BREAKING THE SEQUENCE

Breaking the Sequence

Women's Experimental Fiction

INTRODUCED AND
EDITED BY
ELLEN G. FRIEDMAN AND
MIRIAM FUCHS

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Patriarchal she said what is it I know what it is it is I know I know so that I know what it is I know so I know so I know so I know what it is. Very slowly. I know what it is it is on the one side a to be her to be his to be their to be in an and to be I know what it is it is he who was an known not known was he was at first it was the grandfather then it was not that in that the father not of that grandfather and then she to be to be sure to be sure to be I know to be sure to be I know to be sure to be not as good as that. To be sure not to be sure to be sure correctly saying to be sure to be that. It was that. She was right. It was that.

Patriarchal Poetry.

—Gertrude Stein

By obeying the improvisations born of emotions, by abandoning myself to digressions and variations, I found an indigenous structure, a form born of organic growth, like crystal formations.

—Anaïs Nin

a night of utterly other discourses that will spark out of a minicircus of light upon a page . . . and generate endless stepping-stones into the dark, gathering up solitude as a needed strength that will nevertheless be resented by one and all especially one.

—Christine Brooke-Rose

I see myself: brown very thick skin tender low breasts with huge violet nipples the skin below them curves downwards over man's hips to heavy long spider's legs. . . . I'm looking down at my body and writing.

—Kathy Acker

Mary is tampering with the expected sequence. First she broke the sentence; now she has broken the sequence.

—Virginia Woolf

The Clandestine Fictions of Marguerite Duras

MARIA DIBATTISTA

La femme qui écrit se déguise en . . . , en homme.
M. Duras, *Les parleuses*

BEFORE the world can be represented, it must be felt to exist, but it is precisely this feeling that often fails Marguerite Duras. Her characters are persons displaced (by the reactive power of trauma) or banished (by the force of circumstances) to the limits of what Maurice Blanchot eerily designates as "le lieu sans lieu, le dehors" (the placeless place, the Outside) (142). In *Outside*, a collection of her journalistic pieces, Duras regards the outside world as a spectacle that claims her attention in moments of leisure or imaginative distraction, and then primarily as "cinema" (12), the unreal space of illusionistic projection. Not even Desire, the great unifier, can revoke the law of kind that prevents the mating of inner with outer reality.[1]

This general truth, which is confirmed everywhere in Duras's work, is succinctly formulated in a maxim from Duras's ambitious quest fiction, *The Sailor from Gibraltar*: "They say one person's absence can make the world a desert, but it's not so. But if the world is absent for you, no one can people it" (142). Typically, Duras evokes the world's conventional wisdom (the "*on dit*" that gives to her most personal statements the flat affect of an apothegm) only to reverse and repudiate it, thus compounding psychological with heuristic isolation. Passion can conduct the self voyeuristically outward, but it cannot displace nor cancel "the disturbing and vertiginous reality of the world" (238–39). For Duras, the world is not a desert; it is only incomplete or destitute of meaning. "Le dehors" extends to a horizon of potential significance, like the empty beach Lol Stein conjures as the image most evocative of her solitariness, a beach "empty as if God had not yet finished making it" (162) or the blank sky of Leucate in *Détruire, dit-elle* that speaks to Blanchot of the desertion of the gods (142).

I will be arguing that this visionary horizon, where meaning shimmers like a mirage, delimits the space of her writing as a specifically female domain, the domain of the clandestine. I want to consider, first, what

marks this space as female, and then examine why for Duras this domain is always clandestine. Duras has maintained that men and women do not share the same relation to physical space: "A woman inhabits a place completely, her presence fills space. A man traverses, never really occupies space" (*Les parleuses* 75). This difference, Duras contends, generates the "elementary grammar of images" upon which her work is conceptually grounded. But Duras's writing does not strictly adhere to this grammar, which in any case seems to direct her cinematic rather than literary representations of the female body. Thus while her writing could be read as stories of how women attempt to realize a rich and unhurried relation to space, the most memorable of her women remain heroines *maudites* who seem to evacuate rather than inhabit the space they occupy, like the young woman of *The Square* who is amazed that "I occupy any physical place in the world at all" (9), or like Lol Stein, whose life before her "ravishment" is summarized as the story of "how a dwelling becomes empty when she moves in" (73).

