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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Linda Lê, On Writing and Not Writing

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Abstract

Linda Lê has noted that writing shapes her identity more than any origins or affiliations, a knowledge which she claims allows her to occupy with ease the illegitimate spaces between homeland and adopted country, between belonging and unbelonging. But Lê's work regularly stages the encounter between writing and not writing—juxtaposing the writer and the blank page, inspiration and silence—and figures the act of writing as a symbiotic relationship between a parasite and its host. This paper will examine these themes in two of Lê's novels: *Un si tendre vampire* (1987) and *Conte de l'amour bifrons* (2005). Focusing on the figure of *l'oiseau de mauvais augure* and drawing on the dialogues between Lê and the silenced writers to whom she looks for inspiration in her nonfiction essays, I will present the inability to write not as the opposite of literary inspiration, but as its double. The double is an equally recurrent image in Lê's writing, often represented by the figure of Janus, or the God of beginnings and endings. I will suggest that the bird of ill omen is another Janus figure, the (imagined) presence who embodies both inspiration and its loss, and who is the necessary double within each writer.

Résumé

Linda Lê prétend qu'écrire lui est plus cher que les origines or l'appartenance à une telle communauté, une attitude qui, selon elle, lui permet d'occuper aisément les espaces illégitimes entre le pays natal et le pays adopté, entre appartenir et non-appartenir. Mais dans ses écrits, elle met régulièrement en scène la rencontre entre écrire et ne pas écrire—juxtaposant l'écrivain et la page blanche, l'inspiration et le silence—et elle représente l'acte d'écrire comme un rapport symbiotique entre un parasite et son hôte. Dans cet article nous examinons ces thèmes dans deux romans de Lê : *Un si tendre vampire* (Table Ronde, 1987) et *Conte de*

l'amour bifrons (Christian Bourgois, 2005). En nous penchant sur le personnage de *l'oiseau de mauvais augure* et en faisant appel aux dialogues dans ses essais de non-fiction entre l'auteur et les écrivains réduits au silence qui l'inspirent, nous suggérons que ne pas écrire n'est pas l'opposé d'écrire, mais son double. Le double est également omniprésent dans l'œuvre de Lê, souvent représenté par Janus Bifrons, le dieu des commencements et des fins. Dans son exploration métatextuelle du travail de l'écrivain, Lê dramatise la possibilité de ne pas écrire, paradoxalement garantissant l'acte d'écrire.

Keywords

Lê, silence, inspiration, intertextuality, doubling, writing; l'inspiration, l'intertextualité, le double, l'écriture

Linda Lê has often noted that writing shapes her identity more than any origins or affiliations, a knowledge which she claims allows her to occupy with ease the ambivalent and illegitimate spaces between homeland and adopted country, between belonging and unbelonging. But Lê's work regularly stages the fraught encounter between writing and not writing—juxtaposing the writer and the blank page, inspiration and silence—and figures the act of writing as a symbiotic relationship between a parasite and its host. Writing is haunted by silence, threatened by the inability or refusal to put pen to paper. In her nonfiction essays, she studies the forced or deliberate silences of authors she admires—Ingeborg Bachmann, Stig Dagerman, Marina Tsvetaeva—with a mixture of fascination and horror. In her novels, which often see her characters struggling to write, failing to write, destroying their writing, appropriating the writing of others, or having their own writing stolen, Lê explores the precariousness of representation and forces the writer figure to face repeatedly the possibility that 'one day [she] will no longer be able to write ... one day there will be no more words' (Barnes 2008: 11). Silence looms just beyond each page written. Her authors are harangued, exposed to violence, and prone to madness. They are alienated from the page before them and the world around them. Indeed, Lê's novels regularly pursue examinations of authorship and of that which threatens it. What, they ask, is an author who cannot or does not write?

