

MEKONG REVIEW
August 2022

Dear departed

Leslie Barnes



Photo: Editions Stock

I read the news as I would have read a line from any one of her novels: L.L. ‘had left at daybreak ... A storm had broken out overnight and a warm downpour battered the flowers in the garden, which bent low, their faces to the ground. The rain leaked through the roof, dripped on the table, formed a puddle in the middle of the anthology that for days had been open to the same page. *I shall go by the forest, I shall go by the mountain*’ (*Les trois Parques*). Linda Lê, the headlines read, had died following a long illness. Like the colleagues I would reach out to in the days after learning of her death, I had not even known she was ill. Lê, the image of diffidence until the very end, retreated into the shadows as quietly and as humbly as she had entered the French literary scene more than thirty years ago.

Linda Lê was born in Dalat in 1963 and immigrated to France in 1977 with her mother and sisters. There, in the library of the Lycée Claude Monet in Le Havre, she would find solace in the rows of books surrounding her, each one the keeper of secrets, each one the return to origins and the promise of immortality. She would find safety and friendship within their dusty, yellowing pages. Marvelling at the object in her hands and the discoveries she shared with those who had held it before her, she felt a sense of belonging, of a community that had otherwise eluded her. The book her talisman, and reading a portal to the inaccessible other, Lê lived a life of literary

communion with her fellow readers and beloved writers. Later, when she began the prodigious body of work she has left behind, she would devote multiple volumes to essays on the authors who shaped her as a writer and a person. The ‘dear departed’, as she calls them in *Le Complexe de Caliban* (2005), are authors she admired for their courage, dissent, eloquence and ambition. With these authors—Henri-Frédéric Amiel, Ingeborg Bachmann, Joseph Conrad, Stig Dagerman, Marina Tsvetaeva and others—Lê explored the intersections of reading, writing and a life out of step.

Throughout her œuvre, death lurks nearby. Though not autobiographical, Lê’s early work is marked by the loss of her father, who remained in Vietnam, in 1995. She had not seen him since leaving nearly twenty years earlier, and the trilogy she published in the late 1990s—*Les trois Parques* (1997), *Voix: Une crise* (1998) and *Lettre morte* (1999)—is in many ways a reckoning with her betrayal, his sacrifice and the emotional collapse she suffered after his death. The reference to Victor Hugo’s ‘Tomorrow, at dawn’ to announce her father’s death, on the eve of his planned visit to Paris, captures the same devastating discovery that an anticipated reunion with the beloved will instead be one with their tombstone. Lê mourns her father, as Hugo mourns his daughter, in a text that places individual loss at the service of a universal suffering. I discovered this novel while my own father languished in the terminal phase of a long illness and would carry these words on my lips as I rushed home from my newly adopted country on the other side of the world to be by his side as he left this world; *I shall go by the forest, I shall go by the mountain*. My colleague, Tess Do, told me recently of the comfort she has always found in Lê’s intimate knowledge of the double loss, of both father and country. It is only in Lê’s death that Do and I have discovered this strange and sorrowful communion we share, which has held us up in difficult moments.

For Lê, as she observed in an interview in 1999, her father’s death also meant the disappearance of the imaginary reader she addressed in every book. And the work that came out of that loss points to a more physical, corporeal communion between writer and (ideal) reader. The severed connection is felt at times, in the body. The narrator of *Les trois Parques* is missing a limb. The narrator of *Voix: Une crise*, a writer, is sure that her persecutors are sending messages through her nervous system and sees her own body at the morgue in the place of her deceased father. In *Lettre morte*, the narrator feels she is tied to her father’s rotting corpse; he becomes a parasitic twin, feeding off the survivor’s body. These are novels written in blood, the second in the blood of its suicidal narrator, who lacerates her hand before destroying her manuscript and all of her fathers’ letters. Blood and ink. The traces of the father written on the skin. In both her fiction and nonfiction—the dynamic between reading and writing, but also between presence and absence, forms the means of communing with those lost. The dead, she reminds us, ‘do not let us go’ (*Lettre morte*).

To read Lê then is to be in constant dialogue with death and, for me, to watch warily for the author’s demise. It is well known to her devoted readers—the ‘happy few’ as Michèle Bacholle refers to us—that Lê identified with authors who took their own lives: Tsvetaeva, Dagerman, Ernst Weiss, Sadegh Hedayat, Mario de Sá-Carneiro. She wrote in *Le Complexe de Caliban* of her wish to join these ‘defectors from life ... Christs of literature’ whose suicides sat like a crown atop their bodies of work. Quoting Antonin Artaud, whose fatal overdose in 1948 may have been deliberate, Lê writes of wishing ‘to become one’s own self through words and then through death’. In our recent exchanges, Bacholle reminded me of the momentary surge of fear I felt seeing the publication announcement for *In Memoriam* in 2007. Lê would later sign a copy

of this novel, a story of failed love and suicide, calling it ‘the portrait of an implacable woman’ (*le portrait d’une irréductible*). I would use these very words to describe Lê, even as recent publications attest to a gentle tempering of her furious intransigence. An excerpt on the back cover reads, ‘Now that she was dead, I had to face the emptiness of my spirit: I had lived through the unforgettable and I would spend the rest of my days returning to this grief’. As I have read Lê over the years, writing about and occasionally to her, I have often wondered if she would one day decide that her own body of work was an offering sufficient to crown.

Instead, her death—‘following a long illness’—came quite unexpectedly. With grief, another long-time critic and friend of Lê’s, Jack Yeager, called in tears, lamenting that he had just passed through Paris but had not managed to connect with her. Bacholle was comforted to learn that Lê had not fallen into the abyss that she had for so long circled, but had instead, like another of her ‘suicidal poets’, Cesare Pavese, fought the urge for self-destruction. Tess Do wondered what her last words may have been: ‘Was she anguished or relaxed? Was she ready, or did she rebel against the end? [...] Did she let herself evaporate among her books? Now the author has become a character. Will we find her once more when we return to her work?’

I think of Ylane, who in *Conte de l’amour bifrons* (2005) ‘fights against despair, against the tide of anguish engulfing her [...] She comes and goes. Opens another book. It’s a collection of Chinese poems. She reads just these few words, *The roots of love reach up to the sky*, and in an instant, she is as if transformed. She grabs a jacket, closes the door and goes down the stairs. She walks briskly. She’s going into the unknown to bring back the unknown’. Lê has departed on Baudelaire’s voyage, the last line of which is the title of her 2009 volume of essays, *Au fond de l’inconnu pour trouver du nouveau* (‘To the depths of the unknown to find something new’). She has left, but she is not gone.



Leslie Barnes is a lecturer in French Studies at the Australian National University.