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#### Writing absence: A case study of Duras's *The North China lover*

##### Abstract:

This paper investigates Marguerite Duras's autobiographical novel *The North China lover* (1991) as an example of a writing of 'felt absence', a term appropriated from critic George Steiner. In this discussion, 'felt absence' is employed in reference to a writing mobilised and animated by the absence that pervades it on the level of narrative and language. Accordingly, Duras's novel is considered in terms of both its formal literary qualities and its generation from the author/narrator's own experience of loss and absence. In doing so, this paper will draw upon the ideas of theorists William Watkin in relation to the elegy and Jacques Derrida in relation to the supplementarity of writing, in discussing *The North China lover* as an example of the animating nature of absence in relation to language, which this paper suggests ultimately extends to the act of writing itself.

##### Biographical note:

Ruby Todd is currently undertaking a PhD in Creative Writing at Deakin University, where she is writing her second novel and researching the relation of absence to writing.

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Marguerite Duras's *The North China lover*, an autobiographical novel first published in French in 1991 as *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, offers a rich example of the mobilising potential of absence in literature.<sup>1</sup> On a structural and semantic level, *NCL* presents a writing both generated and animated by a sense of loss deeply felt by Duras herself, and by her self-identified narrator, which is testified to in a narrative marked with silence and elusion and told in a style characterised by poetic compression, fragmentation and gaps on the page. By examining *NCL* as an example of this mobilising power of 'felt absence' in literature, while drawing upon the work of theorists William Watkin and Jacques Derrida regarding the operations of absence in writing, this paper aims to contribute to a wider discussion concerning the implications of absence in the experience of writing and reading creative works of literature.

A key concept in this discussion, 'felt absence' is a term casually invoked by George Steiner (Steiner 1991 [1989]: 122) in his *Real presences* to describe the visceral yet often ineffable sensation of God's 'real' absence. My own use of this term is broader, referring to the lacerating physical sensation of various kinds of absence – be it that of a transcendent realm as represented variously by the entities *Logos*, God, Origin, or the Other, or the more immediate absence of a beloved or homeland. Within the context of this paper, this absence is one that can be understood as 'felt' personally by Duras the writer, in coming to the task of novelising her past, while also being in a sense 'felt' by the text itself and, by extension, the reader in experiencing the poetics of absence within language on the page.

As Steiner and innumerable other critics have discussed, the self-conscious acknowledgement on the part of writers of absence as an animating force in writing has long been a channel through which literature has been tested and energised. From the onset of modernism in the late nineteenth century in the West can be traced an increasing awareness on the part of writers as diverse as Gertrude Stein and Stéphane Mallarmé of the self-referential nature of language: the way in which words refer to other words, rather than to the world. As aphorised by Steiner, this shift in aesthetic consciousness under modernism entailed a fundamental 'break' 'between word and world' (Steiner 1991: 93). With this shift came a spirit of play and exploration, from which emerged a writing that foregrounded its own materiality and formal structures, reflecting back on its own processes in a reflexive style that celebrated the power of abstraction and the primacy of words unmoored from their real-world referents. In the experimental poetry of Mallarmé, for example, one can discern a testament to Derrida's observation of the absence at the heart of the sign and its fundamental estrangement from its signified as being the very conditions by which it is animated. In the poetry of Mallarmé, Steiner discerns a revolutionary shift – that of modernism itself, which acknowledges that 'non-reference constitutes the true genius and purity of language' (Steiner 1991: 96). This is an acknowledgement of the power of the absence and distance that inhere structurally in the operations between signifier and signified, and between subject and object in figures such as metaphor. To cite Steiner: 'That which endows the word rose, that arbitrary assemblage of two vowels and two consonants, with its sole legitimacy and life force is, states Mallarmé, "*l'absence de toute rose*"' (Steiner 1991: 96, italics in original).

