Reading for the Subject: Plots of Desire in the Work of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Marguerite Duras

A thesis

submitted to the Department of French

of Kent University at Canterbury

in fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2014

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest thanks to my main supervisor, Dr James Fowler, for his inspiration, encouragement and guidance. His immense knowledge and passion for his subject were key motivations throughout my PhD studies.

I would also like to thank my second supervisor, Dr Lucy O'Meara, for offering thorough and excellent feedback on many of the earlier versions of this thesis.

ABSTRACT
The purpose of this study is to explore literary representations of the human subject in the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet (1922–2008) and Marguerite Duras (1914–1996), and to do so using a modified, updated version of Peter Brooks's influential theorization of plot in terms of desire. Both 'subject' and 'representation' will receive critical attention; in particular, the relation of 'subject' to 'character' will be explored. Post-Cartesian traditions tend to ground definitions of the subject in particular concepts of its relation to knowledge. As far as Descartes's shadow extends, the individual is seen as coherent, self-aware and exercising freedom of choice. Throughout the nineteenth century, theories of social and medical determinism reflected in Realism and Naturalism posed new challenges to the belief that individuals are self-determining; but whilst they eroded certain assumptions concerning subjecthood in this way, they did not pose radical questions concerning the ability of art accurately to represent the relation of the individual to the (social) world. The assumptions underlying the writing of novels remained rooted in a concept of literature as mimesis. The classic nineteenth-century realist novel aspired to offer a plausible representation or imitation of the real world and, in spite of subsequent radical movements including the *nouveau roman*, it has left an enduring legacy.

The 1950s and 1960s were a time of self-conscious experimentation with the novel: when Robbe-Grillet, Duras and others were writing their most celebrated works, the anti-realist novel – the *nouveau roman* – with its radical break from conventionally mimetic storytelling was only just beginning to develop a set of conventions and descriptions. Roland Barthes confidently proclaimed the 'death of the author' and celebrated the 'birth of the reader'. During and after the *nouveau roman* movement, Robbe-Grillet and Duras attempt very different writing experiments, but there are clear parallels to be made. In *Pour un nouveau roman*, Robbe-Grillet initially presents his work as breaking with realism and mimesis, and ultimately concerned with (self-reflexive) 'écriture' alone. Accordingly, he claims that his works cannot be read in terms of their 'representation' of the world, or related to conventional notions of character; he seems to distance himself, in particular, from readings that assume a coherent, analysable 'psychology' in the (post-Cartesian) character. Similarly, Duras has often been assimilated with the *nouveau roman* movement, as she is held to write experimentally from the early 1950s in ways that subvert and challenge the traditional, male-authored novels of the literary canon as it was constituted in mid-twentieth-century France. Indeed, she has been held up as a rare example of *écriture féminine*.

Peter Brooks's argument that plot is driven (as if) by desire is a valid and exciting one that allows narratology and psychoanalysis to be brought into conjunction. But the desire he invokes is (stereotypically) 'masculine', being the desire of a male subject for a (passive) female object; and he allows this 'plot of desire', which might be termed 'desire in the masculine', a normative status. Using close readings of Robbe-Grillet and Duras, this thesis modifies Brooks's thesis by asking what a plot of 'female' desire might be, besides a softened or more passive version of the 'male' plot. This allows us to reassess each writer's break with traditional notions of representation and subject by reviewing their writing practice in terms of desire. In spite of his claims in *Pour un nouveau roman*, Robbe-Grillet clings tenaciously to a 'masculine' plot throughout his writing; and whilst Duras initially deploys a similar structure, she increasingly problematises it, though without breaking from it altogether, and so offers possibilities for representing desire 'in the feminine'.