Drawing on discussions in her nonfiction and exploring their intertextual echoes in her fiction, this essay examines silence as a metafictional trope in two of Lê's novels: *Un si tendre vampire* (Such a Tender Vampire, 1987), her first novel, and *Conte de l'amour bifrons* (*A Tale of Love*, 2005), which was published almost twenty years later. Both novels explore the author's tenuous and angst-ridden relationship with writing through the figure of what Lê names in the second, *l'oiseau de mauvais augure*.¹ In my analysis, I highlight the ways in which the writer's confrontation with this bird of ill omen, and with the threat of silence hiding behind each word conjured, draws both the writer and the reader into a space of creative irresolution. Throughout her œuvre, Lê writes about not writing, using the work of literature, which is determined, to explore the indeterminacy of identity. And if it is writing that allows her to embrace the fluidity of her own identity, it is the possibility of not writing that motivates the written text. Indeed, though seemingly contradictory phenomena, not writing is not the opposite of writing. Instead, writing and not writing are intimately bound in Lê's universe. They are the two faces of Janus Bifrons, the Roman God of transition 'engagé avec son double dans un devenir éternel,' who

1 'the bird of ill omen' (Lê 2017: 7). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

appears throughout L  s   uvre, mediating beginnings and endings, the past and the future, French and francophone (Grimal 1995: 12–13; Barnes 2014: 203–204).²

It is somewhat surprising that the work of an author as prolific, original, and f  ted as L   would reveal such an ‘anxiety of authorship’ (Ni Chealleaigh 2014: 439). Despite the multiple moments of mourning and crisis that L   herself has traversed, and despite her obsessive fear with this possibility she describes as ‘more chilling than ... death,’ L   herself has never endured a period in which she was unable to write (Barnes 2008: 11). And it is not just her fiction that is recognized as among the most challenging and rewarding in France today. Like many contemporary novelists, L   is both a writer and a critic. Though she has claimed herself to be ‘ni ex  g  te ni critique, simplement un go  teur,’ L   has established herself as a talented literary essayist, publishing to date four volumes of essays that combine literary analysis with biographical detail and in *Le Complexe de Caliban* (The Caliban Complex) extended autobiographical reflections (1997: 2).³ These essays, she notes, offer ‘[une] interrogation sur la langue, sur l’identit   et sur la place qu’occupe aujourd’hui la litt  rature’ and they serve as ‘exercices d’admiration’ for the figures she admired long before picking up the pen herself.⁴ It is clear that L  ’s fiction has, from the beginning, demonstrated a readerly self-consciousness and self-referentiality that Mark Currie has identified as common in the work of writer-critics (1995: 3–4). Her novels often assimilate the insights discussed in her literary criticism, and they regularly include comments on their own construction, dramatizing the borders between fiction and criticism, writing and reading, and writing and not writing.

It is this latter tension I take up here in my discussion of silence, what L   calls elsewhere, ‘la tentation du silence.’⁵ ‘Pourquoi,’ she asks, ‘   partir d’un certain moment, d  cide-t-on qu’on en a fini avec la litt  rature? On en a fini avec les mots, on tire le rideau’ (Cr  pu 2010).⁶ L  ’s engagement with silenced writers abounds in her non-fiction. First there is Bartleby the scrivener and the orphan, in whom she found an immediate kinship as an adolescent, and whose condition embodies the demise of authorship in the age of mass and mechanical reproduction. Bartleby’s ‘I would prefer not to,’ ‘ce refus tranquille, cette r  sistance passive, cette formule simple et pourtant s  diteuse’ represents for L   a refusal to take part, a freedom from attachments, a liberating solitude (2005a: 45).⁷ But it also represents a refusal to write, a revolt perhaps best embodied in Rimbaud’s infamous abandonment of poetry after only five years of writing, what one critic called ‘the great discovery of the creator after interminable agony’ (Shapiro 1962: 146). Then there is the Austrian poet, Ingeborg Bachmann, whose *Malina* is a source of inspiration for some of L  ’s early fiction. Bachmann thematized silence in her own work, locating its roots in the inability to represent the horror of the Holocaust, and later went nine years without producing a literary text in an attempt to protect her own ethical purity in the post-war era (L   1997: 29–30).⁸

2 ‘engaged with his double in an eternal becoming.’

3 ‘neither exegete, nor critic, merely one who samples.’

4 ‘[an] interrogation of language, identity, and the place occupied by literature today’; ‘expressions of admiration.’ See the back cover of *Le Complexe de Caliban* (1997).

5 ‘the temptation of silence.’

6 ‘Why does one decide at a certain point to be done with literature? To do away with words, to lower the curtains.’

7 ‘this quiet refusal, this passive resistance, this simple yet and seditious formula.’

