
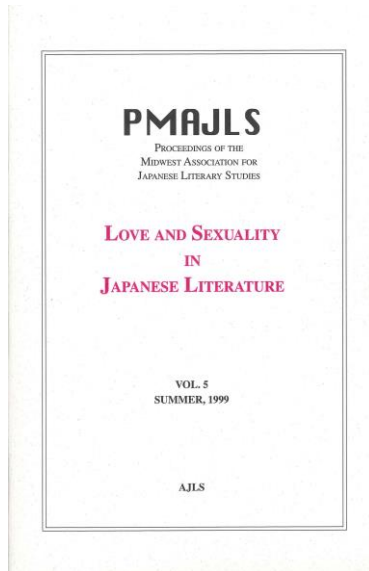


“Triangulating the Voyeur or Desire and the Look”

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TRIANGULATING THE VOYEUR OR DESIRE AND THE LOOK

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To caress with the eyes and to
desire are one and the same.

—Sartre

Faced with two very different but strangely similar novels, I must find some way to situate them. Since both have scenes of voyeurism as focal points, a text I studied long ago suggests itself. Thus to the mix of Tanizaki Junichirō's *The Key* and Marguerite Duras' *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*, I add Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. Quite a threesome, through which I intend to triangulate, that is, to locate the voyeur.

To evoke the name of Sartre today might appear retrograde. Indeed he does suffer from the "collective dismissal" mentioned in the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*. At the most he is named in passing or implied through a vocabulary dating from the 40s and 50s which has been absorbed into present-day critical languages without even need for attribution. I believe that it is time to revisit the original text. His writing, which seemed almost unreadable 30 years ago, is surprisingly clear in today's postmodern world. To be sure it is still complex and convoluted, but it can be followed and rewards with clarity. And so I frame my two novels in Sartre's focus and peer at the look, the body and the self.

Central to Sartre's existentialism is "le regard" or "the look" often translated today as "the gaze." A metaphor as well as a real action the look offers an analysis for the relationship between the Self and Other, in other words, the Subject and Object. The Subject is the "I", the transcendent or free being whose understanding of the world frames whatever he sees. He looks at the Other, his object, and transcends his transcendence by imposing his gaze on him. However, that Other can at any time lift his head and make the Subject the object of his own gaze, at which point the tables are turned. Sartre explains the import of this reversal: "There is a regrouping in which I take part but which escapes me, a regrouping of all the objects which people my universe. . . thus suddenly an object has appeared which has stolen the world from me. Everything is in place; everything still exists for me; but everything is traversed by an invisible

flight and fixed in the direction of a new object.”¹ The world centralized by the Subject’s look is decentralized by the look of the Other. For the former subject now turned object “it appears that the world has a kind of drain hole in the middle of its being and that it is perpetually flowing off through this hole” (Sartre 343). This is the world of equals, an oscillation between states of powerfulness and powerlessness.

In an essay called “Black Orpheus,” Sartre explains how the colonized person with eyes perpetually lowered is the one looked at, forbidden to lift his head. Along similar lines Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre’s long-time companion, asserts in *The Second Sex* that in a patriarchy the woman exists in the same powerless situation. She is always the one looked at, the one robbed of her freedom and transcendence.

It is important to note that Sartre’s analysis of human desire does not share this view. Indeed he asserts that if relationships between men and women were simply that of the man dominating the woman, there would be neither love nor desire: “The lover does not desire to possess the beloved as one possesses a thing; he demands a special type of appropriation. He wants to possess a freedom as freedom” (Sartre 478).

In explaining the changing dynamics of Self and Other, Sartre describes the condition of a Peeping Tom peering through a keyhole—hence my link with the voyeur. This person believes himself free of the danger of being seen, of becoming someone’s object, protected as he is by the door. Thus, he looks in secret, being “a pure consciousness of things, and things, caught up in the circuit of [his] selfness;” because he cannot be seen by those beyond the keyhole, what he looks at is “spectacle to be seen” (Sartre 347). Thus, as the unreflective self, aware only of the object he is looking at, he is in “a pure mode of losing himself in the world, of causing himself to be drunk in by things as ink is by a blotter” (Sartre 348).