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Realist fiction/realism: Throughout this thesis, when I use the term 'realist fiction' or 'realism', I refer to a style of fictional writing that presents detailed descriptions and familiar aspects of what we think of as 'real life'. **Realism** is also the name of a literary movement involving novels written between 1830 and 1890 and is defined by the implementation of particular formal techniques which produce a sense of the 'real'. The traditional realist novel revolves around human relationships; it usually puts forward a 'message' or moral purpose enacted by the traditional realist character.

The traditional realist character: I use this term to describe the literary representation of a coherent entity with a personal history based on the Cartesian humanist notion of the individual as an autonomous, introspective self, as opposed to the notion of the post-Cartesian subject as defined below. **The Subject**: The Cartesian subject was rooted in a specific notion of the transcendental individual's relation to knowledge. The notion of the 'subject' replaces the Cartesian concept of the individual as the site of meaning: the self is redefined in terms of unconscious, cultural and historical forces. When Descartes said 'je pense donc je suis', he equated the consciously thinking subject with the subject as such; this is what Freud's revolutionary theory largely changed in western thought.

Post-Freudian: I use the term post-Freudian throughout this study to mean 'after the influence of Freud's theories'.

Feminist, Female, Feminine: Toril Moi

The socio/cultural conditioning of women is underpinned by three vital distinctions: feminist, female and feminine. I use in this study Moi's definitions of these terms: 'feminist' as a political position, 'female' as a fact of biology and 'feminine' as culturally defined. Duras's writing obviously falls into the category of 'female' according to this definition, but it is not necessarily 'feminist' writing in the sense of anti-sexist. However, the term *écriture féminine* is ambiguous because it denotes writing said to express the essence of femaleness, whereas the definition of 'feminine' as proposed by Moi indicates a social construction. In this study, however, I use the term *écriture féminine* as an easy reference to the particular female writing style advocated by Hélène Cixous, and the term 'feminine' as a social construction as defined by Moi. See Moi's essay 'Feminist, Female, Feminine' in *The Feminist Reader*, Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, eds. 2nd edn. (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 1997), pp. 104–116.

ABBREVIATIONS

After quotations, titles of works by Alain Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras and Peter Brooks have been abbreviated as indicated below. Full publication details of all works cited are included in the Bibliography, as well as in a footnote following each first reference.

Text by Peter Brooks

RP *Reading for the Plot* (1984)

Works by Alain Robbe-Grillet

LV *Le Voyeur* (1955)

LJ *La Jalousie* (1957)

PNR *Pour un nouveau roman* (1963)

MRV *La Maison de rendez-vous* (1965)

GRA *C'est Gradiva qui vous appelle* (2002)

RS *Un roman sentimental* (2007)

Works by Marguerite Duras

VT *La Vie tranquille* (1944)

BP *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950)

MG *Le marin de Gibraltar* (1952)

LB 'Le Boa' in *Des journeés entières dans les arbres* (1954)

MC *Moderato Cantabile* (1958)

LR *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (1964)

AA *L'Amante anglaise* (1967)

DDE *Détruire dit-elle* (1969)

La *L'Amour* (1971)

LP *Les Parleuses* (1974)

HA *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* (1980)

MM *La Maladie de la mort* (1982)

AM *L'Amant* (1984)

LD *La Douleur* (1985)

INTRODUCTION

Julia Waters states that it is surprising that given clear areas of shared literary interests, 'critics have so long overlooked the rich potential of a comparative study of Robbe-Grillet's and Duras's work'.[1] Such a project can serve to throw new light on each author's practice, and also on the wider context of French intellectualism of the mid-twentieth-century and beyond. At first glance, an obvious point of comparison between Robbe-Grillet and Duras is that their writing strikes most readers as 'avant-garde' (a term which Robbe-Grillet disliked) or experimental;[2] these are writers who in obvious respects distance themselves from mimetic traditions in the novel. In their distinct ways they problematise notions of 'representation' and 'character', and prevent the reader from applying reading conventions adapted to mainstream realist fiction.