In correlation to these energising and animating operations of absence with respect to language and literary creation, however, is the notion that a writer's own 'felt absence' or emotional experience of loss (whether physical or symbolic) might be instrumental in propelling them to the act of writing. Nowhere does this possibility find more traction than in the elegy, that most ancient and enduring literary tradition of loss and absence, in which the elegist turns to language to testify to the irremediable absence of a lost loved one. As theorist William Watkin asserts, 'elegy consists of making physical, material works of art out of the very event that destroys our own physicality, in other words, death' and in this way, 'the problems of elegy remain those of language itself' (Watkin 2004: 6).

Of crucial significance here is the way in which the structure of writing, mirroring the situation of the subject grappling with an irremediable loss, has no recourse to its referent other than through the representational structures of language; through linguistic signs and poetic figures such as metaphor, the operations of which depend in different ways on their remove from tangible, real-world objects. As Watkin notes, 'writing can never call up the mimetic, reflective or transparent powers of traditional representation because its referent is permanently absent (Watkin 2004: 8)'. As the following discussion aims to show, this paradoxical relation between the materiality of a text of loss and its wellspring in absence, and the structural difficulties posed by language in representing presence, are in evidence throughout *NCL*.

Drawn from the events of Duras's impoverished childhood in French colonial Vietnam, *NCL* is a novel that appears inextricably linked to the 'felt absence' of its author, in the instance of its conception, in its subject matter, in its formal structure, and in its narrative tone. Broaching the forms of both the novel and the memoir, *NCL*, in Duras's contrarian style, testifies to autobiographical truth while simultaneously suspending the promise of truth-telling. The novel's wild fourteen-and-a-half-year-old protagonist, ostensibly Duras herself and referred to only as 'the child' or 'the girl', is described as the apparition of 'a child prostitute' in her mother's make up and a man's felt hat. Distanced through third-person narrative mode, she inhabits a landscape in which the collapsing sea walls of her mother's futile rice paddies, being swallowed by the river, mirror the collapse of her mother's own mind, of the family's moral order, and of the family itself. The story converges around the protagonist's meeting and subsequent affair with a wealthy young Chinese man in 1930 – a real-life affair already immortalised in Duras's prior and more famous work, *The lover*, and which, by her own admission, marked the end of her childhood and her beginnings as a writer. The affair appears to have affected Duras throughout her life, providing an inexhaustible subject to which she returned repeatedly to re-experience and revise in writing.

*NCL*'s prefatory opening, in which Duras speaks as author, frames the narrative by a recent bereavement: 'I learned that he had been dead for some years. That was May 1990, a year ago now. I had never thought of him dead' (Duras 1994: 1). Duras then essentially outlines the *raison d'être* of the account that is to unfold:

I stopped the work I was doing. I wrote the story of the North China lover and the child: it wasn't quite there in *The Lover* [...]

I didn't go beyond the ocean liner's departure, which is to say, the child's departure. I could never have imagined the Chinese dying, his body dying, his skin, his sex, his hands. For a whole year I went back to the days when I would cross the Mekong River, on the ferry to Vinh-Long.

In the blinding light of the retelling, Thanh's face suddenly appeared, and the little brother's, the child who was different.

The story enclosed me with these people, and with them only.

I became a novelist again. (1994: 1-2)

Thus, from the outset, *NCL* is explicitly conceived as not only a refiguring of *The lover*, but as a work of memory springing from the event of the author's personal bereavement, a work of mourning, of felt absence mobilising the act of writing. Moreover, while *NCL* is framed by Duras's above-quoted description of hearing about the Chinese man's death and reacting by writing, it is in reality a work stemming from and informed by a constellation of bereavements. In many ways, the work is an elegy to Duras's family – to her hardworking, fatally hopeful, possibly mad mother, Marie Legrand; to her adored little brother Paulo; even to her pathologically violent elder brother Pierre. At the periphery of this elegy are other subjects too: H el ene Lagonelle, the outrageously beautiful backward schoolgirl for whom Duras was 'worn out' by desire even while she had her Chinese lover and whom, we understand, she never possessed; the spectre of Anne-Marie Stretter, the governor's wife whose lover was driven to suicide; the beggar woman of Vinh-Long. Notably, however, it is to Thanh, the family's houseboy, that the work is dedicated, another figure in the vivid landscape of Duras's childhood, another beloved who was lost.

