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The “last colonial novel”?

On malaise in Duras’s *Le Vice-consul*

“Une ville au bord du Gange qui sera ici capitale des Indes et nommée Calcutta:”¹ thus Marguerite Duras describes the setting of her novel *Le Vice-consul*, published in 1966. The novel depicts the idleness, vanity, angst and fantasies of a luxurious French colonial society, an insular bubble surrounded by leprous beggars whose poverty provokes its desires and repulsions. This spatial depiction reveals a tension at work in the representation of India in Duras’s novel. On one hand, there is consciousness of fiction’s arbitrary aspect and its inherent artificiality, sketching out a space that depends mainly on the author’s personal creation and projection (in the use of the future tense and the deictic); on the other, there is its inevitable inscription –through the toponyms, the plural noun and the rejection of a realistic historical

1 Marguerite Duras, *Le Vice-consul* [1966], Paris, Gallimard, “L’imaginaire”, 2019, p. 34.

contextualisation— into a collective Orientalist imagery, part of what Said describes as a “Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.”² Effectively, the reader who thumbs through the pages of *Le Vice-consul* is confronted with a geography that paradoxically combines a singular poetic and literary investment in India, seeming to foil the commonplace views and clichés of romantic exoticism, with the informed description and denunciation of certain colonial realities, and the undeniable presence of an imagery which participates in what the geographer Odette Louiset has called “l’Inde affamée,”³ a common Western depiction of India that feasts its eyes on aestheticizing visions of misery, and is used also as foil to justify political and cultural domination.

Although this essay will not specifically tackle this geographical depiction, the ambivalence and contradictions inherent in it foreground both the novel’s relationships with the Orientalist tradition, but also the gaps and discrepancies with regard to this tradition which work to perturb the ideological discourse typical of the French colonial novel. In this essay, I would like to focus on one of these gaps in particular, namely the staging of malaise in the text, which emerges as one of its leitmotifs. Defined as a state of uneasiness affecting an individual or collective body, malaise can be psychological, physiological, existential, cultural, political or social, and appears as a symptom of something else, here providing a useful lens on Duras’s representation of colonial society. On a literal level, this malaise is clearly identifiable in the constant faintness of the character Charles Rossett, newly arrived in Calcutta

2 Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London, Penguin, 2003, p. 3.

3 Odette Louiset, “Images de l’Inde”, *L’Information géographique*, n° 72, 2008, p. 11.

and prone to fainting and nausea, or, more broadly, in the uneasiness of the “Blancs non acclimatés de Calcutta.”⁴ This physiological malaise is compounded by a psychological one, illustrated for instance by “les suicides d’Européens pendant la famine qui jamais ne les touche.”⁵ On a different level, a constant sense of social embarrassment surrounds the vice-consul himself, Jean-Marc de H.: at the central scene of the ball, for example, he begs to stay with Anne-Marie Stretter, behaves drunkenly and falls on the floor in front of embarrassed onlookers. Another type of malaise concerns the colonisers’ inability to address the “incidents de Lahore”⁶ –as they euphemistically refer to a violent episode in which the vice-consul shoots at beggars– which in turn poses the difficulty of interpreting their meaning in the economy of the novel. If these examples illustrate different scales of malaise, their literary analysis leads us back to a single cause, which in this case is undeniably political. Insofar as malaise appears as a symptom of the crisis or dysfunction of an individual or political body, it seems to me that the textual presence of this leitmotiv is intended to reveal the violent and destructive nature of colonisation that is more or less concealed by discourse on it. The motif of malaise appears then as a literary perturbation of the colonial discourse, going against the ideology of the genre of colonial novels, whose function was traditionally to justify colonisation and therefore to provide a representation of the colonial world which could be attractive for readers in the metropole.