Duras's retreat into self-emptying space reenacts her original desertion of the world of the Mother. This motive becomes startlingly clear in her overtly autobiographical fictions and memoirs. In these works her mother is identified with an overpopulated, even cannibalistic world that threatens to devour her and whatever creativity she may express. In Duras's novelistic recounting of her early years in Indochina, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (*The Sea Wall*), the mother is seen to conspire with the mad fecundity of the natural world:

> There were children as there were rains, fruits, floods. They came each year, by periodical tides, or, if you like, by crops and burgeonings. Every woman of the plain, as long as she was young enough to be desired by her husband, had her child each year. . . . This went on regularly, with the rhythm of plant-life, as if, in a deep, long inhalation, each year, the body of each woman took in and swelled with child, expelled in an exhalation a child and then, in a second inhalation, took in another. (92)

The women of the plain whose existence is regulated by this vegetal rhythm experience life as a kind of predictable natural disaster. Duras describes how rains and their fruits, women and their children are overwhelmed in a leveling flood of equivalences, but she refuses to discriminate between the anthropology and the ontology of such disastrous motherhood. The women of the plain, historically identified as the subjugated native population of Indochina in the 1920s, seem equally to be the subjects of a bleak parable of procreation.

The primordial syllable—*mère*, homonym with *mer*, the sea—summa-

rizes for Duras the thematics of this calamitous maternity. This pun encapsulates the mother and the primal force of her madness, the madness of sowing crops and raising children where no earthly life can nor should be sustained. It is the madness of resumption itself, of the ceaseless efforts to turn back the tides of the Pacific and make the wilderness of the salt plains flower into the Promised Land pictured by colonial propaganda posters. The story of *The Sea Wall* centers on the mother's struggles to work an unworkable concession, a story that possesses, especially for the daughter caught in the spell of its unfolding, the dread fascination of a cautionary tale: "She had had so much misfortune that she had become a monster exercising a mighty spell, her children ran the risk of being forever held captive to console her in her grief, and they might never be able to leave her, but would have to go on bending to her will, go on letting themselves, in their turn, be devoured by her." Duras would elude the grasp of this demon-mother who emotionally devours her children by providing her fable with an abrupt, almost offhanded ironic moral: "There were no two ways for a girl to learn how to leave her mother" (148).

Learning how to leave mother is not a lesson easily dispatched, whether one is a young girl or a mature woman. In her study of modern literary women, Ellen Moers noted that Woolf and Colette wrote "of the power and grandeur of motherhood with an air of finality, as if what they were describing would never come again; as if there would never more be any mothers" (359). In Duras we encounter a writer haunted by the opposite anxiety. She represents the predicaments of maternity from the perspective of the daughter who fears that she will never be in the presence of anything *but* the mother. The daughter would avoid the fate of the mother, doomed to perish in battle with the very Nature whose unremitting fertility she externally (and linguistically) symbolizes: "Ever since the failure of the sea walls, there never passed a day without her planting something, no matter what, anything that would grow and give wood or fruit or leaves or nothing—anything that would simply grow" (90). In the literature of mothers and daughters, few approach and none surpass Duras's mordant account of the daughter's sullen attempts to avoid paying tribute to female creativity within this oppressive economy of abundance (an abundance that is the ironic antonym of actual prosperity). The sea wall is Duras's most abiding symbol for two different kinds of female constructions, the one maternal and symbolizing the mother's dream of hegemony over the world of natural process (the sea), the other filial, symbolizing the psychic defense the daughter-who-writes must raise to shield herself from the mother's baffled but determined will.

In *The Lover* Duras returns to her "common family history of ruin and

death" to discover that hers is a history recoverable only within "the very depths of my flesh," where the deposits of both her love and her hate have been secreted. Yet it is on the threshold of this interior that silence commences, and so Duras finds herself once more dumb and immobilized before a "closed door": "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" (25). The closed door, symbol of her impasse, is also the threshold of her vocation as writer, a vocation to be fulfilled once this door has been opened. For Duras now understands that all previous writing, and all former loving, have merely distracted her from this primary calling: to stand in dutiful attendance on the brink of self-understanding. Indeed, one of the real triumphs of *The Lover* is Duras's description of how, with her mother now dead and laid to rest, she may "write about her so easily now, so long, so fully. She's become just something you write without difficulty, cursive writing" (29). The French *écriture courante* denotes a running hand, a writing that *flows*, presumably without impediments. Within this cursive medium, the demon-mother finally assumes a historical, and thus limited existence, and so can no longer return, like other creatures of darkness, from the dead. In cursive writing, the mother, whose adult unhappiness took the place of childish dreams, becomes a "mother either flayed by poverty or distraught and muttering in the wilderness, either searching for food or endlessly telling what's happened to her, Marie Legrand from Roubaix, telling of her innocence, her savings, her hopes" (46). Tellingly, when she remembers her mother, "it is under this particular name, her maiden name that I see her: Marie Legrand" ("Mothers" 99). Any rapprochement with the mother can only be accomplished, it would seem, by seeing through the frenzied widow who dominates the early novels and recovering, from the depths of a lost history, a portrait of the mother as a young girl.

