métissage vient d'ailleurs. Cet ailleurs est sans fin il s'agit d'autre chose qui ne peut pas être dit. (278)

In this passage, the narrator creates her origin outside of a genetic and biological structure. Moreover, this *métissage* does not really define the girl. If anything, *métissage* in this work and in Duras's other autofictive texts aligns her characters with an unknown and limitless identity. Perhaps the most salient example of a figure that contrasts Duras's idea of a boundless identity is the mother's position in the text at both ends of the colonial and social spectrum. To a certain extent, the novel presents the mother as a *métisse* as well. Expulsed from colonial society because of her poverty and her occupation as a teacher in a school for Indochinese children, she seems to be in exile herself. Yet, the mother's actions constantly place her within the constructed and defined position of colonizer, specifically in her relationship to the family's servant, Dô, and in the mother's ill-fated purchase of a plot of land that was found to be useless due to constant flooding from the delta. This need to possess and to control is reflected in the mother's love for the photographs that take the place of her children. Ultimately, the mother's position is inflexible and deadly. As Ince observes, "the mother is never ascribed the flexibility of body and race that characterizes the two younger siblings" (122), and the image that conveys this best is the mother's face in the formal photographic portrait described earlier. In one of the last photographs taken of her before her death, her face resembles the faces of the Indochinese who also sit for their portraits when they felt that their death was imminent. As mentioned above, the mother's resemblance to this cultural other is only in photographs and the similarities between the dead and fixed images.

In both novels, the text focuses the girl's desire on characters that embody a racial elasticity.[96] Resemblance, then, does not elide difference; instead, it allows for there to be greater freedom in how to define traditionally opposed concepts or terms. Returning to the discussion of skin in the novel, it is a trait that overcomes these limits of identity. Even though the lover in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* is more masculine than the same character in *L'Amant*, he still has the same smooth skin. During one exchange between the Chinese man and the girl, the novel reveals how the skin's specificity continues to break down boundaries between differentiated characters. The girl makes a remark about the lover's "rain skin," and the lover responds that he shares this trait with the girl's younger brother: "- Toi aussi tu as la peau de la pluie./- Ton petit frère aussi./- Oui, aussi, on est trois à avoir la peau de la pluie" (149). In each novel, depictions of the two lovers consistently conflate the face with the rest of the body and sight with touch; as a result, skin becomes an important medium of connection with the other. Establishing sight through touch also eliminates danger of capturing the object's image in a fixed and frozen image. The resemblance between her lover's skin and her brother's skin is what connects the two male characters despite the cultural and ethnic differences between these figures.[97] The attention to soft skin—a trait that appeals to touch more than vision—defines a singular kind of trait shared between the self and other. The desired other is like the self; the girl resembles both her lover and her brother.

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[96] Another aspect that overrides ethnic difference is the discussion of wealth in novel : "Même si je suis riche un jour je resterai avec une sale mentalité de pauvre, un corps, un visage de pauvre, toute ma vie j'aurai l'air comme ça" (148).

[97] Another character who falls into this category of *métisse* character is the school friend, Hélène Lagonelle. More so in *L'Amant* than in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, the girl notices her friend's soft skin, "Le corps de Hélène Lagonelle est lourd, encore innocent, la douceur de sa peau est telle, celle de certains fruits, elle est au bord de ne pas être perçue, illusoire un peu, c'est trop" (91). Like the girl, the brother, and the lover, Hélène's skin makes her appearance "illusory," designating her fantasmic identity.

One of the developments in the narrative that occurs between *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* is that the girl's incestuous love for her brother parallels the social and moral transgressions of her desire for the Chinese man. Familial terms such as brother and sister lose their specific meaning and relationship to one another in the narrator's explanation of the love between the girl and her brother. The character of the brother eventually merges with the memory of the Chinese lover in Duras's discussion of the text. For example, in her 1988 interview with Luce Perron, Duras announces, "le petit frère était le Chinois finalement. C'est ça mon secret."[98] The sexual and sometimes incestuous discourse of desire in both texts has a connection to the way the face disappears in the novel and yet still has a function beyond how it appeals to sight.[99] Early in the novel *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, the narrator describes the girl looking upon her brother's face as he sleeps, "Il dort profondément. Les yeux entrouverts comme "ces" enfants-là. Il a le visage lisse, intact de ces enfants "différents"" (31). The brother's face stands out in this description because of its paradoxically distinct and vague qualities. The smooth face that indicates no specific characteristics is not noticeable. What is conspicuous, however, is his resemblance to "ces enfants différents." In her 1984 interview with Pivot, Duras alludes to her love for her brother adding that her brother was "attardé." Perhaps Duras is suggesting that her brother was developmentally disabled, but

[98] I do not quote this statement because I necessarily believe that Duras has revealed a secret, but it is evidence for the way that Duras's texts subvert identity. Cited by Cousseau in *Poétique de l'enfance*.

[99] In her book *Duras la métisse*, Catherine Bouthors-Paillart explores the relationship between the girl's imagined *métissage* and her incestuous love for her brother. "Entre déliaison et inceste, Duras tente d'investir l'espace intervallaire du métissage: par son ambiguïté même—à la fois métissage et *mé*tissage—il relève du désir fusionnel incestueux et de la dynamique propre à la déliaison, mais sans jamais pour autant se réduire à l'une ou l'autre" (38). This author distinguishes between an ideal "métissage" that connects the self and other and a "*mé*tissage" that creates a rupture between the self and other. The narrator's two transgressions, race mixing and incest, are diametrically opposed in terms of their potential for miscegenation or inbreeding, yet fall into the text's definition of *métissage*.

as Anne Cousseau explains in her book *Poétique de L'Enfance chez Marguerite Duras*, the brother is not the only "enfant différent" in Duras's work. Cousseau, citing Duras in two different interviews,[100] argues that the children in this author's narratives share similar traits with her mad characters, specifically because both types of characters have permeable limits. The boundaries between these characters, others, and even their environment are unfixed and mutable. As the narrator of *L'Amant* explains with regard to her brother: "Nous nous ressemblons à un point très frappant, surtout le visage" (68). Moreover, as I have indicated in an earlier section, the narrator of *L'Amant* explains that she and her brother resemble one another, "surtout le visage." The girl shares her brother's smooth and "different" face, which although it might seem to contrast with the image of the destroyed face, presents the radical alterity of both characters.

Resemblance, in Duras's work, does not necessarily mean exact sameness, but the erasure of superficial differences that reveal defined and delineated limits.[101] In *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*'s account of the sexual encounter between the sister and the brother, it does not seem coincidental that the passage begins with the protagonist gazing into a mirror and seeing her brother instead of seeing herself: "Dans la glace passe l'image du petit frère qui traverse la cour" (209). Of note in this quotation is the understanding that the mirror does not reflect the girl's image, and more importantly, the image that is

[100] Cousseau refers to Duras's comments "les enfants et les fous se ressemblent" and "les enfants sont des fous" (407).

[101] Although this concept was discussed to a certain extent in the previous chapter, I believe that as the face's boundaries collapse because of this resemblance, so too do the textual limitations as a result of Duras's constant need to rewrite. Bernard Alazet examines this issue as it pertains to Duras's revisions and rewritings of her texts "la réécriture porte en elle cette tension qui lui fait inscrire, au moment même où elle est gage de répétition, un léger déplacement, une légère dissonance qui sera à même de tracer une avancée" (Alazet, "Faire rêver la langue" 56). One finds a further discussion of this "displacement" in Jean Cléder's article "De la littérature au cinéma: pour une poétique intégrative de l'exception": "La ressemblance systématisée ne fait pas autre chose que designer, de manière très spectaculaire, une singularité qui se dérobe" (212).

reflected is in movement.[102] The desire for the other is not for an exact simulacrum of the self, but for an encounter that dissolves any kind of fixed position. Moving from *L'Amant* to *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, readers can certainly trace the disappearance of the face as an image in the text; yet, the text never entirely absorbs this image. Despite the desire for resemblance the face never fully disappears because of its ambiguous status between self and other. In some ways, this trajectory from the seemingly physical "visage détruit" of the first book's narrator to the unseen girl "sans visage" in the second novel reveals Duras's ostensibly autobiographical work to be a process of self-effacement. However, the importance of the face in the narrator's relationship to the other, and thus to the self, necessitates a different understanding of how the face operates in the text. No longer an image that defines a contained self, the face that Duras presents in these two novels allows her to explore an illimitable connection to the desired other.

The face is not just an image presented in a text, in these novels by Duras, it is actually a channel for writing in the way that it focalizes, albeit elliptically, desire in these texts. Perhaps the most striking example of this is *C'est tout* (1995), the last work published by Duras during her lifetime. In a unique way, this short text embodies the complexity and paradoxes of her earlier "autobiographical" projects. The text consists of a transcription of the extremely ill author's rambling commentary about death, writing, and love: words recorded by her young, gay lover Yann Andréa. At points, Andréa's voice even enters into dialogue with Duras, almost as in imitation of Duras's famous

[102]The brother/sister relationship in Duras's film and play *Agatha* (1980) presents an earlier discussion of how incest in this author's works is a question of finding an absolute resemblance in another person. Commenting on her play, Duras, in the book of interviews *Marguerite Duras à Montreal* explains the ideal relationship between the siblings in the text: "Il se souvient du regard sur le corps de sa soeur. C'est à dire la force de ce regard, de cette découverte. D'une identité finalement. Ils sont du même sang. Ils sont les mêmes. Ils sont donc inséparables, puisque c'est comme un même corps, c'est ça que j'appelle le bonheur, et qui est recherché constamment et toujours à travers les tentatives de tous les amants" (52).

interviews. Despite the fact that the first page reads, “Pour Yann mon amant de la nuit. Signé: Marguerite, l’aimante de cet amant adoré” (7), critics disputed the authenticity of the book.[103] This questioning of the authorial signature, however, seems to align with the paradoxes of Duras’s autobiographical confessions throughout her career, each of her revelations placing the reader in a conflicted position between believing the claim or recognizing Duras’s mediated performance.

Many passages of *C’est tout* offer themselves to be read as either wrenching truth or artfully executed fiction, none more so than the moments where the narrator alludes to the author’s face and its disappearance: “Je n’ai plus de bouche, plus de visage” (47). Some critics interpret this statement as symbolizing the author’s last words, without a mouth the author can no longer speak. Yet, other analyses of this book interpret this description as empty spectacle.[104] Her comment seems to communicate her true fears about dying; yet, this dire remark makes an event to be seen out of her demise. In this text that theoretically conveys Duras’s “last words,” the gesture itself problematizes its own authenticity. Duras’s use of her face as an image once again serves as the focus for the conflict between true confession and invented story. In any case, the face does ultimately seem to vanish in the text. The last reference to the author’s countenance shifts from the use of the word “visage” to “figure”: “Je sais ce que je vais subir: la mort. Ce qui m’attend: ma figure à la morgue” (58). Implicit in this distinction between *visage* and

[103] Yann Andréa had previously co-published a book with Duras, *M.D.*, about her recovery after being in a coma for several weeks.

[104] For a further discussion of this passage in *C’est Tout*, see ““À corps” et désaccords de l’écriture désaccordée au corps comme lieu de l’écriture chez Marguerite Duras” by Sylvie Loignon and Martin Crowley’s discussion in his book *Duras, Writing, and the Ethical*.

figure is the transcendent nature of the *visage* and the fixedness of the physical, dead *figure.*

Despite the obvious description of a once-and-for-all death in the in this discussion of the author's face, *C'est tout* also creates another *visage* in the text, the face of the lover. The narrator's preoccupation with her face contrasts with her interaction with this other face. Punctuating the text at several moments is the narrator's supplication to the lover, sometimes in the *vous* form, "Venez dans mon visage" (27), and sometimes in the *tu* form "Viens dans mon visage" (40). First and foremost, this vacillation between "venez" and "viens" multiplies the potential address of her plea; she appeals, potentially, to an infinite number of others. This desire is not for her to replace one *visage* with another, but to merge with this other's face. The repetition of the verb *venir* when using the word *visage* stands in contrast to the fixed *figure* that the author fears. Even as death approaches, the narrator continues to write, and at one point begs her interolucter, "Viens dans ce papier blanc" (42). The blank page takes the place of the *visage*. In many ways, the face is the "papier blanc" that invites writing. Although the face seems to constantly move out of sight in Duras's works, this image is foundational to the act of writing because of how it allows for passage and invention even in its disappearance and destruction.

Chapter Three: PAINTING AND WRITING WORKS OF BEING

"Je voudrais écrire au vivant de la vie ; je voudrais être dans la mer et la rendre en mots."[105]

I. LA VENUE AU VISAGE

The title of Hélène Cixous's essay "La Venue à l'ecriture"—first published in 1977 and then republished as the first text in the collection *Entre l'écriture* in 1986—suggests the movement inherent in writing. The noun *la venue* is the substantive of the verb *venir* and the English translation, *coming*, is also a verb form which functions as a noun. In both French and English, the title reveals the simultaneity of an event and of a process. In other words, the ambiguous nature of the title automatically places the work to follow in a fluctuating temporality. The word *venue* also has other meanings in French that complicate its interpretation. *La venue* indicates a feminine subject who has arrived, it is a euphemism for birth and development, and it also is a homophone for the word *l'avenue*. The essay's title contrasts instants in time with continuing motion, implying that the text itself will be about a beginning, the advent of writing in the narrator's life, and also highlighting the fact that origins or beginnings are necessarily functions of movement and process. Certainly, the first line of the essay puts what will follow in the context of a beginning. The narrator writes: "Au commencement, j'ai adoré" (9); and, a paragraph later, the reader discovers the subject of this reverence when the narrator continues, "J'ai adoré le Visage" (10). Situated at the beginning of "La Venue," the "Visage" has an important and complicated function in Cixous's discussion of writing. Moreover, this essay's description of the face sets the terms for understanding the centrality of the face in her whole oeuvre.

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[105] Cixous, *Le Dernier tableau* 172.

This action of pointing out the beginning at the beginning, however, is not entirely transparent. Many of Hélène Cixous's works demonstrate a preoccupation with origins and while this term might signify differently in her separate novels, essays, and plays, it is a concept consistently questioned and reinvented in all of these texts. For example, Cixous speaks directly to the question of beginnings in a 1997 interview with Mirelle Calle–Gruber, published in the appropriately named journal, *Genesis*. Calle-Gruber asks a question about the "poétique des commencements" in Cixous's work and this author responds: "Il est vrai: le pluriel est au commencement. Je veux dire : au(x) commencement(s)—et déjà, le disant de la voix, je noie mon poisson !—au(x) commencement(s) il y avait pluriel" (132).[106] Her response, that the beginning is not absolute and singular, also reveals how language is implicated is in this confusion; "au commencement" and "aux commencements" sound exactly the same even though, by definition, they have two distinct meanings. In this passage, language destabilizes the idea that there can be one specific and determined beginning.

In "La Venue à l'écriture," the event of coming to writing is described at many different points as a birth; yet, the narrator's *naissance* as a writer is not singular, and it announces unexpected ways of reading the text.[107] Indeed, the narrator does describe writing like a kind of *accouchement*. As the narrator explains early in "La Venue": "Je ne suis pas née une fois pour toutes. Ecrire, rêver, s'accoucher, être moi-même ma fille de

[106] Mireille Calle-Gruber refers to in the 1994 essay entitled "Portrait de l'écriture l'écrire-penser." In this theorization of origins in Cixous's work, Calle-Gruber explores Jacques Derrida's description of the "origine-ruine" in relation to Cixous's text and also focuses on the way in which beginnings paradoxically have their start "au milieu" in Cixous's novels: "Au commencement, c'est toujours déjà le milieu" (*Photos de racines* 141).

[107] Both Susan Sellers's book *Hélène Cixous: Live Theory* and Sissel Lie's essay "Life Makes Text from my Body" engage with the discussion that birth is a metaphor for writing in the essay, or more explicitly, writing moves from and through the body.

chaque jour. Affirmation d'une force intérieure capable de regarder la vie sans mourir de peur, et surtout de se regarder soi-même, comme si tu étais à la fois l'autre, — indispensable à l'amour—et rien de plus ni de moins que moi" (15).[108] Birth, according to the text, is an event that happens continuously as opposed to being a defined and specific occurrence. There is no one moment of coming into the world, and as a result birth is inherently a plural experience full of different possibilities for the self that gives birth to itself (and to the work that is other) over and over again in writing. This birth moment is even more unconventional because in the quotation above, the narrator describes this physical act as learning how to look upon the self. While birth is a fitting metaphor for writing because of the creation it involves, generating text from one's body, the connection between giving birth and self-sight, or sight in general, is an unusual one. Writing, a productive and creative bodily activity, is also an act of looking.

The opening of "La Venue à l'écriture" reveals an image that appeals to the reader's and the narrator's sense of sight and contains the potential of writing's infinite beginnings: the visage. The narrator explains her adoration and then continues to explain that the focus of this emotion is the face:

> J'ai adoré le Visage. Le sourire. La face qui fait mon jour et ma nuit. Le sourire me tenait en respect, en extase. En terreur. Le monde édifié, éclairé, anéanti par un frémissement de cette face. Ce visage n'est pas une métaphore. Face, espace, structure. Lieu de tous les visages qui me donnent naissances, détiennent mes vies. Je l'ai vu, je l'ai lu, je l'ai contemplé, à m'y perdre. Combien de faces pour

[108] In a similar moment towards the end of the essay comparing writing and infinite birth, the narrator comments, "Je suis grosse de commencements" (59).

> le visage ? Plus d'une. Trois, quatre, mais toujours l'unique, et l'unique toujours plus d'une. (10)

In this quotation, the face is a multiple, mutable, and mysterious site of life's beginning(s). The face is paradoxically plural and singular. Singular articles used in the first lines of the citation transform in the next two sentences into plural articles. There is no telling if the visage is a mix of faces or if it is one face in particular. More than a readable surface, the face is an enigmatic form. In effect, the narrator describes herself in a radically outside position: "Face, espace, structure. Lieu de tous les visages qui me donnent naissances, détiennent mes vies." She looks upon the face but nothing is revealed to her; there is no exchange in the face à face even though the face reflects something about the narrator herself, suggested as this is by the repetitive use of the reflexive pronoun *me*. While this quotation does allude to the previously discussed idea of birth as an infinite beginning, it also questions how sight functions in the narrator's coming to writing.

No one word can describe this image. It is almost as if the narrator must search for a term to describe "le Visage." It is simultaneously "face," "espace," and "structure." She can only write definitively about what the face is *not*, such as the narrator's negation of the face as metaphor. The narrator's claim, "Ce visage n'est pas une métaphore," has a two-fold consequence. On one hand, this seems to suggest that the face is a physical presence; it *is* rather than functioning *as* something. The capital *V* suggests that this "Visage" is an autonomous entity. On the other hand, this declaration could imply the

incommensurability of the "Visage."[109] The reason that the narrator searches to find something with which to compare the face is because these links cannot be fixed. Outside of definition or comparison, the "Visage" constantly escapes any attempt to securely place it in the text simultaneously because of its inaccessible quality and because of its illimitable power of signification.

One of the reasons why the face can escape definition is its anonymity. Throughout the essay, the narrator constantly refers to *the* face (*le* visage). While the use of the definite article might suggest that this term alludes to one specific face rather than to any face in particular, there is no one character in the text who can lay claim to this *visage*. In addition to there being no physical descriptions of faces and hence no way to define the face, there is no trace of a possessive article in relation to the word *visage* itself. For example, it seems at first that the adoration the narrator feels is for her mother, but the paradigm changes with the event of the father's death:

> Le visage primitif a été celui de ma mère. Sa face pouvait à volonté me donner la vue, la vie, me les retirer. A cause de la passion pour le premier visage, j'ai longtemps attendu la mort de ce côté. Je gardais ma mère a vue avec la férocité d'une bête. Mauvais calcul. Sur l'échiquier, je couvais la dame ; et c'est le roi qui est tombé. (11)

Whereas the noun *face* is qualified by the possessive, "sa face," this is not the case with the word *visage*.[110] The visage, then, is something assigned to a subject even though this

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[109] The narrator remarks later in the essay, "Métaphore? Oui. Non. Si tout est métaphore, rien n'est métaphore" (61). In this work, there is no distinction between metaphor and non-metaphor; all language is figurative and shifting.

[110] As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, there is a distinct difference between these two terms.

image has no fixed referent. Despite the narrator's obsession with keeping her mother's face in her field of vision, *le visage* escapes the narrator's sight because of the father's death. The face belongs at the same time to the mother, to the father, and to no one. [111] Death leads to the disappearance of the face: "J'ai découvert que le Visage était mortel, qu'il me faudrait à chaque instant le reprendre de force au Néant" (11). While the essay includes biographical elements about the narrator's life, it is also a manifesto about writing and the unconscious reasons and impulses behind this creative act. The impulse to write is the need to recapture, no matter how unsuccessfully, a disappearing image. [112]

These pages are not *about* a distinguishable and knowable face. The narrator does not describe a human expression or paint a portrait for the reader. Instead, the narrator presents the face as a reason for writing; the text is driven by the need to keep this face in sight. In this essay, the narrator speaks specifically of coming to writing because of the "Visage":

> Peut-être n'ai-je jamais écrit que pour obtenir la grâce du Visage. A cause de la disparition. Pour affronter sans cesse le mystère, celui du là-pas-là. Celui du visible et de l'invisible. Pour lutter contre la loi qui dit: "Tu ne feras pas d'image taillée, ni aucune figure de ce qui est en haut dans le ciel ou de ce qui est en bas

[111] In her essay "Hélène Cixous and the Need of Portraying: on Portrait du Soleil," Christa Stevens cites "Coming to Writing" when she comments on the importance of "the search for the adored but mortal Face, the figure of the lost Father" in Cixous's writing (201). In the essay "Coming to Reading Hélène Cixous," Deborah Jensen reads the face as the maternal face: "The initial "I" who narrates is the child-reader who scans the Face—the Face as the maternal geography that is the signature of life for the infant" (187). Maternal and paternal, unique and anonymous, the face cannot be definitively identified in Cixous's work.

[112] One of the boundaries that the text attempts to transgress through the image of the face is the distinction between life and death. The narrator tears through the "black sail," (the sail that prompted Aegeus throw himself into the sea when he thought his father was dead) in order to glimpse the invisible: "Besoin du Visage: de passer le mur, de déchirer la voile noire. De voir de mes yeux ce que je perds; de regarder la perte dans les yeux. Je veux voir de mes yeux la disparition" (13). I will explore this concept further in the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

> sur la terre, ou de ce qui est dans les eaux, ou de ce qui est en dessous de la terre." Contre l'édit d'aveuglement. J'ai souvent perdu la vue ; et je ne finirai pas de me tailler l'image. Mon écriture regarde. Les yeux fermés. (11)

Despite the fact that it is couched in hypothetical terms, the "peut-être" in this first sentence does not suggest hesitation on the narrator's part. Instead, the narrator's *maybe* refers to the mystery that is the face; the narrator speaks of a concept that is still undecided and unfixed, and one of the reasons for this enigma is the sacred nature of this face. Thus, writing is also a kind of worship of the "Visage" as indicated by the word *grâce*: a gift given where it is not owed such as the benediction accorded by a divine being.

The narrator's reference to the biblical law forbidding graven images is important for several reasons: the first being that it establishes the radical nature of the narrator's work and the second being that it further emphasizes the importance of the face as catalyst for writing. The narrator imagines writing as a way to resist the doctrine of iconoclasm, defined as it is in the Bible's Ten Commandments.[113] Her refusal of the law as it is written in the commandments echoes sentiments from other well-known texts by Cixous, specifically those that have been considered among her most subversive and political such as "Le Rire de la Méduse" (1976) and "Sorties" (1975), both written during the same artistic period as "La Venue à l'écriture." These two texts are primarily known for their discussion of *l'écriture feminine*, or according to these early essays, writing that

[113] The face is implicated in the interpretation of other biblical laws. For example, Emmanuel Levinas describes the face as the site of divine law in the text *Altérité et transcendance*: "Ce visage de l'autre, sans recours, sans sécurité, exposé à mon regard dans sa faiblesse et sa mortalité est aussi celui qui m'ordonne : "Tu ne tueras point". Il y a dans le visage la suprême autorité qui commande, et je dis toujours, c'est la parole de Dieu. Le visage est le lieu de la parole de Dieu. Il y a la parole de Dieu en autrui, parole non thématisée" (114).

attempts to reorder the relationship of the subject, the other, and the world without being controlled by dominant phallocentric structures of knowledge and representation.[114] These structures are restrictive because they are strictly regulated and defined by such things as culturally decided binarisms (i.e. man/woman, light/dark, night/day). Not necessarily limited to the female sex, feminine writing is different from masculine writing because of its power to be a catalyst for change. As Cixous writes in her seminal essay on *l'écriture féminine*, "Le Rire de la Méduse": "*l'écriture est la possibilité même du changement*, l'espace d'où peut s'élancer une pensée subversive, le mouvement avant-coureur d'une transformation des structures sociales et culturelles" (42). Thus, one could argue that the narrator's reference to the Commandments in "La Venue à l'écriture" is a challenge to established structures of patriarchal order and law.[115]

Furthermore, the narrator's reference to the commandment that forbids graven images implies that the representation of the face is implicated in this text's approach to writing. In the context of this essay, the narrator does not present her challenge in terms of creation or destruction, and instead places them in terms of seeing and not seeing. The sacred nature of this image makes attempting to face or "affronter" this mystery a paradoxical task because of the fact that it is a question "du visible et de l'invisible." Alluding to the second commandment, the narrator suggests that this interdiction is not

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[114] In this sense, the narrator's decision to write is a way of overcoming established hierarchies of power and law. After all, "La Venue à l'écriture" is about the way in which the narrator overcomes cultural and social challenges that she has to face as a woman writer, "Tout de moi se liguait pour m'interdire l'écriture: l'Histoire, mon histoire, mon genre. Tout ce qui constituait mon moi social, culturel" (21).