Then he becomes aware that someone is looking at him. Because he feels this Other’s eyes, he sees himself looking, thus becoming conscious of his own existence: “I see myself because somebody sees me” (Sartre 349). He is because he is perceived. He ceases to be the unreflective self, free and unfettered and becomes the object of a gaze, for “We cannot perceive the world and at the same time apprehend a look fastened upon us; it must be either one or the other” (Sartre 347). Thus, consciousness of self is the self objectified.

¹Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel E. Barnes, translator (New York: Washington Square Press, 1973, p. 343. Hereafter cited in the text.

Turning to the issue of desire, Sartre asserts that the look resembles desire: "to caress with the eyes and to desire are one and the same" (Sartre 507). More importantly, desire and love can only exist in the context of freedom. Thus, given the nature of desire, the look is always the locus of the struggle of two free beings.

Written in the form of his and her diaries, Tanizaki's *The Key* outlines almost half a year's worth of marital sex. In our post-Viagra world, the husband's maneuvers to keep love alive seem unnecessary! It would be wrong, however, to consider his voyeurism just a mechanism to whip up his passion. Such an interpretation renders the novel transparent and in no need of a key.

The husband, Papa, is a 55 year old professor who increases his sexual power and pleasure by devising situations to enflame his own jealousy. He puts into proximity his young subordinate, Kimura—supposedly his daughter Toshiko's intended—and his wife, Ikuko, aged 44. Denying her husband the pleasure of looking at her naked, Ikuko performs sex in a perfunctory manner, having remained unsatisfied throughout her marriage. By chance the husband discovers his wife's love of cognac and profits from her drunken moments to peer at her body and do what he will. He can look without being looked at and experience renewed sexual vigor and rare, heightened satisfaction.

He searches for ways to intensify the act of looking by using a fluorescent lamp and later different kinds of cameras that enhance his ability to see, that extend and prolong his gaze, that multiply and proliferate the image of the object.

At first he delights in taking Polaroid shots of her, creating poses, freely manipulating her body, while she sleeps drunk. No one needs Sartre to understand the pleasure of power here. He can make her do anything he wants, but this is only the crudest kind of transcendence, transcended.

One can imagine Ikuko complaining in Sartre's words: "I am possessed by the Other; the Other's look fashions my body in its nakedness, causes it to be born, sculpts it, produces it as it is, sees it as I shall never see it. The Other holds a secret—the secret of what I am" (Sartre 475).

The secret that the husband would like to share with his wife, however, is not one based on his power. He wants to awaken her to her own power, to see that, "she possesses a certain natural gift, of which she is completely unaware."² Toward this end he hides pictures of

² Junichiro Tanizaki from *The Key* translated by Howard Hibbett (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 7. Hereafter cited in the text.

her—representations of how he sees her—in his diary believing that she is surreptitiously reading it, so that the photos of what he sees will teach her something about herself. In other words, it would be through his look that she will gain self-knowledge.

Because he is passionately in love with her, he seeks not only his own satisfaction but also hers, thinking that she will then love and desire him. According to Sartre this kind of thinking is indicative of “mental sluggishness.” Moreover, to equate desire with the desire for satisfaction is to condemn desire to death. “Pleasure is the death and the failure of desire. It is the death of desire because it is not only its fulfillment but its limit and its end” (Sartre 515).

Ikuko understands this. For despite her husband’s success in giving her pleasure she has never known, she still despises him. She continues to submit but only out of duty; she is still a transcendence, transcended.

But the husband as lover does not wish to possess an automaton, a dutiful wife; he would agree with Sartre that the lover “wants to possess a freedom as freedom,” to bask in a love freely given (Sartre 478).

To accomplish this the husband wants his wife to discover her body, not only as flesh but as freedom, since this is essential to desire. He is the opposite of the sadist who seeks to ensnare the freedom in the body of the other. He wants her to know the freedom of her body. “I make her enjoy my flesh through her flesh in order to compel her to feel herself flesh” (Sartre 508). This encounter of flesh and flesh is what Sartre calls the “incarnation of consciousness” which ultimately leads to a love based not on domination but on the mutual realization of each other’s freedom.

In order to achieve this kind of love the husband must have Ikuko acknowledge that she is free and in her freedom choose him, her husband.