8 For a study of Bachmann’s influence on L  ’s   uvre, see Kurmann (2016).

There are the two Russian poets: Anna Akhmatova, whose poetry reflects Broch's 'tâche *antigoniennne* ... d'ôter à l'art son nimbe de pseudo-sainteté et de triompher de la mort'; and Marina Tsvetaeva, the exile, to whom Lê pays homage not only in her edited volumes, but also in a stand-alone 2002 study entitled *Marina Tsvetaeva, Comment ça va la vie?* (Marina Tsvetaeva, How's Life?; Lê 1997: 161).⁹ Akhmatova endured years of state- and self-imposed censorship and for some time managed only to write by scribbling a few lines of poetry, which her friends then committed to memory before she tossed them into the kitchen fire. Tsvetaeva lived a life against and out of place with the demands of her time, protesting in vain the cruel twist of fate that had landed her in early twentieth-century Russia. She wrote every day of her seventeen years of exile and misery but could not tolerate 'le trop de réalité' upon her return to her native country, where she saw her husband and daughter arrested and where she herself suffered greatly under Stalin's regime.¹⁰ Tsvetaeva quit writing before taking her life, two gestures that, perhaps paradoxically, convey her commitment to poetry and to the autonomy of the poet.¹¹ Finally, there is Stig Dagerman, who struggled to write for five years, unable to finish a project, before also committing suicide. Dagerman's silence—his not writing and his death—was not only a means of self-protection, perhaps similar to that of Bachmann, but also a refuge for the individual who had lost faith in the power of writing to change the world: 'Qu'est donc toute littérature en face d'un seul suicide intelligent?' he asked (quoted in Lê 2005a: 69).¹²

Silence in these discussions is often as much a gesture of agency and political awareness, desperate though it may sometimes be, as it is the result of despair, fear, an inability to motivate, or an external restriction. And just as not writing is intimately bound with writing, the other face of silence is inspiration. Indeed, though writing would appear to be inherently futile, it is also the only way to 'transformer les défiances en possibilités, en ouvertures sur l'inconnu' (Lê 2005a: 146).¹³

In this section I turn to the encounters between silence and creative inspiration in two of Lê's works of fiction. The two novels that interest me here do not contain overt, intentional intertextual references to the experiences of silence and silencing Lê discusses in her nonfiction, and my point is not to interrogate the textual sources of the manifestations of these themes in Lê's fiction. Instead, these novels allow Lê to carry on a dialogue with the authors who have inspired her, to continue a collective interrogation of a theme or reality that haunts each of them.¹⁴ Lê's use of the intertext in these instances is at the service of the metatext, which comments not simply on its own creation, but also on the precariousness of this labor.

9 'Antigonean task ... of removing art's halo of pseudo-holiness and of triumphing over death.'

10 'the excess of reality.'

11 See Stock for a study of Tsvetaeva's art and ethics.

12 'What is all of literature compared to one intelligent suicide?' Lê also quotes Dagerman's last text, *Notre besoin de consolation est impossible à rassasier* (*Our Need for Consolation is Insatiable*): 'ma puissance ne connaîtra plus de bornes le jour où je n'aurai plus que mon silence pour défendre mon inviolabilité, car aucune hache ne peut avoir de prise sur le silence vivant' ('my strength will be limitless the day I have only my silence left to defend my inviolability, for no hatchet has any power over living silence') (2009: 103).

13 In a discussion of Blanchot in *Au fond de l'inconnu pour trouver du nouveau* (To the Depths of the Unknown to Find Something New), Lê reiterates this sentiment: 'la puissance du verbe réside dans sa défaillance même' (the power of the word lies in its very weakness) (132).

14 My use of the term intertextuality thus follows Kristeva's discussion and sees Lê's intertextual engagement with Bachmann, Dagerman, Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, and Melville on the question of silence as the extension and transformation of these authors' writings and lived experiences, rather than as the direct impact of a source text on another.