[115] This idea is rendered even more powerful by the fact that in the section entitled "L'Aube du Phallocentrisme" of "Sorties," Cixous quotes Freud's discussion of the second commandment forbidding the creation and reproduction of God's image by man (187). Cixous's use of Freud's *Moïse et le Monothéisme* is double-edged because while Freud's theories participate in the creation of a patriarchal discourse, these theories also reveal the mechanisms that put this discourse in place. Freud's discussion of the second commandment's prohibition reveals the way in which the paternal figure's law is a myth, a fiction that presents itself as reality. For a further discussion, see Ian Blythe's and Susan Sellers's *Hélène Cixous: Live Theory,* which contains a short discussion of Cixous's use of Freud.

merely about worshipping false gods or about creating idols, but about the interdiction of sight. The narrator does not suggest that overcoming the edict involves simply opening one's eyes; instead, she refuses the assumed border between what is visible and what is invisible and how this border is controlled. The desire to see the invisible and to see that which disappears redefines what it means to look. Even as the narrator fights against the "edict of blindness" she describes writing as a form of blind-sight: "Mon écriture regarde. Les yeux fermés." By describing writing as having the power to look, the narrator also suggests that the written text has as a kind of face.

The narrator finishes the quotation above by describing writing as a creative act that evolves from working against this law: "J'ai souvent perdu la vue; et je ne finirai pas de me tailler l'image." Even though she loses her sight, the narrator continues to envision possibilities through her writing. She uses the word *tailler* to describe her writing's motion, insisting on the way in which writing can also be an art of sculpting an image. The narrator's allusion to the ways in which a writer can create like a sculptor or like a painter are frequent throughout "La Venue." Not just focusing on the final product, Cixous's text examines the creation of the work. At one point the narrator comments, "J'ai peut-être écrit pour voir; pour avoir ce que je n'aurais jamais eu; pour qu'avoir ne soit pas le privilège de la main qui prend et enferme; du gosier, de l'estomac. Mais de la main qui montre du doigt, des doigts qui voient, qui dessinent, du bout des doigts qui tracent sous la douce dictée de la vision" (12). Here, the text's language implies that the writer is also an artist who draws or paints. Like the sculptor or the painter, the author in this essay imagines the nexus of her artistic creativity in her hands. The narrator imbues one body part, the hands, with the power of another part of the body, the eyes. In addition

to presenting varied and sometimes conflicting ideas about the sources of writing, "La Venue à l'écriture" also challenges how to perceive writing, specifically in relation to other visual arts.

Throughout Hélène Cixous's vast and continuously growing oeuvre of novels, plays, and essays, this author returns again and again to the subject of painting.[116] As I will show in this chapter, the complex characteristics of the "le Visage" in "La Venue," the way that this image problematizes the boundaries that define temporality, sight, and language, are integral to understanding the connections that the author makes between her writing and the art of painting. As we will see, the face is at the center of a mystery; writing becomes painting through being.

II. PORTRAITS OF PASSAGE

Of the visual arts, portraiture, in particular, is a genre that Cixous's texts address and theorize, and this interest is evident in the repetition of the word *portrait* in several of her titles. *Portrait du Soleil* (1973), the novel that this section will explore in detail, the play *Portrait de Dora* (1976), and the long essay *Portrait de Jacques Derrida en Jeune Saint Juif* (2001) all suggest that they will be literary works of portraiture, more specifically descriptions of the title character.[117] The use of this word in the above titles, however, invokes the ambiguousness of what a portrait might represent in the written text. As Christa Stevens notes in the essay "The Need of Portraying," the ambivalence of

[116] I signal here the exhaustive list of such works that Mairéad Hanrahan includes in the notes of her essay "Countersigning Painting: Hélène Cixous's Art of Writing about Painting."

[117] Among other titles that incorporate this word: "Autoportraits d'une aveugle" in *Jours de l'an* ; "Portraits of Afflictions" in *Déluge* ; "Le Dernier tableau ou le portrait de dieu" in *Entre l'écriture* ; "Le vrai portrait de Nelson" in *Manne* ; "Portrait de Promethea en H" in *Livre de Promethea.*

the double genitive shows that the titles present inherent questions about the very creation of portraits (203). The reader does not know if the figures indicated in the titles are the subjects or the objects of the portrait. Indeed, Cixous's texts focus on challenging the assumed nature of the portrait by exploring these kinds of ambiguities. Subsequently, the way that her texts subvert traditional ideas about the portrait allow the reader to think of the portrait in terms of the face. While the portrait is not always of a face, in Cixous's oeuvre the face and the portrait have certain interchangeable qualities, and these shared qualities resonate in this author's texts.

Cixous's work challenges, in particular, the way that the portrait has a social function. For instance, Cixous questions the use of portraiture as a tool for Western phallocentic discourse: namely, the way in which the portrait can be a form of representation that identifies, appropriates, and masters.[118] In her argument, Stevens quotes from Hélène Cixous's "Le Rire de la Méduse" in order to illustrate this perspective: "hold still we're going to do your portrait, so you can start looking like it right away" (202). As this example reveals, the portrait is the means of fixing and categorizing an individual in a social hierarchy. This quotation does not necessarily address portraiture as an art form, but as a means by which culture identifies others. As Stevens points out, Cixous's references to portraiture are also the result of this author's critical stance towards the idea that the portrait can faithfully render its subject. Historically, the word *portrait* indicates this process of copying, imitating each trait of an

[118] Cixous's discussions of portraiture parallel many of the ways that modernist visual portraits are characterized. Shearer West, in his book *Portraiture*, examines several reasons why nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists challenged the traditional portrait. He explains that portraiture evolved as: "the rejection of mimesis," "the rejection of portraiture's associations with the representational traditions of the past," and in light of the "major social changes that accompanied modernization" (187).

individual as if it were the original.[119] Cixous's use of portraits in her texts calls the reader's attention to the impossibility of this mimetic image. Portraits, in Cixous's work, do not refer back to an original subject. This subversion of the traditional idea of painting is particularly evident in the novel *Portrait du Soleil*, a text which undoes social and gender hierarchy through the way it questions portraits and ultimately denies the transparent relationship between the subject and the image.

Already in the title of this novel is an explicit challenge to the interdictions and laws of representation. *Portrait du Soleil* unmoors the supposed mirror relation between the portrait and its subject. In the first place, the novel is to be a portrait of the sun. On a historical and metaphorical level, the sun represents a patriarchal order in its manifestations as God and as the Father,[120] something which then defines all rubrics of representation. On another level, the novel's reference to this portrait of the sun is the attempt to create the image of something that cannot be physically looked upon, in this case because of the blinding brightness of the sun. In this text, the author examines not only the codes of representation, what can be represented and what is forbidden to be represented, but also the undoing of these codes.[121] Hélène Cixous writes in the 1993 preface to this novel originally written in 1973, "L'auteur a commencé à faire le portrait du Soleil il y a bien trente ans et ce n'est pas facile ni finissable. Il faut le regarder droit

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[119] Woodall, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject* 17.

[120] Both Hanrahan (in her article "Une porte du *Portrait du Soleil* ou la succulence du sujet") and Stevens lay out this hierarchy of the sun's representations in symbol and metaphor through their references to Derrida's text "La Mythologie Blanche."

[121] This challenge is similar to the narrator's project in "La Vénue à l'écriture" where she discusses writing as an act "contre la loi du ciel qui défend la création des images, contre l'édit de l'aveuglement" (11-12).

dans les yeux et l'appeler par tous ses noms" (i).[122] This preface reveals that the figure of the sun is no longer part of a stable tradition; instead, it is an image that the author challenges by looking into its eyes, effectively into its face, and calling it by "tous ses noms."[123] If anything, the novel disturbs this image's hierarchy by showing that it has an infinite number of meanings.

The portrait of the sun is an unending creation, and the images in the text echo this constant evolution and transformation from the novel's first image. Rather than beginning the text with emphasis on the titular words *portrait* and *soleil*, the text's narrator begins with a contemplation of the word *orange*. Despite the jump from the contemplation of the sun to that of a fruit, however, this word still refers back to the title. The *orange* approximates the color and shape of the sun, and the narrator's treatment of this word/color/fruit addresses the ways in which the hierarchy of portraiture and representation will be challenged. She writes:

> Il faut choisir une sanguine. La nuit le sang remonte les âges. Tout le monde vivant a du sang qui remonte la nuit. Pour favoriser la remontée, je mange ma sanguine. Le jus coule par où j'ai parlé, par où je prends silence, par où entre jour et nuit je crie. L'oranje est mon fruit de naissance et ma fleur prophétique. La

[122] Stevens explores how other authors have addressed the problem of representing the sun and particularly how this image offers infinite interpretations. She quotes Francis Ponge, "Pourquoi le soleil n'est-il pas un objet? Parce que c'est lui-même qui suscite et qui tue, ressuscite indéfiniment et retue les sujets qui le regardent comme objet" (24).

[123] While I confine my discussion of *Portrait du Soleil* to the first section of the novel, the later parts of the text which deal with a re-imagining of Freud's case study of Dora also pose the same questions of fluid and uncontrollable representation. In a sense, the novel is also the portrait of Dora and furthermore Dora's name aligns her with the process of portraiture; in English, the first syllable of her name is the same as the word *door*. This mirrors the relationship between the word *portrait* and the word *porte* in the text; Dora resists representation in the text, in part, because her portrait reveals the constant passage and transformation of a subject. For a further discussion, see Stevens' examination of the topic in "Need of Portraying" (167).

> première fois que j'ai coupé un mot c'était elle. Je l'ai coupé en deux morceaux inégaux, un plus long, un plus court. (9)

First and foremost, this citation challenges representation by calling vision into question. Despite the colors that the fruit evokes, the reds and oranges, the representation of this object is not through a process of sight. The novel will take place at night; indeed, the portrait of the sun begins in sunless contemplation. Moreover, the narrator does not examine the blood orange from a distance; instead, the narrator's knowledge of this fruit is through her taste and through her touch. Even sound plays a role in creating this radical form of sight; the author's cries are also her written words in the confusion between the near homonyms: "je crie" and "j'écris."

A closer look at the language of the above passage reveals the image's destabilization in the names that the narrator assigns to this orange. The word itself refers to the color and to the fruit, to the masculine and to the feminine. For the narrator the orange is both "mon fruit de naissance" and "ma fleur prophétique." Rather than taking words from their established definitions, the narrator discusses the origin of the word—the birth from its combined masculine and feminine roots. She also alludes to her own origin; retreating into her memory, the narrator remembers the place of her birth, Oran. [124] The orange is both a "sanguine" and an "oranje," both terms that give a kind of body to this word. While the first term suggests that the fruit itself has blood, is living, the second refers to the narrator herself with the *je* sound in "oranje." This "orange-I" is her

[124] Oran resonates differently in many of Cixous's texts, and I will further explore this word/place in the following chapter's examination of Cixous's autofictive texts. It is important to note, however, that in Cixous's oeuvre, Oran is remembered as a dream-like paradise: "À Oran, j'avais un très fort sentiment de paradis" (*Photos* 196).

past self. As the narrator "cuts" the word to make further meanings, the portrait of the sun becomes an image of the unlimited possibilities of language.

As the slippage in the word "oran*je*"[125] reveals, creating the portrait of the sun paradoxically turns the narrator's focus onto the self. Consequently, the rest of the novel focuses on this narrator's dreams, which transform and emerge from the condensation, displacement, and association of different memories and images in her mind.[126] Chief among these images, is the image of a door, "une porte." Like the word *orange* that signifies in different ways, the word *portrait* also has different meanings in the text, specifically in how the narrator chooses to use the sound of the first half of the word, *porte*. As the text progresses, the portrait resembles less and less an impassable image that is only surface; instead, it takes on the qualities of the door, a boundary that suggests that there is something beyond it and that it can be passed through. The novel is about a creative process (the creation or un-creation of a portrait) as well as the narrator's position with regards to this portrait.

Taken out of its hierarchical and reified function, this portrait becomes a door for the passage and interaction between the narrator and the others in her dreams. The door that the narrator contemplates operates in the text according to its definition, as a boundary that allows for entrances and exits and separates the exterior from the

[125] My emphasis.

[126] I note these psychoanalytic terms in particular to *Portrait du Soleil* because in addition to being a novel about the unconscious, dreams, and Freud's dream-work, all this seems to be connected to the site of the face. The face is an important image (albeit one of many) in this novel through which displacement, condensation, and association all function. The face is a site of displaced affect, it is a term in a series of representations, and it is a site that mirrors the narrator's unconscious thoughts.

interior.[127] Yet, the porte/trait, the portrait that is also a door, allows the narrator to continue challenging fixed ideas of representation. In the word *portrait*, of course, is the word *trait*. The word already refers to the lines of facial features, and Cixous's text plays with this meaning. In the following dense and complicated passage, the narrator's observations about these doors collapse the portrait's two meanings: the *porte*, which permits passage, and the *portrait*, which is a means of representation:

> Et voilà, j'étais devant cette porte... Je me suis souvenue : de tant d'autres portes, debout, couchées, mouvantes, verrouillées: et moi devant la porte derrière la porte moi debout, couchée, agenouillée: et de toutes mes prières aux portes muettes : et des portes écumantes, grondantes, terrifiantes mais muselées. D'où surgiraient des personnes et hommes ou F., ou des dieux, parfois inattendus. Je les dévisageais une fois pour toutes. Toutes ces portes étaient devant moi avec l'épaisseur de l'avenir. Et moi : (ce) qui est devant l'avenir : et je me souviens qu'une des portes s'est ouverte trois fois, ou bien c'étaient trois portes semblables à mes yeux. Il était impossible de les ouvrir de mon côté, le mécanisme et la poignée ne fonctionnaient que pour l'autre. Viens, viens, viens, viens. Et que tout vienne ! Première porte à s'ouvrir: entre… (22-23)

Opaque and concentrated, this quotation puts forth the main themes of Cixous's novel. While the novel is about memory and dreams, about the involuntary thoughts that flood the mind of the narrator during the night, it is also about the novel's confrontation of the supposedly mimetic image. The identities of the "characters" that enter the novel through the door of the dream remain fluid. The narrator has no control over the beings that make

[127] Hanrahan's comment, "C'est la porte qui rend possible le glissement du sujet," in "Une Porte du *Portrait du Soleil*"(52) illustrates this idea.

their entrance: “des personnes et hommes ou F., ou des dieux.” Like the adored face from “La Venue,” the narrator offers her prayers to these doors. Not only does the door allow for the passage of these “characters,” but it allows the narrator the chance to stare at, or *deface,* these figures. The word *dévisager*, in addition to its common definition *to stare*, also suggests that the face is absent when the narrator looks upon them.

Rather than taking away faces, however, this defacing stare is not one that seeks to destroy the face, but to pass beyond its surface. The narrator’s unique description of these doors, adds this specific dimension to the passage above. The face seems to be an impossible image because of both the changing characters and the narrator’s gaze. Yet, there *are* faces in the text, and these faces constantly vacillate between being inaccessible and radically open. For example, the door upon which the narrator looks is not merely an inanimate surface, it is actually *living*. The narrator’s descriptions convey this idea : “Je me suis souvenue : de tant d’autres portes, debout, couchées, mouvantes, verrouillées: et moi devant la porte derrière la porte moi debout, couchée, agenouillée: et de toutes mes prières aux portes muettes: et des portes écumantes, grondantes, terrifiantes mais muselées.” The narrator remembers these doors as if they had mouths, doors that do not communicate, that rest “muettes,” as well as doors that threaten, “écumantes, grondantes, terrifiantes mais muselées.”[128] Even though the narrator continuously describes the door as a mouth rather than a whole face, the focus on the mouth fits in with the novel’s

[128] As is often the case with works by Cixous, images from one text echo in another despite the fact that they may have entirely different meanings in their separate textual spaces. In “Le livre que je n’écris pas,” the narrator describes the terror of facing the idea of the soon-to-be text: “J’avais dit: je vais vers le plus effrayant… On ne peut pas vraiment en faire le portrait car tout ce qu’il dit fait pense vit est faux, absolument tout, sa vérité est un faux…Tous les portraits qui existent de lui sont des faux par définition. Autrefois il apparaissait sous l’aspect du dragon ou de l’hydre, façon allégorique de déguiser ou atténuer la terreur que cause un humain si archiretors et compliqué… Toutefois je n’ai jamais écrit que face à ses grouillements de faces. C’est même ce qui m’a obligée à écrire. C’est-à-dire à essayer de le dessiner. Je n’avais pas le choix” (245).

challenge to the interdiction of sight. Whereas other features of the face might provide a traditionally metaphorical entrance into the subject (i.e. the eyes being the "window of the soul"), this text radically changes the way in which the face can and cannot offer entrance into another being.

The faces of the characters also have this same quality. While a detailed examination of each character and how he or she functions in the novel would be far too complicated to address in this chapter's overall discussion, one of the common descriptions of these characters is their still, flat, faces in relation to their mobile and fleshy mouths: "Ce qui m'a fait peur sur la face de mort de Dioniris c'est cette vie préservée dans les lèvres, ce sont les lèvres muettes, immenses, mûres, qui aspirant" (23). Interestingly, the narrator uses the term *face* in relation to these characters and not *visage*. In this novel, this distinction is important to make because the use of the word *face* implies exactly what the narrator is arguing against, a fixed one-sided representation. The *face de mort*, an image that reoccurs throughout the text, is transformed through its lips and mouths, which suggest that the surface can be passed through. I also do not want to ignore here the sexual connotations in the word *lèvres*. Part of rethinking the stability of the impassable and set *face* is introducing the possibility of difference in this image. Although I will return to this question of sexual difference in Cixous's works at a later point in this chapter, I do want to note that already in the above passage, the face is undergoing a kind of transformation, collapsing the difference between the social, external face and the private, hidden sexual organs.

And indeed, the *Portrait du Soleil* examines how no word and no image can have a fixed representation. Even though the narrator seems to have control as she "cuts" her

words, these words open to reveal and to imply much more than even the narrator can control. In particular, this slippage and transformation arrives through descriptions of the face. More than being just an enigmatic and unreadable surface, this image is also turned inside out by the movement of the text. As demonstrated by the novel's preoccupation with the portrait-door, the narrator is concerned with moving through and exploring what lies beyond the surface. For this reason, the door is also likened to a wound, a point that allows connection between the exterior and interior, in this case, into the body: "… cette porte est une plaie dans l'histoire ou bien une pyramide, si je ne l'ouvrais pas elle m'ouvrait, rien n'est cicatrisé, ce qui est arrivé peut ne pas arriver, rien n'est irrémédiable …" (30).[129] In *Portrait du Soleil* the reader comes to understand that the text's frequent references to the *face* and to the *visage* are similar to its references to the *porte* or to the *portrait* because they all present the possibility that something lies beyond surfaces and beyond barriers. What the narrator reveals is that this involves a brutal opening of terms and of the text itself, ultimately opening the narrator as well as she becomes the subject of the text.[130]

Although *Le Portrait du Soleil* is about a hypothetical portrait, one that that the narrator creates in order to question how a portrait functions, it provides a focus for examining the radical way that Cixous's texts envision paintings. One specific example that gives a broader understanding of how Cixous's texts "open" paintings is in the novel,

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[129] The image of the wound is one that resonates in Cixous's texts, specifically in its relation to the act of writing. As discussed in "La Venue à l'écriture," writing is a function of living and the lived body; wounds and scars tell a story. For a further discussion, see Hugh S. Pyper's "Job the Dog: Wounds, Scars, and the Biblical Text."

[130] Another example of this in the text is the narrator's attention to the Rembrandt painting "Leçon d'anatomie." The Rembrandt painting itself has two subjects: it is meant as a portrait of a famous and masterful Dutch surgeon, Deyman, at work, but it is also the portrait of the dissection of a convicted criminal's corpse. This painting, in particular, echoes Cixous's discussion of how images and words can be opened.

La Fiancée juive (1995). In this beautiful text about in-between spaces (between science and myth, between feminine and masculine, between first and third person, between memory and dreams), the narrator constantly explains her frustration at not being able to see the face of her beloved. The narrative is made up of different missed encounters: "Je me suis penchée sur le beau visage qui me renvoie mon beau visage, mais le miroir ne m'a pas vue. Et nous ne fûmes plus que deux personnes dans la rue" (27). These encounters all involve how the face remains elusive, and later in the text the narrator's search for the lover's image leads her to imagine the act of entering a painting. The narrator can no longer rest before his image, so she enters into it:

> C'est qu'il vient de rentrer dans le tableau d'un intérieure antique. Le tableau est debout, il a une grande taille…Je suppose qu'il me faut grimper sur le tableau comme une mouche sur un vaste miroir. Je n'ose pas, je reste devant…Alors il me dit, de l'intérieur du tableau, de la maison, du temps ; il ne faut pas se laisser prendre à l'apparence de surface. Fais comme si c'était une maison, entre, sans faire attention au tableau… (143)

Calling from the interior of the painting, the beloved, "il," asks the narrator to perceive the painting as a lived space. Rather than remaining at the surface, rather than believing that the appearance of the painting is fixed, the narrator abandons the traditional ways of understanding the image and becomes part of it. Once inside the painting, the narrator no longer seeks to see the face of her beloved, but to *absorb* this other. She describes their embrace as not just a meeting with an other but also a consumption of the other: "nous nous mangions, nous chancelions en riant dans la bouche l'un de l'autre." The two passages that I discuss from *La Fiancée*, although drastically different in scope and

imagery from *Portrait du Soleil*, echo the earlier novel's struggle to locate the face and the final understanding that the face is a boundary and a surface to be traversed. Cixous's constant references to rethinking portraiture stem from the attempt to move beyond the exterior of a face.

III. WRITING PAINTING

In Portrait du Soleil, Cixous "opens" both words and images to examine what might beyond their surfaces, challenging any static signification that they might have, and she continues this process in her texts that examine how writing could be like painting.[131] Many texts by Cixous theorize writing in relation to painting, and in this section I will discuss three specific works that deal with this issue: "Le Dernier tableau ou le Portrait de Dieu" (1983), "Bethsabée ou la Bible intérieure" (1993), and finally *Le Tablier de Simon Hantaï* (2005). Written in different decades and on different subjects, these three texts allow me to construct an argument about the central figure of the face in the relationship between writing and painting. A careful discussion of these texts reveals that the act of *writing like painting* is a way to open up, through the image of the face, the infinite possibilities of representation.

"Le Dernier tableau ou le portrait de Dieu," for instance, makes one of the most explicit connections between writing and painting in all of Hélène Cixous's work,[132] and

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[131] Critics and scholars have written extensively about this connection. Further reading includes the chapter "L'écriture –peinture d'Hélène Cixous" in Christa Stevens's book *L'Ecriture Solaire d'Hélène Cixous*, "La vision prise de vitesse par l'écriture. A propos de *La Fiancée juive*, d'Hélène Cixous" by Mireille Calle-Gruber, and "Countersigning Painting: Hélène Cixous's Art of Writing about Painting" by Mairéad Hanrahan.

[132] It is no coincidence, then, that this essay was first published in the collection discussed above, *Entre l'écriture*. Found at the end of this collection, this essay illustrates how the narrator discovers an "in-between" space in the act of writing, specifically in the way writing relates to painting.

the first way that this essay puts writing and painting into dialogue is through an examination of blindness and sight. As is the case with the title *Portrait du Soleil*, the title of "Le Dernier tableau ou le portrait de Dieu" instantly poses a conflict in representation. The reader understands the title to be both a question and a challenge: how can one create a portrait of god?[133] This impossible representation necessitates a way of approaching the image that is not through sight, or rather, through the understanding that sight is not a way to seize upon an image. In "Le Dernier tableau" the narrator comments:

> J'aime la peinture comme les aveugles doivent aimer le soleil: en le sentant, en le humant, en l'entendant passer dans les arbres, en l'adorant, avec regret et douleur, en le connaissant avec la peau, en le voyant avec le cœur. Je ne peins pas. J'ai besoin de la peinture. J'écris en direction de la peinture. Je me tourne vers la lumière. Vers le soleil. Vers la peinture. (173)

The narrator's description of her position towards painting is paradoxically one of blindness. The impulse to write has at its origin the need to see and to visualize, but the impossibility of sight actually creates perception in the works described here. In this quotation, Cixous's narrator creates a link between painting and the sun; according to the narrator, both of these ostensibly visual objects are accessible only through other senses. She explains not being able to see the sun, but being able to smell it, touch it, feel it, and ultimately being able to envision an interior or invisible image, through the heart instead

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[133] In her essay, "Ou ce qui ne renonce jamais," Calle-Gruber examines what it means to paint the portrait of god in Cixous's essay. Calle-Gruber comments : "Peindre: corps-et-âme; mortalité-immortalité. Elle appelle cela "faire le portrait de Dieu". C'est façon de dire que l'art donne à l'humain sa part divine—la "propre surhumanité"" (270). As Calle-Gruber explains, the portrait conveys both mortality and immortality. Cixous's essay addresses death, and the possibility of art functioning as a way of communicating beyond death, by quoting passages from the correspondence and writings of different painters. In a sense, this allows each artist's voice to bridge the divide between life and death.

of through the eyes. Writing in the direction of painting is the way that the narrator can begin to experience these images through another medium than sight.

Understanding the implications of the word *Dieu*, how it resonates through Cixous's oeuvre, also helps the reader understand how Cixous proposes to create images that are beyond sight. Like the word *portrait*, the word *Dieu* is one that appears in the titles and pages of many of Cixous's works. In the collection of interviews, *Rencontre terrestre*, Frédéric-Yves Jeannet asks Hélène Cixous about the significance of this word in two novels in particular, *Le Prénom de Dieu* (1967) and *Beethoven à jamais: ou l'existence de Dieu* (1993), focusing on the question of how *Dieu* serves as an "entrée" into her work.[134] Cixous responds:

> Je ne suis jamais sans (Dieu) dieu, dieux, un dieu, le dieu, le mien, et c'est à l'aide de dieu le dieumien ou dieubis que j'écris, mais sans en être consciente… L'espace intérieur du secret où je me tiens et suis tenue, et où je suis permise c'est cet Être-là qui le constitue. (10)

The word *Dieu* slips from one meaning to another. This word undergoes constant transformation in her texts, in part because of impossibility of hearing the difference between the singular and the plural. For this reason, *Dieu* is always multiple.[135] The word D*ieu* represents the pure potential of language.