Studies on Duras’s relationship with colonialism have primarily focused on her poetic symbolism, which has, in some sense, depoliticised her depiction of Asia, as if wishing to exonerate

4 Marguerite Duras, *Le Vice-consul*, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 157.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

the writer from accusations of Orientalism. Many contributions on the topic draw on “Durasia,”⁷ Claude Roy’s neologism to describe the stylistic and poetic features of Duras’s representations of Asia, emphasising her intimate relationship with Vietnam, which she always considered the home from which she was exiled. Nevertheless, the problem with the concept of “Durasia” is that, by binding Duras’s representation of Asia so tightly to the author’s subjectivity, it only resolves the contradictions which lie therein by ignoring the ideological suppositions and implications of her representations of the colonial space. This approach also disregards Duras’s changing political positions. Although Duras’s late political engagement took a stand against colonisation – for instance, when in 1960 she signed the anticolonial tract “Manifeste des 121. Déclaration sur le droit à l’insoumission dans la guerre d’Algérie,” which denounced the horrors of French colonisation – she had previously adopted a legitimising political position towards colonisation. Julia Waters, in *Duras and Indochina: Postcolonial Perspectives*, reminds us of the publication in 1941 of *L’Empire français* at the request of the Ministère des colonies. In the text, co-written with Philippe Roques, the reader can recognise the main characteristics of French colonial propaganda, ranging from racist essentialism of the colonised to imperialist myths of the civilising mission. Underlining the intertextual influence of *L’Empire français* on her later work, Julia Waters points out the tendency in Duras studies to “write off or write out *L’Empire français*,” regarded “at most [...] as an example of misguided juvenilia, a long-buried, regrettable and largely irrelevant part of the pre-history of the ‘real’ Duras.”⁸ A tendency has thus developed to avoid

7 Claude Roy, “Duras tout entière à la langue attachée”, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 31 August 1984, p. 66-67.

8 Julia Waters, *Duras and Indochina: Postcolonial Perspectives*, Liverpool, Society for Francophone Postcolonial Studies, 2006, p. 1.

dealing with Orientalist and colonial aspects of Duras's work, and instead restrict analysis of Duras's representations of Asia within the domain of personal mythology and an intimate and purely imaginary geography.

Such avoidance in the academic reception of Duras's "Indochinese novels" is even more surprising when we consider *Le Vice-consul*, at the heart of which lies the depiction of a colonial society that is difficult to comprehend divorced from political considerations. What to think of the euphemising of the "incidents de Lahore?" And what of the poeticisation of misery in the anonymous descriptions of the leprous beggars at whom the vice-consul shoots? Should we see in the languor of the French colonial bubble a sense of indulgence and complacency, or rather recognise in it a bitter portrayal of vanity? Should we attribute our difficulties in interpreting the text to its cleaving to an Orientalist imagery, reminiscent of the genre of the colonial novel, or rather to its disruption of colonial imagery, the ideology of which was increasingly being questioned by the 1960s?

This hermeneutic difficulty, I will argue in this essay, results from a questioning of Western self-representation – in other words, to paraphrase Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, of the narratives produced by law, political economy, ideology and culture, through which Europe as Subject thinks of itself in an acceptable way.⁹ In *Postcolonial Duras*, Jane Bradley Winston reminds us that the French post-war period is marked by "representational efforts designed and employed to conserve (or destroy) the French colonial order and its subject,"¹⁰ and we must contextualise Duras's description of the

9 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern speak?", in *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman, London, Routledge, 2013, p. 66.

10 Jane Bradley Winston, *Postcolonial Duras: Cultural Memory in Postwar France*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 4.

colonial world in *Le Vice-consul* in this period, when France was confronted with its radical violence during the decolonisation of Algeria. In this light, the *Vice-consul's* representations of the colonial world through the motif of malaise would highlight a sickness at the heart of the Western one. As Benedict Anderson has shown in *Imagined Communities*,¹¹ confronting colonial France with its inherent violence destabilised its colonial narratives. Acting as a kind of return of the repressed, this confrontation reveals, to paraphrase Freud, the discontents of French colonial civilisation, whose violence can no longer be concealed behind representations of colonisation that attempt to mask its structural violence through the myth, for example, of the civilising mission.

