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The Pain of Sorrow in the Modern World: The Works of Marguerite Duras
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Source: *PMLA*, Vol. 102, No. 2 (Mar., 1987), pp. 138-152
Published by: Modern Language Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/462543
Accessed: 15-01-2016 04:56 UTC

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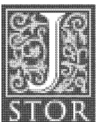

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The Pain of Sorrow in the Modern World: The Works of Marguerite Duras*

Pain is one of the most important things in my life.
La douleur

I tell him that when I was a child, my mother's unhappiness took the place of dreams. *The Lover*

White Rhetoric of the Apocalypse

WE, THE SO-CALLED civilized worlds, know that we are mortal, as Valéry declared after World War I, but now, even more, we know that we can cause our own death. Auschwitz and Hiroshima revealed that the "malady of death," to use Marguerite Duras's term, constitutes our most hidden inner recesses. If the passion for death governs the military and economic domains as well as social and political bonds, this passion now even appears to govern the once noble realm of the mind. Indeed, a monumental crisis in thought and word, a crisis in representation, has occurred. Its analogues can be found in previous centuries (the decline of the Roman Empire and the rise of Christianity, the devastating periods of plague or war during the Middle Ages), and its causes can be sought in the collapse of economic, political, and legal structures. Moreover, the power of destructive forces, both outside and within the individual and society, has never appeared as incontestable and irrevocable as it does today. The destruction of nature, of life and economic resources, is coupled with an outbreak, or simply a more patent manifestation, of the disorders that psychiatry has subtly diagnosed: psychosis, depression, mania, borderline disorders, false personalities, and so on.

Hélène Bamberger

Marguerite Duras

As horrible as the political and military cataclysms have been, and as much as they defy comprehension by their monstrous violence—concentration camps or the atomic bomb—the violently intense deflagration of psychic identity remains equally difficult to grasp. Valéry was already

** Translator's note.* This text is a chapter from the author's *Soleil noir: Mélancolie et dépression* (Paris: Gallimard, forthcoming), entitled "La maladie de la douleur: Duras." The phrase "la maladie de la douleur" combines the titles of two Duras novels, *La maladie de la mort* and *La douleur*, highlighting the themes of *maladie*, *mort*, and *douleur* that the article explores. The English title tries to capture two of the multivalent meanings of *douleur*. Throughout the translation, depending on the context, I have privileged the terms *pain*, *sorrow*, or *sadness* to render *douleur*. Where translations of quoted material are mine, I indicate by "KAJ's trans."; "my italics," however, designates Kristeva's emphasis. I should like to express my gratitude to Domna C. Stanton and Margaret Waller for their meticulous editing.

aware of this phenomenon when he compared the disaster of the mind (which followed World War I but which, earlier still, issued from the nihilism of "the death of God") to what the physicist observes

> in an oven brought to the point of incandescence: if the eye could survive, it would see *nothing*. There would be no unequal intensities of light left to mark off points in space. This tremendous contained energy would result in *invisibility*, in imperceptible equivalence. Equivalence of this order is nothing but *disorder in a perfect state*.
> (27; modified trans.; my italics)

The stakes of literature and art are, thus, to be played out in this invisible crisis of identity, be it personal, moral, religious, or political. At once religious and political, this crisis finds its most radical expression in the crisis of meaning. The problem of naming leads no longer to the "music in letters" (Mallarmé and Joyce were the believers and aesthetes of narration) but to illogicality and silence. After the rather playful yet always politically engaged surrealist venture, the reality of World War II brutalized consciousness by the explosion of death and madness that no dam, ideological or aesthetic, could contain any longer. That pressure found its intimate and inevitable repercussion in psychic pain. An inescapable urgency, this pain nonetheless has remained, in a sense that I want to explore, invisible, unrepresentable.

If we can still speak of "nothing" in trying to capture the intricate meanderings of pain and psychic death, do we still confront nothing in the face of gas chambers, the atomic bomb, or the *gulag*? The issue is neither the spectacular explosion of death in the universe of World War II nor the dissolution of conscious identity and rational behavior, resulting in insane manifestations of psychosis, which are often spectacular as well. For these monstrous and painful spectacles disturb our mechanisms of perception and representation. Our symbolic modes are emptied, petrified, nearly annihilated, as if they were overwhelmed or destroyed by an all too powerful force. At the edge of silence, the word *nothing* emerges, a prudish defense in the face of such incommensurable, internal and external, disorder. Never has a cataclysm been so apocalyptically exorbitant. Never has its representation been relegated to such inadequate symbolic modes.

Certain religious currents have maintained that silence alone is appropriate to such horror, that death must be withdrawn from the living word and only evoked obliquely in the gaps and the not-said of a concern bordering on contrition. In this perspective, a fascination, not to say flirtation, with Judaism has resulted, exposing the guilt of intellectuals regarding their generation's anti-Semitism and collaboration during the early years of the war. A new rhetoric of the apocalypse—etymologically, *apocalypso* means de-monstration, a visual uncovering (*dé-couvrement*), as opposed to *aletheia*, the philosophical unveiling of truth—became necessary to bring the vision of this monstrous nothing, this blinding and silencing monstrosity, into being. That new apocalyptic rhetoric has been realized in two extremes, which seem to be opposites but which often complement each other: the profusion of images and the withholding of the word. On the one hand, the art of the image excels in the crude exposure of monstrosity. Whatever its refinements, film remains the supreme art of the apocalyptic, such is the image's power to make us tread in fear, as Augustine perceived ("Although man is disquieted in vain, yet he walks in an image" [418]). On the other hand, verbal and pictorial art has become the "anxious and infinite search for its source" (Blanchot 289). From Heidegger to Blanchot, including Hölderlin, Mallarmé, and the surrealists,[1] the poet—clearly marginalized by political domination in the modern world—turns back toward his or her proper home in language and displays its resources rather than naively attack the representation of an external object. In this process, melancholy becomes the secret mainspring of a new rhetoric, which now follows the malaise, this ill-being, step by step, almost clinically, without ever overcoming it.

In such an image/word dichotomy, film displays the crudeness of horror or the external patterns of pleasure, whereas literature turns inward and withdraws from the world into the furrow of the crisis in thought. Turned inward in its formalism and, thereby, made more lucid than the enthusiastic "commitment" and the libertarian adolescent eroticism of existentialism, postwar modern literature has embarked nonetheless on an arduous path. Its quest for the invisible, which is perhaps motivated by a metaphysical ambition to remain faithful to the horror's intensity to the point of ultimate verbal exactitude, becomes imperceptible and progressively asocial, antidemonstrative, but also uninteresting because antispectacular. Media art on the one hand, the *nouveau roman* on the other illustrate these two extremes.