Un si tendre vampire is the first of three works L  published with La Table Ronde between 1987 and 1989 before moving to Julliard with *Les Evangiles du crime* (Gospels of the Crime) in 1992 and then Christian Bourgois, where she has remained, with *Calomnies* (Slander) in 1993. Though L  has stricken her first three novels from her bibliography, disparaging them as timid and immature and noting that ‘[elle] ne [s]’y reconna t plus, comme si un miroir [lui] renvoyait un visage totalement inconnu,’ *Un si tendre vampire* anticipates the metafictional impulse found in much of L ’s work, and as such, perhaps deserves more critical attention than it has so far received (Cr pu 2010).¹⁵ The novel opens with a sleepless Philippe—lying in the dark, listening to the nocturnal chorus of his building—in the moments before an enormous black bird charges into his room, surrounded by giant, drunken animals communicating to one another with shouts and raucous laughter. It is the nightmarish return of Louis, dressed in a long, black coat and blue satin wings, a bird mask on his face. Philippe, a writer, had awakened one morning three years earlier to find Louis asleep at his worktable. He had then been manipulated into taking Louis in and had come to depend on him as a source of encouragement. Eventually, Philippe signed the novel he was writing in Louis’s name—at Louis’s suggestion—in a vain bid to keep Louis from leaving him, paradoxically silencing himself as the author while attempting to forestall the crisis of silence he knew would follow once the last word had been written.

At Louis’s return at the beginning of the novel, we learn that Philippe has managed to write only the following lines in the three years since Louis’s disappearance: ‘J’ai tu  Louis. Il dispara t de ma vie aussi brusquement qu’il y est entr . J’aurais voulu le tuer pour de bon’ (17).¹⁶ Louis is accompanied by a woman named Xavi re, who is as desperate as Philippe to remain the object of Louis’s attention. Xavi re and Philippe spend the rest of the night, and the rest of the novel, together, first roaming the streets, then tucked away at a cheap motel, sharing stories of how they fell prey to Louis’s charm. The novel ends with Philippe suspicious that the last twelve hours of his life have been a trap laid by Louis to lure him into writing another novel—this time with Louis as the hero—which will return Louis to his life, for better *and* for worse, and for which Louis will invariably take credit. Equally dubious and desirous of falling into this trap, Philippe finds himself mulling over a sentence that could, he thinks, be the opening line of a new work: ‘Il n’avait pas dormi de la nuit.’¹⁷ This is, of course, the first sentence of *Un si tendre vampire*, the novel we have just finished reading.

Like *Un si tendre vampire*, the structure of *Conte de l’amour bifrons* is circular, ending where the story begins, and the narrative is recounted by a third-person omniscient narrator, who is also the author. Unlike *Vampire*, however, in *Conte de l’amour bifrons*, the narrator/author reveals himself to the reader from the very first page, inserting himself into the narrative in chapters titled ‘Loiseau de mauvais augure,’ a figure to whom I will return in a moment. The narrator interrupts his story to make observations about his characters, to second guess the direction his narrative is taking, and to lament the difficulty he faces making decisions where his novel is concerned: ‘Me voici, moi, l’auteur de ce roman ... Ma plume court sur le papier ...

15 ‘[she] does not recognize herself anymore in these works, as if in the mirror [she] were looking at the face of a stranger.’ Jack Yeager’s article on the question of plagiarism in L ’s  uvre includes a nuanced reading of theatricality and authorship in *Un si tendre vampire*, underscoring the intersection between ‘pretending, role-playing, invention, illusion, artificiality, deception, and falseness at the heart of the text’ (2017: 9). ‘The text’ is, of course, the novel that Philippe is writing; it is also the novel that L  has written—*Un si tendre vampire*—and the novel more generally. Yeager also notes the ‘metatextual thread’ that ties *Un si tendre vampire* to *Conte de l’amour bifrons* (2017: 8).

16 ‘I’ve killed Louis. He disappeared from my life as abruptly as he entered. I would have liked to kill him for good.’

17 ‘He had not slept all night.’