Also resonating throughout Duras's narrative is the loss of her childhood homeland in colonial Vietnam, a loss that is impending at the time in which the story is set, and yet also long-realised within the time of the author-narrator who is remembering. In many ways, however, it seems that the child has never felt 'at home' in the true sense of belonging, but rather, as a white colonial child who is neither of the affluent ruling class nor a native Vietnamese, identified in a wider way as 'exiled' before leaving Indochina. Ever-present throughout the narrative is the irreconcilable distance and difference between her native Indochina and France; between French colonial Vietnam and real Vietnam; and also between her white colonial poverty and her lover's Chinese wealth. Both the white girl and the Chinese man are, in more ways than one, exiles, and, throughout the course of the novel, as the love between them grows more desperate, so grows their dread of their coming exile from each other. The child has always been destined to return to France, and her lover, who is a pawn in his authoritarian father's plans, has always been destined for marriage to another – a Chinese woman whose family's wealth matches his own. The girl, fatalistic before her time, seems to know from the beginning that her story will end in ruin. In this way, *NCL* is composed as a kind of elegy for a homeland that was always strange, to loves which were, from the beginning, lost.

Implicated in the operations and effects of *NCL* and other such writings of felt absence is the way in which the production of meaning via linguistic signs is itself a process necessarily mediated by absence. To cite theorist Kevin Hart, a basic tenet of

that which we call a 'sign' is something that 'is what it is in the absence of its animating presence' (Hart 2000: 12). As recognised by Ferdinand de Saussure, these signs operate as semantic markers that stand in for the external concepts they signify. That is, there exists no intrinsic union between the word 'tree' as a signifier and the concept of a tree as its signified, or, indeed, with the real tree itself, in the world, which exists externally to the sign as its referent. Words do not embody what they signify, but rather depend on their estrangement from the real presence of the signified in order to create the illusion of presence. Similarly, the signifier does not represent a pre-existing concept, but rather a concept whose meaning depends on its relation to other words. As Saussure explains: 'Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others' (Saussure 1959: 114).

Speaking of the system by which meaning is produced through the interrelation of linguistic units, Saussure emphasised the relational and differential nature of meaning as produced by signs, and the operation of values in this system over ideas. That is, he asserts how in producing, exchanging and comprehending patterns of linguistic signs, speakers, writers, thinkers and listeners find not 'pre-existing ideas' but rather

*values* emanating from the system. When they are said to correspond to concepts, it is understood that the concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not. (Saussure 1959: 117)

Saussure's above assertion that linguistic concepts are 'defined [...] negatively' by 'being what the others are not' highlights the inescapably negational nature of the lexical and semantic rifts and absences by which the operations of language's sign-system is structured. In light of such negation at work within language broadly, it is worth considering the ways in which the inherent absences that can be seen to structure language may be mirrored and intensified in writing that (explicitly or less so) springs from and speaks to the experience of loss and the intractability of the absence(s) that loss entails. For example, the paradoxical interrelation of the effects of presence and absence, operating within the linguistic sign-system on the level of speech alone, are already intensified on the level of writing, where a further paradox arises between the immaterial linguistic signs from which writing is crafted and the enduring, repeatable and material nature of the textual artefact. However, it could be observed that the effects of such a paradox are foregrounded and intensified, or 'mirrored', when the text in question is one that explicitly speaks to the experience of loss and the effects of absence.

This intensification could be seen as applying equally to the writing experience as to that of reading. As Watkin has observed, the elegy as a form (considered here only within its literary scope) is explicitly concerned with the paradoxical task of creating a material work when its source and subject, death, in its alterity, evades representation. Inasmuch as writings of 'felt absence' spring from absence and expend their energies in testifying to and self-consciously foregrounding this absence through the mechanisms of poetic language, this task extends to writings of loss more generally – and one could well imagine that Duras, in writing *NCL*, experienced an intensification

of the absence-presence effects of writing similar to the elegist's when trying to represent her own 'felt absence'. Further, to recall Watkin's assertion, just as the representational capacities of writing fall short 'because its referent is permanently absent' (Watkin 2004: 8), so too is the referent of the elegy-writer's loss absent – whether physically through death or another estrangement, or through originary ontological absence, as might be the case in writing of a loss of God, or of self.