An Aesthetic of Awkwardness

The experiment that Marguerite Duras represents seems to be a confrontation with the "nothing" of Valéry rather than a "work pointing toward its origin," as Blanchot would have it. This is the "nothing" imposed on a troubled consciousness by the horror of World War II and, independent of the horror but parallel to it, by the individual's psychic malaise due to hidden biological, familial, and interpersonal calamities. Duras's writing is not a self-analysis that looks for its sources in the "music in letters" or in the undoing of narrative logic. If there is an exploration of form, it is subordinated to the confrontation with the silence of horror within the self and in the world. Such a confrontation leads to an aesthetic of *awkwardness* on the one hand and to a *noncathartic literature* on the other. How is the truth of pain to be spoken when the available rhetoric of literature and even that of everyday speech somehow always seem festive? It is only by subverting this festive rhetoric, distorting it, making it grate, rendering it awkward and clumsy. To be sure, there is a certain charm in Duras's drawn-out sentences, devoid of sonorous grace, in which verbs seem to forget subjects— "Her elegance, both when she moved and when she was in repose, said Tatiana, was upsetting" (*Ravishing* 5; modified trans.)—or which turn breathlessly, brusquely, onto objects or adjectival complements—"Then, although she still remained uncommunicative, she began to ask to eat, the window to be opened, sleep" (*Ravishing* 15; KAJ's trans.). Often one is jolted by a last-minute addition that seems crammed into an unexpecting clause but that gives the clause its meaning—surprise: "She aroused in him his special penchant for young girls, girls not completely grown into adults, for pensive, impertinent, inarticulate young girls" (*Ravishing* 20) or "Their union is constructed upon indifference, in a way which is general and which they apprehend moment by moment, *a union from which all preference is excluded*" (*Ravishing* 51; my italics). Or else one finds words that are superlative or too scholarly or, on the contrary, terms that are banal and overused and that convey a rigid, artificial, unhealthy grandiloquence: "I don't know. The only thing I know anything about is *the immobility of life*. Therefore, when this immobility is destroyed, I know it" (*Ravishing* 120; my italics) or "When you cried, it was for yourself only and not for *the admirable impossibility* of joining her across the difference that separates you" (*Maladie* 12; my italics; KAJ's trans.).

Hers is not spoken discourse but speech that has been overdone because undone, in the way a woman is undressed or un-made-up, not through carelessness but because of some illness that is incurable yet full of a captivating and defiant pleasure. In spite or perhaps because of this characteristic, Duras's distorted, artificial speech sounds odd, unexpected, and, above all, painful. An uneasy seduction draws you to the failures of the characters or the female narrator, to this nothing, the unsignifiable of a malady that lacks tragic paroxysm or beauty, a pain that has nothing left but its tension. In that sense, the stylistic awkwardness in Duras is the discourse of blunted pain.

Film compensates for the failure of this exaggeratedly silent or precious speech that is stretched taut as a rope over suffering. Recourse to theatrical representation, but especially to the filmic image, necessarily leads to an uncontrollable proliferation of associations, a wealth or poverty of meaning and emotion, depending on the viewer. While it is true that the images do not correct the verbal stylistic awkwardness, they nonetheless drown it in the inexpressible: "nothing" becomes undecidable and silence is suggestive. A collective art, even when it is under the screenwriter's control, film necessarily adds to the meager directions of an author who continually harbors an unhealthy secret within a textual plot that is ever more elusive. Film adds the inherently spectacular volumes and combinations of bodies, gestures, actors' voices, sets, lights, producers, of all those professions that involve *showing*. Duras uses film to consume its spectacular force, submerging it in elliptical words and allusive sounds until the invisible becomes dazzling. But she also uses film for its surplus of fascination, which compensates for the verbal shrinkage. By increasing the seductive power of the Durassian characters, their invisible malady becomes less contagious on screen because it is acted out: filmed depression always seems a strange artifice.

Accordingly, Duras's texts should not be given to fragile readers, male or female. Instead, such readers should see her films or plays, where the same malady of pain is subdued, enveloped in a dreamy charm that both softens it and makes it more artificial, invented, in short, conventional. By contrast, her books bring us close to madness. They do not show it from afar, nor do they observe and

analyze it so that the suffering, at a distance, offers the hope that one day, somehow or other, there will be a solution. On the contrary, Duras's texts tame the malady of death to become one with it, part of it every step of the way, no distance, no escape. There is no purification at the end of these novels laden with disease, no heightened sense of well-being, no promise of a beyond, not even the enchanting beauty of style or irony that would provide a bonus of pleasure beyond the ill revealed.

Without Catharsis

With neither cure nor God, without value or beauty other than the malady itself, seized at the site of its essential fissure, Duras's art is perhaps as minimally cathartic as art can be. Undoubtedly, this is because it stems more from sorcery and bewitchment than from the grace and forgiveness traditionally associated with artistic genius. A somber and yet listlessly delicate complicity with the malady of pain and death emanates from Durassian texts. This complicity leads us to x-ray our madness, to the dangerous brinks where the unity of meaning, person, and life falls apart. "Mystery in full light" is how Barrès described Claude Lorrain's paintings; with Duras, there is madness in full light: "I went mad in full possession of my senses" (*Lover* 86). We are present at the nothing of meaning and feeling, which lucidity follows into extinction. We witness clearly our own distress neutralized, with no sense of tragedy or enthusiasm, in the frigid insignificance of a psychic numbing, which is the minimal but also the ultimate sign of pain and ravishment.

Clarice Lispector (1924–77) also offers a revelation of suffering and death without the aesthetic of forgiveness. Her *Apple in the Dark* (*Maçã no Escuro*) seems to be written in opposition to Dostoevsky. Lispector's hero, like Raskolnikov, murders a woman (but his victim is his own wife) and meets two other women who represent the spiritual and the carnal. While they separate him from the murder—as Sonia does for the convict in *Crime and Punishment*—they neither save nor pardon him; indeed, they hand him over to the police. This ending, however, is neither the reverse of pardon nor a punishment. The inescapable calm of destiny descends on the protagonists and ends the novel with an implacable, possibly feminine, gentleness that recalls Duras's disabused tone, the unforgiving mirror of the subject's distress. If Lispector's universe, in contrast to Dostoevsky's, has no forgiveness, it nonetheless contains a complicity among protagonists. Their ties persist beyond their separation and weave a welcoming, invisible environment once the novel is done.[2] Moreover, beyond the sinister unveiling of ill, the humor that runs through Lispector's ferocious stories has a purifying value and serves to distance the reader from the crisis.