By placing Kimura within her reach, the husband is forcing Ikuko to choose. Though young and good-looking Kimura is still his underling and certainly would not betray him, his superior. On the other hand, Kimura must be sufficiently enticed, while restrained; therefore, the senior professor enlists his junior to develop his wife’s pictures. He wonders, “Wouldn’t the photographs be likely to excite him?” (Tanizaki 61). This thought serves also to enflame him, the husband. Moreover, he speculates that when Ikuko discovers that he allowed Kimura to develop these pictures, she would take this as a tacit approval for them to become intimate.

Sartre suggests that this is all part of the game: “Thus the lover demands a pledge, yet is irritated by a pledge. He wants to be loved by a freedom but demands that his freedom as freedom should no longer be free” (Sartre 479). The husband plays at conferring freedom while ma-

nipulating the situation he has created. His aphrodisiac is their freedom freely given; their obedience freely rendered.

According to Ikuko's diary Kimura understands full well: "He wanted me a paper-thin distance from you, and so I've obeyed his wish, I've come as close as I could without violating that rule" (Tanizaki 92). (Later we learn that this was written for the husband's benefit to obscure what had already begun between them.) The husband explains that as the stimulation decreased he reduced the distance between Kimura and his wife, thus putting more strain on their freedom and enflaming him proportionately. (Unbeknownst to the husband, however, the two had crossed the line while deceiving him.)

The wife exerts her freedom and exacts her revenge by calling out Kimura's name at critical moments, thereby not allowing her husband to enjoy his advantage, yet at the same time enhancing his performance by enflaming his jealousy. Ultimately obedience constrained leads both Ikuko and Kimura to break the bonds of vows and convention. They become lovers.

Forever in doubt the husband tries harder and harder to gain his wife's love by turning himself into a sex machine that ultimately breaks down and dies. Through no little prodding by his wife.

It is only after his death, when Ikuko brings her diary to a close that Tanizaki adds another wrinkle to the whole voyeur element of his novel. We learn through Ikuko that the real voyeur in the story may have been Toshiko, the daughter and colluder of both mother, father and lover. It is she who all along might have been watching parents and future husband in their triangular arrangement. A triangle which supposedly would continue in the future with her husband and mother.

If *The Key* is transparent, Marguerite Duras' *The Ravishing of Lol Stein* is opacity itself. The most convenient explanation for this difficulty is that the narrative reflects the insanity of the main character.

Driven mad ten years before, when her fiancé, Michael Richardson, jilted her for an older woman called Anna-Marie Stretter, Lola Valerie Stein returns home to South Thala. Now the mother of three daughters and the wife of John Bedford she appears cured. She renews her friendship with her best friend, Tatiana Karl, who witnessed her outburst of madness at the ball in Town Beach. Tatiana's husband Peter Breugner, a psychiatrist, and her lover, Jack Hold, also a psychiatrist, become part of the circle of friends surrounding the seemingly normal Lol, as she is called. Tatiana's lover, Jack, becomes Lol's lover and narrates this very enigmatic story.

All this apparent normalcy however is belied by the constant questioning of the people around Lol who want to know whether she has really gotten over Michael Richardson. With their questions they attempt to uncover the layers of her being. But at the onset only the reader and the narrator, Jack Hold, are privy to the most intriguing manifestation of her psyche: her penchant for voyeurism. The mystery to be solved is why she sits in a field of rye looking through a window at her friend, Tatiana, and their lover—Tatiana's and hers—, Jack, making love.

This strange triangle of Lol, Tatiana and Jack begins taking shape from the moment they see each other. It seems inevitable. One can piece together from the often cryptic narrative that all three suffer from empty lives, distracted only by love affairs. Jack Hold tells us twice that Tatiana suffers from "ineffable remorse"³ but he never explains of what. We also learn that she is disappointed that Lol has been cured of her "ineffable passion," because she complains, "One should never be cured of one's passion" (Duras 67).