Reacting against the mother and forswearing her destiny, Duras becomes a minimalist in staging the play of desire. Her settings are forlorn and devastated places: a barren Indochinese plain, S. Thala in *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*, or more compelling, Hiroshima. Her characters encounter each other in a village square, a park, or asylum. There they exchange stories and loves, and then part, leaving the world untransformed, everything in the place destined or assigned to it by the powers of the Outside, powers outrageously symbolized by the jackal-like cadastral agents in *The Sea Wall* and never so recklessly specified again. As Germaine Brée reminds us, Duras over the years has simplified her situations in order to isolate the moment when an "inner event seems to be taking shape" (v). The narrator of *The Sailor from Gibraltar* confirms Brée's insight in characterological terms: "One's always more or less looking for

something. . . . For something to arise in the world and come towards you" (128). His own moment of "shameless" happiness, which at once expresses (through a fit of tears) and mobilizes his hysteria, comes when, gazing at Fra Angelico's "Annunication," he perceives the "angel" with "warm wings of untruth" returning his look. Duras, the memoirist spellbound before her closed door, is foretold in the narrator's transfixion as he stands poised, like an aroused and attentive Mary, on the threshold of revelation, awaiting divine instructions. So many of Duras's characters cannot change unless summoned from without (from "le dehors"). They otherwise are doomed, like the young girl of *The Square*, to criticize, but never to abandon a life in which nothing arises in spiritual greeting.

Such sacred encounters on the threshold of madness are not even conceivable for Duras except in a secluded and *inverted* world, like the one depicted in *The Sailor from Gibraltor* by Anna's atlas of the "topsy-turvy universe, a negative of the world," one that corresponds to her vision of a spiritually depopulated globe: "It also showed depths and currents. The continents were mostly as white and empty as the seas" (147). Duras takes odd comfort in these world-blankings because they allow her to survey the "ground," as yet unoccupied, of women's writing: "That's it," she asserts in an interview, "reverse everything, including analysis and criticism. . . . Reverse everything. Make women the point of departure in judging, make darkness the point of departure in judging what men call light, make obscurity the point of departure in judging what men call clarity" (Husserl-Kapit 426). Men are blinded by the dazzling but spurious lucidity of their theoretical intelligence and so have no revolutionary vision to communicate. Women should learn to see by the dim but not false light emitted by the darkness; they should trust to that obscurity that endows nothingness itself with the density of presence.[2]

Duras's own writing transpires within an inverted symbolic field in which darkness signifies the presence of an unquiet interior and white signifies the vacancy of the unreal world ruled by material logic and masculine force. Duras designates this interior, which conceals the most radical (hence transformative) of human thoughts and feelings—*clandestinité*. The underground activity of the French Resistance is the immediate historical resonance of this word. But Duras seems intent on communicating a more general idea of clandestinité, one that comprehends the categorical imperatives of women's writing: to translate this suppressed and all-too-human darkness without "clarifying" it, that is, without betraying it to the rule of reason, which is always authoritarian in Duras's psychology. These translations, which occur throughout Duras's fiction, are specifically identified as a species of clandestine writing during a series of conversations with Xavière Gauthier, published as *Les parleuses*. In their

first conversation Duras remarks that women writers are often "reduced" to clandestinité and that she considers herself a "clandestine" (35). However, in the larger metaphoric (and tactical) reversals that direct Duras's thought, this banishment is also occasion for exploring "*un champ d'expérimentation*" (19)—a field of experimentation that extends beyond or beneath established forms of expression. Duras thus recuperates the clandestine as the domain (assigned or preferred?) of women's literature, the literature of an unknown and as yet unformulated language, the "silence of women."