There is nothing like this in Duras. Death and pain are the text's spiderweb. Complicitous readers who succumb to its charm must beware: they may remain in the web for good. The "crisis in literature" that Valéry, Caillois, and Blanchot describe attains a kind of apotheosis in Duras. Literature is neither self-criticism nor criticism nor a generalized ambivalence, astutely blending man and woman, real and imaginary, true and false in the disabused celebration of a semblance that dances on the volcano of an impossible object or a lost time. In Duras, the crisis leaves writing just short of a complete distortion of meaning and confines it to the laying bare of malady. Noncathartic, this literature encounters, recognizes, but also propagates the ill that mobilizes it. Although close to being the opposite of clinical discourse, it enjoys the secondary advantages of the malady, cultivating and taming but never exhausting it. In view of such faithfulness to this malaise, one can understand how Duras found alternatives in film's neoromantic conveying of messages and in ideological or metaphysical meditations. Between *Destroy, She Said* (1969) and *La maladie de la mort* (1982), in which the theme of love and death finds its ultimate condensation, there are thirteen years of films, plays, and explanations.[3]

In *The Lover* (1984) erotic exoticism assists the beings and words exhausted by a tacit death. The novel displays the passion that is constant in Duras's work—painful and murderous, self-conscious and restrained. "She could say she doesn't love him. She says nothing. Suddenly, all at once, she knows, knows that he doesn't understand her, that he never will, that he lacks the power to understand such perverseness" (*Lover* 37). At the same time, the novel contains social and geographic realism, a journalistic account of colonial shabbiness and the malaise of the Occupation, and a naturalistic rendering of maternal failure and hatred. All this pervades the slick and unhealthy pleasure of the girl prostitute who yields to the tearful sensuality of a rich Chinese man sadly, and yet with the perseverance of a

professional narrator. While remaining an impossible dream, feminine *jouissance* is anchored in local color and in a history that are certainly distant but that the third world masses and the realism of familial carnage make plausible, strangely close and intimate. With *The Lover*, pain attains a neoromantic social and historical harmony that ensured the book success in the media.

Not all of Duras's oeuvre previous to *The Lover* follows an ascetic faithfulness to madness. Among the many texts that do, however, I choose to discuss those that reveal the culminating moments of madness.

Hiroshima of Love

There can be no artifice about Hiroshima, because it happened. There can be no tragic or pacifist artifice in the face of the atomic explosion, no rhetorical artifice before the mutilation of feelings: "All one can do is talk about the impossibility of talking about Hiroshima. The knowledge of Hiroshima being stated à priori by an exemplary delusion of the mind" (*Hiroshima* 9). The sacrilege is Hiroshima itself, the deathly event and not its repercussions. Duras's text proposes "to have done with the description of horror by horror, for that has been done by the Japanese themselves" and to "make this horror rise again from its ashes by incorporating it in a love that will necessarily be special and 'wonderful' " (9). The nuclear explosion thus infiltrates the love itself, and its devastating violence makes it both impossible and superbly erotic, condemned and magically attractive, as is the nurse (Emanuelle Riva) in one of passion's paroxysms. The text and film begin not with the expected image of the mushroom cloud but with fragments of the intertwined bodies of two lovers, who could also be in the throes of death: "Instead we see mutilated bodies—the heads, the hips—moving—in the throes of love or death—and covered successively with the ashes, the dew, of atomic death—and the sweat of love fulfilled" (8). Love stronger than death? Perhaps: "Their personal story, however brief it may be, always dominates Hiroshima" (10). But perhaps not. For, if He comes from Hiroshima, She comes from Nevers, where "she was mad. Mad with spite" (10). Her first lover was a German; he was killed at the Liberation; her head was shaved. A first love was killed by "the ultimate of horror and stupidity" (12). But in a certain sense the horror of Hiroshima frees her from her French tragedy. The use of the atomic weapon seems to prove that horror does not exist only on one side; it has neither camp nor party, it rages absolutely. This transcendence of horror frees the woman in love from a false sense of guilt. She can then take her "hopeless love" to Hiroshima. Beyond their marriages, which they call happy, the protagonists' new love, despite its power and riveting authenticity, will also be "killed": it harbors a disaster on both sides—a Nevers on one, a Hiroshima on the other. However intense it may be in its unnameable silence, love is henceforth suspended, pulverized, atomized.

For the woman, to love is to love a dead man. The body of her new lover is confused with the corpse of her first love, which she had covered with her own body for a day and night, when she also tasted its blood. Moreover, her passion is intensified by the desire for the impossible that the Japanese lover represents. In spite of his "international" air and the Western-like face that the screenplay specifies, he remains if not exotic at least other, from another world, a beyond, so that he blends into the image of the German, beloved and dead in Nevers. But the dynamic Japanese engineer is also marked by death because he necessarily carries the moral stigmata of the atomic death that took his countrymen as its first victims. Is this a love burdened by death or the love of death? Does love become impossible or is this a necrophiliac passion? Is my love a Hiroshima or do I love Hiroshima because its pain is my eros? *Hiroshima, mon amour* sustains this ambiguity, which is, perhaps, the postwar version of love. Or, perhaps, this historical version of love reveals the profound ambiguity of love unto death, the deathly halo of all passion.

> That he is dead doesn't keep her from desiring him. She wants him so badly she can't bear it any longer, and he is dead. An exhausted body, breathing heavily. Her mouth is moist. Her pose is that of a lustful woman, immodest to the point of vulgarity. More immodest than anywhere else. Disgusting. She desires a dead man. (96)

> Love serves life by making dying easier. (92)

The implosion of love into death and death into love achieves its climactic expression in the unendurable pain of madness: "They pretended I was dead. . . . I went mad. Out of spite. I spit in my mother's face, it seems" (107). This madness, ravaged and murderous, is nothing less than her absorption of his death: "One might believe her dead,

so completely has his death drained all life from her" (87). The identification of the protagonists, which confuses their boundaries, their words, their beings, is a permanent figure in Duras. In an effort not to die as he did, and to survive their dead love, the woman nonetheless becomes *like* a dead woman: dissociated from others and from time, she has the eternal animal gaze of the cat. She is mad, "dead of love in Nevers": "I couldn't feel the slightest difference between this dead body and mine. All I could find between this body and mine were obvious similarities, do you understand?" (65). Frequent, even permanent, the identification with the object of mourning is in fact absolute and unavoidable. By that token, mourning becomes impossible as the heroine is transformed into a crypt inhabited by a living corpse.

Private and Public

All of Marguerite Duras's oeuvre may be found in the text of *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1960), whose action takes place in 1957, twelve years after the atomic explosion. *Hiroshima* has everything: suffering, death, love, and their explosive merging in the mad melancholy of a woman. But, above all, what *Hiroshima* contains is the union of sociohistorical realism, which first appears in *The Sea Wall* (1950) and reappears in *The Lover* (1984), and the X ray of depression defined in *Moderato cantabile* (1958), which was to become the preferred terrain, indeed the exclusive realm of the intimist texts to come. If history moves to the background and eventually disappears in Duras's works, in *Hiroshima* it is both cause and setting. This drama of love and madness occurs independently of the political drama; the power of the passion surpasses the political events, however atrocious. Even impossible and mad love seems to triumph over these events, if one can speak of triumph in relation to eroticized pain or suspended love.

Durassian melancholy, however, also explores history. Within the psychic microcosm of the subject, private pain absorbs political horror. This French woman in Hiroshima may be Stendhalian, perhaps eternal, but she nonetheless exists because of the war, the Nazis, and the bomb. And yet, through its integration in private life, political life loses the autonomy that our conscience religiously wants to reserve for it. At the same time, the various parties in the world conflict do not disappear in a global condemnation that would be equivalent to an absolution of the crime in the name of love. The young German is an enemy, the harshness of the Resistance has its logic, and nothing is said to justify Japan's support of the Nazis or the violence of the American eleventh-hour counterattack. While the political facts are treated with an implicitly leftist political conscience (the Japanese man must unquestionably appear leftist), the aesthetic stake is still love and death. As a result, public events are depicted through the prism of madness.