My reading of the text, however, will not seek to pin down Duras's ambiguous position on colonialism or to resolve this textual malaise in a univocal way by applying a fixed political interpretation to it. I will draw, instead, on Rancière's conception of a "politique de la littérature," which is located not in the writer's engagement or explicit political pronouncements, but in the "dissensus" of the text, which emerges from the plurality of meanings that characterises modern literature. For Rancière, this equivocal nature is caused by "l'absence d'un répertoire exact des signes et de leurs significations," with the text perturbing this "répertoire" and highlighting its deficiency through its representation of "êtres en excédent," subjects who are initially excluded and not assimilated to it, and whose representation destabilises the cultural, symbolic and social order.¹² Without the pretence of addressing all manifestations of malaise in Duras's novel, I will analyse three in succession. I will start by showing to what extent

11 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New York, Verso, 2006.

12 Jacques Rancière, *Politique de la littérature*, Paris, Galilée, 2007, p. 42.

Le Vice-consul can be read as a colonial novel, carrying tropes of an Orientalist imagery indicative of the political malaise of 1960s French society. Secondly, considering the symbolic function of the characters, I will look at how the characters' malaise can suggest the fissuring of colonial ideology, by focusing specifically on Charles Rossett's faintness. In the last section, I will analyse what brings the malaise of the reader and the malaise of the characters together –namely the vice-consul himself, and the “incidents de Lahore.”

Interviewing Duras, Pierre Dumayet said of *Le Vice-consul*: “on a dit que c'était probablement le dernier roman colonial, c'est-à-dire que c'est la fin d'une certaine façon de traiter l'exotisme.”¹³ Although Duras answered by stating her hatred of exoticism, Dumayet's remark has the merit of underlining the link between *Le Vice-consul* and the colonial novel: it is as if Dumayet suggests that while following in its footsteps, the novel also seems to stage its “end,” its collapse, and thus acts out the bygone aspect of the genre in the 1960s. Undoubtedly, the novel's links with this genre of the colonial novel can be illustrated by its reproduction of a series of Orientalist tropes in its representation of India. One highly metapoetic character, Peter Morgan –a novelist who writes about his projections on Calcutta, and may be seen as a double of Duras herself– illustrates how the text stages and reproduces this Orientalist literary tradition. At the beginning of the novel, Peter Morgan is portrayed roaming around the streets of Calcutta in the early morning:

Peter Morgan est un jeune homme qui désire prendre la douleur de Calcutta, s'y jeter, que ce soit fait, et que son ignorance cesse avec la douleur prise. [...]

13 Marguerite Duras, *Dits à la télévision: entretien avec Pierre Dumayet*, Paris, EPEL, “Atelier”, 1999, p. 42.

Déjà, de loin en loin, Calcutta remue. Nid de fourmis grouillant, pense Peter Morgan, fadeur, épouvante, crainte de Dieu et douleur, douleur, pense-t-il.¹⁴

As we can see in this extract, the romantic aestheticisation of misery, the animalisation of Indians who are compared to a “nid de fourmis grouillant,” and the insistence on their superstitions combine to delineate the contours of the representation of India as produced by Indology –a term Ronald Inden uses to designate the scientific and cultural discourse held on India since the Enlightenment, which has made of this culture the West’s subjugated Other *par excellence*.¹⁵ Duras repeats several aspects of this Orientalist depiction of India, for instance through the reproduction of binary oppositions which, according to Inden, serve to aggrandise the West’s value and justify its domination of the colonised subject.¹⁶ We can distinguish several essentialising conceptual binaries that work as leitmotifs in the text and differentiate the colonisers from the colonised: Charles Rossett’s *logos* is opposed to the mad laugh and meaningless song of the beggar woman; the embassy’s refinement and luxury contrasts with the misery of the lepers; the individualisation of the white characters does not apply to the Indians, who are always apprehended collectively; the beauty of Anne-Marie Stretter is opposed to the ugliness of the beggar woman, described as a “bonzesse sale.”¹⁷ This binary pattern is even more striking in the novel’s seventh sequence regarding the exchange of a child, where the white woman personifies the figure of the good mother, of charity and life, by adopting the child of the beggar woman

¹⁴ *Id.*, *Le Vice-consul*, *op. cit.*, p. 28-29.