The word "ineffable" seems a key. It indicates that which is indescribable because almost sacred. And we come to understand that the word ordinarily used for what ought to be ineffable is love. But this word, love, the named and the namable is but a pale reflection of the real thing that remains unnamed, ineffable, described as, "a single entity but unnamable for lack of a word. . . . It would have been an absence-word, a hole-word, whose center would have been hollowed out into a hole, the kind of hole in which all other words would have been buried . . . this word which does not exist, is none the less there . . . it defies you to raise it" (Duras 38–39).

Tatiana and Jack are fascinated by Lol because they find in her madness the "ineffable" that which cannot be darkened by the mundane of daily living. Jack has an indication of its existence by looking into Lol's eyes: "I can see her eyes. I see them: a transparency is looking at me. Again I cannot see. . . . The transparency has gone through me, I can still see it, blurred now, it has moved toward something else that is less clear, something endless, it will move on toward something else, some endless thing that I will never know" (Duras 144).

Throughout the book Lol wants to impose her look on the world; she wants to look rather than be looked at. She seems to have taken Sartre at his word, she chooses her world, she makes her life. Indeed, she sits Sartre's analysis on its head and chooses complete freedom within the

³Marguerite Duras from *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*, translated by Richard Seaver (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966), p. 50. Hereafter cited in the text.

confines of facticity, by making her own reality. We call this madness. Her gaze will define the world: "and in this enclosure, that opens wide to her eyes alone, she begins again to live in the past, she arranges it, puts order into the dwelling place that is truly hers" (Duras 36). "What she is reconstructing is the end of the world" (Duras 37). But the narrator reminds us, "[s]he is not yet God" (Duras 39). Others may flee from such memories, fearing destruction of the lives they have created in the present, but she "cherishes it, tames it, caresses it."

As if to rectify the past Lol recreates it, because, as she explains, "I never had a chance to choose my life" (Duras 84). She chooses now.

The Capital moment, the center around which Lol chooses to organize her life is that night at Town Beach when Michael Richardson saw Anne-Marie Stretter and figuratively died in Lol's eyes. Now she will resurrect him by finding another Michael. "I picked you" she tells Jack Hold (Duras 102).

At Town Beach Michael abandoned Lol when he saw his "perfect woman," Anne-Marie Stretter. He would be her "perfect man." Now, 10 years later Lol observes Jack Hold in the streets, waiting for Tatiana. But as he waits he looks at every other woman, "in the vague hope . . . of meeting some other woman, of following her and standing up the one he was supposed to meet" (Duras 44). Lol found this "exquisite." It's not that Jack looks like Michael but he looks at women the way Michael did.

"Lol found that he was capable of looking around him in half a dozen directions at once" (Duras 47). She scrutinizes his look: "Not one of them escaped his glance" (Duras 47). She compares his look to that of a ferret "imagining he was having for a few seconds each of the women, then rejecting them, mourning each and every loss" regretting not meeting that one special woman, the one who would make that "hole-word" a full-word (Duras 47).

The first time he and Lol touch, Jack explains that "the memory of an unknown man, now dead, comes back to me: he will serve as the eternal Richardson, the man from Town Beach, we will be mingled with him, willy-nilly, all together, we shall no longer be able to recognize one from the other. . . we shall lose sight of one another, forget our names, in this way we shall die for having forgotten—piece by piece, moment by moment, name by name—death" (Duras 103).

She returns to Town Beach with Jack to the site of her loss. Her intent is to bury the memory of that moment; Jack speaks: "The ball will be at the end of the trip, it will fall like a house of cards. . . . She is seeing her present memory for the last time in her life, she is burying it" (Duras 165).

This capital moment is replaced with another of Lol's own creation at the Forest Hotel, the place of assignation for Jack and Tatiana in the present and in the past for Michael and Lol. Looking through the window of the hotel room, Lol sits on a hill outside. The narrator insists on the fact that the window serves like a movie screen or more like "a narrow stage". He talks of Lol taking her "choice seat" not comparable to an opera seat but certainly one in front of a spectacle. Lol on the hill is melding present with past for this physical site is also the site of memory.

Lol takes her place to look at Jack and Tatiana make love, a scene that she has staged as a replacement for the scene that she had lived. Even before their trip to Town Beach Jack knew that this was her plan but he had not known the details. He relates, "What she wants, I now understand clearly, is to be seen and encountered by me in a certain space, a setting she is presently arranging. What setting?" (Duras 95).