In our time, the only event is human madness. Politics, especially in its murderous outbursts, is part of that madness. It is not, as it was for Hannah Arendt, the arena where human freedom unfolds. The modern world, the world of the world wars, the third world, the subterranean world of death that moves us do not have the policed splendor of the Greek city. The modern political realm is massively, and in a totalitarian way, social, leveling, killing. Thus madness represents a space of antisocial, apolitical, and, paradoxically, free individuation. In the face of madness, political events, however exorbitant and monstrous—the Nazi invasion, the atomic explosion—are internalized and measured only by the human pain they induce. In the extreme, moral pain creates no hierarchy between a French woman in love whose head is shaved and a Japanese woman burned by atomic fallout. For this ethic and aesthetic focused on pain, the "trivial" private realm attains a somber dignity that reduces the import of the public world even as it attributes to history the grandiose responsibility of triggering the malady of death. Public life, then, becomes profoundly unreal, whereas private life is intensified to the point that it absorbs the real and invalidates all other preoccupation. Political by nature, the new world is unreal. We experience the reality of a new world of pain.

Given the imperative of this fundamental malaise, diverse political commitments appear to be equivalent and reveal their escapist strategies and treacherous weaknesses:

> Collaborators, the Fernandezes were. And I, two years after the war, I was a member of the French Communist party. The parallel is complete and absolute. The two things are the same, the same pity, the same call for help, the same lack of judgment, the same superstition if you like, that consists in believing in a political solution to the personal problem. (*Lover* 68)

At that juncture, the examination of the political cause is suspended and replaced by an exclusive detailing of the rainbow of pain. We are survivors, the living dead, corpses on suspended sentence, harboring our personal Hiroshima in the hollow of our private world.

We can imagine an art that would recognize the weight of modern pain and yet drown it in the conqueror's victories, in metaphysical sarcasm or enthusiasm, or even in the tenderness of erotic pleasure. Is it not true, after all, or above all, that today we have vanquished death more than ever before, that life always wins out in our experience, and that the destructive military and political forces of World War II seem to have been halted? Duras chooses, or yields to, a different path: the complicitous, voluptuous, bewitching contemplation of death within us, of the permanent wound.

La douleur (1985), a strange, secret journal kept during the war that narrates Robert L.'s return from Dachau, reveals one of the essential biographical and historical sources of this pain. It is the human struggle against death in the face of the Nazi extermination and the survivor's struggle with his cadaverous body to rediscover the vital forces of life. The narrator, both witness and combatant in this fight between life and death, presents it from within her love for the resurrected dead man:

> The struggle with death started immediately. You had to go at it gently, delicately, tactfully. It closed in on him from all sides. Still, there was a way you could reach him even though the space for communication wasn't very large. But life was still in him, hardly as big as a splinter, yet that big. Death rose to attack—temperature 39.5 the first day. Then 40. Then 41. At 41, death was out of breath: the heart vibrated like the string of a violin. Still at 41, but it vibrates. We thought the heart would give out. Steady at 41. Death strikes with whiplashes, but the heart is deaf. It can't go on, the heart will give out.
>
> (*Douleur* 57; KAJ's trans.)

The narrator is meticulously concerned with the minute, essential details of the body's fight with death, of death's fight with the body: she studies his "haggard but sublime" face, his bones, skin, intestines, even the "inhuman" or "human" shit. At the heart of her love for this man, which itself has been dying, she finds, through pain and thanks to it, her passion for the survivor Robert L., a unique and thus forever beloved being. Death revives the dead love:

> At the sound of the name, Robert L., I cry. I'm still crying. I could cry all my life. . . . I came to know this man Robert L. best during his agony. . . . I saw then and forever what made him himself alone, and nobody and nothing else in the world. It was then that I could speak about the special grace of Robert L.
>
> (*Douleur* 80; KAJ's trans.)

Is pain enamoured of death the supreme individuation?

It was perhaps necessary for Duras to experience the strangeness of being uprooted. A childhood on the Asian continent, the tensions of an arduous existence with a hard but courageous mother who was a schoolteacher, the early encounter with her brother's mental illness and with everyone's misery—these may have produced the personal sensitivity to pain that allowed her to espouse the drama of our times (with such avidness). For almost all of us, this drama places the malady of death at the center of psychic experience. It involves a childhood where hope and where love, already burned by the fire of restrained hatred, could only become apparent under the oppressiveness of misfortune:

> And she thought: "I'll spit in his face." But when she opened the door the spittle dried up in her mouth. It wasn't worth while. This was just a misfortune, this Monsieur Jo, another misfortune like the sea walls, the horse that died. He was not a person: he was only a misfortune.
>
> (*Sea Wall* 57)

This childhood of hatred and fear is the source and emblem of a vision of contemporary history:

> It's a family of stone, petrified so deeply it's impenetrable. Everyday we try to kill one another, to kill. Not only do we not talk to one another, we don't even look at one another. . . . Because of what's been done to our mother, so amiable, so trusting, we hate life, we hate ourselves. (*Lover* 54–55)

> My memory is of a central fear. (84)

> I think I can already say, I have a vague desire to die. (103)

> . . . I feel a sadness I expected and which comes only from myself. (44)

With the thirst for pain unto madness, Duras reveals the grace of our most contemporary despairs, those that are most tenacious, most resistant to faith.

Woman as Sadness

"How does a woman go about things?" asks the Vice-Consul. The Secretary guffaws. . . .
"I should play on her sadness," says the Vice-Consul, "if I got the chance." (*Vice-Consul* 61)

Sadness could be the essential malady of Duras's women if it were not their unhealthy core (Anne-Marie Stretter [*The Vice-Consul*], Lol V. Stein [*The Ravishing of Lol Stein*], and Alissa [*Destroy, She Said*] are three that come to mind). It is an undramatic, faded, unnameable sadness, the nothing that brings on quiet tears and elliptical words and that merges pain and ravishment unobtrusively: "I've heard that . . . her heaven is tears," says the Vice-Consul about Anne-Marie Stretter. The strange ambassador's wife in Calcutta seems to carry death buried within her thin and pale body: " 'Death in the midst of life,' says the Vice-Consul at last, 'death following but never catching up. Is that it?' " (139). More than her shattered loves, she carries within her the loss of a musical career and the melancholic charm of her childhood Venice. She is the walking metaphor of a dull blue-green Venice, an end-of-the-world city that remains for others the exciting City of the Doges. And yet, Anne-Marie Stretter is the incarnation of the sorrow of every-woman; she is "from Dijon, Milan, Brest, Dublin," she is perhaps somewhat English, no, she is universal: "What I mean is," she says, "it's too simple to say that one comes from Venice, or only from Venice. It seems to me that one also comes from other places where one has stopped along the way" (86).