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[134] Another important aspect of "Dieu" in Cixous's oeuvre is that it refers to the figure of the father: " …je veux cette présence baignante prégnante de Dieu, le mien, pas le Dieu d'Abraham ni des religions mais un que j'appelle Dieu pour m'aider à excuser et à supporter la dimension miraculeuse et donc menaçante de la vie. Dieu est très "homme" pour moi, depuis qu'il m'est né, c'est un dieu qui m'est né (j'entends hyménée) de la mort de mon père. Ce jour là j'ai dit à Dieu le Grand : je te renie, et je prends mon père pour Dieu avec qui parler de dieu" (Jeannet 9-10).

[135] In the essay "Hélène Cixous's Improper Name," Hanrahan examines names in Cixous's works and how the referential function of naming is compromised by slippage in language. She uses the example of the names Dieubis and Dioniris in *Portrait du Soleil*. Not only does the name Dieubis infer that the character is already a double (through the prefix *–di*), but the name Dioniris also echoes the same sounds and a similar

Elsewhere in other interviews and texts, Cixous's narrators continue to explore the infinite possibilities of the word *Dieu* and its importance to writing. In a section of the novel *L'Amour du loup* (2003) entitled "Conversations avec l'âne: Écrire aveugle," Cixous's narrator enters into a discussion of the linguistic, and ultimately artistic, potential of this word: "Le mot *Dieu*: le mot d'yeux. Mélodieux. Le nom Dieu. Qui j'appelle Dieu, qu'appelé-je dieu ? Nécessité du mot dieu. Aucune langue ne peut se passer d'un mot dieu. J'aime le mot dieu français. Le mot-dieu. Le mot dit eux. Le mode yeux" (100). Sliding from a proper noun to a common noun, the word becomes unmoored from the possibility of having one transcendent meaning. The progression of this passage eventually divests the word *Dieu* of any specificity; on one hand the narrator writes about the word *God*, but on the other hand she writes of a "god-word," a word that can transform into anything and everything. Not only does this word challenge the limits of language and knowledge, but it also challenges sight. Even as the narrator explores the melody of the word, she also explores what may or may not be available to vision in this progression. Despite there being little difference in the way that the words *dieu* and *d'yeux* are pronounced, they are clearly different when the words are looked upon. The narrator continues by elaborating on the problem of sight with reference to God: "Dieu est toujours déjà di/eu, di/visé, visé par nous, atteint, fendu. Des lèvres s'ouvrent en son absente face. Et il nous sourit. Le sourire de Dieu dit la blessure que nous lui sommes" (101).[136] The word is constantly divided, and thus different from itself, by the act of

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meaning (the name echoes Osiris, an Egyptian god). Another critical essay that examines the polyvalent word *Dieu* is Frederic Regard's "Faites d'yeux."

[136] In other works by Cixous, looking on the face of God reveals and destroys the reflection of the on-looker. In *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, Cixous writes: "What we hope for at the School of Dreams is the strength both to deal and to receive the axe's blow, to look straight at the face of God, *which is none other than my own face*, but seen naked, the face of my soul" (63).

looking. Looking into the face of God, therefore, only reveals what is absent. Yet, I want to insist on the fact that this quotation does not prove that the face is missing from these texts; instead, the narrator questions how the face, that which is supposed to be eminently available to sight, can be encountered and approached in other ways.

This "interior space of the secret," to which Cixous refers in the interview with Jeannet, is marked by the presence of god (or the word-god) because it is something that resists knowledge, sight, and even the constraints of time. In a 1994 interview, Stevens asks Cixous about the risks the author takes when her texts journey into a territory that is outside of perception: "ce qui, par definition, se soustrait à la visibilité, à la nomination, à la representation" (321). Cixous responds by suggesting that that which is too obscure to see is only so because it is too "éblouissante." She gives the example of a lover's adoration for the beloved and explains that any possibility of seeing this other is blinding. Cixous continues:

> …comme le dit l'Apocalypse, on voit trop: on voit un moment d'une manière absolument incendiante comme on verrait Dieu, mais comme un voyant, Dieu on ne le voit pas, on passe de l'autre côté. Et à ce moment-là on est dans l'obscurité produite par la trop grande lumière. Or c'est là, c'est-à-dire aux deux extrémités, dans le noir le plus noir et le noir le plus éblouissant, qu'ont lieu tous les mystères qui nous agitent, qui nous gouvernent, qui nous portent, qui font notre vie et notre destin. (323-324)

Interestingly, Cixous explores how looking at *Dieu* is actually the movement of passing through this image, "on passe de l'autre côté."[137] Yet, despite the fact that Cixous

[137] This movement echoes this chapter's previous section about moving through the portrait.

describes a movement of passing through this image that is impossible to see, the above quotation also indicates that this is an instantaneous moment. In one moment, brightness and darkness, "l'obscurité produite par la trop grande lumière," collapses into the experience of this mysterious image.

"Le Dernier tableau," examines the situation that Cixous describes in the aforementioned interview with Stevens through the temporality of writing and painting; the portrait of God is something that can only be achieved if writing can enter the same kind of nebulous time as painting. The essay's narrator explores the importance of contrasting moments of time in the very beginning of the essay, which opens with the following declaration:

> Je voudrais écrire comme un peintre. Je voudrais écrire comme peindre./ Comme je voudrais vivre. Comme peut-être j'arrive à vivre parfois. Ou plutôt : comme parfois il m'est donné de vivre, au présent absolu./ Dans l'événement de l'instant./ Juste au moment de l'instant, dans ce qui l'ouvre, je me pose ensuite je me laisse glisser dans la profondeur de l'instant même. (171)

These lines juxtapose two desires: the desire to write like a painter and to produce writing that is like painting. These desires pose an ontological question of how to inhabit a space or a time through writing and through painting. According to this essay's terms, painting allows the possibility of living in the instant,[138] totally in the present, and this is something that the narrator looks for in her writing. The poetic rhythm of Cixous's own writing suggests a preoccupation with temporality and in particular the relationship of the instant to the duration. In the sentence "Comme j'arrive à vivre" for example, the

[138] For a detailed analysis of what "writing like painting" might mean, see Christian Picaud's article "Peinture poésie: vers le portrait de Dieu." In this essay Picaud describes the instantaneity of painting as it manifests itself in Cixous's writing.

assonance between the verbs *arriver* and *vivre* serves to join the act of living with the act of a constant and/or always imminent arrival. The narrator's understanding of artistic representation, therefore, is not in terms of having a distant position in front of this work, but instead, participating in the work itself. While the first two lines seem to mirror each other, there is a particularly telling asymmetrical moment. The use of the noun *painter* is paired with the verb *to paint*. This interesting asymmetry brings the individual of the painter and the act of painting closer to each other, in a certain sense allowing them to stand in for each other while there is no such connection indicated between the writer and what he or she writes.

According to this passage, painting (and writing as painting), is more efficient at dissolving the stable and overarching identity of the Artist or the Author. The narrator describes a specific example of this transcendence between artist and work in Rembrandt's self-portraits, which the narrator discusses as paintings where the painter disappears. For example, Rembrandt can as easily refer to the painting as to the painter. The title "Le Dernier tableau" seems to allude to death—the death mask or "le dernier portrait"—but here this death is aligned with the question of mystery and of the unknown. Death is the action of giving over to the act of painting, by allowing the creation to become the creator and vice versa: "Que d'amour pour la peinture bien plus grand que pour soi-même! Pour arriver jusqu'aux portraits d'un homme qui se laisse regarder, qui se laisse peindre, qui se donne à peindre, en renonçant à soi, qui se donne à la peinture, comme d'autres à Dieu" (195). It is no coincidence that here the narrator equates painting to a religious experience, blind faith divested of the needs and importance of the self.

The artist becomes part of the work, steeped in the time of the work, just as the work becomes a creator in its own right, and this connection reveals one of the reasons for Cixous's allusions to faces in her texts. The narrator declares herself ultimately a writer, but this does not stop her from attempting to give a face to her words through the invisible painting that a text evokes. The visage is what enables the writer/painter to give these words their immediacy. The narrator explains this unique temporality in "Le Dernier tableau": "J'écris. Mais j'ai besoin du peintre pour donner un visage à mes mots. D'abord j'écris, ensuite, il faut que tu peignes ce que je t'ai dit" (175). Through painting, or through the temporality of painting, words finally have the instantaneity for which Cixous's narrator searches, and this instantaneity is given through the figure of the *visage*. Cixous draws on the ambiguity of the pronoun *tu* in order to further complicate the idea of the author and his or her authority. *Tu* could be the painter or the reader, or perhaps even an address to the text itself; the author is relinquishing a certain power over the text, which then allows words to have faces and signify in a way that is not determined by the author.

According to Cixous's narrator in this essay, in order to write like a painter, it is necessary to write texts that do not need to reflect the intentions or the identity of their creator. The narrator describes this important characteristic in art in her discussion of both Monet and Rembrandt. Monet's series of water lilies or of the Rouen cathedral achieve the same effect of Rembrandt's chiaroscuro filled portraits and self-portraits because the works become *visageified*.[139] Not simply a question of having metaphorical

[139] I refer here to Gilles Deleuze's definition of an image that has been *envisaged* or *visageified* in *L'image-mouvement*. While Deleuze writes of the cinematic image and not the textual image, this philosopher's description of the close-up as a kind of face that can return the gaze of the viewer and that can express thoughts reminds me of Cixous's "oeuvre d'être." Deleuze writes: "Le visage est cette plaque nerveuse

faces, these images become contemplative in and of themselves, able to reflect, think, and ultimately communicate beyond the creator's original intentions. For this reason, the way in which Cixous uses the term *visage* has little to do with identity and recognition and the physical face of physiognomy; instead, the word with a *visage* has the ability to turn towards or turn away, become different from itself, leave the control of the writer, and continue to change. The use of the *visage* in this essay introduces a radically different way of understanding writing through painting because this new definition does not rely on a simple description of both art forms as a means of transparent representation. Despite the fact that a painting might be in front of a viewer's eyes, the painting can withhold the image of itself. This specific idea that the work does not function as an *object for* the viewer echoes in the narrator's distinction between *oeuvres d'art* and *oeuvres d'être*[140] in "Le Dernier tableau":

> Pour Rembrandt, ce qui est très bouleversant, c'est à quel point dans la plus intense présence, les personnes qu'il a regardées sont seules, ont l'absence de l'intimité, ne se savent pas regardées, regardent à l'intérieur de leur cœur du côté de l'infini. C'est en passant par ce double chemin, que je suis arrivée à me dire que ce qui m'importe le plus, dans l'art, ce sont les œuvres d'être : des œuvres qui

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porte-organes qui a sacrifié l'essentiel de sa mobilité globale, et qui recueille ou exprime à l'air libre toutes sortes de petits mouvements locaux que le reste du corps tient d'autrefois enfouis. Et chaque fois que nous découvrirons en quelque chose ces deux pôles, surface réfléchissante et micro-mouvements intensifs, nous pourrons dire : cette chose a été traitée comme un visage, elle a été "envisagée" ou plutôt "visagéifiée", et à son tour elle nous dévisage, elle nous regarde…" (126).

[140] In both her essay "Cixous' Concept of "Brushing" as a Gift" and her book *La Cosmogonie d'Hélène Cixous*, Claudine Fisher presents the argument that Cixous's use of the terms *oeuvre d'être* and *oeuvre d'art* is a way of differentiating art that remains silent and art that is capable of communicating or "speaking to the soul" of the viewer.

> n'ont plus besoin de se réclamer de la gloire, ou de leur origine magistrale, d'être signées, de revenir, de faire retour pour célébrer l'auteur. (184)

Interestingly, the narrator first begins her discussion of these specific works with allusions to the people represented in the images, the individuals that Rembrandt had before his eyes and then painted onto the canvas. Yet, as the quotation continues, the narrator conflates the work with the individuals. The image in the work becomes its own referent, and there is no distance between the work and the represented figure. When the painting shows life it becomes an *oeuvre d'être*, and this work is defined by the contradiction of being both present and absent, by having a face (at least in the sense of what is looked upon, "les personnes qu'il a regardées") as well as by being the proof of an invisible and interior representation. The *oeuvre d'être* subverts the hierarchy of creator and representation, and it also challenges the relationship of the viewer to the work of art.

Although never directly addressed in the text itself, Cixous's essay "Bethsabée ou la Bible intérieure"[141] presents an *oeuvre d'être.* This essay, moreover, emphasizes the importance of the face as a focal point of the *oeuvre d'être*. Devoted to an examination of the Rembrandt's *Bathsheba at Her Bath* (1654), this essay puts the autonomy of the painting into context through a discussion of Bathsheba's face. Already in the title is an allusion to what is interior, secret, and hidden. The ability to act as a screen, which can both hide and reveal, is an inherent quality of the face. Reflecting on the painting of Bathsheba, the narrator remarks, "Le visage voyage: un grand silence règne dans le

[141] In this discussion, I refer to two versions of this essay. The original French version was published in the art magazine *FMR* in April 1993. The English version of this essay available in the book *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (first published in an issue of *New Literary History*) was translated from an unpublished French version, and there are some marked differences between the available French version and the English version to which I also allude.

tableau" (17). In this one short line, the text describes the position of the viewer before *une oeuvre d'être*. Even though the viewer can perceive the face, the image in the painting is not looking back at the viewer; rather, the gaze of the painting is turning inward. The essay's narrator describes the face as it travels; this movement of passage is what enables the viewer to perceive the contemplative and inner life of the *oeuvre d'être* without actually being able to access this perception.

The essay about Bathsheba echoes ideas from "Le Dernier tableau"; individuals in Rembrandt's paintings do not look out to the viewer, they look within. In this sense, the narrator reveals the face to be inverted. "La Bible intérieure" begins by describing the face in Rembrandt's painting as a negative space. The narrator compares da Vinci to Rembrandt:

> Ce qu'il n'y a pas dans Rembrandt: il n'y a pas Vinci. Pas le sourire. Pas le regard qui se laisse regarder. Qui se sait regardé. Pas de face. Pas de surface. Pas de scène. Tout est à l'intérieur. Pas de représentation. (14)

Upon a first examination, this quotation seems to deny the possibility of the image. However, the constant negation in this section needs to be interpreted as more than a denial. The word *pas* has a multifaceted use in works by Cixous. While *pas* could be translated as *no* in this context, it is also important to recognize that *pas* could mean *step*. As explored in critical texts like *Hélène Cixous: Chemins d'une écriture*, the idea of writing as a process, le *cheminement* of writing, is a theme in many of this writer's novels, plays, and essays. In an interview with Stevens published in *(En)jeux de la communication Romanesque*, Cixous infers the multiple meaning of *pas*:

> Le pas à pas est très important, c'est pour moi l'unique méthode qui permette d'aller vers la vérité, non pas de l'atteindre, parce qu'elle est loin, mais d'aller vers, où on ne peut aller que pas à pas. En jouant bien sûr sur les pas, sur toutes les valeurs du pas en français et aussi sans sauter un seul pas parce que l'exploration intérieure, psychique, spirituelle, ne peut se faire que dans une patience (une passcience)… L'écriture va pas à pas extrêmement vite. (321)

In this passage, the author explains the movement necessary to go towards truth, one step at a time. Yet, as she reveals, truth is something that cannot be attained. This impossibility is necessary to the artistic venture of writing. In the interview quoted above, transcribed a year after the publication of "Bethsabée," the conversation does not speak directly to the question of art, but it does seem to speak indirectly to the "voyage" described in the painting.

Bathsheba's journey, in Cixous's essay, is an interior one, and it takes place *pas à pas*. The repetition of forceful negation in the essay couches the face in terms of a refusal, a resistance, or a struggle more than in its absolute absence. Among the fervent litany of *nos* is one sentence written without negation, "Tout est à l'intérieur." This statement suggests that if there were to be a face in all of this, that face would be hidden and turned away from the viewer. The idea that the interior face can exist yet not be perceived is evident in the string of short sentences: "Pas de face. Pas de surface. Pas de scène." "Pas de face" is qualified by "Pas de surface." The prefix *–sur* refers to the exterior, what is placed over the interior face. The face then is not absent in this text; instead, it is being thought of in terms of interiority, in terms of a face that resists and transforms rather than destroys representation.

The negation that Cixous's narrator uses does not deny the face as an image in the text; rather, it calls into question what can be seen in the face and what the face can communicate as it moves away from the viewer. Indeed, the face can only continue to signify, continue to compel the movement in the image, if it is composed of what cannot be seen and what moves from sight. This concept becomes more solvent when examining how the text transforms Bathsheba's body into a kind of face. The text's discussion of the veil shows how the body becomes the face, hidden from sight, resisting the viewer, despite its seeming presence:

> Bethsabée nue. Je vois Rembrandt peignant le voile (qui ne cache rien) sur l'aine. Rembrandt effleurant d'un voile l'aine de Bethsabée. Le voile, un rien qui fait la nudité. Sans ce rien transparent nous oublierions qu'elle est nue. Bethsabée est en personne. En costume de chambre. En corps. C'est le corps qui est le visage. (16)[142]

In Cixous's lexicon, the veil has a very specific place in that the French word can be either feminine or masculine: *le voile* referring to the English *veil* and *la voile* referring to the English word *sail*. This difference in the word itself is reflected by its usage in the citation above.[143] On one hand the veil indicates sexual difference even as it resists the

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[142] Another interesting element of this passage, particularly in how it relates to the theme of negation in the work, is the diffusion of the naked female body in the image. The body, defined as the face, can be both hidden and revealed; it can have multiple surfaces and it can resist definition and representation. This moment echoes a short passage in one of Cixous's earliest texts, *Les Commencements* (1970) where the narrator comments on her fondness for Paul Klee's work of art, "Un visage et aussi celui d'un corps" (1939). In this novel, the narrator discusses the "et" of this title. The face, no longer on the head, is on a woman's body, the breasts taking place of the eyes and the groin taking the place of the mouth. The narrator explains: "ce qui me réjouit c'est la victoire de ce visage qui entraine et incorpore en sus le corps dont il s'est coupé pour s'y coller deux fois" (104). The body as the face can multiply its meaning, and it can encompass contradiction.

[143] The collection *Voiles*, co-authored by Cixous and Derrida in 1998, explores the polyvalency of the word *voile*. In this collection Cixous's contribution is entitled "Savoir," an essay that will be discussed at greater length below.

strict definition of masculine and feminine; the veil is "a nothing that creates nudity." On the other hand, the veil in its meaning as *sail* indicates the escaping movement of the body in the text, in the body that becomes the face. This image is more complicated by the fact that even though it covers her naked body, it is the sign that presents that she is naked. The veil is a "transparent nothing" that reveals the nudity of the body. Moreover, it qualifies the body as a face, "C'est le corps qui est le visage"; the text calls into question the ability of the viewer to *see* the body/ face. As described earlier in the essay, the face is not available in the painting; it is present but only in its distance. There is no face and there is no surface because there is no exterior. The body/ face, veiled as it is by "nothing" is also articulated in these terms of presence in absence and absence in presence.

Cixous draws attention to the negative space that the face creates in the painting, to that which constantly moves from the viewer's sight; this simultaneous visibility and invisibility is a characteristic of other elements of the painting, specifically the letter that Bathsheba holds in her hands in Rembrandt's painting. The letter is something that the narrator notices belatedly in the essay: "D'abord je ne l'avais pas vue" (17). Despite being an afterthought, the letter becomes the most visible image in the painting. When the narrator does, however, perceive this piece of paper, it overwhelms her vision: "Il y a donc une lettre. Il y a toujours une lettre. La lettre, quelle violence! Comme elle nous cherche, comme elle nous vise! Nous. Surtout les femmes" (17). The above passage echoes Derrida's discussion of "la violence de la lettre" in *De la Grammatologie*, certainly in the way that Derrida's text examines how language, specifically writing, is a medium that classifies, determines, and perpetuates the idea of the "truth" of dominant

Western culture's political, cultural, and social agendas. In Cixous's essay, the narrator describes this violence through how the letter that Bathesheba holds in her hand searches out "Nous…les femmes." In this sense, the letter is a tool of dominance and oppression. There is a complicated relationship between Bathsheba's body and the letter. The letter could be the summons from King David, which eventually leads Bathsheba into an adulterous relationship. Cixous's essay seems to suggest that the letter threatens Bathsheba's image in the painting with objectification and representation because the letter defines her as a tragic adulteress, and victim.

The sudden apparition of the letter, however, also connects to how the narrator cannot see Bathsheba's image. The blank white of the letter seems to tear into the viewer's perception of the painting and disrupt the viewer's contemplation: "Soudain je suis frappée de lettre. Et je ne vois plus qu'elle. Cette lettre! Non, c'est un trou dans le corps du tableau, la déchirure, l'accroc dans la nuit. Si je vois la lettre, je ne vois plus Bethsabée" (17). The letter seems to take over and define Bathsheba's image; yet, it also prevents Bathsheba from being seen. The letter disrupts sight. In the language of the passage, the letter and Bathsheba are equated by the ambivalence of the feminine article *la* and the pronoun *elle*. Ultimately the two become interchangeable, *l'être* and *la lettre*. There is a transformation from woman to letter and letter to woman: "Ce qui monte en Bethsabée, ce que la lettre a versé dans son corps, dans ses organes, dans son cerveau et qui travaille son corps, son visage, son sourcil, de l'intérieur. Elle écoute cela: cette transformation en elle-même" (18). Moreover, the letter and the woman are similar in that they both have the metaphorical power of looking themselves. For this reason, the letter is capable of fixing its sights ("comme elle nous vise") on the reader and "striking"

the narrator. Bathsheba's body is described in a similar way. Rather than the painting being a focus, the painting itself becomes a gaze: "Les "rideaux" se sont soulevés comme des paupières, découvrant la prunelle claire: le corps lumineux de Bethsabée" (16). Even as it is revealed to the reader, the body protects itself by returning the gaze. The letter is only seen *de dos* and Bathsheba herself is in the process of turning her face away from the viewer. By the end of the essay, the letter indicates passage and transformation rather than being merely an object of power and submission.[144] Even though "Bethsabée ou la bible intérieure" is about how a specific painting can be an *oeuvre d'être*, the narrator's focus on the image of the letter, particularly its autonomy and agency, suggests that writing can be a *work of being* as well.

The project that Cixous sets out in "Le Dernier tableau," to explore how writing can be like painting, is precisely in this creation of textual works of being. One finds a clear example of what an *oeuvre d'être* might look like in writing by entering into another text, the novel *Limonade tout était si infini*, written in 1982, one year before "Le Dernier tableau."[145] The novel itself seems mostly concerned with written artistic production, a fact that is evident in the title's allusion to a phrase written by Kafka shortly

[144] The original version of the essay ends at this point. In the revised version of "Bathsheba or the Interior Bible," only available in English, however, the narrator ends the essay on the contemplation of another painting, "The Slaughtered Ox." The interior portrait of the woman Bathsheba becomes the painting of the literal and physical interior of the slaughtered ox, the image marked by the gaping cavity in the animal as well as by its missing head. Both "Bathsheba" and "The Slaughtered Ox" are eminently visible in their invisibility. The woman's flesh and the animal's flesh, as Cixous's narrator describes them, both radiate with light, but this light is blinding. I choose to end this close reading at the point where the original version of the essay ends for two reasons: what follows repeats much of what I have discussed in terms of the impossibility of seeing a face, and the narrator's allusion to a "transfiguration" between these two paintings is a theme that I will pursue in relation to a different text in the next section of this chapter.

[145] "Le Dernier tableau" presents its own parallels with the novel; as the essay's narrator explains, "C'est un peu parce que j'avais écrit ce texte "Limonade tout était si infini", que je me suis permis d'aventurer vers la toile. Parce que, pour travailler sur ce qui, pour moi, est le trésor même de l'écriture, c'est-à-dire des phrases ultimes qui sont pleines d'être, qui sont à la fois si lourdes et si légères, qu'elles sont pour moi plus précieuses qu'un livre entier,--pour travailler sur le mystère de ces phrases j'avais été amenée à m'aider de la peinture" (184).

before his death and also in the two titles that make up the novel's sections: "La première lettre" and "La dernière phrase." In the first part of this novel, the narrator explores how to communicate her love to her daughter through language. The constant movement in language and in silence towards her daughter, however, is complicated by the concern that these words cannot be received with their intent intact. The second part of the novel explores the narrator's appropriation of and love for specific quotations from the works of Dostoevsky and Kafka. In her essay "Cixous's Concept of Brushing as a Gift," Claudine Fisher interprets the narrator's discussion of works of being and works of art as a question of origins, life, death, and rebirth (115-116). In the case of Kafka and Dostoevsky, their works of being are the words that these authors write that continue to signify and communicate beyond their death. For the narrator, she imagines her own daughter as a work of being. Despite the fact that "Le Dernier tableau" is about painting and *Limonade* is about writing, this novel's preoccupation with works of being as opposed to works of art is much like the discussion in "Le Dernier tableau." In both texts, the narrator is profoundly touched by the thought that a work of being is something that can escape the traditional relationship or hierarchy between an artist and a work of art.