The scene that Lol has staged for future repetition is Tatiana and Jack together while she watches from a field of rye. Moreover the Jack/Michael figure is now coupling with the Tatiana/Lol figure, for in Lol's mind she and Tatiana are one. : "And now there was no longer any difference between her and Tatiana Karl . . . and in the two names she gave herself Tatiana Karl and Lol Stein" (Duras 179).

Previously, Jack wanted to leave Tatiana, but Lol insists that he continue as her lover. Without the Sartrian analysis an explanation seems difficult. Jack describes Lol looking at him looking at (possessing) Tatiana—Lol looks unblinkingly—: "The nudity of Tatiana, already naked, intensifies into an overexposed image which makes it increasingly impossible to make any sense whatsoever out of it. . . . The void is Tatiana naked . . . transformed, poured out lavishly, the fact no longer contains the fact. . . . There are the two of us, now, beholding Tatiana naked beneath her dark hair" (Duras 106).

In order to assure that only he and Lol do the looking (she is outside in the field of rye) : "He hides Tatiana Karl's face beneath the sheets and thus has her headless body at his disposal, at his entire disposal" (Duras 123). In effect, they have defined Tatiana, possessed her. She is no longer free; she has been categorized as Jack Hold's mistress, one with no power for self-definition. Tatiana is now a transcendence transcended. As a result Jack seeks an end to their relationship, "In two short days I shall possess all of Tatiana Karl, possess her completely, until there is nothing left to possess" (Duras 82). Desire dies, when the other is an object.

Ironically, Jack now feels free to tell Tatiana, "I love you" for the first time. Now he can use the substitute word with her, the one that cannot contain the ineffable; he no longer needs to search for the hole-word.

In other words, love and desire cannot endure, if a relationship is based on a constant change of power positions, an alternation between subject and object, the result of being either the one who sees or the one who is seen. Sartre writes that in love one does not want to reduce the other to the position of object: "Quite the contrary, I want to assimilate the Other as the Other-looking-at-me, and this project of assimilation includes an augmented recognition of my being-looked-at. In short, in order to maintain before me the Other's freedom which is looking at me, I identify myself totally with my being-looked-at" (Sartre 476).

The flipside of the voyeur is the exhibitionist, the one who gains pleasure in being seen. The exhibitionist defines his selfhood not through the act of looking but in being looked at. To be is to be perceived. Sartre explains: "But in order for me to be what I am, it suffices merely that the Other look at me" (Sartre 351). The exhibitionist within Sartre's system is the one who perceives that others are looking at him and thus has a sense of being, a sense of self through the perception of others.

Jack appears to understand this; he perceives and allows himself to be perceived. He chooses Lols' way of looking at things by identifying totally with his being looked at. He writes, "Let her consume and crush me with the rest, I shall bend to her will" (Duras 97). One might object that this sounds like transcendence transcended, a case of Jack Hold losing his freedom.

Why would Jack submit, if not for a gain? It appears that Jack's choice is prompted by his own desire for self-knowledge. He asks, "What is there about me I am so completely unaware of and which she summons me to know?" (Duras 96). Jack Hold assimilates Lol's vision of him, embraces her look in hopes of seeing himself.

Although Jack is the narrator, we later understand to what extent our knowledge of him has been constructed by Lol's perception of him, a perception that he himself has embraced. He later denies that he ogles women. But we have accepted Lol's version of him just as he himself has.

Through her triangulated voyeurism Lol has discovered a way to extend desire beyond pleasure, by inventing a pleasure that cannot kill desire, an unfulfillable desire. The ravishing of Lol Stein is thus not her rape, as some critics have suggested, but her ecstasy. She will be continually carried away by her passion. Through her madness she has found a way to be both object and subject; creature and creator. She has found a

way to do what Sartre says is impossible to perceive and be perceived at the same time. According to Tatiana she is a lunatic; according to Jack Hold she has almost become god.

I came to the same conclusion that Professor Ōtomo did concerning the novel as voyeuristic genre. In this case I have imitated Lol Stein by creating a triangle with Sartre and myself as subject and the two novels as our object. Some of you may think me a lunatic but only because I tried to be god, the critic!