Sorrow is her sex, the focal point of her eroticism. When she covertly convenes her cenacle of lovers at the Blue Moon or in her secret house,

> They look at her. She is thin in her black housecoat, her eyes are screwed up. She is no longer beautiful.
> She seems to be in a state of what can only be described as unbearable well-being.
> And now, the thing happens that Charles Rossett, without knowing it, has been waiting for. Has it really happened? Yes. There are the tears. They are oozing out between her eyelids and rolling down her cheeks, in very small, glistening drops. (156)

They both stand there, looking at her. Her long eyelids quiver, but the tears do not flow. . . . "I cry for no reason I can explain. It's as though I were shot through with grief. Someone has to weep, and I seem to be the one."
No doubt she is aware of the presence of the men from Calcutta. She lies absolutely motionless. If she were to move . . . no. She seems now to be in the grip of a sorrow so old that it is impossible any longer to weep for it. (158)

This sorrow, expressing an impossible pleasure, is the agonizing sign of frigidity. Holding back a passion that cannot flow, this sorrow is, more profoundly, the prison of an impossible mourning for an ancient love made up wholly of sensation and *autosensation*; it is inalienable, inseparable, and, for that very reason, unnameable. This unfulfilled mourning for the autosensual preobject constitutes feminine frigidity. Thus the sorrow attached to it contains a stranger, a woman unknown to the one who inhabits the surface. To the disaffected narcissism of melancholic manifestations, sorrow opposes and adds a profound narcissism, archaic autosensuality, wounded affects. Indeed, at the source of this sorrow, there exists an unassumable abandonment. Sorrow is revealed by the play of duplication where the body recognizes itself in the image of another so long as this other is its replica.

"Not-I," or Abandonment

Abandonment represents the insurmountable trauma inflicted by the discovery—which undoubtedly occurs early and is thus impossible to articulate—of the existence of a "not-I." In fact, abandonment structures what remans of a story in Duras's texts.[4] Woman is abandoned by her lover. The French woman's German lover dies in Nevers. Michael Richardson publicly leaves Lol V. Stein. Again Michael Richardson, the impossible lover, punctuates a series of disasters in Anne-Marie Stretter's life. Elisabeth Alione loses her stillborn child, and before that, the young doctor who loved her tries to kill himself when she shows her husband her lover's letter (*Destroy, She Said*). The man and the girl in *La maladie de la mort* are possessed of an inherent mourning that turns their physical passion into something distant, morbid, always already condemned. Finally, the little French girl and her Chinese lover know that their liaison is impossible and condemned from the outset; thus the girl convinces herself not to love and is not troubled by her lost passion except when she hears the disturbing echo of a Chopin melody on the boat taking her to France.

This sense of inevitable abandonment that the real separation or death of the lovers finally reveals seems immanent and almost predestined. It centers

on the maternal figure. The mother of the young Nevers woman was separated from her husband, or else (the narrator hesitates) she was Jewish and left for the unoccupied zone. And before the fateful ball where Michael Richardson will abandon her for Anne-Marie Stretter, Lol V. Stein arrives accompanied by her mother, whose elegant and bony silhouette, bearing "emblems of some obscure negation on the part of nature" (5), prefigures the elegant, deathlike, and inaccessible thinness of the future rival. More dramatically, there is the mad, pregnant, and gangrenous Buddhist woman of *The Vice-Consul*, who travels obliviously from Indochina to India and who struggles with death but primarily with the mother who threw her out of her childhood home: "Aloud, she speaks a few words of Cambodian: Good morning, Good night. She used to talk to the child. To whom is she talking now? To her old mother in the Plain of Tonle Sap, the fountain-head, the instigator of all her misfortunes, her blighted destiny, her innocent love" (50).

The mother's madness in *The Lover* looms with a lugubrious Gothic force; the mother is, in fact, the archetype of the mad women who people the Durassian universe: "I see my mother is clearly mad. . . . From birth. In the blood. She wasn't ill with it, for her it was like health . . ." (30). Hatred locks daughter and mother together in a vise of passion that emerges as the source of the mysterious silence that streaks the writing:

> . . . she ought to be locked up, beaten, killed. . . . I think I wrote about our love for our mother, but I don't know if I wrote about how we hated her too. . . . It's the area on whose brink silence begins. What happens there is silence, the slow travail of my whole life. I'm still there, watching those possessed children, as far away from the mystery now as I was then. I've never written, though I thought I wrote, never loved, though I thought I loved, never done anything but wait outside the closed door.
> (23, 25)

Out of fear of maternal madness, the novelist eliminates the mother, separating from her with a violence no less murderous than that of the mother who beats her prostituted daughter. Destroy, the daughter-narrator seems to say in *The Lover*, but in erasing the figure of the mother, she actually takes her place, substituting herself for maternal madness. She does not kill the mother so much as extend her presence into the negative hallucination of an always loving identification:

> There suddenly, close to me, was someone sitting in my mother's place who wasn't my mother. . . . that identity irreplaceable by any other had disappeared and I was powerless to make it come back, make it start to come back. There was no longer anything there to inhabit her image. I went mad in full possession of my senses.
> (85–86)

While the bond to the mother is an antecedent to sorrow, the text does not designate it as the cause or origin. Sorrow is self-sufficient. It transcends cause and effect; it sweeps aside every entity, the subject as well as the object. Is sorrow the ultimate threshold of our objectless state? It defies description, but it can be perceived in sudden breaths, tears, in the blanks between words: " 'I am drunk with the sufferings of India. Aren't we all, more or less? It's impossible to talk about such suffering unless one has made it as much a part of oneself as breathing' " (*Vice-Consul* 124). Massive and external, sorrow is connected with separation. Or, then, it can be considered a profound scission of feminine being, experienced as the impassable void of boredom at the very site of the subject's division:

> The only times she did speak was to say how impossible it was for her to express how boring and long it was, how interminable it was, to be Lol Stein. They asked her to try and pull herself together. She didn't understand why she should, she said. The difficulty she experienced in searching for a single word seemed insurmountable. She acted as though she expected nothing further from life.
>
> Was she thinking of something, of herself? they asked her. She didn't understand the question. It seemed as though she took everything for granted, and that the infinite weariness of being unable to escape from the state she was in was not something that had to be thought about, that she had become a desert into which some nomad-like faculty had propelled her, in the interminable search for what? They did not know. Nor did she offer any answer. (*Ravishing* 14)

On Ravishment: The Absence of Pleasure

The Durassian woman does not represent all women. Still, she possesses some typical features of female sexuality. In this being of utter sadness, one tends to see the exhaustion rather than the repression of the erotic drives. Seized by the love object—by the lover or, before him, by the unmournable mother—the drive is faded, emptied of its power to create a bond of sexual pleasure or of symbolic complicity. To be sure, the lost "object" has left its trace in unused affects and in a discourse emptied of meaning, but it is the trace of an absence, of a *fundamental unbinding*. It can induce ravishment but not pleasure. This love can only be found in a

secret cave where nothing exists except the horrible agony of a girl merging into the glowing eyes of Nevers cats.