To speak on tabooed subjects demands, besides great courage, great facility in translating such a burdened silence, and Duras has proved herself possessed of both. Yet she is not interested in becoming a kind of captive Cassandra, an inspired but unregarded prophet of a conquered female population. She remains clandestine even as she attracts public notice by communicating through an abstract ventriloquism that mimics in order to subvert the voices of vested authority. "The woman who writes," Duras once provocatively averred in the assertion that serves as my epigraph, "disguises herself as a man." The man Duras impersonates is, however, a particular kind of man, a man without affect, often without charm, indeed, to invoke the title of a novel that impressed her, a man without qualities. She assumes not just the vestige and verbal mannerisms of another sex, but impersonates the narrative figure men have often arrogated for their own questionable ends, that classical figure of psychological and grammatical detachment—the third person. The assertion that opens *Le Vice-Consul*, "Elle marche, écrit Peter Morgan," astounds because it stands in stark isolation, unattended by further sentences of contextual qualification. This fiercely univalent sentence, which is followed immediately by a new paragraph stylistically remarkable for its collation of grammatical persons, alerts us to the way a classical grammar of persons reinforces as it constructs a narrative about the relation between perceived and perceiver. The third person who observes and describes, that is who writes, is male, while the female acts and is acted upon in consequence of this male predication. *Détruire, dit-elle* is Duras's most spectacular assault on this narrative relation and the grammar that constitutes it. The destruction this text intends is registered in the syntactical shock of the title, which deploys the infinitive with a violence Blanchot admired as truly oracular (39).

Duras's experiments in sexual mimicry, then, are adroit acts of cultural sabotage. If she adopts the disguise of male authorship (as in *The Sailor from Gibraltar* or in *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*), she does so to camouflage a more serious transgression, her "making free" with tabooed erotic topics, especially in the scandalous form of adulterous passion. Duras ob-

serves: "Adultery is a . . . bugbear; however, for the conditioning of the erotic, it is irreplaceable" (*Les parleuses* 46). Duras does not appear to be interested in deciding whether this conditioning is a social or a biological fact of life, only in contending that the abolition of adultery, like the abolition of all illicit love (*amour clandestin*), while desirable, "involves somewhere the idea of loss": "I don't really like it when one says: 'All this is bad, we need to get rid of everything and regret nothing.' I regret at the same time as I cast away" (225). Duras's praise of the folly of adultery is a sign of her attachment to the topics of the clandestine. She is responding, in passages like this, to a reflex of her own writerly temperament, for she often seems drawn to the perverse excitement of a thing done in secret for its own sake. This would explain why she would regret even as she attains her liberation from clandestine existence. Duras's experimental writing is, in her own figure, "*un passage à blanc*" (45), a passage across a blanched, reclusive space where desire is either consumed or neutralized, a space that is simultaneously the realm of discovery of experiment and invention, and the domain of self-loss.

Within this experimental field, elementary distinctions of place and person are effaced to create phantasmal names worthy of Duras's de-realizing syntax. Duras's pen name is one of the most successful creations of this transformational grammar. In one of her interviews in Montreal, she responds to a remark about the importance of names in her work by revealing that her surname is Donnadieu, a name (given-unto-God) that at once reverses and puns on the terms of the God-given (Lamy 55). In fact, it is in response to a question about the writer's displacement of God in the work of creation that this biographical information is volunteered. But Duras obviously renounced any hint of such theopathic writing in forsaking her surname (with its hint of divine surrender) and assuming as pseudonym the name of a village of Lot-et-Garonne, near property her father once rented and where he died (55). Readers of Duras become accustomed to such blendings of the personal and the communal identity. Duras's exploitation of the self-substantiating property of places and place names has become a signature of her work, sometimes quite shockingly, as in the film *Hiroshima mon amour*, where Hiroshima and Nevers-en-Loire become fetishized beyond the historical suffering they designate. The film evokes the holocaust of Hiroshima from an adulterous hotel bed, a fetishization Duras admits to be a "voluntary sacrilege" (*Hiroshima* 2). The generic heroine of *Hiroshima mon amour* testifies to the reality of horrors *personally* witnessed against the generic male's repudiation of this historical impiety:[3]

LUI:—Tu n'as *rien* vu à Hiroshima. Rien.
ELLE:—J'ai *tout* vu. *Tout.* (16)