On pourrait croire qu'avec les années, avec tous les livres que j'ai écrits, j'avance avec l'assurance et la maîtrise de celui qui connaît son métier. Il n'en est rien' (48).¹⁸

These chapters alternate with those advancing the narrative, which tells the story of a pair of young lovers, Ylane and Ivan, following them through moments of psychological crisis and hospitalization, renewal with the discovery of their love, and an inevitable separation, which gives way to metamorphosis. In Ylane and Ivan we see Lê expanding on the themes of the double and the orphan, or singleton, already germinating in *Un si tendre vampire* and in fact developed throughout her œuvre. We also see her experimenting with the recurring themes of departures and 'transformative ruptures' (Barnes 2014: 177).¹⁹ The opening chapter begins with a description, given directly by the narrator, of the novel's central character, Ylane, whom he claims he never would have discovered were it not for *l'oiseau de mauvais augure*, who insisted that he find her and make her his heroine (7). When we meet Ylane, she has abandoned her job, broken all her ties to the outside world, and is seated alone at her kitchen table, talking to herself like a madwoman. Before her is an open book, on which she has scribbled the command that haunts her and that the narrator says was given to him by *l'oiseau de mauvais augure*: '*Va tu ne sais où et rapporte tu ne sais quoi*.'²⁰ It appears as though this is precisely what she does since the next time we see her she is at the psychiatric clinic where she meets and falls for Ivan, an encounter that saves her from the madness overtaking her. At the end of the novel, however, six months after Ivan has left her to travel the world aboard an ocean liner—a departure he hopes will lead to the metamorphosis he desires—we find her again alone at this table, 'comme au premier chapitre,' the narrator tells us (147).²¹ And we learn that in this moment, though Ylane ultimately decides against suicide, the words '*va tu ne sais où et rapporte tu ne sais quoi*' signify the allure of death, the great journey into the unknown, the great journey into silence.

Like many of Lê's novels, the narrative action in *Un si tendre vampire* and *Conte de l'amour bifrons* unfolds in a precarious universe. Her characters wander, often fleeing some form of physical or psychological pursuit, and spend significant periods of time in transient spaces, for example, motels (*Vampire*) and hospitals (*Conte*): 'deux mondes de transition, où se côtoient les moribonds et les vivants, les partants et les arrivants' (1999: 26).²² As works of metafiction,

18 'So here I am, author of this novel ... My pen runs over the paper ... You might think after all these years, after all the books I've written, that I'd set out with all the confidence and command of someone who knows what they're doing. Not at all' (Lê 2017: 43).

19 See my discussion of Catherine Malabou's plasticity in relation to Lê's trilogy of the late 1990s (Barnes 2014). In her analysis of the 'dusk of writing,' Malabou identifies a "'crepuscular movement of transformative rupture" which is the reconciliation of crisis, the past, and the forgotten through metamorphosis' (Barnes 2014: 177). A similar 'transformative rupture' is at work in Lê's fiction, I suggest, 'one that attempts to explore the exhaustion of fiction at "the dusk" of the 20th century as a condition of its own regeneration in the 21st' (Barnes 2014: 177). See also my discussion of the relationship between intertextuality, metamorphosis, and Lê's aesthetics of exile (Barnes 2014: 199–228).

20 '*Go into the unknown and bring back the unknown*' (Lê 2017: 7).

21 'just as we found her in the first chapter' (Lê 2017: 137).

22 'two transitory worlds, where the dead mix with the living, the leaving with the arriving.' We might consider this an example of the kind of indirect intertextuality I locate in Lê's work. In an essay on Bachmann in *Tu écriras sur le bonheur* (You Will Write About Happiness), Lê recounts two episodes—one taking place in an airport, the other in a hospital—that capture the 'conflit et angoisse latents' ('conflict and latent anguish') in Bachmann's life and work. In cultivating a similar 'conflit et angoisse latents' in these two novels, Lê performs her intimate understanding of and complicity with Bachmann, writing novels that converse with the Austrian poet. There are also multiple instances of citations and textual borrowings, in other words, the more direct forms of intertextuality throughout her œuvre. *Conte de l'amour bifrons*, for example, contains citations from Lautréamont and Tolstoï and references to other authors that appear in Lê's essays (e.g., Félixberto Hernandez and Doestoevski).

both novels also dramatize the variability of purpose and the unpredictability of inspiration to which the writer is prey. In *Un si tendre vampire*, Louis embodies this current of instability. Every morning Louis returns from his nocturnal adventures to sleep in Philippe's bed as the latter rises to work on his novel. Like a mother bird with her young, he alights on Philippe's doorstep to offer morsels of creative sustenance, and more often, to distract and manipulate his host. Philippe, fearing he is unequal to the task, quickly comes to depend on Louis's presence to write: 'ces farces, ces faussetés lui étaient devenues si nécessaires qu'il les attendait avec une impatience mêlée d'allégresse' (43).²³ He rewrites the novel according to Louis's suggestions and experiences extended bouts of writer's block during Louis's periodic short-term disappearances. The two men develop a mutually parasitic relationship in which each feeds off the other. Philippe's productivity depends on the volatility Louis has introduced into his life, and Louis's immortality—as a celebrated author—requires that he take from Philippe only enough to leave his host functioning until the novel is finished, at which point he delivers the fatal blow.