The disguised ravishment is in some sense anerotic. For it lacks a bond; it is separated from the other and turns inward toward the hollow of one's own body only to be disconnected at the very moment of *jouissance* and to sink into a beloved death of self. Might this anerotic ravishment be, if not the secret, then at least an aspect of female *jouissance*? *La maladie de la mort* would so suggest. In this text, the man savors the open body of the young woman like a regal discovery of sexual difference that would otherwise be inaccessible but that still seems to him dangerous, engulfing, deathly. He denies himself the pleasure of lying within the wet sex of his partner by imagining her murder: "You discover that it's there, within her, that the malady of death is fomenting, that it's this figure spread out in front of you that decrees the malady of death" (38; KAJ's trans.). At the same time, she knows death. Detached and indifferent to sex, yet in love with love and docile toward pleasure, she loves the death she bears within her. Even more, this complicity with death gives her the feeling of being beyond it: woman does not submit to death, she inflicts it because *she is part of it*. Whereas the man *has* the malady of death, she *is* the malady of death moving ever elsewhere: ". . . she looks at you through the green filter of her eyes. She says: You announce the reign of death. You can't love death if it's inflicted on you from the outside. You think you're crying because you can't love. You're crying because you can't inflict death" (48). Deified by the narrator, the inaccessible woman moves elsewhere, bringing death to others through a love that is "an admirable impossibility" for herself and her lover. The mythification of the inaccessible feminine in Duras then contains a certain truth about the female experience of a *jouissance* of sorrow. Moreover, this *no-man's-land* of painful affects and devalorized words that brush the heights of mystery does not lack expressiveness. However dead it may be, this no-man's-land has its own language of duplication. It creates echoes, doubles, replicas that express the passion or destruction from whose deprivation the woman suffers. And in her sorrow she cannot speak.

Couples and Doubles in Duplication

(Re)duplication is a blocked repetition. Whereas repetition extends in time, reduplication is outside of time, a reverberation in space, a game of mirrors with no perspective, no duration. For a while, a double can freeze the instability of the same, give it temporary identity, but eventually it explores the abyss of the same, probing those unsuspected and unplumbable depths. The double is the unconscious depth of the same, that which threatens it, can engulf it.

Created by the mirror, reduplication precedes the specular identification characteristic of the mirror stage. It leads back to the limits of unstable identities, confused by a drive that nothing can defer, negate, or signify. There is an unnameable power in such a gaze, beyond sight, the faculty that functions like a privileged and unfathomable universe in desire: "He was satisfied just to gaze at Suzanne with troubled eyes, to go on gazing, to enhance his view with another supplementary look, as is usual when one is devoured with passion" (*Sea Wall* 54). Beyond or beneath sight, hypnotic passion sees doubles.

Anne Desbaresdes and Chauvin in *Moderato cantabile* (1958) construct their love story as an echo of their imagined tale of an impassioned couple, according to which the woman wants her lover to kill her. Would the two protagonists exist without the reference to the imaginary masochistic *jouissance* of this couple? The narrative is structured to play out—"moderato cantabile"—another internal reduplication: between mother and son. This couple, in which the woman's identity drowns in her love for the child, marks the apogee of imaged reflection. If daughter and mother can be rivals and enemies (*The Lover*), mother and son in *Moderato cantabile* represent pure devouring love. Anne Desbaresdes's son absorbs her much like the wine she drinks, and even before it absorbs her. She accepts herself—she is indulgent and ravished—only in him. He is the axis that replaces her underlying disappointments in love and that reveals her madness. She would probably be dead without him. With him, she is in a vertigo of love, of practical and pedagogical concerns, but also of solitude, eternally in exile from self and others. Like a banal quotidian replica of the woman who wanted to be killed by her lover at the beginning of the novel, Anne Desbaresdes, the mother, lives her ecstatic death in her love for her son. While unveiling the masochistic depths of desire, this complex figure (mother-son/female lover–male lover/impassioned dead woman–impassioned killer) reveals the narcissistic and autosensual pleasures that sustain feminine suffering. The son is undoubtedly the mother resur-

rected but, conversely, her "deaths" survive in him—her humiliations and unnamed wounds have become living flesh. Indeed, the more that maternal love hovers over a woman's suffering, the more the child represents a painful and subtle tenderness.

The Japanese and the German in *Hiroshima* are also doubles. In the experience of love, the Japanese man reawakens the memory of the Nevers woman's dead lover. But the two masculine images blend in a hallucinating puzzle that suggests that the love for the German is present and cannot possibly be forgotten and, by the same token, that the love for the Japanese man is destined to die. Such is the reduplication and exchange of attributes. Through this strange osmosis, the vitality of one of the survivors of the Hiroshima catastrophe is shadowed by a macabre fate, whereas the other man's certain death survives, diaphanous, in the woman's wounded passion. This reverberation of her love objects pulverizes the heroine's identity: she belongs to no time but to the space of contaminated entities where her own being oscillates, alternately saddened and ravished.

The Criminal Secret

This technique of reduplication culminates in *The Vice-Consul*. Anne-Marie Stretter's decadent melancholy complements the expressionist madness of the Buddhist beggar from Savannakhet, who echoes the theme of the Asian woman with the gangrenous foot in *The Sea Wall* (94). Next to this woman's poignant misery and rotting body, Anne-Marie Stretter's Venetian tears seem a capricious and insufferable luxury. Yet the contrast between the two does not hold once pain becomes part of the picture. The two women's images blend together in malady, and Anne-Marie Stretter's ethereal universe gains a dimension of madness that would be far weaker without the imprint of the wandering woman. Both are musicians, one a pianist and the other a delirious singer; both are exiles, one from Europe, the other from Asia; both are wounded: one suffers from an invisible wound, the other is the gangrenous victim of social, familial, human violence. The duo becomes a trio with the addition of another replica, a masculine double: The Vice-Consul of Lahore. A strange character, he must have some archaic, unavowed distress that is perceptible only through his purported sadistic acts: throwing stink bombs in school, taking gunshots at living beings in Lahore. But has he, in fact, committed these acts? Feared by everyone, the Vice-Consul becomes Anne-Marie Stretter's accomplice, although this man in love must suffer her coldness since even her seductive tears are reserved for others. The Vice-Consul might be a vicious transformation of the ambassador's melancholy wife, her masculine replica, her sadistic variant, the expression of the very act she cannot commit, even in intercourse. The trio of these unbalanced figures—the Buddhist, the Vice-Consul, the depressive woman—weaves a universe that escapes the other characters in the novel, however attached they may be to the ambassador's wife. That universe offers the narrator rich ground for her psychological concerns—the mad criminal secret that lies beneath the surface of our diplomatic behavior and to which certain women, by their sadness, discreetly bear witness.

The act of love is often the instance of such reduplication, each partner becoming the other's double. In *La maladie de la mort*, the man's deathly obsession merges with his mistress's thoughts of death. The tears of the man stimulated by the woman's "abominable fragility" respond to her sleepy, detached silence and reveal its meaning: suffering. What she views as the falseness in his discourse, what does not correspond to the subtle reality of things, is refracted in her indifference to his passion and her flight from the room where they made love. In this way, the two characters seem to become two voices, two waves "between the white sheets and the white ocean" (*Maladie* 61; KAJ's trans.).