¹⁵ Ronald Inden, “Orientalist Constructions of India”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 1986, vol. 20, n° 3, p. 401.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 402.

¹⁷ Marguerite Duras, *Le Vice-consul*, *op. cit.*, p. 17, p. 198.

who by contrast appears as the bad mother, who gives up the child she attempted to abort. Lastly, the setting of the novel seems marked by the feminine through the dominant figure of the beggar woman, whereas the French colonial bubble is, above all, a masculine world, where Anne-Marie Stretter personifies the object of male desire around which Peter Morgan, Charles Rossett, Jean-Marc de H., George Crown and the French ambassador gravitate. Considering all these features that match an Orientalist construction of India,¹⁸ I do not think we can claim that Duras's work is not Orientalist,¹⁹ or that there is neither Orient nor Occident in Duras's work.²⁰ Even if *Le Vice-consul* does not adopt the modalities of an idealising exoticism, its representation of India must also be received as an Orientalist one.

At the same time, however, *Le Vice-consul* also questions the model of the colonial novel through a series of perturbations of its canonical tropes, as evidenced by the possibility of a growing revolt against the colonisers, but also by the malaise experienced by the colonisers present in the text. Having recently arrived in Calcutta, Charles Rossett is one of the characters who suffers most in the climate, which he fails to adapt to, such that he considers returning to France. He is

18 Inden evokes the Orientalist associations between India and femininity, dream and irrationality. See Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2000, p. 1.

19 Florence de Chalonge, for example, argues that: "[dans] la rencontre avec l'autre [...], les œuvres de Duras ne s'abreuvent pas à l'Orientalisme, décrit par Edward Said comme la rencontre où l'Orient serait façonné par l'Occident pour lui servir de complémentaire" ("Dans l'Orient de Marguerite Duras que sont les Orientaux devenus?", *Orient(s) de Marguerite Duras*, ed. by Florence de Chalonge, Yann Mevel & Akiko Ueda, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2014, p. 40).

20 "il n'y a, littéralement, pas d'Orient, pas plus que d'Occident, chez Marguerite Duras, puisqu'il n'y a pas de mot pour le dire" (Madeleine Borgomano, "Questions d'orient(s) dans l'œuvre de Marguerite Duras", *ibid.*, p. 21).

not the only character in the novel, of the many “Blancs non acclimatés de Calcutta,” to feel uneasy.²¹ The text also evokes a famine which provoked the deaths of many Europeans not by starvation but by suicide, and the constant fear of leprosy leads many colonisers’ to return to Europe. This systemic malaise among the colonisers recalls what colonial psychiatry named “tropical neurasthenia,” described by Anna Crozier as “a popular diagnosis for European renegade, bizarre or lazy (as well as genuinely neurotic) behaviours in tropical colonial outposts, especially between 1905 and 1920.”²² The history of psychiatry has shown that this diagnosis was “useful” to the colonial power as a “means of categorizing and regulating the behaviours of Europeans abroad,”²³ but it was also a way to condemn what was seen, according to colonialist ideology, as a moral defeat and failure on the part of the coloniser unable to “acclimatize.”²⁴ By insisting on the malaise of its European characters, it therefore seems to me that *Le Vice-consul* stages a destabilisation of the colonial power afflicted by this “neurasthenia,” which can be understood in relation to the French political context of the 1960s. This physical malaise can be read as an existential and political one, in the sense that it results from a confrontation between the Western subject and the colonised Other who refuses to be subjugated and contained by the colonial dynamics of power. The depiction of leprosy is also a symbol of this weakening of the

21 Marguerite Duras, *Le Vice-consul*, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

22 Anna Crozier, “What was Tropical about Tropical Neurasthenia? The Utility of the Diagnosis in the Management of British East Africa”, *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, vol. 64, n° 4, October 2009, p. 518-548.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 518.