An aspect of such mirroring in *NCL* can also be observed on the level of the narrative, which is characterised by a sense of absence extending from losses (of loved ones, of youth, of a homeland) that have already occurred, and which, at the same time, is (re)experienced in the immediacy of the narrative present – although in fact the narrator is remembering this time. The inherent structures of absence in language can also be seen to resonate in *NCL* on the level of form, where disjointed, terse sentences create scenes breached by silence and narrative gaps, further intensified by the use of line breaks and blanks on the page. In *NCL*, Duras's choice of words and images is measured equally by what she leaves out, an economy that opens the narrative field for the reader to enter. In 'The Black Block', one section in a volume of conversational musings on various subjects entitled *Practicalities* (1987), Duras asserts that '[w]riting isn't just telling stories. It's exactly the opposite. It's telling everything at once. It's the telling of a story, and the absence of the story. It's telling a story through its absence' (Duras 1991: 27).

This sensitivity to the negative space of a narrative, to what remains unsaid and unrevealed, is evident in the writing that comprises *NCL*. Frequently, single, terse sentences are indented to command the weight of a paragraph. Pivotal scenes are left mid-motion, swallowed back into silence as the narrative shifts. Linearity is bypassed in favour of the kind of stop-start fragmentation experienced by a mind remembering the past. Composed in sentences that are frequently fragmented and abrupt, luxuriant in imagery and suggestive dialogue, the pervading tone of *NCL* is elegiac. The interweaving voices of the child and the adult narrator impart a sense of longing that will remain unfulfilled. Duras's narrator blends this plaintive tone of fatalism and romance, however, with one of philosophical detachment, enhancing the reader's sense of strangeness and alienation amid a cast of tragic, morally bankrupt characters in a forsaken landscape. In the section of sparse pages that comprises the book's opening, short paragraphs of emphatically indented sentences are set at spacious intervals from each other. At the beginning of one page, Duras again seeks to complicate and expand the categorical borders of the text, entertaining the notion of a filmic parallel, stating:

This is a book.

This is a film.

This is night.

(Duras 1994: 6)

This rhythmic writing of emphatic, punchy lines is a stylistic hallmark of Duras's writing, lending to *NCL* a poetic urgency and compression, while also foregrounding voice, the sense of a speaker murmuring in one's ear. One reason for this is perhaps

the way in which the landscape of the story being told is inextricably linked to the emotional landscape of its narrator. The order in which scenes come to us, for example, is not linear but rather reflective of the narrator's process of remembering. Similarly, there is the sense in which the scenes, images and details that are vividly present in the narrative are the highlights of a wider historical reality that itself remains in shadow – the forgotten hinterland of the narrator's memory. In this way, as a whole, *NCL* imparts the impression of a chiaroscuro, of presence engulfed by absence.

In considering the mobilising potential of absence in the activity of writing, it is worth attending briefly to Derrida's discussion of supplementarity in his 1967 *Of grammatology*. Conducted as a deconstructive reading of the contradictory assumptions held by Jean-Jacques Rousseau regarding speech in relation to writing, this discussion is most relevant here for its illumination of Rousseau as a writer consumed by the possibility that writing poses for 'the restoration, by a certain absence and by a sort of calculated effacement, of presence disappointed of itself in speech' (Derrida 1997: 142). In this reading of Rousseau, we glimpse an instance of the paradoxical interrelation of absence and presence that operates in language being encompassed in a writer's own motivation to write.

Derrida is here caught between the uncontainable nature of speech, which in its immediacy at once promises ideal presence and withdraws it, and writing as an 'unnatural' method of violence to this promised presence which yet offers recourse to its incomplete salvage. He describes Rousseau as resigning himself to the compensatory operations of writing, as a removed and imperfect recapture, mediated by absence. In this way, writing serves a 'supplementary' function. As Derrida posits, the supplement is in fact a contradictory phenomenon that, rather than adding itself to and enriching an existing presence, in fact 'adds only to replace'; it fills at a remove only that which cannot be filled, and 'its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness' (Derrida 1997: 145). Language, and in particular writing, with its code of signs 'standing in' for their referents, is inherently supplementary. In Derrida's words, 'The sign is always the supplement of the thing itself' (Derrida 1997: 145).