A past pain fills these men and women who are doubles and replicas and divests them of all other psychology. These carbon copies are individuated only by their *proper names*, incomparable, impenetrable black diamonds over a suffering expanse. Anne Desbaresdes, Lol V. Stein, Elisabeth Alione, Michael Richardson, Max Thor, Stein—these names seem to condense and retain a history that is perhaps as unknown to their bearers as to the reader but that inheres in their strange harmony and in the end is almost revealed to our own unconscious strangeness, suddenly becoming incomprehensibly familiar.

Event and Hatred between Women

An echo of the deathly symbiosis with the mother, passion between two women is one of the most intense figures of doubling. Once Lol V. Stein is dispossessed of her fiancé by Anne-Marie Stret-

ter (who, we know from her inconsolable sadness in *The Vice-Consul*, is not fulfilled by her victory), she retreats within a bored and inaccessible isolation: "to know nothing about Lol Stein was already to know her" (*Ravishing* 72). Years later, however, when everyone believes she has been cured and is happily married, she spies on her former friend Tatiana Karl and Jacques Hold making love. In fact, she is in love with the couple, Tatiana especially: she wants to take Tatiana's place in the same arms, the same bed. This absorption of the other woman's passion—Tatiana being the substitute for the first rival, Anne-Marie Stretter, and she, in turn, for the mother—is also reversed: Tatiana, always carefree, now begins to suffer. The two women are carbon copies from now on, replicas of each other in the scenario of pain that, in the ravished eyes of Lol V. Stein, governs the world's merry-go-round:

> . . . things are becoming somewhat clearer around her, and she is suddenly seeing the sharp edges, the remains that are left here and there throughout the world, which turn this way and that, she sees this leftover already half eaten by rats, Tatiana's pain, and is embarrassed by it, sentiment is rife everywhere, people are slipping on that greasy substance. She used to think that it was possible for there to be a time which filled and emptied alternately, which filled and emptied, and then was ready to be used again, always, to be used and reused, she still believes it, she will always believe it, she will never be cured. (148)

Doubles multiply in *Destroy, She Said* and hover over the theme of destruction. Once named in the text, that theme surfaces to clarify the title and to make the relations in the novel intelligible. Elisabeth Alione, depressed in the aftermath of an unhappy love and the stillbirth of her daughter, is recuperating in a desolate hotel full of people who are ill. She meets Stein there and his double, Max Thor, two Jews eternally becoming writers: "how strongly sometimes one feels one mustn't write" (*Destroy* 27). He loves Alissa; they love Alissa and are fascinated by Elisa. Alissa Thor discovers that her husband is happy to meet Elisa, who seduces Stein. Thus she, too, lets herself be loved by the same Stein (the reader is free to compose dyads in this suggestive plot). She is dumbfounded that Max Thor enjoys this kaleidoscopic universe of doubles—with Stein, and probably because of Elisa, although he claims to be happy also because of Alissa. "Destroy," she says (19). Fully inhabited by Elisa, even if it is through this destruction, Alissa sees herself in Elisa and expresses, in the ambiguity of identification and decomposition, a real madness beneath her fresh and youthful appearance: "I'm afraid. . . . Afraid of being abandoned, afraid of the future, afraid of loving, of violence, of numbers, of the unknown, of hunger, of poverty, of the truth" (45). Whose madness? Hers or Elisa's? "Destroy, she said." The two women understand each other, however. Alissa is Elisa's voice. She repeats Elisa's remarks, reveals her past, foresees a future only of repetitions and doubles since the strangeness of both women means that each becomes in time the other's double and her own other:

> Elisabeth doesn't answer.
> "We knew each other as children," she says. "Our families were friends."
> Alissa repeats softly:
> "We knew each other as children. Our families were friends."
> Silence.
> "If you loved him, if you'd loved him once, just once in your life, you'd have loved the others," Alissa says. "Stein and Max Thor."
> "I don't understand . . ." Elisabeth says, "but . . ."
> "It'll happen other times, " Alissa says, "later. And it won't be you or them. Pay no attention to what I say."
> "Stein says you're insane," Elisabeth says.
> "Stein will say anything." (64–65)

The two women echo each other. One finishes the other's words, and the other denies them even though she knows that the words tell a part of their common truth, their complicity. This duality might come from being women, from sharing a same, so-called hysterical, plasticity, a readiness to take one's own image for the other's ("She feels what the other feels" [82; KAJ's trans.]). Or does this plasticity come from loving the same male double? From having no stable love object, dissecting this object in a shimmering of elusive reflections, lacking an axis capable of arresting and calming an endemic passion, one that might be maternal?

Indeed, the man dreams of her, of them. Since Max Thor is in love with his wife, Alissa, but does not forget he is Stein's double, he names Elisa in his dream while Stein names Alissa in his. Elisa/Alissa. Thus they "are both reflected in the mirror":

> "We're alike," says Alissa. "We'd love Stein if it were possible to love."
> . . . .
> "How beautiful you are," Elisabeth says.
> "We're women," Alissa says. "Look."
> . . . .
> "I love and desire you," Alissa says. (62–64)

Despite the homonymy, no identification occurs between them. After the fleeting moment of specular and hypnotic recognition, there is the dizzying impossibility of being the other. Hypnosis, which generally means that "the one is the other," here combines with the painful awareness that their bodily fusion is impossible, that they will never be inseparable mother and daughter: Elisa's daughter is dead at birth, destroyed, and this loss unbalances each of the protagonists and deepens her unstable identity.

The ingredients of this mixture of hypnosis and utopian passion are jealousy, restrained hatred, fascination, sexual desire for the rival and her lover. A whole spectrum is inscribed in the behavior and words of these lunatic creatures who experience "enormous pain" and who do not speak but rather "sing" their complaints (79; KAJ's trans.). The violence of these drives, which cannot be reduced to words, is veiled by restrained conduct, an internal mastery that comes from an attempt to give the conduct form, as one would with a preexistent mode of writing. The cry of hatred, then, does not resound with savage brutality. It is transformed into a music that makes visible the knowledge of an invisible, subterranean, uterine secret, something like the smile of the Virgin or the Mona Lisa. It is a music that conveys to civilization a disciplined, ravished, but always unrelieved pain beyond words. It is a music both neutral and destructive: "shattering the trees, thundering down the walls," but weakening rage into "sublime gentleness" and "pure laughter" (84, 85).

Does feminine melancholy find relief in reunion with the other woman, when she is imagined as the man's privileged partner? Or does it thrive on the impossibility of meeting and satisfying the other woman? In any case, between women, restrained hatred is drained and returns inwardly to the place where archaic rivalry lies imprisoned. When depression emerges, it is eroticized in destruction: unleashed violence with the mother, graceful demolition with the friend.