The radical nature of each of these writers has often been commented on. Let us take the case of Robbe-Grillet first. Writing at a time when perhaps that author's vogue was at its height, Jacques Leenhardt asserts:

La disparition du personnage dans le roman présentait […] une homologie rigoureuse avec la disparition du rôle de l'individu dans le fonctionnement de la société capitaliste d'organisation, tandis que les objets, à travers le phénomène du *fétishisme de la marchandise* étudié par Marx prenaient une importance toujours plus grande.[3]

Leenhardt here seems to credit Robbe-Grillet with effecting nothing less than 'la disparition du personnage' from the novel. This would indeed represent a radical break with mimetic tradition; and it is the kind of claim which Robbe-Grillet initially makes for himself in the various articles that were collected together under the title *Pour un nouveau roman*. As for Duras, her efforts to transcribe experience in her later work by means of a sparse narrative and incomplete, sometimes incoherent phrases, highlight the lack of effectiveness of realism to communicate what she sees as reality. As she argues in *Les Parleuses*: 'Le réalisme […] poussé à fond, il devient irreél' (*LP*, 93).[4] Moreover, we will see in Chapter Three that

[1] Julia Waters, *Intertextual Rivalry: A 'Reading in Pairs' of Marguerite Duras and Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2000), p. 10.
[2] In his collection of essays, *Pour un nouveau roman*, Robbe-Grillet dismisses the term 'avant-garde': 'Le mot "avant-garde" […], malgré son air d'impartialité, sert le plus souvent pour se débarrasser […] de toute œuvre risquant de donner mauvaise conscience à la littérature de grande consommation'. *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Minuit, 1975), p. 25. Orig. publ. 1963.
[3] Leenhardt, *Lecture politique du roman: La Jalousie d'Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Paris: Minuit, 1973), p. 13.
[4] See *Les Parleuses*: *Xavière Gauthier and Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Minuit, 1974), p. 93. *Les Parleuses* is a series of conversations between Gauthier and Duras principally focusing on the relation of the writer to writing.

various critics have credited her with an even more radical break vis-à-vis the aesthetics of mimesis than she claimed for herself: her writing is held up as an example of *écriture féminine*, a practice that supposedly breaks with 'masculinist' traditions of discourse, including the male-authored novels of the French literary canon as it had come to be defined by the middle of the twentieth-century (or before May 1968).

The claims to have broken with mimetic realism made by these authors, or by others on their behalf, are justified up to a point. No longer the fully realized protagonist of classic narrative, driving the engaging story through goal-oriented actions, their respective fictions focus on the subject, not as a coherent synchronization of faculties working towards a particular end, but as an entity of opposing parts battling with one another. However, recent developments in narratology, critical theory and literary psychoanalysis implicitly limit the extent of such claims, be they made by Robbe-Grillet and Duras themselves or by critics such as Leenhardt (especially those writing in the 1970s and 1980s). For instance, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, a particularly important narratologist, asks: 'but is the character as dead as all that or is it only that a traditional concept of it has been dismantled?'[5] This view is reinforced by Jonathan Culler who states that the dismantling of the traditional literary character 'may well be a case of moving too readily from one extreme to another, for the roles proposed are so reductive and so directly dependent on plot that they leave us with an immense residue whose organization structural analysis should attempt to explain rather than ignore'.[6] In modern critical theory, the mimetic character has been largely replaced by a conception of character as a linguistic construct, but Rimmon-Kenan, Culler and others are right to suggest that it remains an essential aspect of narrative fiction without which the reported actions of the plot would be less comprehensible.

Culler and Rimmon-Kenan are responding to a trend away from character which has been argued for, most influentially by Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot*.[7] Taking Aristotle as a starting point, Brooks privileges plot over character, arguing that the former is the organizing line that makes narrative possible because 'finite and comprehensible'(*RP*, 4). He maintains that plot is the causal agent, the 'thread of design' and the means by which narrative is generated. The importance which he accords to plot is further increased given that he believes that it is an 'impossibly speculative task' to say what narrative itself is (*RP*, 4).