24 Marianna Scarfone, “Quatre dossiers médicaux pour six mois d’internement: les étapes du rapatriement de l’ouvrier Alessandro T. d’Érythrée en Italie”, *Les Sciences de l’homme en manuel*, n° 29, 2016, p. 191-209.

border between the dominants and the subalterns: “la lèpre amoncelée se sépare, bouge et se répand.”²⁵ Throughout the novel, as it grows in strength, the illness that threatens the Europeans becomes a metaphor for political revolt.

One pivotal scene that takes place on the Prince of Wales Island perfectly illustrates this symbolic threat of a contagion devastating the colonial order. In this confrontational scene, Charles Rossett finds himself face-to-face with the beggar woman. The latter could be seen as an “être en excédent,” perturbing colonial discourse’s “répertoire des signes:” by trespassing into a place reserved for the colonisers –crossing the “grillage élevé contre la mendicité,”²⁶ which symbolises and protects its borders– she bursts the colonial bubble and exposes its fragility. The beggar woman goes further, terrifying Charles:

Elle cherche dans sa robe, entre ses seins, elle sort quelque chose qu’elle lui tend: un poisson vivant. Il ne bouge pas. Elle reprend le poisson et, lui montrant, elle croque la tête en riant davantage encore. Le poisson guillotiné remue dans sa main. Elle doit s’amuser de lui faire peur, de donner la nausée. Elle avance vers lui. Charles Rossett recule, elle avance encore, il recule encore, mais elle avance plus vite que lui et Charles Rossett jette la monnaie par terre, se retourne et fuit vers le chemin en courant.²⁷

While reproducing the binary, Orientalist opposition between colonised and coloniser, the beggar woman is portrayed as an uncivilised character; however, she also appears aware of the role she has been attributed by colonial propaganda, and in her performance (“elle s’amuse”) also destabilises colonial civilisation and its foundations. The decapitation of the fish can be seen as a symbolic castration, which curtails the colonial male’s desire and echoes the insistence on

25 Marguerite Duras, *Le Vice-consul*, op. cit., p. 162.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 196.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 199.

Charles Rossett being “privé de désir.”²⁸ Desire, valued by a whole Western philosophical and psychoanalytical tradition as the locus of will, is therefore emptied by the female character. The beggar woman’s gesture is also perhaps a way to attack the Christian foundations of Western self-representation. The fish is a traditional symbol for Christ, and the image of Charles “jet[ant] la monnaie par terre” before running away reveals and challenges the apparent contradictions of a civilisation built on the Christian ideal of charity –in the Bible, commonly enacted towards lepers– and on the violence and “bloody events” ensuing from its conquests, colonial or otherwise.

The beggar woman appears in this scene as a threat that Charles is unable to face, and a similar unwillingness to look at someone is mentioned elsewhere in the text, interestingly in relation to Jean-Marc de H. In a scene that precedes that with the beggar woman, the French ambassador says that Peter Morgan “ne peut pas supporter la vue du vice-consul de Lahore,” before adding: “Ce n’est pas de la peur à proprement parler, c’est un malaise... On fuit, oui, je l’avoue... je fuis un peu.”²⁹ These glances, which avoid the vice-consul, make of him a double of the beggar woman, perhaps because they both, in very different ways, symbolise the violence of colonisation: the vice-consul’s murderous gesture reveals colonisation’s naked truth, while the beggar woman represents the colonised subject troubling the colonial order.