This (male) nothing and this (female) all collapse into the intensive space of confrontation that is the film's psychological *mise-en-scène*. At film's end, the lovers' identities dissolve the place names denoting the shame of collaboration (loving a Nazi soldier) and the horror of mass death. She and he intone, as if in clandestine benediction, the visionary identifications begotten by love:

ELLE: "Hi-ro-shi-ma. C'est ton nom."
LUI: —C'est mon nom. Oui. Ton nom à toi est Nevers. Ne-vers-en-Fran-ce. (102–03)

This erotic grammar that fuses person and place disguises but cannot eliminate the fundamental dichotomy that determines Duras's political outlook as well as her narrative strategies, the dichotomy between individual experience, provocatively figured in the autobiographical and generally erotic tenor of her work, and the traumatic historical *episode* lived by everyone, reluctantly figured in the local and global politics, the Outside, of her narratives. From this fundamental difference between the collective outer world and the inner world of the imaginary, other distinctions follow, perhaps the most morally sobering being Duras's assertion that her recently resurrected memoirs of the Liberation, *La douleur* (*The War*), are charged with "a tremendous chaos of thought and feeling . . . and beside which literary work was something of which I felt ashamed" (10). Duras claims that she could not bring herself to tamper with the original draft of these texts. She demands that in reading them we separate the *literary* from the historical as the sacred is from the profane. "Learn to read them properly: they are sacred," she intones like a high priestess—or a penitent. For *The War* is a text that assembles—but does not "construct"—a sequence of remorseful memories and guilty identifications: "Thérèse is me," she proclaims of "Ter of the Militia": "The person who tortures the informer is me. So also is the one who feels like making love to Ter, the member of the Militia. Me. I give you the torturer along with the rest of the texts" (111). The "me" so identified is strangely depersonalized, as if in ritual confession, and yet we know from her other works the intimacy subsisting between self-abasement and self-absorption.

The self-concern that inevitably conditions the sufferings of the guilt-ridden appears in a different register in Duras's mesmerizing text of self-doubling, *The Lover*. This "memoir" of her sexual initiation deliberately confounds the imagined with the remembered and confuses what was lived with what was dreamed. The resulting confusion in her text is not only intentional, but necessary, in fulfillment of its nature as "writing": "Sometimes I realize that if writing isn't, all things, all contraries con-

founded, a quest for vanity and void, it's nothing. That if it's not, each time, all things confounded into one through some inexpressible essence, then writing is nothing but advertisement" (8). The quest for vanity and void terminates in love-making, "when you let the body alone, to seek and find and take what it likes . . . in the force of desire" (43). What is discovered in this moment of abandonment is the vanity of the desire it consummates. For it is desire, Duras observes, "that deludes the body, that deceives" (*Les parleuses* 223). Desire can create a text of deception, but it leaves no truthful record of itself, except in the lines of the ravaged face.

The life-worn face is the initial image with which Duras presents herself in *The Lover*. She watches her own face age with the "same sort of interest I might have taken in the reading of a book," an analogy that justifies her mood of self-congratulation in remarking that her face, though "scored with deep, dry wrinkles," has not collapsed. For those scorings will help her confirm how, as a young girl, "the space existed in me for desire," how at the age of eighteen, fifteen (she is careless of strict chronology) she already was possessed of "that flagrant, exhausted face, those rings around the eyes, in advance of time and experience" (9). What the translator renders as "experience" is in French a word embracing literary as well as sexual expectations of originality, *l'experiment* (italics in original), an Anglicized locution (*experimentation* would be the normal French usage). Duras literally italicizes her riskiest translation in linking the traditional metaphor in the women's literature of self-realization—sexual discovery as self-discovery—with the *failure* to define a female "subject." For no stable relation exists between the subject who writes and the subject of her recounting. As memorist, Duras shifts restlessly and without explanation from first to third person.

The Lover seduces us by flaunting rather than disguising the literary conventionality of its autobiographical premise: associating the initiation into sexual *jouissance*, a pleasure-unto-death, with the emergence of the woman who writes. Duras remains safely within, even as she plays against the sexual orthodoxy that *only* pleasure can instruct and liberate. However, Duras's conformity to a model text promoting the sexual liberation of woman is vexed by her insistence that her life cannot be "composed" into a tendentious narrative. She is adamant on this point: "The story of my life doesn't exist. Does not exist. There's never any center to it. No path, no line" (8). She refuses to ascribe a fixed end, purpose, or structure to those human occurrences and relations that nevertheless indisputably formed the person who retells them. She writes instead of self-contained moments and their elaborately distended images. These images are then metaphorically assembled into incantatory descriptions of *situ-*

ations rather than metonymically arranged (and ideologically fashioned) into a *story* in which we can see the self unfold. To abide within the limitations of such self-contained scenes is to sacrifice certain narrative luxuries, those thrilling feats of romantic fiction in forging a series of accidental occurrences into an amorous destiny. In Duras, desire circulates, destitute of destination.