At one particular moment in *Limonade,* the narrator describes herself in the third person experiencing language as it arrives to her: "le survenir des phrases, en plein air, déjà écrites" (185); this movement is what enables her to identify the words as a work of being:

> Chaque phrase était d'une eau si limpide, d'une taille si extraordinairement travaillée pour produire cette pureté, qu'au premier regard, signifiait les années et les années d'apprentissage passionné d'être humain ; oui, chaque phrase n'était

> rien de moins que la preuve qu'une personne avait passionnément, longuement appris à être humaine. N'était pas une "œuvre" "d'art", n'était pas un objet, n'était pas le beau résultat d'une ambition, n'avait pas été atteinte, pas visée, pas désirée comme but, n'avait pas été destinée à être produite pour l'admiration d'autrui, n'était pas une pièce de livre ou de musée, non, n'était pas l'aboutissement d'un rêve d'artiste. Etait,—étourdie d'émotion, d'angoisse de ne pas être digne de sentir ce qu'elle sentait—était, oui : *une œuvre d'être !* (188-189)

One of the most striking details about this last citation is the description of the liquid-like sentences. Fluidity is an important theme to the novel as is highlighted in the work's very title. References to liquids in the novel work on different levels. Language is something that can fulfill a need or slake a thirst; both liquid and language play on the tongue and in the mouth. In addition to this, however, the description that each sentence is made "d'une eau si limpide" insists on not only the fluidity and changeability of language but also the clarity and the purity of the sentence. The phrase is not an object and cannot be read as such because of this translucence that does not submit itself entirely to an onlooker's gaze.

The narrator compares the emotion she feels when one particular sentence appears in her thoughts, "pleine de lumières de sens qu'elle lui a fait penser," to what she feels when viewing Rembrandt's paintings of his beloved, Saskia. The overflowing of emotions is similar in both cases: "Parce que c'est seulement en s'avançant dans l'humide lumineux se répandant autour du visage de Saskia qu'elle avait déjà eu cette même envie de pleurer" (187). The light that spreads from the image of Saskia's face makes the narrator want to cry, which makes a connection between the flowing radiance

of the painting and the potentiality of the streaming tears. Repeatedly, throughout this section, the narrator alludes to the transformative movement of the work of being, and the image that manifests this constant shifting is the face. Sentences like Kafka's "Limonade tout était si infini" and paintings like Rembrandt's portraits of Saskia have a significance that is not entirely directed towards an end or towards the creation of a cohesive and understandable surface.

IV. TRANSFIGURATION

Cixous's distinction between works of being and works of art provides a way to understand how writing could be like painting; yet, her texts also move beyond a discussion of how these two arts share qualities to suggest that writing can *become* painting and painting can *become* writing. As explored in the section above, the work of being is one that has a transforming power, and it is precisely this potential for metamorphosis that finally allows the terms painting and writing to become interchangeable. This transmutation between the two kinds of artistic expression is one that Cixous examines, in particular, in the book *Le Tablier de Simon Hantaï*. The text begins as a contemplation of Hantaï's painting *Peinture (Écriture rose)*; yet, the narrator's focus moves beyond this single work of art. One of the reasons for the narrator's inability to stay trained on her discussion of this painting is because of how the painting reveals, "la transfiguration de Peinture en Écriture, d'Écriture en Peinture" (10).[146] Her use of the word *transfiguration*, the way that the word implies movement in

[146] The process and the act of transfiguration, however, is one applied to multiple subjects and ideas in Cixous's work. For example, one finds allusions to Raphaël's *Transfiguration* throughout Cixous's oeuvre, most notably in reference to Stendhal's discussion of the painting in his text *La Vie de Henry Brulard*. Cixous discusses this art work in *Hélène Cixous, photos de racines* (1994). In the chapter "Die Ursache—

its prefix -*trans* and the face in its use of the word *figure*[147] conveys not only the shifting meaning of the art that she contemplates, but also the importance of the image of the face in this transformation.

Whereas the word might have the same meaning as *metamorphosis* or *transformation*, it is important to note that the use of the word *transfiguration* is very specific in the way it evokes mystery, specifically in its theological import. Cixous's references to biblical stories, from both the Christian and Hebrew bibles, are numerous in her novels, essays, and plays. Among the many stories that are interpreted and re-read in Cixous's texts are narratives from Genesis such as the creation story, the story of Jacob's ladder, and the story of Abraham and the Donkey, and events from the New Testament also play into this dialogue such as the Crucifixion and the Transfiguration. Biblical moments resonate in these texts because of their inexplicable and enigmatic qualities as well as their importance as reinterpreted and retold narratives.[148] The narrator of the previously discussed "Bethsabée ou la Bible intérieure," for example, describes the site of the bible as a textual origin and as a primal scene in relationship to both painting and writing: "Le pays même de Rembrandt? Ni la ville, ni la campagne. Le pays intérieur: "le paysage de la Bible intérieure". Je dis la Bible, c'est-à-dire le pays des passions les plus anciennes; c'est un pays sans paysage, sans monuments. Mais non sans forme et sans

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La Chose" of the novel *L'Amour du loup* (1993), Cixous's narrator makes a reference to Raphaël's painting and how the story of this painting is one that brings about transfiguration: "L'idée de Transfiguration nous transfigure" (137). Works of art can be transfigured, but so too can the viewer and the artist. In the article "Umasked!", Cixous writes of the transfiguration of the actor on stage, and in an essay on Clarice Lispector, "Extreme Fidelity," Cixous examines the transfiguration of the author.

[147] While *figure* certainly refers to the face as a more concrete and tangible object, its echo in the word *transfiguration* actually seems to undo the definition. The prefix of this word seems to insist that the *figure* becomes a more mobile image.

[148] The essay on Bathsheba is found in a collection entitled *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*. This title also directly refers to biblical myths and stories.

habitants" (14). The biblical text is a place of genesis for narratives and for images, and the narrator's description, "sans monument," also seems to refer to a lack of artificial constructs in the way that the Bible represents people and events. In this sense, meaning is not fixed to an anchored object.[149]

Considering the importance of biblical events and characters in Cixous's work, it seems appropriate to imagine that her use of the word *transfiguration* alludes to this event in the Bible. The story of the Transfiguration, which varies considerably from account to account, is told four times in the New Testament, and there are many allusions to the event in other parts of this religious text as well. For example, the shining face of Christ in the Transfiguration is reminiscent of a moment in Exodus that describes Moses's face shining with the glory of God.[150] Each story in the New Testament is similar in how it recounts the miraculous change in the appearance of Jesus Christ on Mount Thabor, the moment in the New Testament when Christ was revealed to the apostles Peter, James, and John as the son of God. In the gospel according to Saint Matthew, the change in Christ is perceived primarily though the face that radiates light like the sun. In biblical accounts of the Transfiguration, the three apostles are forbidden to tell anyone what they have seen on the mountain. In this sense, the Transfiguration is something that cannot be told and is defined by the question of how its occurrence will be transmitted. It is always, already a question of narrative. At the core of this event then is a secret, and this mystery plays a role in much of Cixous's works. As she explains in a series of interviews with

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[149] Cixous elaborates on the importance of the Bible as primal scene and original story in *Rencontres terrestres* : "De la Bible, il y a partout et inauguralement et "naturellement" dans ce que j'écris, mythes, leitmotivs, chants, terres promises, philosophèmes, J'y suis "chez moi" comme au désert et sans Dieu c'est-à-dire avec besoin et manque de Dieu" (111).

[150] Browning, *A Dictionary of the Bible* 1996.

Calle-Gruber in *Hélène Cixous, photos de racines*, writing is this search to communicate what cannot be spoken: “Cette urgence, ce besoin de déchiffrer ce qui ne se dit pas, ce qui s’exprime autrement que par la parole verbale qui cependant suscite l’envie des mots, c’est notre drame humain” (65). As a result, the Transfiguration, in its historical as well as in its etymological import, is part of Cixous’s texts because of the mystery it presents.

One of the first indications that *Le Tablier de Simon Hantaï* will be about a radical transformation and ultimately a transfiguration between writing and painting is that the work begins, not with a description of one of his paintings, but on a literary text. The narrator discusses a re-reading of Paul Celan’s *Die Niemandrose* as a point of entry into her writing on Hantaï’s painting, and the first thing that strikes the narrator as she opens up the book of poems is the image of a face. The narrator’s meeting with Celan’s text and her ultimate use of the text in discussing Hantaï’s painting hinges on the appearance of a face in the confluence of these different kinds of texts and images:

> Le Mardi 25 Novembre 2003 quand j’ai ouvert la porte de *die Niemandrose* elle a été là soudain et à nouveau posée juste en face de moi, sur mon lit, son visage rose tourné calmement vers mon visage, une lumière blanche safranée coulait un flot immobile par la fenêtre, repeignant la chambre passée en présent, Thessie ma bien aimée disparue revenue, m’attendant à l’orée de la *Niemandrose* c’était elle et c’était moi et c’était le 5 juin 2001 comme je l’apprenais par l’inscription au dos de la photo… (9)

This quotation is a complex structure of layered references, but they all refer back to the face and the possibility of transfiguration. Before arriving at the face, however, it is important to unpack all of the possible meanings in this quotation. For example, the

visage rose and the reference to Celan's book of poetry all pose the question of how this color/flower could be operating in the text. The importance of *la rose* and *le rose* already suggests passage as well as mystery in the text; the rose is in-between two poles of meaning.[151] The difficulty of the syntax in the first lines also contributes to this confusion of how words signify and what language means. The book of poems is confused with a personified being: *la Rose de Personne*.

It seems as if the book has the face until the reader realizes that the face turned towards the narrator's own is a photo of Thessie, the cat, the *bien aimée*. Just as the allusion to the *rose* creates a collapse between two terms in this quotation, so too does the figure of Thessie. Cats in Cixous's work are part of this in-between space, representing the human, animal, and divine.[152] In particular, Cixous's novel, *Messie* (1996), discusses the cat as this hybrid animal and human subject. Moreover, the cat as the beloved in Cixous's text is the being that promises a future without expecting anything in return. Cixous describes this important quality in "Le Livre que Tu n'écriras pas" with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet. She explains "Terre promise et en même temps à venir et jamais. Pour moi, c'est une bénédiction. L'à venir ne vient jamais mais te fait avancer, marcher, écrire. Autre version : le Messie – ce sont mes chats. Si familiers. Le donné à venir. Il y a du don dans ce qui n'est pas encore. Avoir c'est perdre, viser, attendre, presqu'atteindre mais sans

[151] Cixous's use of the word *rose* also connects this discussion to other texts such as Genet's *Miracle de la Rose*. In her article "Genet and Cixous: Intersext", Hanrahan examines the for Genet's influence on Cixous's work, commenting, "…what Cixous most admires about Genet's texts is the extent to which they move, are in constant metamorphosis, constant alteration" (724). Language, in its movement, is able to reveal mysteries.

[152] Marta Segarra discusses the topic of the "animal other" at length in her article, "Hélène Cixous's Other Animal: The Half-Sunken Dog."

finitude" (3). The fact that the narrator of *Le Tablier* sees the cat's face upon opening the book implies both the sacredness of this image as well as its potential and promise.[153]

The cat as *messiah* is a figure of one whose arrival is anticipated, and as shown in the passage above, this image subverts the flow of time in order to arrive in the present from the past. The transformation in these pages of *Le Tablier* is due to the way in which the text collapses the division between past and present. The quotation above combines two moments into one; there is immediate transparency between the 25th of November, 2003 and the 5th of June, 2001. The date June 5th in particular is of interest because it is the birth date of Cixous. For this reason the date indicates not only a history, but also a constant renewal in that it marks the date of *birth*: one precise and unique moment that then paradoxically is repeated in the subsequent years as a date for celebration. The importance of the date once again calls attention to Celan's poetry and in particular to Derrida's critical work, *Schibboleth pour Paul Celan*. As Derrida writes, dates are a kind of schibboleth, or *pass*word, in that it they allow movement and circulation: "Une date s'emporte, elle se transporte, s'enlève—et donc s'efface dans sa lisibilité même" (40). The date serves as an entrance into reading, but it also marks a unique moment which continues through a process of resurgence and effacement.[154]

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[153] This shining face calls to mind the earlier texts discussed in this chapter, specifically the adored face in "La Venue à l'écriture."

[154] The word *schibboleth* connects Cixous's text to both a literary culture and a religious culture. One definition of the English word, *shibboleth*, is something that cannot be spoken or uttered. This definition originates in the Bible, specifically in Judges 12:4-6, where the ability to pronounce the word correctly allowed the Gileadiates to identify Ephraimites at a river crossing (Cunningham, *Reading After Theory* 107). In Cixous's work, however, the main importance of this word is as a means of passage in language: "Aucun n'imite l'autre. Mais chacun reconnaît que l'autre est aussi un appelé. Et on entend résonner leurs mots de passe. Il n'y a pas un mot de passe unique, un schibboleth. Chacun a les siens selon sa langue, et c'est toute la langue de chacun qui est schibboleth" ("Conversation avec l'âne," *L'Amour du loup* 96-97).

The book of poems and the ambiguous face that the narrator sees in these poems distract the narrator from her discussion of the paintings she sets out to describe; yet, when she finally arrives at the discussion of the painting, its contemplation seems impossible. The narrator considers if it is even possible to capture the idea of this painting in her discussion because of two reasons: the inability to rest in front of the painting and the painting's constantly shifting meanings. The narrator explains:

> Je voulais parler devant le tableau de Hantaï, dit *Peinture (Écriture rose)* 1958-1959, et j'ai divagué. Car comment ne pas s'enfoncer, dès qu'on a lancé le fil d'un regard vers la mer aux cent profondeurs la mer promise, dans le labyrinthe aux trois cent soixante-cinq jours […] troupeaux minutieux de signes conduit sous les mots Peintre (Ecriture rose) sous le toit ou les doigts de ces noms qui ne nomment pas proprement, qui déclarent l'évidence trouble, la transfiguration de Peinture en Écriture, d'Écriture en Peinture. (10)

The narrator's first meditation on the work of art is about the desire to *speak before* ("parler devant") one of Hantaï's paintings rather than to *speak of* the painting. The preposition *devant* places the narrator in front of the painting, but this position towards the painting is untenable. Once the narrator looks at the painting, she realizes that she will begin to sink into, "s'effoncer dans" the labyrinth of meaning that the work creates. Moreover, attempting to *see* Hantaï's painting and then relay what it is about is an impossible process because of the troubling title of the painting: *Peinture (Écriture Rose).* She ruminates on how she could possibly talk directly about a painting with names "qui ne nomment pas proprement." Already in the title is the transfiguration, the

transformation from one medium to another; however, this event resists being put into words even as the narrator has the overwhelming desire to do so.

Speaking *of* the painting is difficult because of this transfiguration. The title contains words which are in constant metamorphosis and movement. Furthermore, the narrator describes her preference for speaking of her meeting with the portrait rather than of the portrait itself: "D'un autre côté, je ne voulais pas parler du tableau, ni de Hantaï. Mais plutôt de mon aventure, de l'aventure du tableau, de mon aller-à-la-rencontre d'une chose dite tableau …" (11). The narrator's text, then, is more a meeting between the painting and the author than an author's comments on a work of art. As the narrator repeats in this last quotation, she will write of the *aventure* of her meeting with Hantaï's text. The original meaning of the word *aventure* implies what is *à venir* or what is *to come* much like the arrival of Thessie in the aforementioned photograph. *Aventure* also implies something that is unanticipated in its meaning as *hazard*. In this sense, the discovery of the book of poetry's face in the early lines of the essay defines the ways in which the narrator will be able to interpret Hantaï's work: through the sudden unanticipated arrival of a face in the painting, or in the narrator's words, "cette chose dite tableau." The work is called a painting, but as the narrator's examination continues, the transformation of the object is so complete that language can only approximate what it really represents. Language must constantly catch up to the escaping and transforming image.

The descriptions of the painting echo this idea that the only way to approach the painting is as if it were a face that arrives to the on-looker, not only from the perspective of the author but also of the painter. Hantaï explains one of the theories behind his

painting to the narrator: “ce tableau c’est essayer de faire venir des yeux cachés derrière des millions de petites paupières” (11). In his description, one can imagine that each of the words on the canvas has its own face. Looking at the painting is a process of catching the eye of the painting itself. On one hand, the painting is a reflection of the artist, documenting the artist’s thoughts for the period of a year; day after day Hantaï copied biblical and philosophical texts onto the canvas. On the other hand, despite the ways in which the painting documents 365 days of the painter’s life, the painting ultimately reveals its own preoccupations and its own meaning. Even though this last quotation only discusses the *gaze* of the painting, further descriptions by the narrator reveal that one of the only ways to discuss the transfiguration of the painting, its mystery, is in the terms of the face: “Il n’y a pas de rose et pourtant elle est rose—à nos yeux. Je regarde la toile aux trois cent soixante-cinq visages mêlés et je vois rose” (12). Indeed, the painting physically appears pink because of the ink used to paint the words (the painting is like a giant abstract rose). Yet, the color, the narrator suggests, arrives because the component parts of the painting; its symbols, words, numbers and colors are all contemplated as if they were faces. Every day has a face that symbolizes lived, and living, experience. The mix of these faces is what reaches the viewer’s eyes as *rose*.

The narrator focuses the discussion of her inability and difficulties to write *on* or *before* the painting on the impossibility of seeing a face: “Je passai deux ans devant la tapisserie aux mystères. Je cherche. Je cherche. La Cause. Le visage de la Cause. Je lus tous les livres./ Je ne trouvai pas le visage. Pourtant je l’entendais sourire. Dans le bruit du banquet philosophique, j’étais sûr, j’entendais son silence” (25). In searching for ways to write about Hantaï’s painting, *Peinture (Écriture rose)*, the narrator moves through

texts, both literary and philosophical, as well as through time, the simple past, the imperfect, and the present, in order to find the image of a face. Yet, the face in Cixous's works, as it has been discussed throughout this dissertation, cannot be fully experienced through sight. The smile, the enigmatic indication of the invisible face, is not seen but *heard* in this above quotation. This face, "le visage de la Cause," seems to hold a key to understanding Hantaï's work, as I will explore further below, and this specific visage cannot be understood in terms of the physical, accessible human face.

The narrator never comes face to face with the painting; instead, she documents her journey in order to meet the painting. The narrator weaves through Celan's poetry in order to understand Hantaï's painting and then finally arrives at notes and corrections for passages of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. The narrator's allusions to Proust's text are significant here because the narrator's search through these literary works is a process of unmasking. Through tracing *la branche d'aupébine*, the spray of hawthorn, in Proust, the narrator arrives at what she describes as the secret of the painting, something that is hidden in this early twentieth-century author's work. Cixous's narrator describes finding this image throughout Proust's notebooks "une fois sous un masque de maronnier" (27) and "une fois sous un masque de notes et de larmes" (28). The branch finally moved aside in Proust's text reveals *La Mer*: "Ainsi c'était Elle, La Mer, et c'est toujours la même qui se tient perdue, la promise cachée derrière le panneau du tableau!/ C'est la Mer ! et la Mère, à laquelle nous aurons été ramenés par les champs et par l'œuvre" (29). By following these flowers, the narrator comes upon something which is hidden in Proust's text and, as the reference to the "promise cachée derrière le panneau du tableau" suggests, in Hantai's work as well. This discovery, however, is not as

transparent as it might seem. The narrator perceives the sea, “La Mer,” and, by the sound’s multiple meanings, also the mother “La Mère.” In other words, locating “La Mère/ La Mer” does not necessarily mean that the narrator has been able to finally face Hantaï’s work because what she discovers automatically means more than itself.

Just as Cixous’s essay on *Le Tablier de Simon Hantaï* opens on the illuminated and photographed face of her beloved in a book of Celan’s poetry, the unmasking continues in Proust’s text and finally leads the narrator to the photograph and “portrait” of Hantaï’s mother. It seems that the transfiguration between writing and painting takes place because of the fluctuating and unattainable image of the face in the work. The narrator’s discourse moves from Hantaï’s self-portrait to the portrait of his mother and finally to the text’s eponymous object, *le tablier,* as it is recreated in Hantaï’s *Peinture pliée*. In the narrator’s voyage through Proust’s work, she arrives at the ocean, but also at the feminine figure, “Elle.” “Le visage de la Cause,” the face hidden behind Hantaï’s painting, seems to be identified as a portrait of Hantaï’s mother. The first portrait the narrator discusses is actually a photograph of the mother, one that Hantaï sent to the narrator:

> Voici maintenant qu’il me montre le tablier il y a quatre-vingts ans, dans le lointain d’une photo voilée. En ce temps-là le tablier accompagnait la mère, il peignait, il faisait le portrait d’Anna, elle lui ressemblait. Un instant on le prend pour elle, elle est sa version vierge, une légérissime ironie intimide son visage de jeune garçon féminin. (36)

Faces, *les visages,* are constantly implicated in the way the text discusses transformation and metamorphosis. As mentioned above, another one of these moments of

metamorphosis is the movement from the artist's self-portrait to the portrait of his mother. Already in the narrator's description of the young feminine boy in the photograph of the *tablier*, there is a connection between the artist and his mother through the resemblance of the face. The narrator exclaims with regard to the *tablier* in the photograph, "Soudain je vois: c'est le miroir de la peinture de Hantaï" (36).

The *tablier* not only serves to define the mother's portrait, but it is also mirrors the artist's work. In the photograph, which is actually shown in the text, the *tablier* "accompanies" the mother; she wears this item of clothing. Yet, in the details of the squares of black cloth that make up the *tablier* in Hantaï's *Peinture pliée*, also pictured in Cixous's text, the narrator sees the possibility of all portraiture: "Le tablier n'est d'ailleurs pas un tablier. C'est le rideau devant le mystère" (36). In this sense, the discussion of *Peinture (Écriture rose)* results in the narrator tracing a kind of genealogy of the work; the artist's self-portrait catches the reflection of the mother's portrait. Transfiguration is possible between writing and painting because of the face. Through tracing the secret of the *aupébine* to *la mer* and finally to *la mère* in other works of literature, the narrator is then able to explore the connection between the mother's face and Hantaï's artistic production: "De la mère, Anna, au visage semblable au sien, posé ineffaçable il garde, à travers terres et guerres, le premier tableau, le manteau de travail, surface et volume" (42). This work of being, several times over, accomplishes the transfiguration between writing and painting. Cixous's essay, *Le Tablier de Simon Hantaï,* puts into perspective the radical upheaval transfiguration creates in works of art.

Chapter Four: THE OTHER FACE

"Le Visage me soufflait quelque chose, me parlait, m'appelait à parler, à déchiffrer tous les noms qui l'entouraient, l'évoquant, l'effleuraient, le faisaient apparaitre"[155]

I. WRITING BLIND

Beginning in the early 1990s, Cixous's work changed in a subtle way: the many repeated themes, images, and events from her earlier work became more locatable in an ostensibly "autobiographical" discourse. Her texts became more and more pointed about these personal stories even as their telling challenged the limits and the function of the work of autobiography.[156] In discussing these later texts, I will use the term *autofiction* precisely because of the way Hélène Cixous acknowledges the schism between the author and the self. Cixous has addressed this issue in many different interviews, declaring to Aliette Armel in 2004:

> Cependant, même si tout ce que j'ai écrit est pensé à partir des expériences que j'ai pu faire, je me trouve relativement absente de mes textes considérés comme autobiographiques. L'essentiel de ce qui a été moi est complètement secret. (27)[157]

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[155] Cixous, "La Venue à l'écriture" 10.

[156] Different critics have explored the unique status of autobiographical elements in Cixous's fiction. In her article "Birthmarks (Given Names)," Elissa Marder explains that the texts written in this decade after 1991 are forms of an "auto-analysis" and more provocatively of an "auto-odyssey" (32). Marder explains how the "real fictions and fictional realities" of these later novels rearticulate events from Cixous's earlier novels, and thus should be read retroactively. For a further discussion of the debate surrounding autobiography in Hélène Cixous's work see Mairead Hanrahan's essay "Of Altobiography," Claire Boyle's chapter on Cixous in the book *Consuming Autobiographies* and Sissel Lie's essay "Personal and/or Universal? Hélène Cixous's Challenge to Generic Borders."

[157] She echoes this sentiment to Frédéric-Yves Jeannet in the book-length interview *Rencontre terrestre* (2005) when he asks her about the personal elements of her novel: "Mais en vérité, il n'y a, venant de ma vue, que bien peu d'éléments concernant ma propre personne, ne trouvez-vous pas? Ce sont les personnages, les proches, les foules d'êtres qui en effet me font mais ne me sont pas, qui occupent toute ma scène. Ma propre vie reste inconnue" (123).

Cixous proposes two interesting facets of her autofictive work: the self is absent from these texts and the life that the text is ostensibly about remains a mystery. While there are many ways to explore these aspects of this author's autofictive writing, in this chapter, I will show how the image of the face, in particular, drives her production of this genre. Similar to my earlier discussion on autobiographical elements in works by Duras, Cixous's autofictive works seems to fit squarely within this specific genre developed in the mid to late-twentieth century; yet, as in Duras's work, the encounter with the other's face complicates the point where life and fiction meet.

One of the first ways to understand how the face might be central to this author's autofictive texts is in the way that this author describes the relationship between blindness and autobiography. Cixous addresses this connection in *Hélène Cixous, photos de racines*. Calle-Gruber comments on Cixous's statement that it is always the other who creates one's *autoportrait*. Cixous responds to her interlocuter with the following answer:

> La provenance du matériau dans l'écriture, elle ne peut être que de moi. Moi ce n'est pas moi, bien sûr, puisque c'est moi avec les autres, venant d'autres, me mettant à la place de l'autre, me mettant les yeux de l'autre. Ce qui signifie qu'il y a du commun. Tu dis qu'il ne peut pas y avoir d'écriture autobiographique, ça j'en suis bien consciente. Il peut y avoir ces fractures du moi passionnantes que sont les confessions. Ce sont pour moi des œuvres, des livres. Appelons cela l'autobiographie, mais c'est une version. C'est la version de l'aveugle. (96)

This quotation sets the terms for thinking about Cixous's autofictive works because it reveals how any kind of autobiographical writing stems from the self's inherent alterity. Her version of the autobiographical tale is made up of disparate confessions given by a

fractured *moi*. This *moi* is not stable because it is a self that does not just develop in relation to others, it evolves from being in the other's position. Writing about the self is paradoxically destructive and unifying considering that it breaks up the idea of a single, discrete life through a joining of the self and the other. In the correspondence between self and other, something remains hidden in the confessions; broken as they are, the confessions do not fit back together perfectly. Cixous alludes to this unknowable quality of any "autobiographical" text in her description of the work as "la version de l'aveugle." Looking through the other's eyes, the self is blinded to the narrative, which proceeds out of the writing self's control and sight.