As Derrida shows, the seduction of the supplement for Rousseau extends beyond writing to become the seduction of any sign, representation or symbolic presence that stands in for and appears to promise a real presence in the world. In this way, Rousseau's attachment to masturbation emerges as a corollary to writing, through which the immediate experience of presence (intercourse with a living woman) is threatened and possibly exceeded by its supplement, the secondary simulation of intercourse in auto-eroticism. Later, Derrida quotes Rousseau describing his desperate love for his mother, affirming the paradoxical relation of presence to absence in the statement, "I only felt the full strength of my attachment when I no longer saw her" (Rousseau qtd. in Derrida 1997: 152). As Derrida highlights, it is only 'when the mother disappears that substitution becomes possible and necessary' (Derrida 1997: 152-3). Ultimately, Derrida suggests, supplementarity operates as 'an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence' (Derrida 1997: 157). God,

*Logos*, origin all those entities of ‘absolute presence’, urges Derrida, are non-existent, and ‘what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence’ (Derrida 1997: 159). In this way, writings of ‘felt absence’ can be seen as perpetuating the negations by which they are structured. For Rousseau, the act of writing appears to have indeed been mobilised by his own complex experience of absence, serving to supplement and, at times, to paradoxically exceed the experience of presence.

The central subject of the narrator’s felt absence in *NCL*, the Chinese man whose death is presented explicitly by Duras as the *raison d’être* of the book, and the meeting of whom serves as its narrative catalyst, is only more affecting for its echoing of *The lover* and its revisitation of that loss. Duras’s references to this prior version of the same story imbue the later one with a sense of intensity and myth: ‘This is the ferry across the Mekong. The ferry in the books’ (Duras 1994: 26). This suggests a sense in which both written versions exist as mere fragments of the limitless ones simultaneously present within the author’s imagination and memory. Despite this sense of multivalency and myth, however, in *NCL* there is a reality and density underlying Duras’s representation of the love affair that is less pronounced in *The lover*. Duras is careful to assert the distinctions between this version and the former, describing how ‘[t]he man who gets out of the black limousine is other than the one in the book, but still Manchurian. He is a little different from the one in the book’ (Duras 1994: 26). Much of the power of this writing is drawn from the intensity of youthful desire and love experienced by the speaker, emotions at once savage and mournful, and which appear to have always been destined to futility, to non-satisfaction. For ultimately, everyone loved by the child in *NCL* will, through death or distance, be lost, will exist only in absence.

While it is the Chinese who forms the central object of the child’s desire, it is in fact a desire that extends simultaneously to various other characters. Loved most absolutely by the child is brother Paulo, whom she strives maternally to protect even as she takes joy in his body during incestuous unions. It is with the threat that shadows Paulo’s existence that the book begins, as sadistic Pierre throws him from a window. Also imperilling Paulo is his delayed mental condition, rendering him vulnerable to predators. Thanh, the family’s beloved houseboy with whom the child has shared sexual intimacy, is destined to remain in Indochina in the event of the family’s eventual return to France, seeking reunion with his family in Siam. Indeed, following their return, the family never hears of Thanh or sees him again. There is also the child’s school fellow at Lyautey, who is, as Duras writes, ‘The child’s other, never-to-be-forgotten, love’ (Duras 1994: 43). Hélène, appearing to share with Paulo the child-like vulnerability of mental delay and lacking the self-possession of the protagonist, seems to be fated for conventional marriage to the first acceptable suitor that appears. While we sense that Hélène too feels a certain ardour for the child, her innocent passivity frustrates the child’s desire to consummate their feelings. In a scene in which the child notes ‘the black shadows under Hélène’s eyes and her pale face’, Duras writes of the child attempting ‘to overcome a kind of uneasiness’ which in fact ‘will persist until they’re separated’, at which point is positioned a footnote, detailing Hélène’s death of tuberculosis at twenty-seven (Duras 1994: 43, 44). Toward the end