The mad, dominating, broken-down mother is a powerful presence in *The Sea Wall.* "Desperate of hope itself" (113), she determines her children's sexuality:

> The doctor traced these attacks of hers to the crumbling of the sea wall. Maybe he was mistaken. So much resentment could only have accumulated very slowly, year by year, day by day. There was more than one single cause: there were thousands, counting the collapse of the sea walls, the world's injustice, the sight of her children splashing in the river. . . . (17)

Drained by "misfortune," exasperated by her daughter's indiscriminate sexuality, the mother has nervous fits: "Ma showered blows upon her again, as if driven by an irresistible compulsion. Suzanne, at her feet, half naked in her torn dress, wept. . . . 'And suppose I want to kill her? Suppose it would please me to kill her?' " (109–10). Under the influence of this passion, Suzanne gives herself without loving anyone—except, perhaps, her brother, Joseph. And this incestuous desire, which the brother shares and acts out in his own furious and quasi-delinquent manner (". . . it was almost like sleeping with a sister when I slept with her" [203]), establishes the key theme of the novels that follow: the impossibility of a love limited to doubles.

After the implosion of maternal hatred in the Buddhist woman's madness (*The Vice-Consul*), the mutual mother-daughter destruction in *The Lover* makes us realize that the unleashing of mother against daughter constitutes the "event" that the hating and enamored daughter watches for, experiences, and reproduces in wonderment: "My mother has attacks during which she falls on me, locks me up in my room, punishes me, undresses me, comes up to me and smells my body, my underwear, says she can smell the Chinese's scent" (58). The elusive double thus reveals the insistent presence of an archaic, uncontrollable, and imaginary love object. It literally deadens by its domination and evasions, its sororal or maternal proximity, but also its impregnable and therefore hating and hateful exteriority. All the figures of love converge on this autosensual and ravaging object even if they are continually reanimated by a masculine presence. Often central, the man's desire is nonetheless overwhelmed and overtaken by the wounded but slyly powerful passivity of the women. Moreover, the men are outsiders: the Chinese man in *The Lover*, the Japanese man in *Hiroshima, mon amour*, the series of Jews or uprooted diplomats. Sensual yet abstract, they are ravaged by a fear that their passion never masters. This impassioned fear functions like the backbone, axis, or launch for the mirror games between the women: they display the flesh of pain where men are its skeleton.

On the Other Side of the Mirror

In the space that separates two women, there is a ravished, unfulfillable dissatisfaction that could

crudely be called female homosexuality. In Duras, however, this dissatisfaction involves a profoundly nostalgic quest for the same as other, for the other as same within the spectrum of narcissistic mirage or hypnosis that the narrator considers inevitable. She recounts the psychic underground that precedes conquests of the opposite sex, that underlies the possible and perilous encounters between men and women. Traditionally, we pay no attention to this quasi-uterine space. And we are not wrong. For identities, bonds, and feelings are destroyed in this crypt of reflections. "Destroy, she said." Yet the company of women is neither necessarily savage nor simply destructive. Out of the fragility or impossibility of erotic bonds, this company creates an imaginary aura of complicity, somewhat painful but necessarily mournful, so that it drowns every sexual object, every sublime ideal in its narcissistic fluidity. Values cannot hold out against the "irony of the community," as Hegel referred to women. Ironic or not, women's destructiveness is not funny.

Pain unfolds its microcosm through the reverberation of the characters. They double themselves as in mirrors, magnifying their melancholy to the point of violence and delirium. This dramatic art of reduplication recalls the unstable identity of the child, who finds its mother's image in the mirror only as a replica, a calming or terrifying echo of itself. Like an alter ego settled within the range of intensive drives that motivate it, detached but never stable, the mother's image is always on the verge of reinvading the child's identity in a hostile boomerang effect. Identity, as a stable and solid self-image, wherein the subject's autonomy will be constituted, can be achieved only at the end of this process, once narcissistic mirroring culminates in a jubilant assumption that is the work of a third.

Even the most solid among us know, however, that a firm identity is a fiction. In grandiloquent and empty words, Durassian pain evokes an impossible mourning that, were it achieved, would detach us from our doubleness and set us down as independent and unified subjects. Thus this mourning seizes and draws us to the dangerous brinks of our psychic life.

Modern and Postmodern

This literature of our maladies parallels the distress that is generated and accentuated by the modern world but that nonetheless remains essential, transhistorical. It is a literature of limits as well because it exposes the limits of the unnameable. The characters' elliptical discourse, the obsessive evocation of a "nothing" that could sum up the malady of pain designate a wreckage of words in the face of the unnameable affect. This silence, as I have said, recalls the "nothing" that the Valerian eye saw in an incandescent oven at the heart of a monstrous disorder. Duras does not orchestrate this nothing as did Mallarmé, who looked for the music in words, or Beckett, who refined a syntax that stumbles or advances in fits and starts, diverting the forward motion of narrative. The reverberation of the characters, the inscription of silence, and the insistence on "nothing to say" as the ultimate manifestation of pain lead to a whiteness of meaning. Combined with rhetorical awkwardness, they constitute a universe of troubling and contagious malaise.

Historically and psychologically modern, this writing faces today's postmodern challenge. From now on, "the malady of pain" represents only a moment of *narrative synthesis* just as capable of bearing philosophical meditation in its complex vortex as erotic defenses or diverting pleasures. The postmodern lies closer to the human comedy than to abyssal malaise. Hell itself, thoroughly explored in postwar literature, seems to have lost its infernal inaccessibility and become our daily, transparent, almost banal lot—a "nothing"—just as our "truths" have become visualized, televised, in fact, not so secret as all that. Today, the desire for comedy covers over—without ignoring, however—the concern for truth without tragedy, this melancholy without purgatory. One is reminded of Marivaux and Crébillon.

A new amorous world is surfacing in the eternal return of historical and mental cycles. After the winter of worry follows the artifice of semblance; after the whiteness of boredom, the searing diversion of parody; and vice versa. Truth, in short, asserts itself just as well in the shimmerings of factitious pleasures as in painful mirror games. After all, does the wonder of psychic life not reside in these alternations of defenses and failures, smiles and tears, sunlight and melancholy?

Paris, France

Translated by Katharine A. Jensen

Notes

[1] In literature Roger Caillois favors "techniques of exploring the unconscious": "accounts—with or without commentary—*of depressions*, confusion, anguish, and affective personal experiences" (my italics; KAJ's trans.).

[2] "They both avoided looking at one another, overwrought with themselves, as if they finally had become part of that greater thing which sometimes manages to express itself in tragedy . . . as if they had just again realized the miracle of forgiveness; embarrassed by that miserable scene, they avoided looking at each other, uneasy, there are so many unaesthetic things to forgive. But, even covered with ridicule and rags, the mimicry of the resurrection had been done. Those things which seem not to happen, but do happen" (Lispector 353).

[3] Duras is the author of thirteen film scenarios and fifteen plays, three of which are adaptations.

[4] As Marcelle Marini suggests, "Marguerite Duras's strength is to hazard a discourse somewhere between 'a charm that would enact a rescue' and 'a suicidal love at first sight,' the death drive where what is called sublimation is said to originate" (56).

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