In *Conte de l'amour bifrons*, the figure of Louis returns as a bird who circles the narrator's head, periodically landing on his shoulder to encourage or torment him in his moments of creative uncertainty: 'c'est le trou noir. Je reste des heures à chercher un mot qui ne vient pas, un mot que l'oiseau de mauvais augure tient dans son bec et qu'il refuse de lâcher' (49).²⁴ Like Louis, *l'oiseau de mauvais augure* is erratic and cruel, sowing as much doubt in his author as he does inspiration and abandoning the author arbitrarily: 'cela fait deux jours que l'oiseau ne me rend plus visite ... ses commentaires, ses sifflements, son croassement me manquent' (82).²⁵ As the narrator questions his capacity and negotiates with his muse to take control of his story, his character, Ivan, also struggles to write. Like Ylane, Ivan is an avid reader, but in his happiness with Ylane, the young *poète maudit* is unable to write and only rediscovers his creative spark once he's abandoned his lover. These fictional writers are not intertextual manifestations of the silenced authors Lê writes about in her essays, though she does give a nod to these discussions in *Conte de l'amour bifrons*, when the narrator notes that he often wonders about the writers he admires and whether they too have encountered the bird of ill omen and known the same crises he has known. They are not muzzled by the state or unable to reconcile the futility of their writing with the political situations in which they find themselves.²⁶ Instead, they suffer from fear, despair, and a prevalence of romantic notions of the conditions under which writing can take place.²⁷

23 'The tricks, the falsehoods had become so essential that he awaited them in a state of impatience mixed with joy.'

24 'a black hole. I sit for hours searching for a word that won't come, a word that the bird of ill omen holds in his beak and refuses to let go' (Lê 2017: 44).

25 'It's two days since the bird stopped coming to visit me ... I miss his running commentary, his whistling, his cawing' (Lê 2017: 77).

26 Though it is a projection of the narrator's psychosis, in *Voix: Une crise* Lê explores the possibility of external persecution through the figure of 'l'Organisation,' who the narrator believes is threatening her life and demanding that she destroy the novel she has written. See Barnes (2007).

27 In many ways, Ivan is Lê's Johannes, the protagonist of Knut Hamsun's *Victoria* (2011 [1898]), in which 'l'amour absolu est une faim qui demande à ne pas être rassasiée' ('absolute love is a hunger that demands to not be satisfied') (Lê 1997: 119). Johannes, a celebrated poet, loves Victoria and cannot have her, and in Lê's reading, he finds fame only because she is not his. Indeed, for Hamsun, men become 'des génies, des héros, des poètes et des saints grâce à la jeune fille qu'ils n'ont pas possédée' ('geniuses, heroes, poets and saints thanks to the young woman they did not possess') (Lê 1997: 117–118). In Hamsun's novel, it is the tutor, whom Lê calls *l'oiseau de mauvais augure*, who tells Johannes he can never have the one he loves.