A closer look at the novel *Jours de l'an* (1990) and specifically the chapter "Autoportraits d'une aveugle"[158] reveals what blindness might mean in relation to the work of the author and also what is at stake when the text conveys something beyond the narrator's sight. While this is not one of Cixous's autofictive texts per se, this text does provide insight into the very unique position from which Cixous imagines writing about the self. *Jours de l'an* itself is a book that examines authorship and authors, and the book begins with an impossible text. The narrator explains that on her journey of writing, she has been led to understand that there is a book that she has never written: "le livre que je n'ai pas écrit" (7). The book, *Jours de l'an*, constantly reveals the absence of the book that the narrator never wrote. In trying to explain this impossible text, the narrator makes detours through the lives and works of other authors including Paul Celan, Clarice

[158] Interestingly, Cixous published this novel in the same year as Jacques Derrida's *Mémoires d'aveugle*, a text that also engages the question of blindness and writing. I will discuss the relationship between these two writers in a later section, but Derrida's description of how the work of self-portraiture is blinding resonates in this particular work by Cixous, specifically in the way Derrida describes the gaze of the other upon a self-portrait as what introduces the loss of sight in the relationship between artist and work.
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Lispector, Marina Tsvetaeva, Aleksandr Pushkin, Rainier Maria Rilke, Thomas Bernhardt, and Honoré de Balzac. Not just about other authors, the book is also about the author's own other; the book constantly shifts between the third person and the first person. Admitting the presence of this book that is not written (but paradoxically still exists) parallels the narrator's exploration of the possibility of another author, or "elle," working alongside her and consequently disrupting the narrator's connection to what she writes and could potentially write.

The chapter title, "Autoportraits d'une aveugle," highlights the paradoxical plurality of the self-portrait. The auto- or self-reflection to which the title of the chapter refers is never unified; instead, it is multiple. The narrator explains that the reason for this shifting portrait is due to the author: "elle." The narrator explains:

> Pourquoi parlé-je de l'auteur comme si elle n'était pas moi? Parce qu'elle n'est pas moi. Elle part de moi et va où je ne veux pas aller. Souvent je sens qu'elle est mon ennemie. Non pas l'hostile, mais celle qui me déborde, me déconcerte, va jusqu'à me jouer, me rouler, me faire tomber…. (153)

The *je* separates herself from the author in the beginning of the chapter by distancing the pronoun and the noun from each other; *I*, the narrator, is not the author. This narrator is not a *je* in an autobiographical tale, split between a past and present *I*, but rather a *je* that changes according to the desires of a fictive author. Even though the narrator's language in the text is very clear about this division between *elle* and *mo*i, the menacing and uncanny author continues to influence the narrator's text, overcoming the separation between the two and deciding what happens to the narrator.

The author that the *je* describes in this section is able to control the text, but the narrator also explains that this author goes where the narrator herself does not *want* to go. In Cixous's text, the narrator loses control of the text and of herself as author, bringing the narrator to a frightening possibility that she cannot face: death, specifically her own. The narrator explains: "Il y'a en moi une force inconnue qui écrit avant moi, contre moi, et que je redoute cette fois-ci plus que jamais. C'est elle qui est ma mort" (155).[159] Autobiography constantly imperils the life of its subject(s). This threat, however, is not just confined to autobiographical texts; it is a trait of all writing in Cixous's works. The narrator of "Autoportraits d'une aveugle" speaking from the position of the author (in the guise of reading notes by the author), even goes as far as to describe writing as not just generative, but also as murderous:

> *L'auteur* : Quand j'écris un livre, il y a sous la pierre de ce livre, le livre que je n'ai pas écrit. Quand j'écris un livre, je suis constamment en train de ne pas écrire un autre livre, j'avance en repoussant, sur les bords de chaque chapitre qui naît gisent les pages qui ont expiré, ah ! c'est un cheminement féroce que je fais, je tue sous moi, avec une injustice intolérable, ce que j'allais écrire glisse soudain dans l'abîme, d'une main je repousse la main qui m'est tendue, de l'autre main j'en saisis une autre: voilà pourquoi je retarde le récit que je veux tellement écrire. Il y aura des récits morts autour de ce récit, et peut-être ce récit lui-même ne survivra-t-il pas à un récit qui, à l'instant même où je me pencherai sur le papier pour

[159] I do not have the space to address fully this important concept in terms of the whole section, but it relates, in particular to the narrator's description of the images of two dead authors: Clarice Lispector and Marina Tsvetaeva. The narrator describes these two women proceeding into death through their own writing, in other words, a complete absorption by the text that the narrator admires, but still resists.

> déchiffrer le visage de la personne chère, s'emparera de la place je voudrais garder. (155)[160]

In this excerpt, the author describes a situation the narrator fears, one that relates writing to the power of giving or taking away life. Underneath the book that the author does write, "sous la pierre de ce livre," is the book that the author does not write. Each book is a tombstone that in its own birth marks the presence of "dead" pages. The juxtaposition of birth and death imagery marks writing as a paradoxical activity of both giving life and taking it away. The author's reticence to create the story that she wants to write is because of the text's simultaneous link to life and death; the story and its characters might not survive the text's composition. Interestingly, what marks the death in the above quotation is the way that the face slips away; in writing to find a place for a loved one's face, the author threatens the possibility of this image.

"Autoportraits d'une aveugle" describes writing as the act of capturing life in the process of killing this life, and this consequence is the mysterious truth to which the narrator must remain blind. She notes:

> Il fait noir sous ma terre. Je suis un peu perdue. Ce que je voulais dire, je l'ai peut-être dit. Si je pouvais revenir sur mes pages, et me lire. Mais dans une telle obscurité je peux seulement écrire en me suivant, jusqu'au bout. Je suis maintenant dans la partie obscure de la vérité. (196)

The narrator is writing blind, unable to look back at what she has written and unable to understand what she will write. This extreme blindness even separates the narrator from herself; she cannot turn back to read her own story because it has already been taken over

[160] An earlier line of the text puts this in terms of portraiture. Losing control of the narrative makes it impossible to create any kind of portrait in the text: "Une histoire raconte toujours une autre histoire. On fait le portrait de quelqu'un, et c'est le portrait de quelqu'un d'autre" (154-155).

by the text. The author cannot have a life in writing, an autobiography, as the text only gives life that is paradoxically death. As the narrator of *Jours de l'an* shows, writing exceeds her lived experience. She is placed in a powerless position to the work that leads her to explore unknown and perhaps ultimately unknowable regions. In this last quotation, the narrator describes following the figure of herself in the work; she is made other by the act of writing.

This description of the author following herself also goes beyond the boundaries of the work because it alludes to Ovid's story of Orpheus leading Eurydice out from the underworld. The importance of these figures to the genesis of Cixous's texts is something Jeannet addresses in *Rencontre terrestre*, a collection of his interviews with the author from 2005. In this interview, Jeannet asks Cixous about the allusions to the singer poet Orpheus in her work and the influence of Maurice Blanchot's discussions of this figure. Cixous responds:

> "Orphée", il me semble l'avoir d'abord vécu avec une ambiguïté structurelle (c'est un homme dans le mythe donc pas moi. C'est le chanteur – donc moi. C'est elle, c'est lui). Il est devant, elle est devant. Qui est devant qui ? Qui devance. Le devanceur est l'aveugle, il ne voit pas qui est dans son dos. C'est une figure infinie, qui m'a hantée … Orphée est toute créature qui écrit, et se divise en deux, meurt d'écrire, vit d'écrire, meurt d'envie d'écrire. (2-3)

The character of Orpheus, as explained in the quotation above, mirrors the divided author in "Autoportraits d'une aveugle." He is blind because he must not look back at the one who follows him. He is not just a leader, however. He also follows behind when he descends to the underworld. He is "moi" and "pas moi," and thus in relation to the author

he is both feminine and masculine. Ultimately, he is one entity split into two. Implicated in this division, of course, is also the question of how the work simultaneously gives the author life as it takes it away.

The allusion to Orpheus in "Autoportraits d'une aveugle" illustrates the narrator's understanding of the paradoxical relationship between life and death in writing and also introduces, albeit subtly, how the image of the face might function in this act of writing. The figure of Orpheus, especially in his relationship to Eurydice, suggests a way to interpret how the face operates in the relationship between self and other in Cixous's autofictive texts. In *L'Entretien infini*, where he addresses the moment when Orpheus looks back at Eurydice in Ovid's tale, Blanchot compares Eurydice's face to an emptiness: "Telle fut Eurydice dans les enfers, à l'instant où Orphée va la toucher du regard, quand il la voit telle qu'elle est, voit qui elle est, l'enfer, l'horreur de l'absence, la démesure de *l'autre* nuit, et cependant, en ce hasard, voit que le vide est aussi le visage nu d'Eurydice tel que le monde le lui a toujours voilé" (274). This quotation highlights how it is not necessarily Orpheus's gaze upon the face of Eurydice that causes her image's disappearance; rather, his gaze at this moment finally sees her as she is. Throughout life, a person's image can hide the imminence of death; yet, as he is emerging from the underworld, Orpheus sees that these two states are one and the same. He simultaneously sees and unsees her face in the same instantaneous moment. Significantly, Blanchot describes her *naked* face, and seeing this bare face does not mean that Orpheus finally has access to her image. This naked face shows the disappearance of the loved one in the finality of an unveiling.

In Cixous's autofiction, the narrative self, like Orpheus, is constantly placed in an untenable position with the regard to the other; each work conveys a desire to see the face even as it reveals why the face to face encounter can never happen. On one hand, writing is a way of giving life to the other, a "course contre la mort."[161] On the other hand, however, writing about the other imperils that very life. In these works, the narrators' allusions to faces always indicate a struggle between maintaining a life in a potentially deadly medium or resuscitating a dead figure without destroying the memory entirely. And this relationship to the other is what defines Cixous's autofictive works, the self can only be explored through the other's always escaping image. In the autofictive universe of Cixous's works, there are several figures that her narrators attempt to face: among them loved ones (mother, father, son, daughter, brother, friend, beloved) and even places (Oran, Osnabrück, Alger, and Manhattan). I begin my discussion with a close reading of "Savoir," an essay in the book *Voiles* (1998), co-written by Cixous and Derrida. While the essay reveals just what is sacrificed when one sees a face, the book as a whole reintroduces the possibility of approaching the other from a position other than *face to face*. I follow the appearance and disappearance of the *visage* in *OR. Les lettres de mon père* (1997), *Osnabrück* (1999), and *Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage* (2000), and I end with an examination of the novel *Si près* (2006). Despite their differences in scope and subject, all these novels (and, as we will see, the lives within) proceed from the various ways that the narrator approaches the face of the other without ever being *en face*.

[161] Cixous discusses this "course contre la mort" in *Rencontre terrestre* when she discusses her autofictive texts in particular. She explains that the "levée d'interdit" of writing about her life and her family in her later texts is due to "l'imminence de la fin de nos vies et ce qu'elle entraînera silence, omission, effacement, étranglement, oubli" (122).

II. WRITING FACES

Voiles is a text that explores what it means to see and what it means to not see, both within Cixous's essay "Savoir" and also between Cixous's text and Derrida's essay, "Un ver à soie." The title itself, *Veils*, suggests that there is a face hidden in the text. Six sketches by Ernest Pignon-Ernest interspersed within the pages suggest that the face has an enigmatic position in the work. In one two-page image, the left side of the sketch hints at the revelation of a face complete with rippling veil, tendrils of hair, and an ear, but the right side of the image is entirely blank. Even though a frame for the face is given, the face itself is not there. This visual absence reflects an interesting conflict in the book as a whole; the face is central to the discussion within and between each essay in *Voiles* although its image in the text is difficult to locate. I dwell on the intricacies of this particular text first and foremost because the title suggests the hidden face, and also because both essays belong to the autobiographical genre, albeit in a complicated and problematic way. Cixous's essay, "Savoir," is a presumably autobiographical text about a surgical procedure that enables the severely myopic narrator in the story to see without the aid of contact lenses or glasses. The essay describes the consequences of the surgery: the simultaneous gift and loss of knowledge due to the narrator's suddenly perfect sight. Derrida's text also seems to display autobiographical elements, specifically his recollections of the tallith or prayer shawl he received as a young man from his grandfather and his childhood experience of cultivating silk worms. Yet, as we will see, autobiographical information in each essay destabilizes any possible fixed portrait of these authors.

In “Savoir,” an essay that relates the consequences of seeing the face, both of the self and of the other, the title hints that the essay will be about understanding, but the essay itself complicates what kind of knowledge the narrator receives. The title is the first indication that “knowledge” is not a transparent concept. In terms of the ostensibly autobiographical text, the word *savoir* sounds very much like the reflexive verb *se voir*. These two verbs, however, are not aurally identical. A closer homonym to *savoir*, however, is *ça voir*. In *L’Amour même dans la boîte aux lettres*, the narrator explores this sibilant and slipping pronoun. In this novel, *ça* seems to refer to a mouse, but then becomes a conteplation of the small word: “Comment passe Ça? Ou vit Ça? Où se cache Ça. *Ça* ne veut pas mourir. Ça est un pronom indéfini. On ne sait pas de quoi on parle quand on dit ça. Ça n’est pas ci ? Ça s’en va. Cela ne veut pas dire que ça ne revient pas” (67). In terms of “Savoir,” this seemingly inconsequential word embodies the indistinct and fluid world that resists designation in the narrator’s inability to see the people and places before her.

From the very beginning of the essay, the narrator describes her near-sightedness as a condition that places her in a constant state of doubt. One of the first indicators of this incertitude is the vacillation in the text between the pronoun *elle* and *je*. Whereas the essay begins with the narrator discussing an unidentified female, the narration changes in the same paragraph to the first person. Being myopic places the narrator in a constant state of unknowing, and this questioning even extends to her sense of self. The narrator first describes the near-sightedness of “elle,” and then the narrator claims this doubt of the visual world for her own:

> La myopie était sa faute, sa laisse, son voile natal imperceptible. Chose étrange, elle voyait qu'elle ne voyait pas, mais elle ne voyait pas bien. Chaque jour il y avait refus, mais qui pouvait dire d'où partait le refus: qui se refusait, était-ce le monde ou elle ? Elle était de cette race obscure subreptice qui va désemparée devant le grand tableau du monde, toute la journée en posture d'aveu: je ne vois pas le nom de la rue, je ne vois pas le visage, je ne vois pas la porte, je ne vois pas venir et c'est moi qui ne vois pas ce que je devrais voir. (11)

In the very first lines of the text the narrator defines "elle" through this figure's knowledge of her lack of sight. "Elle" turns her indeterminate gaze on herself and automatically undoes this gaze, seeing that she does not see well. Not only is "elle" confused about what she sees, but she also questions her place in the world: "d'où partait le refus: qui se refusait, était-ce le monde ou elle?" This confusion implies that there are no boundaries between this feminine persona and her surroundings; she is undefined and unformed because of her imperfect sight.

The narrator describes her myopia as a fault, a leash, and an imperceptible veil; yet, while these descriptions might seem to fix and imprison the narrator in a mode of being, she is still paradoxically free. Even though her near-sightedness (functioning as a veil) suggests her removal and distance from the sensory world, "Elle était née avec le voile dans l'oeil… Elle était née avec le voile dans l'âme," (14) her inability to define the world through sight confuses the boundary between herself and her environment. The two flow into one another. "Elle" wonders if it is the world that does not consent to let itself be seen or if it is she who does not consent. The natal veil that the narrator wears over the eye and soul is one that separates the narrator from the world but *only through*

sight. In all other respects, it is impossible for the narrator to distinguish herself from her surroundings. Only a few paragraphs later, this inquiry as to the place of "elle" in the world continues with the confusion over the place of "je." The narrator continues to ask questions, but from a different subject position: "Les vérités se démasquaient une seconde avant la fin. Vois-je ce que je vois? Ce qui n'était pas là était peut-être là? Être et ne pas être ne s'excluaient jamais" (14). This separation extends to the point that the individual doubts not just her perception of the world, but also her place in it. Being able to see, in this sense, is not just about witnessing what is visible; it is also about claiming an ontological position.

Before the surgery, the narrator cannot see the faces around her; in fact, in the world of imperfect vision, there seem to be no faces. Before the surgery, all is veiled and masked, the narrator and the faces of those around her. She even worries that she will not be able to recognize her mother: "En courant à toutes jambes vers sa mère elle se réservait la possibilité de l'erreur jusqu'à la dernière seconde. Et si sa mère n'était soudain pas sa mère à l'instant où elle atteignait son visage ?" (14). Interestingly, the narrator explains herself reaching or achieving the mother's face rather than seeing this image, almost as if sight would even be improbable from close proximity. The narrator also describes the impossibility of the other seeing her face : "Avant elle n'était pas une femme d'abord elle était une myope c'est-à-dire masquée. Les yeux personne ne les voit derrière le masque de verre" (17).[162] In this last quotation, there is no face because through a metonymic link the eye becomes the face, and this eye is masked; she considers

[162] The relationship between the eye and the face here is an interesting one. The eye stands in as the face as it is constantly described as being masked or veiled. In this sense, the whole face takes on the role of an ocular organ. One finds this kind of metonym in the descriptions of "Bethsabée ou la Bible intérieure" as well; Bathsheba's whole body becomes an eye in the narrator's description.

her face a false one, in that the lenses she wears hide her true nature as myopic, as an individual unable to perceive the world without any prosthesis. In fact, she must insist to others that her face is not her own: “Un temps elle fut la première à se démasquer. Les lentilles lui parurent une fraude. On lui dit: vous avez de beaux yeux, elle répondait: je suis myope. On ne la crut pas: on ne l’écoutait pas. Elle disait “la vérité”. Elle dé-mentait son visage, ses yeux” (17). Others look upon the narrator only to see her fraudulent face, the one that seems to see even as the narrator herself knows that this perception is not true. The mask or veil that the narrator describes as the symbol of her myopia impedes the narrator’s sight, but it also obscures the sight of anyone who looks upon the narrator.

The consequence of the altering surgery is that it brings “elle” into a world of faces. After her operation, all of the new visual knowledge that the narrator has of the world is synthesized by the appearance of faces: “Ainsi le monde sortait de sa réserve lointaine, de ses absences cruelles. Le monde montait à elle, précisant ses visages” (15). Everything that “elle” sees is marked by its face: “La présence sort de l’absence, elle voyait cela, les traits du visage du monde se lèvent à la fenêtre, émergeant de l’effacement, elle voyait le lever du monde” (15). The narrator describes her character’s introduction to the perfectly pictured and visual world through this revelation. It is interesting to note, however, that at this point the narrator discusses the *visage* in the plural. Before the surgery, the narrator only describes the *visage* as if it were one whole, limitless, unknowable, and indistinct entity. After the surgery, the narrator draws attention to the possibility of the world’s face having distinct and multiple traits. Seeing the face of the world has repercussions. Without her visual incertitude, the world begins to break up in precise and discrete parts. Before the surgery, “elle” may have been cut off

from knowledge of her exterior environment and in a constant state of doubt, but her new found sight also compromises her understanding. Her perfect vision separates her from her original and prior knowledge that although inexact was unique and powerful in its understanding of the *invisible* and *imperceptible* world.

Once her vision is corrected, the narrator realizes the peace of her pre-operative state: “Jamais elle n’avait été jetée dans la guerre des faces, elle vivait dans l’au-dessus sans images où courent les grands nuages indistincts” (18). In “la guerre des faces,” the narrator is placed in opposition to everything around her. The “indistinct clouds” standing in for images she saw as an individual with flawed vision were able to resist categorization. Once “elle” is able to see, however, she enters into a war because every object begins to take sides. This war is also violent. Before her surgery, the narrator belongs to an in-between space, a place without conflict where terms were not mutually exclusive, specifically the concepts of life and death. After the surgery, the face does merely become a plural entity; it also begins to give up its divine and transcendent qualities. In the above quotation, the narrator uses the word *face* for the first time in the essay. This choice is significant because *face* implies a constructed and social image rather than the elusive and enigmatic *visage*. The narrator explains her prior wanderings in this space as opposed to her new, clear and brutal knowledge:

> Limbes: la région des myopes, purgatoire et promesse, lisière douteuse, séjour des âmes des justes avant la rédemption. Et maintenant elle perdait ses limbes, qui étaient les eaux dans lesquelles elle surnageait. Elle était en train d’être brutalement sauvée. Rédemption sans délai! Mais est-on sauvé par un coup de grâce. Ou bien frappé, jeté, foudroyé!? (19-20)

The narrator highlights the contradiction in regaining her sight; she is "brutalement sauvée." And the operation that restores her vision is, in effect, a death blow. Not being able to see enabled the narrator to remain hidden, but once she enters the world of delineation and distinction offered by her new-found clear vision, the narrator also becomes a separate entity and a finite self.[163] The sense of the illimitable self is destroyed.

As successful as the surgery is in giving the narrator sight, it is ultimately a loss because she surrenders the double function of the veil that protects as well as hides: "Ne-pas-voir c'est défaut pénurie assoiffement, mais ne-pas-se-voir-vue c'est virginité force indépendance. Ne voyant pas elle ne se voyait pas vue, c'est ce qui lui avait donné sa légèreté d'aveugle, la grande liberté de l'effacement de soi" (18). This self-erasure is something that parallels the enigmatic function of the *visage* in the narrator's post-operative state. The narrator notes differences in how she, or "elle," perceives faces before the operation and after the surgery, particularly in the way her own face relates to the face of the other:

> Et aussi ne-pas-se-voir-soi-même est chose de paix. Elle n'avait jamais eu à subir son propre visage. Elle se mettait le visage aimé pour visage, non qu'elle n'en ait pas un, mais elle ne le voyait pas. Sauf de très près. De très près elle voyait sa bouche, sa joue, mais non son visage. Voir-de-près est-ce voir? C'était le visage de l'aimé qui était son visage. (18)

[163] In his article on "Savoir" entitled "Faite d'yeux: genèse sans généalogie," Frédéric Regard explores questions of knowledge, blindness and sight and in particular how they relate to the kind of unbound and sacred knowing the character has in the essay that she ultimately loses. Regard discusses the repercussions of knowledge in relationship to the divine and the story of Adam and Eve. Quoting from Genesis, this critic shows how knowledge is inextricably linked with the sight of the other.

Prior to the operation, she does not see the face but can perceive the parts of the face from her position, “très près.” The *myope* scrutinizing the world around her can only approach the world from a position that overcomes distance and boundaries; she must be close up. Even as detailed as this sight is, it never reveals the distinction between her face and the other’s face. Yet, once her vision is corrected, the narrator loses the unity of having the face of the loved one for her own. Once she has the operation, she has to come to terms with her own specific sense of self, violently cut from a once undifferentiated world.

Whereas “Savoir” conveys the violence of seeing the other’s face, the connection between Cixous’s and Derrida’s essays seems to restore the veil that paradoxically holds together and divides the two essays in the collection. In other words, Derrida’s text restores doubt to the clear and delineated vision of the world with which Cixous’s text ends, and the second essay accomplishes this destabilization, interestingly enough, through a discussion of sexual difference and gender. The topic of gender is one already implied in the title of the collection; yet, while there might not be an obvious connection at first, the discussion of sexual difference is not without consequence to understanding how the face remains hidden in the text. Gender and the relationship to the other are both explored through the concept of, as Cixous terms it in her essay, *non-voyance.*

Cixous’s examination of the subject of sexual difference is concentrated in the discussion of her nearsightedness as a prelapsarian state of innocence; in contrast, Derrida addresses the impossibility of ever seeing the proof of sexual difference, or any difference at all, when one peeks under the veil. He creates an argument against Freud’s theory of femininity and weaving from *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*

(1933): the idea that a woman's affinity for weaving comes from noticing how her pubic hair hides the fact of her sexual difference, and the fabric she creates becomes a way to obscure the absence of the phallus. This distinction infers that under the veil or the cloth, one can unveil difference, and Derrida argues against the concept of *dévoilement* as a means of finding truth; instead, he comments on the way in which Cixous weaves the narrative of "Savoir" to be something that escapes sight entirely through the importance of sound. He notes the labial consonant *v* and how it echoes throughout Cixous's text:

> Tous ces vocables se répondent dans *Savoir,* ces mots et bien d'autres s'y relancent sans fin le long d'un écho en chaîne, dans un faisceau de lumière dont la puissance est accrue par les miroirs qu'elle frappe en chemin, là où "*elle avait vécu*", "*dans la caverne de l'espèce*". La tresse de phonèmes n'est pas toujours invisible, mais d'abord elle se donne à entendre, elle se noue hors de la vue, devenant ainsi chose de la myopie ou de la cécité. Plus sensible aux aveugles, elle reste à tout jamais, comme la trame de ce texte-ci, il faut le savoir, intraduisible. (55)[164]

The *phonème labial* is a sound made with the lips, and because it carries with it some allusion to female anatomy, the sound's resonance remains ambiguous. Derrida points out the impossibility of *seeing* under the veil and even empties sight from his text by focusing on sound. Language can re-introduce ambiguity into the sharp, violent clarity of Cixous's essay.