If the vice-consul and beggar woman disrupt the colonial order and its “representational efforts” to make itself into a thinkable subject, the character of Jean-Marc de H. and the “incidents” he is at the centre of compound the malaise of the reader and of the characters. The mystery surrounding

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

the reasons behind what happened in Lahore remains unsolved: while Jean-Marc de H. writes in his declaration to the ambassador that he “reconnâit] avoir commis les faits retenus contre [lui] à Lahore,” he adds:

Je ne peux pas m'expliquer ni sur ce que j'ai fait à Lahore ni sur le pourquoi de ce refus. [...] je me borne ici à constater l'impossibilité où je suis de rendre compte de façon compréhensible de ce qui s'est passé à Lahore.³⁰

Jean-Marc de H.'s testimony excludes madness (by acknowledging responsibility) and inebriation: two motives which could typically have explained such an irrational gesture. This gesture is instead “impossible”³¹ – a word with which the character is repeatedly associated – in the sense that it challenges the limits of what is thinkable for colonial society. It is described as inexplicable: it cannot be comprehended within a discourse, a *logos*, which could make it acceptable or rationally understandable. This nonsense thus exerts violence on the colonial community's self-representation, and the vice-consul is apprehended by this society with a mixture of familiarity and rejection, and the feeling of both proximity and distance (of which the onomastic Lahore can be a symbol of the paradox) which can be understood as a symmetric reversal of Freud's concept of uncanny where strangeness has a sense of familiarity. Furthermore, the crime of shooting at beggars from the embassy's balcony is treated as a simple diplomatic “incident”, while Charles Rossett wonders why everyone is being “indulgent” with the vice-consul. How can we understand the indifference with which this criminal act is received? When Charles Rossett asks the ambassador why the option of a “sanction exemplaire” has not been

30 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 155.

considered, the answer he receives is: "Ici, il n'y a pas de partie adverse, n'est-ce pas, c'est un... état de choses... c'est évident et Lahore... Lahore qu'est-ce que ça veut dire?"³² The answer suggests that Lahore constitutes a kind of lawless zone, where the law of the strongest prevails, while the absence of an opposing force implies that colonial society in its entirety remains on the side of the vice-consul, his gesture consequently becoming a collective one. Therefore, the vice-consul's actions confess the nature of the colonial structure and reveal its radical violence in the most explicit way, well illustrating what Achille Mbembe calls "necropolitics," that is "the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die," a capacity seen as the "ultimate expression of sovereignty."³³ The adjective "ultimate" is significant here, because it underlines the fact that this radical violence is at the foundation and heart of every structural power, situated beyond the outward appearance of representability that power gives to itself in order to sublimate, hide and repress its original violence. The beggars whom the vice-consul shoots at then are the embodiment of Agamben's "bare life,"³⁴ that is the vulnerable body on which power acts, while the vice-consul appears as an horrific but representative image of a colonial civilisation stripped of its so-called refinement – of which the Prince of Wales Island, with "son luxe profond et éprouvé" but made of "faux or,"³⁵ provides a symbol. The "incidents de Lahore" thus illustrate the failure of the sublimation of colonial ideology, whose deathly drive is made explicit and no longer hidden behind a cultural narrative.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³³ Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics", *Public Culture*, vol. 15, n° 1, 2003, p. 11.

³⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998.

³⁵ Marguerite Duras, *Le Vice-consul*, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

The vice-consul is therefore a deeply ambivalent figure, much more so than Duras suggests in an interview, advocating what seems to me an overly redemptive and positive interpretation of the character that would make of Jean-Marc de H. a figure close to the Angel of Abyss (*Book of Revelation*, 9:11) “tir[ant] sur la faim. Sur le malheur. Sur le million d’enfants qui va mourir dans les quatre mois qui viennent.”³⁶ On one hand, he personifies the violence of colonial civilisation and is linked, because of this, to its very foundations; on the other hand, he destroys colonial culture by making its foundations visible, when its culture and representability depend on their denial. The vice-consul thus embodies the death drive of colonial civilisation, pointed both at itself and at the other – hence the unwillingness to face or look at him. The depiction of him stumbling, falling to the floor, being an uncomfortable and inappropriate presence in the ballroom whom nobody wants to talk to or look at, finally makes him a metaphor for the colonial unconscious that consciousness would like to be able to ignore. The ballroom itself becomes the symbol of a collective consciousness (which expresses itself through the use of direct speech that is not assigned to anyone in particular) and the vice-consul a figure of abjection³⁷ that the collective self of colonial society would like to reject, because it leads the subject “là où le sens s’effondre,” where the ego and its need to represent itself as a meaningful *object* are debunked.