At one point near the end of *Conte de l'amour bifrons*, the narrator questions whether he is actually the author of the novel: 'Il semblerait que j'en sois l'auteur mais par moments je ne sais plus si j'écris le livre dont rêve Ivan ou si je rêve du livre qu'il a écrit' (135).²⁸ The authorial anxiety present in both novels—in other words, the anxiety surrounding silence, inspiration, and the coming into being of each novel—also manifests itself in the writer's relationship with the characters he creates. *Un si tendre vampire* does not merely recount how a man, Louis, steals another man's novel; it recounts how a character, Louis, imposes himself on a writer, invading his home and his head, to become his protagonist. And when Philippe notes at the end of *Un si tendre vampire* that Louis would reappear as soon as he began to write again, the reader understands that it would be simultaneously as character (who needs Philippe to write in order to exist) and as usurper (who needs a new novel to steal in order to ensure his immortality). Philippe is at times almost aware of Louis's game: 'Il se demandait si Louis ne menait pas cette existence un peu mystérieuse pour l'intriguer et l'amener à l'observer' (55).²⁹ His intimate access to Louis sometimes echoes that of the narrator of *Conte de l'amour bifrons*, who sees himself as his characters' servant and friend, the secretary of their emotions, and who, like Philippe, feels he is nothing without them: 'Depuis des mois je ne vis plus. J'ai donné mon sang, mes nerfs, ma chair, mes pensées à Ylane et Ivan. Ce sont mes vampires' (135).³⁰ In Lê's novels, the characters are parasites, insatiable voids, gentle yet devastating in the violence they inflict on the writer, who wittingly cultivates the perverted symbiosis that will give as much as it takes. For the vampire creates in his thieving, and the novels crafted in *Un si tendre vampire* and *Conte de l'amour bifrons* attest to the parasitic form of paternity he proffers.

It is important to note that this opportunistic relationship is not a destructive one, but rather, depends on the sustained vitality of the other. In this, Lê's exploration of the vampire develops her broader thematic preoccupation with the double. Philippe's need for Louis positions him as a Romantic hero 'perpétuellement à la poursuite d'un double introuvable, sur lequel il compte pour lui garantir son être propre;' without this double, the hero himself is in peril (Rosset 1976: 115).³¹ The same could be said for Louis, the (anti)hero of his novel. Ylane and Ivan, on the other hand, languish in the nonexistence of the double—one already gone, the other only imagined; one whispering verses in the poet's ear, the other animating the words and gestures of a shadow from the grave (2005b: 76–77; 90–91). In *Conte de l'amour bifrons*, perhaps even more so than in *Un si tendre vampire*, Lê figures the other as the original, of which Ylane and Ivan are mere duplications. And the foundational absence of this double sets the young lovers adrift; in losing the other they have lost themselves, 'dans le sens qu'on [perd] celui qu'on voudrait être' (Rosset 1976: 92).³²

This perverted and paradoxical doubling, in which the self is the duplicate of the other, who is the original, also captures the encounter between writing and not writing in Lê's work. In his meditation on *Le Réel et son double* (The Real and its Double) Clément Rosset offers a discussion of *l'événement réel* (the real event) and *l'autre événement* (the other event) that

28 'It would seem that I'm the author, but there are moments when I no longer know whether I'm writing the book that Ivan is dreaming about or if I'm dreaming about the book he has written' (Lê 2017: 125).

29 'He wondered if Louis didn't lead this slightly mysterious existence to intrigue him and lead him to watch.'

30 'For months I've had no life. I've given my blood, my nerves, my flesh, my thoughts to Ylane and Ivan. They are my vampires' (Lê 2017: 126).

31 'always pursuing the missing double, on whom he relies to secure his own self.'

32 'in the sense that we [lose] the one we would like to be.'

illuminates the tensions inherent in L  s reflections on the writer who does not write and in her own writerly tendency to write about not writing. If we substitute ‘writing’ for *l’  v  nement r  el* and ‘not writing’ for *l’autre   v  nement* in the passage that follows, not writing becomes the original, ‘the absolute real’ that writing doubles, and without which, writing ceases to exist. Rosset notes:

On d  couvre ... que l’‘autre   v  nement’ n’est pas v  ritablement le double de l’  v  nement r  el. C’est bien plut  t l’inverse : l’  v  nement r  el qui appara  t lui-m  me comme le double de l’‘autre   v  nement’. En sorte que c’est l’  v  nement r  el qui est finalement l’‘autre’: l’autre c’est ce r  el-ci, soit le double d’un autre r  el qui serait lui le r  el m  me, mais qui   chappe toujours et dont on ne pourrait jamais rien dire ni rien savoir. L’unique, le r  el, l’  v  nement poss  dent donc cette extraordinaire qualit   d’  tre en quelque sorte l’autre de rien, d’appara  tre comme le double d’une ‘autre’ r  alit   qui s’  vanouit perp  tuellement au seuil de toute r  alisation, au moment de tout passage au r  el. L’ensemble des   v  nements qui s’accomplissent—c’est-  -dire, la r  alit   dans son ensemble—ne figure qu’une sorte de ‘mauvais’ r  el, appartenant    l’ordre du double, de la copie, de l’image : c’est l’autre que ce r  el a biff   qui est le r  el absolu, l’original v  ritable dont l’  v  nement r  el n’est qu’une doublure trompeuse et perverse. Le r  el v  ritable est ailleurs. (44–45)³³