Duras will only acknowledge the reality of certain *crossings* that are fateful, like her crossing of the Mekong on an ordinary day, except this day she encountered her first lover, scion of a Chinese landowner from Fushun, wealthy and taboo. Their first meeting fails to impress on Duras's memory a distinct image, but this confounding of outlines is precisely what endows the event with "the virtue of representing, of being the creator of, an absolute" (10). This absolute is both incarnated and dispersed in a series of fragmentary memories that recall the physical appurtenances of the crossing: the dress of threadbare silk that belonged to her mother and so definitely *pertains* to her, speaks of her, who she is and where she came from; the man's hat she wears that bestows a crucial ambiguity on her self-recollection and allows her to see herself "as another would be seen, outside myself, available to all, available to all eyes, in circulation for cities, journeys, desire." She would never part from this hat because it reminds her of that moment when the "inadequacy of childhood . . . [the] inescapable imposition of nature" turned into a "provoking choice of nature, a choice of the mind" (12). The hat retains its historical value as a reminder of the futility of her provocations in the wilderness of her impoverished childhood.

These vividly ambiguous images replace and are meant to correct the "romancing" of her earlier autobiographical fictions. In assuming the burden of truthful recounting (itself, of course, an art like any other, but requiring either more candor or more guile to attain), Duras insinuates the frank intimacy of long acquaintance between the "I" who writes and the "you" who reads (and rereads) her: "So you see it wasn't in the bar at Réam, as I wrote, that I met the rich man with the black limousine, it was after we left the land by the dike, two or three years after, on the ferry, the day I'm telling you about, in that light of haze and heat" (27). Yet even told with scrupulous honesty, the past seems attended by portents of its own inevitability. Duras makes the space of recollection fateful by filling it with a series of self-projections or self-doublings, brief but psychologically "complete" portraits of women she might have turned into rather than, as it happened, she turned away from: Marie Carpenter, the American expatriate who leaves people "with the feeling of having experienced a sort of empty nightmare" (65); the collaborator Betty Fernandez who instructs her in another form of vanity—the superstition of

trying to seek political solutions for personal problems; the Lady, never designated by any other name but this class word, who is "consigned to the infamy of a pleasure unto death, . . . unto the mysterious death of lovers without love" (90). These women are all more or less creatures of that nonlife that Duras locates in the realm of "publicity," life conducted in the public domain of the Outside.

Only one person escapes "the law of error"—the law of futile self-display, which holds that either desire is "in the woman who aroused it or it didn't exist" (19) and she is Hélène Lagonelle. Her name reverberates with the internal echo of *lagon*, a lagoon, secluded well for narcissistic reflection. This verbal echo is corroborated by Hélène's white body, an important social fact in a colonial country where being white is already "to have desire in you," that is, to possess the sexual prestige of the "uncolored." This body arouses Duras's talent for fantasizing. She would have gladly drowned in this pool, even as she would resist engulfment by the mad flood of maternal love: "I want to take Hélène Lagonelle with me to where every evening, my eyes shut, I have imparted to me the pleasure that makes you cry out. . . . I want it to happen in my presence, I want her to do it as I wish, I want her to give herself where I give myself. It's via Hélène Lagonelle's body, through it, that the ultimate pleasure would pass from him to me" (74). Hélène is the vehicle for Duras's sexual tenor; through her, jouissance might circulate "from him to me" and yet remain within the classical registers of *amour propre*.[4] This fantasy awaits fulfillment "On the other bank of the river. As soon as you've crossed to the other side" (75).

Of course, what Duras also finds on the other side is "this arid and terrible place" where she lives "to the exclusion of everything else"—the domain of the family. But only within this demonized space can Duras locate "the heart of my essential certainty, the certainty that later on I'll be a writer." This certainty is intermingled with her love for her younger brother. His death is the first in a series of deaths, including, much later, a stillborn child, that initiates Duras into the *douleur* of writing: "I think I can already say, I have a vague desire to die. From now on I treat that word and my life as inseparable. I think I have a vague desire to be alone, just as I realize I've never been alone any more since I left childhood behind, and the family of the hunter. I'm going to write" (103).