36 Duras also adds: “Je ne pense pas qu’il tire sur la folie. Il tire sur la douleur” (Marguerite Duras, *Dits à la télévision*, *op. cit.*, p. 42).

37 I use the term following Kristeva’s definition, which opposes the *abject* to the *object*: “Mais si l’objet, en s’opposant, m’équilibre dans la trame fragile d’un désir de sens qui, en fait m’homologue indéfiniment, infiniment à lui, au contraire, l’*abject*, objet chu, est radicalement un exclu et me tire vers là où le sens s’effondre” (Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l’horreur: essai sur l’abjection*, Paris, Seuil, 1980, p. 21).

It is in the same sequence, during the party, that one of the anonymous voices commenting on the vice-consul's actions asks: "Mais des lépreux ou des chiens, est-ce tuer que de tuer des lépreux ou des chiens?"³⁸ This question sums up the ambivalence of *Le Vice-consul*. Although there is no doubt that the violence of the statement kindles the reader's discomfort, its excessive nature can also be received as a provocation by the writer. Like Baudelaire's famous injunction to "assommer les pauvres," whose sarcastic irony confronts the bourgeoisie with its hypocrisy, the idea of "tirer sur les lépreux" allows the text to reveal the contradictions of a Western civilisation trying to hide its primary violence behind discourse of cultural sophistication. The anonymous voice, which epitomises the collective, avows the reason for the euphemisation of the "incidents de Lahore," that is the colonialist and racist exclusion from humanity of the colonised. In her essay on the novel,³⁹ Christiane Blot-Labarrère recalls Breton's *Second Manifeste du surréalisme*, in which he writes that "l'acte surréaliste le plus simple consiste, revolvers aux poings, à descendre dans la rue et à tirer au hasard, tant qu'on peut, dans la foule," just after having stated that "le surréalisme ne ten[d] à rien tant qu'à provoquer, au point de vue intellectuel et moral, une *crise de conscience* de l'espèce la plus générale et la plus grave."⁴⁰ As I have sought to show in this paper, the gesture of the vice-consul also provokes a "crise de conscience" within the colonial civilisation, which is a crisis of self-representation, and therefore as total as the crisis Breton describes. However, interpreting the vice-consul's gesture in light of Breton's definition of "l'acte surréaliste le

38 Marguerite Duras, *Le Vice-consul*, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

39 Christiane Blot-Labarrère, "Allegro furioso ou les colères du vice-consul", *Roman 20-50*, hors-série n° 2, ed. by Florence de Chalonge, 2006, p. 24.

40 André Breton, *Second Manifeste du surréalisme* [1930], *Manifestes du surréalisme*, Paris, Gallimard, "Folio essais", 2011, p. 74, p. 72.

plus simple" leads us to raise a final interrogation about the equivalent of "la foule:" what would have been the hermeneutic consequences if instead of lepers, the vice-consul had shot at the guests in the ballroom? The question reminds us that violence here, even though it has a knock-on effect on colonial society, is primarily and still directed against the Other in the novel. It is perhaps only in Duras's *India song* (1975), a film that is sometimes read as a free adaptation of *Le Vice-consul*, that a new aspect will emerge in the malaise of the French colonial bubble, with the suicide of Anne-Marie Stretter. As Jane Winston writes, the character "embodies the object of French colonial nostalgic desire for [...] Indochina,"⁴¹ and her death by suicide finally brings to culmination the symbolic destruction of colonial narratives.

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41 Jane Winston, *Postcolonial Duras: Cultural Memory in Postwar France*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.