Understanding this communication between Cixous and Derrida in *Voiles* and how it redefines sight, however, necessitates going further outside of the bounds of the

[164] Interestingly, in the list of *v* words found in "Savoir," Derrida does not include the word *visage*. This absence seems to draw the *sight* of the face further and further from Derrida's essay.

actual text. This collection is not the only instance of back and forth movement between Cixous's and Derrida's writings. In his essay "Portraits of H.C. as J.D. and Back," Laurent Milesi closely traces the movement or the "textual crossings" between their works.[165] Milesi begins his article with a chronology outlining significant moments in their discourse, from the first meeting between the two authors in 1962 to Jacques Derrida's inaugural lecture at the conference on Hélène Cixous "Genèses Généaologies Genres" in 2003. Milesi also notes the work that Cixous continued to publish in response to Derrida even after this philosopher's death in 2004. To a certain extent, the interweaving of the two essays puts the authors in a position vis à vis the other, but only imperfectly.[166] In the narratives built up around the relationship between Cixous and Derrida, many critics begin their discussion with an account of Cixous's first encounter with Derrida when she heard him speak, his back turned to the audience, in front of an academic jury. Milesi examines the complexity of this event in the authors' own works, noting how Cixous (in *Portrait de Jacques Derrida en Jeune Saint Juif* (2001)) quotes Derrida (in "H.C. pour la vie" (2000)) quoting her: "Auparavant, m'a t-elle dit depuis, de longues années auparavant, quelque sept ans auparavant, elle m'avait, elle, vu et entendu—mais de dos" (13).[167] This indirect meeting supposedly precedes the first "real meeting" between the two when they met in Paris in 1962. In the long chain of one

[165] The connection has been examined by many different critics and in many different texts, most notably among them: *L'événement comme écriture: Cixous et Derrida se lisant* and the *New Literary History* issue dedicated to this subject published in 2006.

[166] This disjunction in the face to face moment is seen in the corresponding titles of both essays in Voiles, which echo each other, but not exactly. As discussed earlier, *savoir* sounds similar to the French verb *se voir* and *soie* is a homonym for *soi*. In Derrida's title, *ver* picks up a thread of Cixous's discussion on sight through its connection with the word *verres* or *glasses*.

[167] In "H.C. pour la vie," Derrida explores the meaning of "en face de" as opposed to "à côté de" in Cixous's works.

quoting the other (another's words taking place of the author's words) the possibility of a face to face moment in this history becomes more and more improbable, even more so because it all started "de dos."[168] Cixous's discussion of this moment in *Portrait de Jacques Derrida en Jeune Saint Juif* describes it as a primal scene: "Il me donnait le do. À l'insu, comme se donne le don. J'ai dû commencer à noter. Cette scène primitive mérite un autre livre" (13). This indirect non-meeting figuratively "set the tone" for Cixous's work.[169] The first encounter, precisely because it is not face to face, serves as a beginning for certain texts by Cixous.

The myth-like quality of this initial meeting founds itself on the invisibility or absence of the face and this ambiguity continues throughout the rest of the exchange between the two authors. Milesi focuses specifically on *Voiles* among the many texts between these authors because the two essays create an infinite reflection. He suggests: "H.C. and J.D. offer us chromatic variations of crossbred, inverted serigraphies of one's self, or *écritures sur soi(e), vers soi, sur le ver à soie*, in the "double mirror" effects of this infinite (auto)biographical (self-) portrait in which "you see me also see you see me" (73). While a portrait is not necessarily of a face, the use of autobiography and biography in *Voiles*, and certainly elsewhere in Cixous's work, prompts an examination of how to see the face in writing. This face actualizes the necessary contradiction of not seeing the

[168] Another analysis of this moment is in the essay "Voir à lire" by Ashley Thompson : "Car, si "voir de dos" et "nonvoir" ne sont pas exactement la même chose-et cette correspondance dissymétrique importe-, les deux visions rendent compte d'un voir qui-n'en-est-pas-un, vision qui trouble toute opposition simple qu'on serait tenté de voir entre voir et ne pas voir, et ainsi entre voir et lire…" (329).

[169] Cixous discusses the importance of this non-meeting to her work in several texts, including in a 2004 interview for *Magazine Littéraire* entitled "Du mot à la vie: un dialogue entre Jacques Derrida et Hélène Cixous." The interviewer, Aliette Armel, asks about their first meeting, describing it as a "face-à-face" and then Cixous, in turn, replies: "Autour des mêmes scènes, mes sentiments légèrement différents. Tout a été ordonné pour moi lorsque je l'ai non vu la première des fois. Ce qui s'est inscrit dans ce qui m'est devenu par la suite une sorte de légende—c'est-à-dire quelque chose de lisible—c'est que je l'ai nonvu : je n'ai fait que l'entendre" (24).

face and viewing the self as the other. As Milesi points out in his argument, the work of portraiture in *Voiles* is not the function of first seeing and then representing; instead, it is the result of seeing sight, of the infinite experience of being able to encounter the self through the eyes of another.

III. MOURNING FACES

As we have seen in "Savoir," seeing faces can be violent and shattering, and Cixous's narrators have to navigate ways to see but not see the other. As explored in this chapter's introduction, one of the paradoxes of the autobiographical text in Cixous's work is that it collapses the distance between life and death, and this relationship becomes further complicated in the works where Cixous's narrators attempt to contemplate a dead other. Writing can bring life back to the memory of a long lost loved one. However, writing can also annihilate this memory because the text escapes and relates another story in place of the initial one. "Albums et légendes," this author's ostensibly most autobiographical text, begins with the epigraph, "Toutes les biographies comme toutes les autobiographies comme tous les récits racontent une histoire à la place d'une autre histoire."[170] In writing about a dead person, the author risks repeating the loss of this figure and losing its memory forever. Subsequently, Cixous's narrators must discover ways to suspend the final disappearance of the dead loved one, and this preservation entails exploring ways to see this other's face.

[170] "Albums et légendes" itself offers potential solutions that counter the final destruction of the memory of the loved one. In this text, the narrator explores the image of a family member whom she has never met: her maternal grandfather. As I will explore, Cixous's narrators are generally suspicious of the photographic image, but in this short text, the narrator maintains a unique position with regards to the photographs. She explores how she can enter the photo, ""Photos: portes, portiques" (188), and allow the dead figure to speak through her text rather than be destroyed through the text's representation.

The narrator or *OR. Les Lettres de mon père* struggles with the simultaneous loss and resurrection of a dead loved one in writing; yet, in this text, both the act of writing and reading menace this image. One day, quite suddenly, the narrator learns of the existence of hundreds of letters written by her father to her mother when the couple was engaged. Rather than a transmission of these letters in the text, the novel is about the narrator's debate as to whether or not she should read them. She wonders in what way reading these letters will replace or annihilate the image of her father as it is established in her memory. Early in the novel, the narrator defines what reading is to her, and she uses the neologism *oublire* to describe her interactions with texts. To explain this term to the reader she continues, "Relire, c'est-à-dire lire, c'est-à-dire ressusciter-effacer c'est-à-dire *oublire*" (16). As it is shown in the actual structure of this sentence, reading is a process of replacement and oblivion. The narrator repeats "c'est-à-dire" frequently because the terms shift; a rereading replaces a prior reading, which in turn both erases and resuscitates that reading.[171] With this understanding of reading as a process of resuscitating and erasing (potentially frightening concepts when one considers that she is considering reading her dead father's fragile letters), the narrator chooses to approach these letters carefully. Rather than relaying a reading of these letters, the narrator explores her position towards these letters.

In this sense, the letters create a problematic portrait of the father and present the narrator with the dilemma of facing or not facing this image. Significantly, the title word

[171] Derrida's discussion of *OR. Les lettres de mon père* in the essay, "H.C. pour la vie, c'est à dire…" echoes the shifting terms in Cixous's text. In part, this essay is about translation and interpretation in Cixous's works; for example, the title poses the question of how to read the letter *C* as opposed to the word *c'est*. Furthermore, the second part of the title, "c'est à dire" also presents the reader with the translation process. The title means something else. Through the play of these initials Derrida's essay, while having nothing to do with *the face* per se, is still a portrait because of its examination of the letter, the word, and the trait in Cixous's work. The title, however, leads the reader to question the subject of the portrait, H.C. being both the author and not the author.

OR is in capital letters. These letters seem to refer to the possibility of the father's portrait in the text, *or* being a sound in the father's name: Georges. However, the two letters also offer other interpretations and not just because *or* is a grammatical conjugation. *OR* could also represent initials. There is an unknown identity and/or an unknown signature in this portrait, one that could replace the father's memory. Proper names, as the narrator announces, are imbued with a certain power of life: "Mais tout commence par le nom propre. Je te désire et je te garde et je te tiens solidement au-dessus du néant par ton nom, je te dire de la fosse par la tresse de nom" (21). She alludes specifically to Lazarus's resurrection and the fact that this miracle occurs as Jesus calls the dead man's name. The title of the text, however, resists using the father's name (and indeed, this name does not enter the text until the last few pages). As the narrator notes, the letters were written before her father was her father, and thus, resuscitating this figure through reading and writing would risk bringing a man back to life who is potentially not her father.

The problem of what kind of identity the letters present is implicit in how they affect the narrator's own position. In one of the first descriptions she gives of the letters, the narrator indirectly and directly explains how the letters might alter her. She explains that the letters are: "déchirantes pour les yeux comme le visage nu de l'amant, elles me regardent pour la première fois les lettres bien vivantes de mon père très mort. On ne peut pas voir ces traits sans tressaillir" (34). One of the first noticeable effects of this encounter between the narrator and the letters that were originally addressed to a fiancée is that the narrator looks upon the letters as if they were a lover's face. The letters are heart breaking, *déchirant*, for the narrator, but in this French word one also hears the verb

déchirer, to tear.[172] The narrator feels pain, and she also becomes more susceptible to destruction, easier to tear, than the letters themselves. The letters are *like the naked face of a lover*; and this phrase echoes an earlier discussed quotation from Blanchot's *L'Entretien infini* where he describes "le visage nu d'Eurydice." Implicit in Cixous's textual allusion, is the idea that the narrator is the father's beloved, and her gaze on the letters, on the naked face of the lover, will be what ultimately reveals this individual's death. The face establishes an insurmountable absence as opposed to a sustainable face to face connection. As in Ovid's tale, looking on the face is the paradoxical action of seeing the loved one and annihilating that image.

In comparison to the "very dead" father, however, the letters are "very alive"; this distinction presents the possibility that the letters could overrun the dead father's image. The letters are radically other for the author; not only have they arrived to her suddenly and astonishingly, but they are also texts that the narrator cannot control. The letters will communicate things to her that she might never have known in addition to changing all that she knows. The text articulates the power of these letters through the features of the face:

> Elles sont toutes là, à peine ouvre-t-on le carton on ne peut pas ne pas voir cette écriture se pencher sur nous, et nous regarder avec les lèvres légèrement

[172] In the essay "Vues sur ma terre," the narrator describes the return of the father in much the same terms : "Lorsque mon père revient tout ce qui se passe est déchirant. Il y a d'abord le déchirement de la toile du temps. Toile invisible, toi l'invisible, temps sans. Soudain il est là, là ! je le vois, mais non ! je le vois *luire*, je le *voilure*, je vois la vision de lui. Ce n'est pas du tout simple, je vois *mon père luisant* doucement, et c'est la violence même cette douceur, ce Lui, ce n'est pas *Toi*, pas encore, c'est encore Lui, pas papa, mon père" (235). Not only is the fabric of time "torn" in *OR*, but the narrator's own position is thrown into confusion.

> retroussées par le dessin méticuleux du sourire. Aussitôt, comme devant tous les visages qui vous regardent aux yeux, on baisse les paupières. (63)[173]

The letters present faces, and the attribute that marks these problematic faces is the smile.[174] Strangely, the letters' mouths take the place of their eyes, which seems to insist that the letters will not just look back at the narrator but communicate stories, perhaps unwanted, to her. The smile is something received by the narrator, and this facial movement is what makes the narrator lower her eyes. Through their eyeless yet smiling faces, the letters force the narrator into the problematic position of a reader of these letters; the repetition of "ne pas," in particular, manifests this simultaneous resistance and powerlessness on the narrator's part. Moreover, instead of the reader leaning over the letters and poring over the writing, it is the writing which takes this position with regard to *nous*. In this section of the novel, the subject comes apart. The letters have implications beyond the narrator because they are neither addressed to her nor to anyone in her family at that moment. Because of the time that has elapsed between their composition and their arrival, their address has become unlimited. It is their status as faces, however, that provokes the reader to turn away. The narrator has a certain reverence for these letters that remind her of death but are still immortal.

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[173] Throughout the novel, the narrator constantly refers to the letters' "traits" as facial features: "A un mètre de moi le lendemain sourit, les lèvres énigmatiques…Les cils des lettres battent doucement" (33).

[174] The smile is an interesting image in Cixous's texts because more than the gaze, the smile is something that has the ability to pass between people. While I do not mean to suggest that the smile functions the same way in all of Cixous's texts (indeed, her novels and essays show the metamorphosis of this word from the imperative *souris* or *smile* to the French word for mouse), overall the smile seems to create a connection between the self and the other. The smile, unlike the gaze, preserves the other's enigmatic position rather than leads to its destruction. In *Limonade tout était si infini*, for example, the narrator explains *:* "La phrase était composée de mots et de mystère. Elle la laissait luire de tous ses mots. Etait un sourire. De toutes ses dents lui a souri aussi. Etait un talisman. L'essentiel c'était le sourire. Le mystère c'était quel bien magique elle lui faisait : parce qu'elle lui signifiait sans remuer : "Je te souris. Ce sourire est ma bénédiction"" (24-25).

As the novel progresses, the narrator continues to discuss her approach to these letters and the necessity of finding a way to look on them that will not be destructive, either to her or to her memory of the father. Notably, the narrator imagines this process in terms of finding a different way to see a painting:

> Je pris quelques lettres, je ne les lus pas, je leur jetai un coup d'œil, car lorsqu'enfin l'on arrive devant l'autoportrait de Rembrandt que l'on désirait voir depuis si longtemps en réalité, on passe devant, vite, on ne s'arrête pas, non, non, on a l'humilité de s'approcher de côté, la tête légèrement inclinée, les paupières en visière baissée, il est impossible, il serait ruineux et présomptueux de se planter en face du Visage auquel on a voué espérance comme devant une vitrine de magasin et d'envoyer les yeux fouiller dans l'étalage, non non, il faut s'approcher caché comme d'un tigre, comme d'un dieu sauvage, comme de l'Etincelle divine qu'un regard brutal peut éteindre, mais qui flamboiera pour l'éternité si l'on a su conquérir sa grâce. J'inventai un regard en coin presque par-dessus l'oreille, je passai précipitamment presque d'un bond, afin de n'entrapercevoir qu'un flou de traits, puis je commençai à revenir vers le tableau à reculons. (85-86)

In this passage, the narrator compares her approach to the letters through her discussion of how one must view a self-portrait by Rembrandt. She must invent a way of seeing/reading that does not put her in the position of *facing* a text; like the father's letters, the Rembrandt presents the narrator with something that she desires to see but resists seeing. Paradoxically, looking at the painting *en face* destroys the sacredness of an

image that is actually the *Visage.*[175] Facing the *Visage* causes its disappearance. By approaching the painting in the way the narrator describes, she maintains the divinity and the mystery of the artwork: the divine spark that gives life to the dead Rembrandt--both the painting and the painter.

In the above passage, the narrator describes the one glimpse of the face in the painting that she sees as a "flou de traits," and interestingly, the narrator's final contemplations of her father's memory echo this *near* image. Cixous's novel is about a conflicting desire to see but not to see, to know but not to know, all in order to preserve a mystery and to prevent a once-and-for-all death. Although she does not read the letters, their appearance in her life causes her to re-imagine and reexamine the loss of her father, which rather than being a final death, is described as a disappearance and an erasure:

> Un jour en plein midi je vois disparaitre. Je perds le contact, ma main touche son rien; sous mes yeux il devient nuageux, je vois encore ses yeux me regarder, un silence est devant sa bouche, maintenant il est décoloré. Je vois encore le retirement. L'effacement est ineffaçable. (184)

The father's image becomes fluid and hazy, but the narrator's gaze is able to see him seeing her. She is able to look even without having complete visual access. Everything in the citation suggests the near meeting of their gazes, "je vois encore ses yeux me regarder" but this connection remains possible rather than made. The narrator's word choice is ambiguous and allows for the passage to be interpreted in different ways; her use of the word *encore* could suggest that everything is *still happening* or that it *has happened* once again. In any case, this scene does not present a final event. The tautology

[175] Perhaps implicit in this action of looking from the corner of the eye and then approaching the painting with the back turned is the way that the narrator can escape Orpheus's fate as he leads Eurydice out of the underworld.

that an erasure cannot be erased implies that the narrator's memory of the event of this disappearance, its progression, is one that will never be forgotten. His disappearance can continue to take place because of the narrator's position. The fact that the narrator sees herself through her father's eyes reveals that her very existence is one that keeps the dead alive.

The text, the novel that the narrator writes, becomes the medium through which the narrator can have this near vision and this near knowledge without allowing the apocalyptic end and once and forever death. For the narrator, the process of writing the novel becomes a form of reading, and more importantly a process of *oublire*. Reading as a form of erasure allows the text to reappear; the narrator's action of writing about the letters also allows this same kind of erasure and permits the letters to continue to have an indefinite and undefined position and narrative:

> Me voilà dans le ravissement: il s'agit d'un haut espace calme immense impersonnel où *je me trouve*. Sans douleur sans souvenir sans oubli sans poids sans moi. Mais en tant que joie sublime. Je me trouve: je flotte sur les lèvres des lettres comme un sourire. Il y a la promesse d'un texte sans reproche. Depuis une telle hauteur, me dis-je, je vais pouvoir tout lire sans heurt sans coupure….(198)

In this passage at the end of the novel, the narrator is no longer in a position *before* the letters: "je flotte sur les lèvres des lettres comme un sourire." In fact, the letters become a space where she finds herself. Reading the letters might have posed a problem as long as the narrator was in opposition to them, but here she offers a silent solution: becoming part of the letters. The enigmatic promise of the smile is one that is then reproduced by her

text, "la promesse d'un texte sans reproche."[176] Ultimately, the thing that is the text *OR. Les lettres de mon père* is at the same time the father's story and the narrator's story. This novel is a kind of portrait of the father in the sense that the arrival of the letters causes the narrator to *re-imagine* her father. The narrator fears that the letters will end up substitutes and replacements for her own images of her father, but in her exploration of how to see a face without being *en face,* the text creates a space where writing, death, and life are not mutually exclusive.

IV. LIVING FACES

Writing, reading, forgetting, and remembering all take place in the work through the impossible image of the face. The *visage* promises vision and understanding yet cannot be addressed *en face*. *Osnabrück*, published in 1999, two years after *OR*, resembles this earlier text in its depictions of the loved one's face. The narrators' efforts to reconcile their positions with regards to these faces, however, is unique to each novel. In *OR*, the narrator must contend with the memory of her dead father and the face or faces presented by the immortal letters that have outlived the father. *Osnabrück*'s narrator, however, is concerned with how the image of the remembered mother will change as a result of *writing about* the living mother. This novel's title indicates that geography will be important in writing on the mother, but as the reader comes to

[176] Enigmatic silence, however, does not end *OR. Les lettres de mon père*. Just as the narrator imagines the possibility of reading the letters seamlessly without conflict, the mother enters the room. This interruption, although it breaks the narrator's reverie, allows her to begin looking through the eyes of the letters: "Je regarde les visages de 1995 avec les yeux du fiancé et il trouve que Eve et la terre n'ont pas du tout changé. La mémoire sans nombril" (199).

understand, the places in the text are imaginary.[177] The novel may be about a place, but really it is the mother who is a world unto herself: "Elle ne prend pas de place. Toute la place c'est elle. Ne sachant pas, elle est spontanément inévitable. Je creuse des trous, des cachettes, des abris, sous le monde qu'elle est, car il faut bien que je me trouve quelque part où elle ne passera pas" (47). Considering that the mother is an inevitable place, *Osnabrück* is about how the narrator struggles to write about her mother, an act that requires distance from this all encompassing, present, and living figure.

The novel's prologue begins with the loss of the *mère* and the adoration for the figure of *maman*. As a child at school, the narrator's separation from her mother created an image of an absent and inaccessible *maman*. The text sets up a dichotomy between the present *mère* and the remembered *maman* because in order to write the novel, the narrator must reconcile the difference between the adored, absent face and the actual, living face of her mother. In the first pages, the narrator examines how the constant image of her mother today threatens to supplant an older, revered, and ephemeral image: "Comment Eve-elle-même-de-maintenant, ma mère actuelle, anéantit les visions de la déesse qu'elle n'est plus, je l'ai souffert" (18).[178] In sharp contrast to the narrator's visions of the remembered goddess, the figure of "Eve-elle-même-de-maintenant" does not hold the promise of the sacred face that the narrator anticipated in her childhood. Eve is a mother

[177] At different moments in her texts, Hélène Cixous has discussed her mother's life as her own life, explaining in *Hélène Cixous*, p*hotos de racines*: "L'enfance allemande de ma mère venait se conter et ressusciter dans mon enfance comme un immense Nord dedans mon Sud" (183).

[178] Writing about the mother is potentially violent : "j'ai découvert que ce serait un combat ce livre contre lui-même et plus précisement ce qui s'annonçait, à ma surprise, c'est un combat de ma mère contre ma mère, je précise : de *maman* contre *ma mère*, et plus précisément encore *un combat mené dans ma mère* même et sur tout l'étendue de a terre—la terre qui est elle" (16).

of the present, of a specific and anchored time, and by blotting out the goddess, Eve also prevents this face from ever returning.

Looking closer at the description of the mother's divine face from childhood reveals why the narrator is in awe of *maman*'s image[179]:

> ELLE. Ne vient pas me-voir. Elle vient paraitre. Je suis l'adoratrice du Premier Rayon du Visage. La Vie Maman m'en met plein la vue, moi tellement à vide, souffrant de l'avidité, avide de la souffrance de l'avidité, avide du Rayon aveuglant de la Vie qui ne me connaît pas./ Je voulais la voir. Je ne l'ai jamais vue. Même dans la même pièce, même de près, elle reste diffuse un flou d'or, légèrement enlevée toujours à ma prière. Un vouloir plus fort que moi m'emportait vers elle par-dessus moi au-delà d'elle. (69)

The "Visage" in this last passage is held as sacred, and it is revered through its connection with life. "Visage" in the first line of the passage becomes "Vie" in the next two lines. Moving from a masculine noun, the face is able to indicate something feminine. The face is not a physical attribute here; it is a life giving force like the sun. Moreover, it blinds and it resists sight and knowledge. Rays of light shining from the adored face impede direct sight, but the resulting blur of golden light is full of the promise that it will eventually reach the narrator's eyes.[180] The desire to see is what brings the narrator closer to her mother even as the face remains distant from the narrator's adoring eyes. And the above passage emphasizes the distance between the

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[179] In a novel like *Portrait du Soleil* there is a distance between the narrator and the face that the text constantly explores and attempts to overcome. The divine, unreachable, and unseen face is aligned with the law of the father in *Portrait du Soleil*, but in many of Hélène Cixous's texts, the original and adored face is also maternal.

[180] This description echoes the myopic narrator's description of the images around her in "Savoir."

daughter and the radiant image of the mother with the first sentence of each paragraph; "ELLE. Ne vient pas me-voir. Elle vient paraitre" imperfectly reflects "Je voulais la voir. Je ne l'ai jamais vue." The pronoun *elle* in capital letters highlights the mother as an indescribable and mythical figure; as a subject, "ELLE" is separate from its own sentence. She simply appears. The "je," as a result, is placed in a constant state of waiting and blindness. The two figures never coincide.

Part of what makes "le Visage" so desirable to the narrator is its mystery, the fact that the face appears and disappears without ever being fully in sight, and this the tension in *Osnabrück* builds around the narrator's question as to whether she can/will/wants to write the story of her mother. On one hand, the narrator is moved to write about her mother in order to preserve this sacred face. On the other hand, she worries that this action would result in replacing *maman* with the figure of *la mère* and the definitive loss of the divine face that is "la Vie Maman." Resembling the narrator's use of the neologism *oublire* in *OR. Les lettres de mon père,* the type of reading that simultaneously effaces and resuscitates, *Osnabrück's* narrator searches for a way to write about her mother that both respects the invisibility of *maman* as well as makes it possible for this figure to continue to live. This narrator likens her action of writing on her mother to opening up a prehistoric cave:

> On ouvre la grotte et le troupeau qui se rue sur les parois s'écroule, massacré. Ce qui a été oublié doit rester gardé oublié. L'oubli protège, pensais-je dans la cuisine, un certain oubli est fait pour garder de l'anéantissement, ne vais-je pas abîmer grièvement maman par un geste de dévoilement que me dicte le désir de consacrer une cérémonie à ma mère, ne vais-je pas, inspirée par l'amour filial et le

> sens du devoir donc poussée par des sentiments de respect, causer d'irréparables dommages à mes statues secrètes à mes tableaux vivants à mes innombrables archives, un trésor dont moi-même je ne connais pas la valeur, rangé sous "maman"? … (18).

The only way to keep or protect the image of *maman* is by forgetting it in a specific kind of way. In this quotation, there is an interesting opposition set up between the words "anéantissement" and "oubli." Annihilation implies final destruction whereas forgetting implies the possibility of the memory's resurgence. "Dévoilement" is also a significant word choice, especially considering the narrator's illusions to art. "Unveiling" automatically implies a revelation, and here the use of the word indicates that the narrator's memories of her mother are already formed representations: "statues secrètes" and "tableaux vivants."[181] Remembering, forgetting, memorializing, and destroying the image all revolve around the narrator's unique struggle to preserve this figure of "maman" in a fictional text.