of the same scene, the child confesses to H el ene her fear of loving the Chinese, due to her wish ‘to love only Paulo till the day I die’ (Duras 1994: 49). As they embrace, murmuring intimacies to each other, Duras narrates H el ene’s emotions, describing her as being assailed by the fear ‘that she is deceiving herself about the true nature of this passion they have for one another’ (Duras 1994: 49). In the foretelling of H el ene’s untimely future death, a tragic aspect is imparted to her recurrent presence in the novel, deepening the sense in which she exists in the narrator’s memory as a haunting absence, longed for yet never possessed.

The Chinese lover, under the rule of his authoritarian father, is engaged to a Chinese girl from a suitably wealthy family. Having attempted unsuccessfully to bargain with his father out of this arrangement, and unprepared for the alternative of exile from the family and consequent poverty, the Chinese resigns himself despairingly to relinquishing the child. Yet it is not only these characters with whom the child shares a sexual passion that infuse the narrative with a sense of loss and felt absence. The child’s own mother resonates in the story as a tragic figure whose own despair at life has driven her children to a similar fate. Despite the bitterness and near hatred with which she is drawn by the speaker as a monstrously neglectful mother who displays a preference for her eldest so primal that it drives her to imperil for years her younger children, she appears also as an innocent, a victim of her own goodness and hope, of the grief over her husband’s death, of the corrupt land office officials, and a victim also of the madness that increasingly plagues her. As emotionally distant as she remains to her daughter, she is loved deeply. Grief is the emotion that the child’s representation of her mother most often evokes. Their relationship in France during later years is poignantly depicted as emotionally estranged, engulfed by absence, even in the event of a grandson. There is grief, too, in the spectre of the elder Pierre, the ruined layabout sibling, sadistic and addicted to opium, who manipulates his mother emotionally and financially, who directs a murderous rage toward his younger brother, jealous of his closeness to his sister, and who appears strangely to fear her. Even as she is resigned to the ruin of her brother’s nature and his life and herself harbours feelings of murderous hatred toward him, the child grieves for him.

The presence of everyone in the child’s life appears imperilled and soon to pass – as foreshadowed from the outset by an elegiac narrative mode that at times presents the retrospective musings of the elderly speaker, who is situated in a future that is foreign and solitary from the land and people of the book. Even as they are represented in their immediacy and presence, everyone but the narrator is preceded by their own absence, in distance if not in death. We meet each one, only to learn the danger and fragility of their existence in relation to the child. The weight of the child’s desire, which is both sexual and spiritual, both directed and general, carries always a sense of ominousness and despair, and becomes the felt absence of the elderly child. This desire that cannot be satisfied, that can never be filled by its object, is borne by writing that seems to mirror this perpetually felt absence on a structural level, in the libidinal flow of repetition, in the fragmentation of sentences and scenes, in the spaces of the page.

As a work of literature, *NCL* testifies to the paradoxical impossibility of writing to manifest real presence, or to restore lost ones, even as the instinct to write ‘through’

absence, to write into the rift between being and its representation, to supplement the real with the sign – for Duras as for Rousseau – transcends time and all logical obstacles of language. In the breach, lies the art. To cite Steiner, ‘[t]here is always, as Blake taught, “excess” of the signified beyond the signifier’ (1991: 84). That we persist in writing toward presence in spite of the fact that we will fail to preserve it is an instinct echoed in a final dialogue between the child and the lover from whom she is soon to be forever parted:

She tells him that sometime he must talk to his wife about everything that happened – between you and me, she says [...]. In order for people – anyone who wanted to, she says – to tell it over and over again, for them not to forget the whole of the story, for something very precise to remain, you’d have to give the names of the people, the streets even, the names of the schools, the movie houses, even the houseboys’ songs at night at Lyautey and even H el ene Lagonelle’s name, and Thanh’s, the orphan from the forest of Siam. (Duras 1991: 208)

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Hereafter to be referred to as *NCL*.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, *NCL* emerged following Duras’s failed collaboration with Jean-Jacques Annaud for the film of *The Lover*.

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