If we follow Rosset to understand this tension in L  s work, ‘we discover that [not writing] is not really the double of [writing]. Instead, the opposite is true.’ Writing is a perverted caricature, ‘une singerie’ of the real, which is not writing (46).³⁴ Rosset’s interest in this passage is oracular literature, of which he gives three examples. One example is Jacques Deval’s *Ce soir    Samarcande* (Tonight in Samarcand, 1950), in which a terrified Vizir escapes Baghdad for Samarcande, where he thinks he will escape death, but where death actually awaits him. His death in Samarcande is a distortion of reality, which is the death he is trying to prevent, in other words, his death somewhere other than Samarcande.³⁵ In a similar vein, writing is a false real, the one that doubles not writing, which the writer knows to be real, and which remains present even as it is negated in the ‘passage au r  el.’³⁶ As with the oracular structure, where, for example, the Vizir’s death is and is not the death fated, a bifurcation takes place that not only presents as two that which is actually one, but that also reveals what is seemingly one to be in fact two. In L  s novels this plays out in the circularity of their narrative form. When we find Philippe lying in the dark on the first page of *Un si tendre vampire*, Louis has not yet returned,

33 ‘We discover ... that the “other event” is not actually the double of the real event. The opposite is in fact true: the “real event” which itself appears as the double of the “other event.” So that it is the real event that is the “other” in the end: the other is this real, that is, the double of an other real which would be the actual real, but which is always escaping and about which we can never say or know anything. The unique, the real, the event thus possess this extraordinary quality of being, in a sense, the *other of nothing*, of appearing as the double of an ‘other’ reality which is perpetually vanishing at the threshold of its realization, at the moment of its passage into the real. All the events that take place—in other words, the whole of reality—figure only as a sort of ‘bad’ real, belonging to the order of the double, of the copy, of the image: it is the other that this real has crossed out that is the absolute real, the true original, of which the real event is but a deceitful and perverse stand-in. The true real is elsewhere.’

34 ‘an aping’; Here, one cannot help but recall the plagiarism accusation Marie NDiaye leveled at Marie Darrieussecq in 1998 after the publication of Darrieussecq’s *Naissance des fant  mes* (*My Phantom Husband*, 1998). Writing is stolen, illegitimate, its origins always dubious. See also Yeager (2017).

35 The other example Rosset gives is Oedipus, for whom ‘le r  el v  ritable,’ is the patricide and incest he thought he’d escaped—but in fact set into motion—by fleeing Polybus and Merope.

36 ‘passage into the real.’

and Philippe has written nothing since his departure. When we circle back to this moment at the end of the novel in the reiteration of its first line, not only has Louis already returned, but Philippe has finished a second novel. At the beginning of *Conte de l'amour bifrons*, Ylane sits at her kitchen table in a moment of sorrow simultaneously prior to and months after her discovery and loss of Ivan.

Un si tendre vampire and *Conte de l'amour bifrons* dramatize the intimate encounter between writing and not writing, which, like the two-headed Janus Bifrons presiding over Lê's work, are two sides of the same coin, at once alternate and identical. In these novels, Lê presents authors who are panicked before the blank page and who nevertheless continue to draw inspiration from the threat of silence. These novels offer a response to her nonfictional interrogations of silenced authors, one that reveals no anxiety of influence, but that instead explores the creative possibilities inherent in such a conversation with her predecessors. Moreover, these novels, one of them in a sense silenced by the author herself, place the intertext at the service of her ongoing metatextual engagement with the writerly vocation. When the writer—when Lê—sits down to write, she always faces the unnerving possibility that the words will not come. Like Ylane, the heroine of *Conte de l'amour bifrons*, she stands at the precipice, momentarily paralyzed in fear as she considers the injunction before her: 'va tu ne sais où, rapporte tu ne sais quoi.' But fortunately for her readers, Lê has never not written. The words always come. Because nothing guarantees the existence of writing like not writing.

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