The question remains, however, whether or not writing can accomplish this remembering, this "dévoilement," without obliterating the image, and the narrator struggles with this conflict: "Je ne peux pas écrire sur maman. Il faut le faire. Il ne faut pas le faire. Maman résiste à la transfiguration. Je complote avec le livre. Le livre et moi nous essayons de l'attraper" (49). "Capturing" the adored mother is only possible with the help of the book. Elsewhere in the text, the narrator describes writing as the necessary

[181] Another significant comparison that the narrator creates to explain the impossibility of looking on her mother is in her alignment with, once again, the figure of Orpheus: "Ma gêne vient de ce que je ne parle pas d'une seule personne familière. Elles sont plusieurs celle que j'appelle, elle qui m'arrive si souvent dans le dos alors que je l'ai connu et désirée de face. Elle me dépasse. Je la garde. Je la retiens de force. Elle reste derrière moi. Elle se retire. Je la supplie. Je la menace, mon Eurydice" (70).

conduit for perceiving the mother because the mother's face has everything to do with the narrator's compulsion to write. The narrator cannot be face to face with her mother; instead, the text takes on this role of veil between the narrator and her mother. The narrator describes the act of writing as it exists between the two women:

> Inutilité du texte pour elle. Cela ne l'empêche pas de m'apporter du thé. Je lève les yeux de ma page et je contemple son visage aux ronds yeux calmes. Nous nous sourions. Je la regarde. Elle ne me regarde pas: ce je ne la regarde pas. Rien ne nous sépare sinon tout. Derrière mon visage souriant celle qui écrit écrit. (43)

Although the mother and daughter smile at each other in this last excerpt, there is paradoxically a missed connection in the narrator's use of the third-person reflexive pronoun: *se sourire*. In this exchange there is no *je* or *tu*. The statement, "We smile at each other," supports the idea that the narrator is too close to her mother in the present to have the distance necessary to look upon her. And the two figures are both unified and separated by their gaze that does not see: "Elle ne me regarde pas: ce je ne la regarde pas." The mother's eyes are described as round and calm; these eyes do not register the individual in front of her; rather, they present an opaque passivity. Furthermore, the mother has no relationship with writing as it serves no purpose for her. For the narrator's part, her face may be turned towards the mother's face; yet, rather than looking, the face is described as writing: "Derrière mon visage souriant celle qui écrit écrit."

Mother and daughter have different ways of looking; the narrator writes and the mother takes photographs. This difference, in particular, seems to suggest why there is no coincidence between their faces. As the narrator explains, "Eve prend des photos. C'est par amour. Partout où elle va se promenant, Eve, par amour, prend … Elle aime les fleurs

en photo. Elle plante en photo" (37). The function of the photograph here is to keep one specific and defined image. Yet, this is the opposite of what the narrator wants with regards to the image of her own mother; she cannot bear to have one image of her mother replace another.[182] Whereas the narrator's desire is to allow multiple and changing images of the other, the mother takes photos in order to preserve one specific image. For the mother, the photograph is a transparent image of life, but for the narrator this same photographed image is final and fixed. The photograph keeps, and more explicitly, takes an image. Photography does not allow the shifting and inaccessible face for which the narrator searches.

The mother does not acknowledge the narrator's writing self, the one that is able to change and transform, and instead defines her daughter according to the photographs in the home. The narrator describes this relationship with her mother, quoting her:

> Elle dit: ma fille travaille trop. C'est ainsi que je suis décrite, et je mourrai inconnue de moi-même. Léger effacement de moi dans la maison. Je suis attaquée par les photos qui portent mon nom et ne sont pas moi. (169)

"Elle," the mother, comments on the narrator's constant work, writing, but the simple and utilitarian way that the mother addresses this art denies the possibility and promise of the text. In this sentence, the mother fails to recognize the daughter in the ways that the daughter attempts to see or recognize the mother. As a result, the photographs take the place of the narrator. The multiplicity and instability of the author's identity as reflected in the written text is more preferable than the non-identity found in the photos. The

[182] In an interview with Susan Sellers (*Hélène Cixous: Live Theory*), Cixous alludes to this quality of the photograph, something that freezes the image without letting it transform and metamorphose: "I don't like photographs either. No. And it's strange because it's a kind of denial of myself, but it's probably that I must have the feeling that I'm not the one I was, I'm the one I shall be" (111).

photographs do not offer a boundary to be traversed, a goal to attain, the face vacillates between the promise of its appearance and the threat of its disappearance; rather, photos destroy the possibility of any metamorphosis (there is no becoming in this equation, only being and not being) by replacing one singular image for the possible images available in the text.

Seeing the other is a process of creation, possibility, and fiction. For the narrator, the photograph does not function as a way to see the divine *visage* because of the way it fixes the image. While the photograph posits itself as the "real" image, it also eliminates the potential of a creation that incorporates its own impossibility. The narrator continues to explain the difference between a photographed image as opposed to one painted or written by the other:

> Ma maman ne me peint pas. J'ai un corps avec jambes et branches de bras mais de visage, point. Ma maman ne me conte pas ... Dans le conte de mon miroir je me rends au sort à moi attribué à la naissance, mon lot, mon élection unique, ma myopie. J'adore et je ne vois pas. Je ne vois pas voilà pourquoi j'adore. Mes mains me servent de visage. Mon visage n'arrive pas jusqu'à moi. Je me regarde du bout des doigts. Les photos se retournent contre moi, elles me lancent à la face une figure vernie ironique dont elles me disent qu'elle est moi ... Maman ne me donne pas d'image. (170-171)[183]

Once again, the narrator highlights the difference between her mother's gaze and her own. While the mother's love manifests itself in photographs, a fixed visual image, the

[183] Many moments in Cixous's work echo the work of Henri Michaux, specifically when it is a question of faces. In *Passages*, Michaux describes not being able to see his own image in the faces before him: "Est-ce moi tous ces visages?"; "Visages des personnalités sacrifiés, des "moi" que la vie … tua" (60).

narrator's adoration stems from her blindness, her inability to ever see a distinct image. According to the economy of this text, the photograph is not an image like the one created in a painting or in a story. In the first place, the photograph over defines the self; the narrator fears the "figure vernie ironique" in the photographs. Whereas the *face* and the *figure* delineate fixed, closed, and discrete images, the *visage*, threshold between life and death, is able to overcome set boundaries. What the narrator laments is that the mother does not create her in their relationship: "Ma maman ne me peint pas…Ma maman ne me conte pas." Sight cannot establish the *visage*; instead, this image must be imagined and created in a fictional reality. Therefore, for the narrator, the only *visage* she has is her hands; her writing is the way she attempts to face and be faced by the world.[184]

Creating the mother as a work of art is fraught with difficulties, but in the 2006 novel *Hyperrêve*, the narrator is able to accomplish this creation in the contemplation of her mother's mortality. While I will not have the ability to explore fully this intricate and beautiful story justice here, I want to isolate the narrator's contact with the mother because it replaces the threatening position of being *en face* of the other with a unifying rather than separating way of encountering the other. Most of the novel seems to take place in the narrator's wandering thoughts and dreams as she performs the repetitive gesture of applying cortisone cream to open sores on her mother's body. Almost as in a response to the narrator's comment in *Osnabrück,* "Mes mains me servent de visage," the narrator's use of her hands in the ministrations to her mother are what allow her to make the missed connection between their faces.

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[184] The essay "Vues sur ma terre," a "coda" to *Osnabrück,* continues the original novel about the mother and also recounts an event that does not happen in the novel. In a fleeting moment, where the narrator sees her mother from the angle of two streets walking away, the narrator imagines that she sees her mother's face. The impossible moment of this meeting is preserved in the mother's movement as well as the narrator's constant description of the moment as an illusion.

The action of smoothing on the ointment is a kind of painting, but as the narrator explains this art is not a means to convey *lived* experience, but *living* experience:

> Il me vient à l'idée que la peu de ma mère debout devant moi le matin de juillet où nous continuons à vivre, c'est-à-dire où la vie continue à tisser ses tissus dans le cadre du corps de ma mère et dans le cadre de mon corps, sans que pour ma part j'aie rien demandé, quoique pour la part de ma mère, celle qui me revient, je demande au contraire une chose et une autre sans arrêt,--la peau de ma mère, datée, serait la toile, ou le miroir ou le tableau, le plus fidèle de mon état d'âme fondamental et daté, ou de ce qu'on appelle la vie, ce moment de mon histoire, la cinquième saison, ou peut-être l'horizon du temps sur lequel se peignent ou se déposent les effets physiques de ce qui nous arrive à vivre. (21)

The date of the painting is one that encompasses an enigmatic time, a combination of past and future. The mother's body becomes the work of art in which the daughter creates both her mother's portrait and her own portrait. She recognizes that this is the skin that she will become one day, "Je serai cette peau demain" (37), both indirectly addressing the mother's death through the physical evidence of her age and reflecting on the movement of living. Somehow the mother's lacerated skin becomes the evidence of what is both life and death; the wounds speak about her life. The porous skin, rent even more by the mother's sores, becomes a means of communication: "c'est à moi que cette maladie s'adresse indirectement et directement et à moi en tant que ma mère à venir et à moi en tant que gardienne de ma mère présente" (39).

The back, specifically, serves as a *visage* because it is the body part that manages to best avoid the ravages of time even though, to the narrator, this skin seems to be the most vulnerable:

> Aucun être aussi docile, aussi confié que la peau—en tant que visage du dos, d'autant plus docile et consentant et sans défense que cette peau, ce dos, c'est le résumé à protéger de la personne qui m'a toujours porté secours et protégée, successivement ma grand-mère et ma mère, ma mère assumant la place et les fonctions de sa mère notre grand-mère. (41)

The function of the face, normally the reminder of the moral and ethical responsibilities toward the other, is found at the back in this novel. Unguarded, this part of the body is what incites feelings of protection in the other. More than the face, the "visage de dos" is the boundary that connects the narrator with her mother's life that is also her death.

V. SEPARATING FACES

Working through texts about the dead father and the living mother, it becomes clear that even in its function as a boundary, the *visage* does not separate or divide; instead, it encompasses inconsistencies and contradictions. In this sense, the *visage* is a knot in the text, one that the narrative continues to tighten even as the narrator attempts to unravel the experience of encountering the other's face. Despite the fact that the *visage* resists sight (in its strictest definition), the narrators constantly find a way to invent approaches to this face. Discovering the way to encounter a face, however, seems to be much more problematic in the case of the third book: *Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage*: *Scènes primitives.* In relation to the other two books discussed in this chapter, *OR* and

Osnabrück, there is a significant lack of allusions to faces in the *Les Rêveries*. Whereas all three books articulate the search for the face, the narrator's inability to envision the *visage*, even in the fictive and imaginative universe of this text, is much more pronounced. While the overarching narrative is the story between a brother and a sister, the narrator's return in the text and in her memory to her childhood home of Algeria is also a focus of this narrative.

The book begins with its own unbidden arrival in a dream and upon awaking the narrator scribbles out the first few pages in the dark of night. The next morning she can no longer find what she has written, and she compares this feeling of having lost or missed something to the feelings that she has about the land of her birth:

> …c'est exactement ce qui se passait avec Algérie, du temps où y'y vivais: je l'avais, je la tenais—je ne l'avais plus, je ne l'avais plus, je ne l'avais jamais eue, je ne l'ai jamais embrassée. Exactement: je la poursuivais, et elle n'était pas loin, j'habitais en Algérie, d'abord à Oran puis à Alger, je vivais *dans* la ville d'Oran et je la cherchais ensuite je vivais *dans* la ville d'Alger et je cherchais une entrée et elle m'échappait, sur sa terre, sous mes pieds elle me restait intouchable, je voulais que la porte s'ouvre …. (13-14)

The missing pages are like the narrator's missed connection to Algeria. Even though the need to write about Algeria is part of her, she is denied entrance into this relationship. The narrator discusses her relationship with this country as she remembers this place, and the memory is considerably marked by her desire and need to seek out the face of the other: "Et pourtant dix-huit ans *j'étais réellement inséparabe*. Je m'accrochais au grillage, je guettais le portail j'attendais le message: *un* visage, une porte, un sourire. La

passion pour ce pays c'était moi en ce temps-là" (89). An undercurrent in the novel *Les Rêveries* is the narrator's attempt to recognize and be recognized by this face despite the fact that she is always waiting for the face to arrive. In the above quotation, the meaning between "visage," "porte," and "sourire" collapses; all three terms manifest the hope for an entry into Algeria. The narrator's early life as she describes it in the novel is formed around the anticipation of perceiving a face, something that would welcome her into a country in which she already lives. The neologism "inséparabe" embodies this radical distance that separates the narrator from her home; she is locked inside only to be completely outside of this experience, specifically because of her position as a non-Algerian. Tragically, she is completely foreign to the country that forms her personal history.[185]

The narrator's inability to enter her homeland is because of the dilemma of how to see a face. This impasse evolves, in part, because *le voile* is not just an abstract concept or word in this novel, but a physical, cultural, and religious fact.[186] Radical separation between the narrator and the country occurs at the boundary of the face. One such character who remains distant from the narrator is Aïcha, an Algerian woman who works in the narrator's home. Aïcha embodies the paradoxical situation in which the narrator lives, the fact that the narrator is within a country yet entirely foreign to it. Unlike the

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[185] Another text which explores the impossibility of entering Algeria is *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* (2000). I signal this text because of the way that the narrator locates her separation from Algeria in photographs. Comparing her own image to those of Algerians in a book of archived photos, the narrator notices a significant difference between the images: her smile. She explains "Avec ma bouche ouverte et toutes mes dents étalées luisantes j'étais comme une blessure que je ne cessais pas de commettre alors même que j'aurais tant voulu guérir la plaie. Ma souriance m'échappait, je m'ouvrais, je signifiais entrez, je mimais ce que je voulais et non vraiment ce que j'offrai" (27-28). The smile is a wound that will not heal, that will not pass into memory. The narrator is always cut from Algeria and moreover she describes this separation as a difference in her face.

[186] This focus on the veil in *Les Rêveries* is somewhat different than the function of the veil in "Savoir," which provides the blind sight necessary for the narrator to see the *visage*.

narrator, who frequently describes herself as locked behind the home's gates, Aïcha has the power to circulate because of the veil:

> Je l'ai regardée. Je la regarde arriver à la voile au petit porte de la cuisine, portée lente ample sans remuer par l'eau invisible avec la lourde légèreté de la barque de pêche qui s'échoue au sable en soupirant elle avance sans remuer les pieds petite majesté enveloppée jusque dans la petite cour. Je la regarde enlever le voile qui la berce et la barque parmi les barques blanches et dessous c'est une femme qui est-la-femme et il n'y a pas d'autre femme qu'Aïcha…. (90)

The narrator is in a constant state of looking, in the past and in the present. She scrutinizes the actions of Aïcha, but nothing is revealed. In the above passage, the woman's movement in the house leaves little evidence of her presence. The moment of unveiling in the above quotation is secondary to the way in which Aïcha arrives "by sail." In fact, the narrative is considerably vague about this character despite her importance to the narrator and to her experiences in Algeria.

Like the narrator's connection to Algeria, her link to Aïcha is also one of a paradoxical intimacy and separation. In a reverse movement, Aïcha enters the family's home; yet, as the narrator explains, never accepts the girl into her own life: "Tout le temps du Clos-Salembier j'ai rêvé d'aller un jour chez Aïcha dans son chez" (92). Not only does the narrator want to be invited in to Aïcha's home, she desires to be part of (or issue of) her body. This is evident in the way the narrator connects Aïcha and Algeria. The narrator draws the connection between these two figures through their names: ""L'Algérie", en tant que nom caressant de l'intouchable. Le nom velouté de la fuyance. La beauté du mou, beauté rare et difficile" (92). The description that follows this

quotation conveys the image of a maternal, soft, and encompassing feminine figure. More than anything, the narrator's relationship to this character relies on touch and not vision, and while it might seem like an intimate connection, it is also one of doubt. She can remember the sensation of the woman rather than any exact or concrete fact. This character is so present in the mind of the narrator that she is a foundation for the narrator's personal history; conversely, the centrality of this character poses a problem because she is a part of a history that remains inexact and escapes. The narrator presses her mother for information about Aïcha, but this entrance into a specific history remains closed: "J'aimais le toucher du nom Aïcha, rien de sentimental, tout sensuel et infantile. Et finalement elle ne s'appelait pas Aïcha et de même qu'aucun d'entre nous ne sait d'où était venu ce nom qui n'était pas le sien, de même aucun d'entre nous ne sait maintenant qui de nous l'a appris de qui et comment" (93). As the narrator eventually learns, Aïcha's name is really Messaouda. The more the narrator relates about this character, the more distant and unknown this Algerian woman becomes. Aïcha's name does not even truly designate her, and moreover, for ten years the narrator had unwittingly been "sinning" against "Aïcha c'est-a-dire Messaouda ou inversement." The text undercuts the role of this eternal, maternal, and feminine body, "une femme qui est-une-femme," by revealing the narrator's unconscious violence towards and separation from this world.[187]

The narrator directly addresses the separation hinted at in the story about Aïcha/Messaouda in a critical moment of the novel: when she recounts the story of a young Algerian woman who jumps from a carnival ride. The narrator describes

[187] In "My Algériance," published in English in the collection *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*, Cixous describes this misnaming as a parapraxis. Her use of this term suggests that the narrator herself unconsciously chose to "expropriate" and "reappropriate" Aïcha through the mistaken name.

witnessing this event as a child and how she internalizes its brutality. After the incident, the young woman's body falls to the ground, cut in two, but still held together in her veil.

> C'est une tragédie qui est aussi une Ville, un pays, une histoire, l'histoire de celle que je ne suis pas, un voile nous sépare et pour cette raison même je sens un voile tomber une buée rouge sur ma tête et sur mes épaules, effrayée de toutes mes forces je me débats mais je ne le nie pas, pour rien au monde je ne le nierais pour rien au monde je ne le mettrais, et pour cette raison même malgré moi je porte une jeune fille voilée que je ne suis pas, j'ai en moi la fille coupée en deux le voile mortel la coupure parce que je suis une fille témoin de la victime, coupée de la victime... J'ai le sentiment que *cela m'est arrivé*. Depuis l'accident quelque chose en moi me reste voilé. (146)

Horrifying as the accident is, the narrator's account of the event focuses on the role of the veil. For the narrator, the veil is what cuts and separates her from the country around her. The veil is not just something that covers but also something that divides. The veil reveals the cut between the narrator and the country, and it operates at the boundary of the face. One particularly gory detail of the death conveys this inherent conflict: "Son corps coupé en deux par le milieu retenu dans le voile tombe come une masse sur le sol de la place … J'ai l'existence coupé en deux" (145). The tragedy is both caused by the veil, the woman jumps from the ride in order to prevent being accosted by a man, and contained by the veil. It is precisely the narrator's position as witness that puts her in this untenable position: "J'étais là. Je suis encore là. J'ai vu. J'ai vécu. Je ne suis pas morte. Il y a faute. Et c'est ma faute obscurément" (146). Even though he narrator notes that the tragedy of the young Algerian woman is "l'histoire de celle que je ne suis pas," she also

has the feeling that it, "cela" has once happened to her. Twice in the passage above, the narrator repeats the phrase "pour cette raison même"; this "même" is what causes the violence in the account because the "same" is savagely separated. In particular, the birth metaphor in the text is what links the narrator's story to the tragedy. The "buée rouge" falling on the head and shoulders suggests a bloody birth or entry into the world. The fact of the narrator's birth explains why the tragedy has also happened to her. The event that the narrator witnesses, and should never have witnessed, is her own separation from her maternal country's body.

This veil operates on both psychological and political issues that create a divide between the narrator and the world around her. Whereas the Algerian woman in the tragic account above wears *le voile*, this clothing does not define the narrator herself. Of course, the narrator does not entirely belong to the French colonial institution either. Born Jewish in a French Algerian territory under Vichy, the narrator lives in a state of limbo, neither French nor Algerian.[188] In fact, the narrator begins the account of the young woman's death by couching it in her own history: "J'ai sept ans, depuis quelques années je suis juive dit-on" (145). Seemingly à-propos of nothing, this sentence leads into the account of the unthinkable event. I would argue that this statement only further emphasizes how the narrator is cut from the country and the history in which she is born. "One" says that

[188] Although I do not have the space to explore the entire implications of the narrator's religious identity in relation to her inability to arrive in her home country, it is interesting to note that some of Cixous's narrators describes how the face signifies the cultural difference between the Jewish character and the Algerians. Among the many essays that have been written on the topic, Christa Stevens's "Judéités, à lire dans l'œuvre d'Hélène Cixous" is a fascinating examination of how the signifiers of Judaism play a role in Cixous's examination of both belonging and being in exile. One of Stevens's discussions that adds to the examination of the face in Cixous's works is this critic's analysis of the "nez," a facial feature that the narrator inherits from her father. In certain texts, such as the novel *Le jour où je n'étais pas là*, Cixous makes the connection between "nez" and "naitre." A facial feature marks the narrator's birth.

she is Jewish—the reason for her separation comes from the exterior.[189] Persecuted because of their religion, the narrator's family is not considered citizens of any country. It does not seem accidental that after stating this information the narrator then launches into a violent story that reflects another way she is separated from the country.

The primal scene of the "fille coupée en deux" shocks the narrator with the knowledge that her life is one that proceeds from a cut and an expulsion. Part of what makes this terrifying event so real (despite its unreal qualities) and pointed is the fact that "L'Algériefrançaise sort de la scène" (142). In this scene, "Frenchalgeria" does not play a role. The narrator is very explicit that "L'Algériefrançaise" creates a world of artifice and disguise. Not only are the faces of Algeria unavailable to the narrator of *Les Rêveries,* but the French colonial institution *masks* this truth from the country's inhabitants. In addition to the tragic memory of the "fille coupée en deux," the narrator experiences the mask imposed on the reality of Alger in the French lycée where she studies: "Je médite la ruine du Lycée déguisé, de toutes mes forces de toutes mes faiblesses je fore je creuse je fomente" (147). In her description of the school, the narrator uses the term, "déguisé." The constant problem of seeing the face of the other, in effect, being welcomed in, becomes more pronounced towards the end of the novel. Her plan to reveal the false world around her is one of unmasking; in order to discuss the ways in wish she cannot access the Algerian world around her in part because of the deception of "l'Algériefrançaise," the narrator uses vocabulary that centers on the face: "Moi aussi je suis initiée au camouflage, au déguisement, au semblant, à la feinte, au masque" (149). Not just veiled or hidden, the school perpetuates the lie that Algerie does not exist, that

[189] Under Vichy, the French administration repealed the Loi Crémieux, which guaranteed citizenship to Jewish citizens.

the school *is* France, "ce n'était qu'un immense mensonge délirant qui avait pris toute la place de la vérité" (150); the reality of the school disguises the truth that the narrator perceives but cannot see.[190]

Alienated from her peers by her religious background and her awareness of the repressive colonial atmosphere around her, the narrator attempts to reveal this system. Her rebellion in the text involves using her dead father's broken camera to take invisible and imaginary pictures in order to unveil and unmask the world around her: "Avec l'appareil inhabité je prenais des photos des professeurs. Des dizaines de clichés. Des dizaines de photos inexistantes. Par ce moyen je les inexistais. Toutes. L'une après l'autre. Je les regardais du point du vue de l'absence de regard" (149). The inverted use of the camera, taking pictures that do not exist, requires the narrator also to invert her gaze. In effect, the narrator hopes to unmask the deception of the school around her precisely by revealing it to be invisible under its disguise: "Je vais saisir le système d'annulation de l'être algérien réel dans son propre piège" (149). The narrator's plot hinges on *not seeing* through the camera's lens in order to unveil the truth. She gives herself the very philosophical and improbable task of revealing absence through absence.

While the narrator does not explicitly mention photographing faces in this section of the novel, the arrival of three young Algerian students at the narrator's school reveals the importance of the face in this tension between absence and presence. Although never a part of their lives, the narrator understands the presence of these three students as revelatory and sacred encounter with the face of the other:

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[190] In a separate essay, "Letter to Zohra Drif," which I will discuss more in the next section, published in 1998, the narrator describes the actual camouflaging of her school during World War II. The events of the war and the decisions of the Vichy government had a direct effect on the young Jewish narrator. Even though this is not apparent in *Les Rêveries*, the school's disguise is one that elides Algeria's history as much as it elides Jewish history and tragedy.

> Juste à ce moment-là apparurent au Lycée trois musulmanes et par-dessus le marché dans ma classe, et c'est à moi que cela arrivait, au moment où j'étais éveillée au comble de la solitude, plus aucune rêverie, une blonde une brune une rousse, Zohra Samia et Leila. Elles ont été inoubliables dès le premier jour elles étaient futures et nécessaires, mais seul ma vie le savait, …J'étais attachée à leurs trois présences. J'étais avec elles et elles n'étaient pas avec moi, j'étais avec elles tenue loin d'elles par tous mes fantômes …, j'étais avec elles sans elle moi qui à moins d'elles ne pouvais être moi. Je voyais toutes mes algéries face à face. J'ai vu en vives lueurs comme je ne serai jamais une leur. Elles allaient à la vie leur, leur tour vient devinais-je, sans lequel je ne serais pas moi et qui brille loin de moi, devinais-je. (151-152)

In this passage, the narrator's revelation comes as glimmers of light. I do not think it a coincidence that these illuminated young women should arrive right after the narrator's "complot photographique de ruine" fails. Somehow the narrator is able to make a connection with Algeria because these women are like rays of light. Even though this light is insubstantial, without a frame or material like a photograph, its image still reaches the narrator. Despite the fact that the narrator is outside of their experience, the presence of these young women still has a direct effect on who the narrator is (and indeed, how she tells her story). One can witness this simultaneous connection and separation in the passage above: "lueur" transforms into "leur." The narrator sees their light, yet still understands that she will never belong to their "their." More importantly, the presence of these feminine Algerian figures gives the narrator a future. For the first time in the novel, the narrator is able to imagine the in-between space that is both a combination of the past

and future. Throughout the novel the narrator describes the awful certainty of what has happened but is paradoxically unknown; yet, with the appearance of these three young women, the narrator finally has some kind of promise: “Il y eut une lueur d’histoire. Elle n’avait pas d’événements particuliers à ce moment-là, mais elle allait en avoir et je me mis à vivre de ce qui allait arriver. Mon âme prophétique. Le futur, enfin, il y en avait” (152). Faces suddenly appear towards the end of the novel and even though the narrator is in no position to look upon them, they still assure some kind of connection.