Her destiny as a writer is announced at the crossing between familial love and sexual love and is therefore virtually a synecdoche for the incest taboo. Incest is not an act she commits, but rather a clandestine representation she makes as she and her Chinese lover become entangled in a Faulknerian skein of cultural interdictions, the scandal of incest and miscegenation: he, the Chinese lover, making love to her "as he would his own child," a child he has illegitimately created (101); she, adoring his

"member" for engendering her, haunted by the ghost of her brother, which proleptically informs her of the love she bears him, but will only recognize upon his death. Duras's *sexual* certainty that she is "the Queen of his desire" merges perilously with a fantasy of beleaguered narcissism, but that fantasy appears vindicated when after "war, marriages, children, divorces, books," her lover travels to Paris with his wife, then phones Duras to tell her "he could never stop loving her, that he'd love her until death" (117).

There is yet one final encounter in Duras's fateful crossing over to clandestine love—her traumatic contact with the local lunatic, excluded from all recognizably human society, who frightens and mocks her with a language she cannot understand, a madness she is in danger of sharing: "For me the whole town is inhabited by the beggar woman in the road. And all the beggar women of the towns, the rice fields, the tracks bordering Siam, the banks of the Mekong—for me the beggar woman who frightened me is inhabited by them. She comes from everywhere" (86). This madwoman, like the leprous beggarwoman of the *India Song* cycle or the itinerant mother with the gangrenous foot forced to abandon her child in *The Sea Wall*,[5] embodies the disfiguring power of the Outside that everywhere encroaches on Duras's essential certainty that she will be a writer. This omnipresent figure of reproach challenges the self-withdrawal that protects that certainty and on which it is grounded. She comes to symbolize for Duras the negative interpenetration of figure and world, indeed represents, at the point where internal certainty and external doubt converge, the possibility of representing the sufferings of the world, the brutalities of colonialism, the injustices of the gods who are hidden from us. And it is here, and here only, that literature stops and writing becomes sacred—here where it rejoins the world as a transgressive text insistent on its sins but pentitent for its self-absorption, its errancies of will. It is also here that the general but very real resemblance between the literature and the cinema of Marguerite Duras reveals itself. They unfold in the same definitive darkness, the amorous night of the clandestine, sequestered—but only for a time—from the Outside with its blinding lights and unanswerable realities. Ultimately Duras's art is the art of negatives that when projected assume the spectral luminousness, and all the false candor of life.

NOTES

1. Julia Kristeva speaks of a "Hiroshima of Love" in which outside and inside conjoin in an "implosion of love into death and death into love." Kristeva contemplates this catastrophe as one of the more disturbing manifestations of

Duras's postmodern "aesthetic of awkwardness." I find it difficult to endorse this rhetorical conflation of public and private, a conflation that leads Kristeva to argue that within the "psychic microcosm" of Duras's narrative subjects, "*private pain absorbs political horror*" (142–43). As I shall argue in the pages that follow, Duras herself is skeptical of the reality of the subject and is the last writer to offer us the descriptive plenitude—even in miniature—of a microcosm. She depicts psychic "scenes," not worlds; she is the chronicler of madness, as Kristeva says, but this madness is not so much the synecdochic event that recapitulates the insanity of modern history, but a writerly stance that places Duras not within the heart, but on the borders of reality.

2. This obscurity can be communal and political in nature. Duras, after lamenting the failures of Mai 1968, which she sees as a failure to abide a silence "equivalent to the sum of our collective respirations," reaffirmed her belief in this abandoned "communal obscurity" in which new behaviors and modes of life could have been charted (*Les parleuses* 226).
3. Duras intended the Japanese engineer to be immediately identifiable as an "international type" of advanced global capitalism. He is the moral and historical product of his times, educated in its techniques and at home in its economic and political environment, a man "who would never feel out of his element in any city of the world." The French actress Duras envisaged—and cast—possessed a "Look" at once seductive and unselfconscious (137, 139).
4. For a more elaborate and sympathetic consideration of female doubling in Duras, see Kristeva (148–51).
5. I am grateful to Suzanne Nash for this synoptic example and for her generous help with this essay.

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