One sees the same kind of luminous face appear in the penultimate moment of the text. In this section, the narrator hears her brother speaking to her in her memory as she is leaving Algeria. The voice of the brother encourages her to stay in Algeria, reminding her of her relationship with a young Kabyle man named Idir *or* Kader. It is significant that the name be questionable because this unfixed identity will then translate into the narrator’s memory or dream of a photograph in which both she and Idir/Kader stand looking at one another. The photograph is brought into the text at this point in that it represents the fleeting and impossible work of memory. The narrator cannot say for sure whether she remembers Idir/Kader but then the image of the photograph juxtaposes its possibility against its impossibility. Faces are important in this moment because they pass indistinctly and momentarily:

> … au bout de la grande allée du Clos-Salembier, le visage tourné vers mon visage, depuis l’autre bout de la grande allée, je le regarde, le visage tourné vers son visage, nous sommes étranges, nous sommes nimbés d’une étrange absence de violence, les cheveux épais, le poitrail étroit, prêts à fuir l’un vers l’autre, ne bougez pas! dit l’auteur de tout-ce-qui-arrive-comme-n’arrivant-pas, nous ne

> bougeons pas, il y a maintenant la photo, on voit : *la rencontre dont l'autre nom est adieu*. Tout ce qui pourrait arriver et n'arrivera pas sur cette terre c'est cela qui laisse des traces lumineuses dans la Grande Allée, nous nous regardons une fois pour toutes les fois qui ne seront pas et nous pensons en même temps qu'il est trop tôt autour de nous pour Cela. (156)

The dream photograph presents a moment in which the narrator has a "visage" and is able to turn towards the sacred face of another, but only in the position of an outsider looking in on the scene. As the memory of the boy vacillates between Idir and Kader, between a moment of meeting and a moment of parting, the photograph of this occurrence only exists in its contradictions. For this reason, the most striking element of this dream or memory photograph is the quality of the light. Rather than being fixed and constant, the light of the photograph is a result of the questionable temporality and indeed the uncertain existence of the photo itself: "Tout ce qui pourrait arriver et n'arrivera pas sur cette terre c'est cela qui laisse des traces lumineuses dans la Grande Allée." What illuminates the photo is this unknown element of what could happen and what will not happen, but this light is also what makes the connection between the two figures possible. The *visage* is possible only in this conflicting moment.

VI. ILLUSORY FACES

In *Les Rêveries,* the narrator is compelled to travel in her dreams and in her memories to her native land even though she can never arrive there. This voyage happens again in Cixous's works, particularly in the novel *Si près* (2006). Overall, *Si près* is a story of the narrator's actual physical return to Algeria. While the *visage* is only a very

small concern in this long, complicated, and dream-like account of the narrator's return to Algeria, each significant step in the novel addresses the possible ways to encounter the face of the other. Indeed, beginning with the hypothetical statement, "j'irais peut-être à Alger," each stage of this dream-like trip, (imagining the trip, debating the trip, and finally taking the trip) focuses on how this moment is in related to a specific face. *Si Près* reintroduces the problem of seeing the living mother's and the dead father's faces, but more importantly it finally gives Algeria a face, that of Zohra Drif.[191] As I will explain in more detail below, the narrator's relationship to these family members bookends an underlying narrative, the arrival of a letter "written" to Zohra Drif in 1998 that arrives in this 2006 novel. From the narrator's desire to keep her aging mother exactly as she is, to her desire to be welcomed in Algeria through the face of the other, and finally to the narrator's "meeting" with her father in Oran's cemetery, the text ultimately reveals the extent to which passage and movement are opportunities for approaching the face of the other in Cixous's texts.

In the early pages of *Si près*, just before the narrator announces her idea to go back to Algeria, she sits before her mother on her mother's ninety-fifth birthday and writes about her desire to take her mother's photograph: "j'avais le regard occupé à photographier mentalement son visage désiré, le visage de son anniversaire, je voulais graver dans je ne sais quelle cire immortelle les traits de mon bien-aimée à l'heure de ses quatre-vingt-quinze ans" (10). Taking a photograph, however, is not described above as an instantaneous effort; instead, the narrator imagines photography as an artistic creation that takes place over time. She explains wanting to engrave her mother's features in wax.

[191] Zohra Drif, Cixous's classmate, fought with the FLN for Algerian independence. She was imprisoned for several years as a result of her involvement.

On one hand, the narrator has the desire to commemorate this image of her mother, to make it immortal. On the other hand, this image that the narrator wants to engrave in her memory is also a moment of transformation. Reminiscent of the photograph of Idir/Kader in *Les Rêveries*, the photograph that the narrator describes in *Si près* is also fluid, fluctuating, and momentary. For this reason the mother's photograph can only be an imaginary one: "l'idée de prendre une photographie techniquement tout m'effraie, l'idée de "prendre" alors que selon moi l'appareil coupe d'une photo, le flux infini de l'imprenable, alors qu'écrire ne prend rien de tout, écrire rêve de ne pas arrêter ce qui est en train de se perdre" (12). The textual photograph does not "keep" the mother; instead, it follows the mother's disappearance.[192]

What the narrator finds most striking this moment is the mother's old bathing suit, a strange item of clothing that makes the mother's image appear. In the text, the narrator explains her secret observations of her mother:

> …j'étais toute à cette tentative secrète de vol d'une image prise sur ma mère en maillot, je souhaitais qu'elle n'en sache rien, je souhaitais absorber sa figure, cette musculeuse pulsion de proie qui fait son nid en moi couvait la forme de ce visage en transformation, je regardais le maillot puis le visage, *ce* visage n'est pas son visage, c'est un visage qui lui échappe, qui la singe, elle n'est pas avertie, il y a un visage qui la précède, lui fait des propositions, va et vient nerveusement, semble toujours sur le point d'avouer, quoi, encore une de ces pensées triomphalement incongrues peut-être, des plis d'éclats de rire se ramassent autour de ces lèvres,

[192] The narrator discusses writing as a way of allowing the other to pass through representation without being cut or "taken," and she also examines the telephone as a means of doing the same: "Voilà une singularité: mon amour pour le Téléphone est égal en intensité et en ténacité à mon antipathie pour l'appareil photo. C'est que le Téléphonique c'est toi. L'appareil photo c'est une prothèse, c'est une pince optique, un harpon oculaire, un prolongement avide de moi" (14).

> comme les rideaux des deux cotés de la bouche d'où va jaillir la vérité… Je regardais le visage puis le maillot. Et tous ce mouvement, ces mouvements de ma mère est dans un maillot aux fibres élastiques. (10-11)

Overall, the narrator's position is one of secrecy; she stalks the image like prey because the mother's image constantly threatens to escape. Her desire is not for possession, however; the narrator describes her emotions in this moment as the effects of a drive to "absorb" the mother's image. Her desire is not *to have* an image of the mother, but to become one with this image. And significantly, the element that provokes this longing gaze is the transformation of the mother's face. The narrator compares the elasticity of the bathing suit to the mother's face; the moment that the narrator wants to photograph is the elusive moment of shifting representation.

The novel begins with the examination of an elastic and transformable face and the secret desire to keep the other in a constant state of metamorphosis. In fact, it is the narrator's contemplation of her mother that leads her to announce that she wants to return to Algeria, her childhood home. Something about her interaction with her mother, the fear of losing her but the resistance to impeding her transformation, makes the narrator think of her tenuous connection to this country. The announcement of the idea, however, alienates the narrator from herself. "J'ai dit avec une voix distraite, sans couleur: J'irai peut-être à Alger. Je ne peux pas affirmer l'avoir dit moi-même. C'est plutôt l'autre voix qui a prononcé ces mots comme pour les essayer" (16). The decision to go to Algeria is one that is not made by the narrator, something speaks from within her, and the decision is made by this being. Just as the narrator has conflicting desires about her mother's face, her resistance to photographing the face in order to keep it forever as opposed to letting it

pass from existance, she has a conflicted desire to go to Algeria : “J’ai une crainte d’aller en Algérie et de manquer l’Algérie en y allant de ne pas l’y trouver et donc de commencer à l’avoir perdue, alors que je n’ai encore jamais perdu l’Algérie, me disais-je, je n’ai même jamais si fortement joui de la chose ou de l’être Algérie que depuis que j’en suis partie en 1971” (23). Both the mother and the country, at different points in this novel’s first pages, threaten to disappear. The narrator wants to preserve these relationships even as they change, despite the difficulties in doing so.

This obsession with seeing the mother at the beginning of the novel is asymmetrically reflected in the anxiety of never finding the father’s grave at the end of the novel. Going back to Algeria means returning to the father’s tomb. The account of the narrator visiting her father’s grave at the end of the novel plays on this importance of the face in the meeting of the other, but the face also entirely exceeds its boundaries. Highlighting the narrator’s own experience of the voyage is the objective gaze of the video camera that the narrator brings with her, lent to the narrator by her friend, Ruth Beckermann. At certain points, the narrator explicitly addresses what she sees as opposed to what this camera views. She explains, “Je peins le secret. Un luxe de secrets. La luxuriance des secrets rassemblés dans le volume d’Alger. Je peins le voyage dans le voyage” or more precisely, “ce que la caméra ne voit pas” (161-162). Implied in what the narrator sees is what the camera will not be able to see, anything that is hidden and at the interior of this voyage. In this sense, meeting the father at the grave site is something that will not happen through sight.

The narrative indicates the narrator’s loss of sight in the cemetery. Searching for the grave, the narrator finds that she can no longer visually navigate the cemetery. She

believes that she hears her father's voice among the tombs, but cannot *see* him. In the narrator's panicked haste and confusion to find the tomb of her father, she despairs that she will never see the other:

> L'idée me vint que j'avais pu passer devant toi et ne pas te voir, peut-être que tout le malheur de ma vie a été de passer *tout près et peut-être si près* du visage du bonheur que je ne le vois pas et peut-être qu'avoir toujours été si près de ma vie est ma fatalité, d'être peut-être à deux mètres de toi, toute ma vie à deux pas, tu es déjà passé …. (202)

Both the narrator and "toi" in this passage are in movement; the face of the other is always something that passes before or behind. In *Si près*, the narrator seems to be exploring how to see faces through different media, but the final section of the novel reveals that the loved face is one that not only arrives of its own accord but also must be radically absent so that it can be glimpsed in the act of returning. The descriptor, s*i près*, can refer to the proximity of two different boundaries: so close to life and so close to death, so close to presence and so close to absence. When the narrator finally "sees" the tomb, it returns her gaze but only by looking beyond her. Rather than being a fixed moment of encountering the other, the event can only be illusory and dream-like:

> Tu me regardais. J'ai vu au-delà de mon regard tes paupières à peu près baissées, j'ai vu le rêve de ton regard par les fentes de tes paupières, un regard de rêve étrange doux et interminable qui ne voit pas comme voient les yeux de ce monde-ci qui voit quelque chose que je ne sais pas voir de mes yeux mais dont je vois le reflet dans la soie immobile de tes prunelles et comme cela brille sans bouger je crois que c'est l'éternité. (206)

Implicit in this passage is the idea that the meeting with the father is an illusion. The narrator sees “au-delà” of her gaze and what she sees is the “rêve” of the other’s gaze. The chimerical connection between the two takes place in what the narrator sees in the reflection of the other’s eyes, something that shines as if through a dream. Of course, this eternity that is reflected in the father’s eyes is death. The father’s face reveals itself within the bounds of the cemetery because its appearance coincides with mourning for this image. In this sense, the narrator’s return to Algeria is ultimately predicated on finding a face that is simultaneously present and absent: absent in that the face has disappeared, or passed, as the narrator describes it, but present in that the *visage* is something that can be seen once the narrator looks beyond lived experience. The face, ultimately, is something that defies any kind of logical structure that would insist on difference. In order to see the face, sight must be blindness, life must be death, the self must be other, and presence must be absence.

The incongruous and improbable moment of seeing the face is what founds all of the texts discussed in this chapter, and these paradoxes resonate in how the narrator encounters a third face in *Si près*: the *visage* of Zohra Driff. In fact, it is this face that makes the voyage in *Si près* possible. Going back to the narrator’s first decision to return to Algeria, she explains that the way to arrive there without irrevocably losing her connection to the country is through the figure of the letter:

> Y aller comme en rêve, ce serait l’idéal me disais-je. Y aller comme *un rêve*. Y aller de façon si magique, si intense, si puissante, si légère, si totale que j’y aurais été tout en étant comme si je n’y étais pas moi-même mais une autre, avec la force mais l’impunité, et même l’immunité d’une lettre. (23-24)

The letter, in addition to being something in and of itself, *l'être*, also includes in its composition, the response of the other. In *Si près*, the letter signifies both the narrator's desire to arrive in Algeria and the impossibility of doing so. The narrator describes a letter she has wanted to write but has never sent to one of her classmates, an Algerian woman named Zohra Drif. The narrator's journey to Algeria is predicated on her *being* another. She wants to go there as if she were someone other than herself. Ultimately, however, the letter's arrival is impossible because the narrator has no address: "Ne-pas-avoir-l'adresse de la personne à qui je voulais à tout prix écrire, c'était comme j'avais toujours été en Algérie à vouloir à tout prix parler, toucher trouver je savais exactement quoi et qui, mais je ne savais pas comment, *où*, l'atteindre" (27). The narrator thinks "logically" about this problem: the letter that is not written and has no address will never arrive. Her history and origin make it impossible for her to ever arrive as a *lettre* and also as who she is, *l'être*.

These musings on what is possible and what is unfathomable, however, lead the narrator to imagine her lessons from a high school philosophy course. As the narrator dreams up ways of returning to Algeria, she is reminded of when she studied *Discours de la Méthode*. The text juxtaposes Descartes' maxim "le bon sens est la chose du monde la mieux partagée" to the narrator's memory of a particular face at that moment, that of Zohra Drif. The rationalism of Descartes does not align with the narrator's attempt and desire to imagine the face of Zohra in her class at the French lycée:

> …j'ai cru voir le visage de Zohra Drif. C'était sûrement une illusion, mais vitale. Je voulais voir un visage. Un visage est la chose du monde la moins partagée. L'aveugle de la Vue qui attendait la lumière philosophique depuis des années.

> J'attendais un visage. Je n'y voyais pas à trois mètres, mais cela n'empêche pas de voir autrement. (30)

The face, then, opposes the base of Descartes' philosophical tradition; it is irrational and paradoxical. One can interpret from the above passage that the *visage* is emphatically not "le bon sens." The narrator's word choice, "sûrement une illusion," contrasts hypothesis with certitude in the same space. In this passage the narrator mentions the French education she had while living in Algeria and particularly her inability to *believe* in it as reality.[193] The face becomes evidence of this artifice even as it resists logic in *Si Près*. Zohra is the face of this near yet missed connection. Moreover, the narrator can only *believe she has seen,* "cru voir," the face of Zohra.

The possibility of the journey, and thus the possibility of the text, rests on the need to see an other's face only in its absence, disappearance, and impossibility. In writing, the narrator is guided by the question "Que va dire Zohra?" The constant repetition of this question insists on the impossibility of its answer. Furthemore, the narrator indicates that her question is not just in reference to a person, but to her whole relationship with Algeria: "Z. c'est l'Algérie donc l'inconnue à laquelle je pense depuis que je l'ai quitté après qu'elle m'eut quittée toujours d'avance et qui désordonne tout ce que je tente de penser. Je m'appuie sur le point Z. pour me regarder de l'autre point de vue" (65).[194] The memory of Zohra creates an unknowable yet desired image that

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[193] Throughout the whole novel, and particularly at this point, the text makes an allusion to the short essay "Letter to Zohra Drif" written by Hélène Cixous and published in translation in the journal *Parallax* in 1998. In this letter that, addressed to one person but arriving to an infinite number of people, the narrator is more explicit about the cultural and political atmosphere in which the she grew up and how it caused her separation. In this letter, the narrator describes the incongruity of her position as a young Jewish woman in a French Catholic institution, paradoxically on the inside and outside of Algerian history.

[194] This need for self-reflection also echoes in portions of Cixous's earlier "Letter to Zohra Drif." As the narrator explains in this essa, the letter encompasses all that the narrator wanted to be but could never be:

alternately creates the narrator. Desiring to see herself from another point of view, the narrator does not just attempt to see, but to inhabit and experience the other's face.

Although it seems somewhat incommensurable with this discussion, the narrator *does* actually meet Zohra in the novel *Si Près*; yet, it is the inability to *see* the face that sets the novel's tone. The novel is able to address what is impossible to face. Zohra's face in this work becomes the haunting yet living face that defines why the *visage* should be such an intractable image in this author's work. Paradoxically, by revealing that the face cannot be seen, Cixous's work is able to embody the *visage.* Showing films of her travels people upon her return, the narrator of *Si près*, describes the following exchange: "On ne voit pas Zohra, dit Ruth. Du point de vue de la caméra. Mais selon moi ce livre ne voit qu'elle" (169). The film can only present a face, whereas the text can show this face in the never ending process of arriving. The novel's creation is ultimately an unseen image, and this image is a face. In Cixous's oeuvre, specifically her autofictive works, the *visage* is both the obscure and necessary center of textual production.

"It was a letter in the image of my fatality of Algeria: mute, ardent, faithful, enthusiastic. Forbidden. I can talk about it because it is still there. It did not go by. I did not throw it into forgetfulness. It knows this. I did not deny it. It is the portrait of my own inexistence, phantom that I was as a child and young girl, surreptitious and unknown at school. I keep it, unfinished. It is the only photograph of my soul that I accept as a witness of my extreme Algerian impotence" (194). The narrator's description of her "impotence" echoes the birth imagery from *Les Rêveries*; Algeria does not produce the narrator, and in turn she cannot create her life in this country.

CONCLUSION

"Dans l'accès au visage, il y a certainement aussi un accès à l'idée de Dieu."[195]

Understanding the importance of the face in the works of both Duras and Cixous entails accepting, at least in the context of their oeuvres, multiple contradictions and inconsistencies. The idea that the face is not seen is perhaps the most prevalent incongruity in these authors' works because it encompasses their discussions of the collapse between the terms life and death, self and other, and text and image; the face manifests itself in the "là-pas-là" upon which these authors direct their focus.[196] And interestingly, it seems that the constant reference to this image contributes to one of the most transgressive traits that their works' share: the subversion of the word *God* as an indication of the radical nature of their writing. Cixous explains in an interview from 1996, "I have always played with God. For me, the signifier Dieu, as I have always said, is the synonym of what goes beyond us, of our own projection toward the future, toward infinity." As discussed throughout this dissertation, both authors challenge what can be represented in writing and how it can be represented, by focusing on an image or a concept that cannot be translated. Duras's texts attempt to reveal the "ombre interne" while Cixous's texts endeavor to communicate the secret "en état de secretion."[197] The face of God is perhaps the most problematic, sacred, and inaccessible face in the Western literary tradition, and this kind of face, in texts by Duras and Cixous, is the boundary for

[195] Levinas, *Éthique et infini* 86.

[196] One of the ways to reconcile the presence of this "visual absence" in their works is to examine how other senses take on the role of sight, namely sound and touch, and even in the case of Cixous, taste and smell.. Although this is a fascinating subject, it is one upon which I touch only briefly throughout my chapters.

[197] Armel, "Du mot à la vie" 29.

both the interior shadow and the unknown secret. At many different junctures, each author uses the word *God* as a synonym for their impossible task. Their use of the word *God* has nothing to do with an argument for religion or for the transcendence of God; instead, these authors explore the boundaries of representation through their use of the word *God*.

Perhaps the clearest example of "what goes beyond us," specifically in terms of the word *god* in Duras's texts, is her faceless characters. Lol V. Stein, for example, is formed through the impossibility of representation.[198] And indeed, throughout the novel, the narrator describes Lol as an absence, not taking part in her own history and narrative. Hold, or the narrator, constantly addresses his inability to understand and possess Lol. He imagines her wanderings in S Thala and her constant returning to a past where she is no one and replaceable: "Elle n'est pas Dieu, elle n'est personne" (47). By not being *God*, interestingly, Lol is an impossible character to represent; Hold's desire to see Lol is his attempt at ordering the universe that has been upturned by her character's emptiness. In *Le Camion* as well, the word *god* relates to the impossibility of locating an organizing principle in the world. The "invisible" woman in *Le Camion* forecloses the possibility of representation in her understanding of God. In a conversation about politics (where the final conclusion is "Que le monde aille à sa perte, c'est la seule politique" (25)), the woman responds to the truck driver's question about the link between loss and god: "Rapport à Dieu ? Elle dit : oui : Rapport au vide. Regardez" (23). In this moment, the woman not only presents god as the synonym of emptiness, she also asks the man to look. The reader has no way of understanding to what she refers at this moment, but earlier in

[198] Already implied in the title of the novel *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* is the mystical idea of rapture, of being taken away.

the novel she repeats “Regardez, la fin du monde” several times, indicating the ocean that the truck passes. The woman uses the word *god* to indicate the limitless, boundless sea: an image that reflects her world view.

The character of Aurélia Steiner, as Duras describes her in *Les Yeux verts*, is also indicative of how the word *God* is used to subvert dominant ideas or representation, particularly through writing. Aurélia, as Duras explains, dissolves her identity and undermines her own representation in her writing: “L’écrit a à voir avec Dieu. Aurélia Steiner dix-huit ans, dans l’oubli de Dieu, se pose en équivalence à Dieu face à elle-même” (76). These lines, in the section “Aurélia Aurélia Quatre” stand out on the page, larger and darker than the surrounding text; this visual emphasis draws the reader’s attention to these words. The passage itself seems to suggest something important about Aurélia’s character and why her face is missing from her films and novels. She takes the blank position of God in her act of writing: “j’écris,” in many ways, is her rejection of a fixed and definable being. This action is ultimately destructive, but it is also the only way to articulate the tragic story of her Jewish family, her own “ombre interne.”

The impossibility of representation and the impoverishment of words and images in Duras’s oeuvre take place through writing itself and through the way that the word *God* in Duras’s work is a synonym for the pain of the writing process, the attempt to externalize the unknown parts of the self. In a 1981 interview published in the collection *Duras à Montreal*, the author explains “Si on le sait, on n’écrit pas” (21); thus, writing can only eternally fail at translating what cannot be represented or understood. Writing is a suicidal impulse because it destroys the position of the author in terms of her understanding and her control over the text: “Cela a affaire avec Dieu, à une sorte de

prémonition très troublée, très troublante de Dieu. On croit qu'on peut régir le monde, qu'on peut y aller, qu'on peut faire tourner le monde à son écriture, à son propre moteur. C'est très très exaltant, c'est très démolissant, on est très esquinté après" (22).[199] Writing mediates the collapse between the emptiness of the world and the destructive "ombre interne" of the self. Paradoxically, the only way to explore one's history, mind, and secrets is to destroy the self.

Cixous's exploration of "what goes beyond us" is also in terms of representation, but in the illimitable and inaccessible promise of creation rather than the unending and unknowable process of destruction. In "La Venue à l'écriture," Cixous explores how writing can manifest this "beyond" by challenging dominant Western conventions and codes of representation. As I have discussed earlier, the specific "law" that she mentions is the Bible's second commandment forbidding graven images. Her desire to subvert this law comes from her need to approach the adored *Visage* that is so central to this essay. This unseen *Visage* manifests itself throughout the essay as a whisper or a breath and commands: "Ecris-moi!" and "Peins-moi" (19). Even though the narrator works "contre l'edit d'aveuglement," writing this Face, creating this graven image, is not an act of sight. With eyes closed, the narrator explores writing with her whole body: "Écrire, rêver, s'accoucher, être moi-meme ma fille de chaque jour. Affirmation d'une force intérieure capable de regarder la vie sans mourir de peur, et surtout de se regarder soi-même, comme si tu étais l'autre,--indispensible à l'amour—et rien de plus ni de moins que moi" (15). In this text, writing, for Cixous, is not creating representations of monolithic and

[199] Duras also makes connections between her alcoholism and this word: "On manque d'un Dieu. Ce vide qu'on découvre un jour d'adolescence, rien ne peut faire qu'il n'ait jamais eu lieu. L'alcool a été fait pour supporter le vide de l'univers, le balancement des planètes, leur rotation imperturbable dans l'espace, leur silencieuse indifférence à l'endroit de votre douleur" (*La Vie matérielle* 22).

distant ideas, but instead generating images of the self and other through the body. The text and what it represents is then simultaneously within close and intimate proximity to the writer and wholly unreachable.

In using the word *god*, Cixous's work does not allude to the unchanging, eternal Word of God, but the creative and shifting power of language that constantly slips away. In particular, she explores how the word is a site of potential and promise in *L'Amour du loup*. The word *God* is a word-god, one that is infinitely divisible and generative. The word implies constant movement forward in the attempt to say everything even though it cannot be said:

> Je n'ai jamais écrit sans Dieu. Une fois on me le reprocha. Mais dieu, dis-je, c'est le fantôme de l'écriture, c'est son prétexte et sa promesse. Dieu est le nom de tout ce qui n'a pas encore été dit. Sans le mot Dieu pour héberger l'infini multiplicité de tout ce qui n'a pas encore été dit le monde serait réduit à son écorce et moi à ma peau. (101)

The word *God* is the synonym for what the text promises and why the act of writing needs to constantly take place. Words are able to multiply infinitely, and the author can only attempt to keep up. As discussed above, Cixous reveals that with every book that she writes, there is a book that she does not write. The impossibility of ever creating the work that one wants to create, however, is necessary for the process of writing, and she explains this uncontrollable movement in terms of the face of God, or any mythical figure, "On soupire après ce qu'il serait, si on pouvait se le représenter, mais c'est comme dans toutes les légendes et mythes: on ne peut-doit pas regarder dieu en face, ni Psyché, ni Eurydice, etc... Il est infigurable et improbable et pourtant *il est*" (8). Not being able to

face the other is a necessity for writing; the text can support the other's existence without her representation. In this sense, actually being able to write the book that she cannot write, or see the face that she cannot see, would result in its complete and absolute disappearance. The word *God* is a synonym for what writing promises but can never fully access.

In many ways, the face is an image that must remain beyond representation in the works of Duras and Cixous in avoid its final and complete destruction and preserve its alterity. The presence of the word *God* in their works, in addition to communicating "what goes beyond us" in writing, is also an indication of the sacred nature of the *visage* that the texts hope to protect: not the perpetuation of hierarchical ideas about religion and culture, but the preservation of a mysterious image that will always embody the potential for writing and the encounter between the self and the other.

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