[5] Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*: *Contemporary Poetics*, (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 31.
[6] Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1975), p. 272.
[7] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*: *Design and Intention in Narrative* (London: Harvard University Press, 1992).

He therefore suggests that plot may be the only point of entry to narrative, the only effective analytical tool in its study. This involves a rejection not only of notions of character but also of structure as far as the latter is understood as meaning more than 'plot'. Describing theoretically oriented critics as 'formalists', Brooks states that he embarked on this work as an opposition to the assortment of structural critical approaches to the study of the literary text (*RP*, 35). It is the process, the changes that take place between the beginning and the ending of the text, that Brooks tries to explain with the Freudian model.[8] The tension in narrative between the pleasure principle and the death instinct create a 'dilatory space in which pleasure can come from postponement' (*RP*, 103).

Brooks's theory is exemplified by excellent close readings, but is open to question *qua* theory. There are two main problems. First, dismissing character as a category, he fails to see that it can usefully be rethought in terms of the broader concept of 'the subject'. Because of his preoccupation with the 'logic' of narrative possibilities, Brooks ends up by de-historicizing the subject as he universalises the narrative process. Indeed, in his enthusiasm for plot over character, he fails to visualize a subject encoded as 'character' and engendered precisely by its engagement with other elements of narrative, a subject inscribed in a textual practice. His formulation of the narrative process fails to take into account that subjectivity is bound up in the very workings of narrative and indeed constituted in the relationship between narrative, desire and meaning. And yet Brooks engages with desire in narrative and desire logically arises in a subject. My approach modifies Brooks's findings by allowing for historicization (and therefore de-universalising) of his model: Brooks's emphasis on the importance of plot in narrative is more germane to certain narrative genres or historical periods than others and can therefore not have universal validity. He intimates this himself when he acknowledges that plot assumed greater importance from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century (*RP*, 12). This brings us to the second major problem in Brooks. His suggestion that we read 'for the plot' involves viewing plot as a tracing of desire through narrative: but whose desire? Given Brooks's approach to the plot, we are left with Balzac's 'desiring machine' (*RP*, 39, 40) – almost always a male – depicted in the text and somehow apprehended by the reader, an unspeaking entity without agency driven by the *péripéties* of the plot[9]. Clearly a theory of narrative should at least consider the relationship between the

[8] See Brooks's chapter 'Freud's Masterplot' in *Reading for the Plot*, pp. 90–112.
[9] Brooks argues that the heroes of nineteenth century narratives could be thought of as '"desiring machines" whose presence in the text creates and sustains narrative movement through the forward march of desire, projecting the self onto the world through scenarios of desire imagined and then acted upon'. See *Reading for the Plot*, pp. 40, 41.

plot supposedly driven by desire and a desiring subject, be that subject purely textual. Brooks also argues that a purely formalist approach does not provide an explanation of the dynamics of narrative, its connection to memory and its status as part of human cognition, but he rejects the psychoanalysing of character. Nevertheless, he proceeds to do something very similar to psychoanalysing the character in the nineteenth-century novel and other works, showing that if narrative were constructed merely of plot convolutions unravelling as we read, the transformative and desiring power of the character would be lost.

Brooks's emphasis on desire in the shaping of narrative, or narrative as shaped 'as if' by desire, is an important one; but it must be nuanced if it is to help us to an understanding of Robbe-Grillet's and Duras's writing. Robbe-Grillet exemplifies, *malgré lui*, Brooks's notion of a plot shaped (as if) by 'male' desire – a plot in which the male is the active, desiring subject, reducing the female to the status and function of passive, desired object (an account that only mildly caricatures Brooks's position, as we will see). I write that Robbe-Grillet does this 'malgré lui' because as we will see in Chapter One he insists, in *Pour un nouveau roman*, that his works lack plot (*intrigue*) and are impossible to assimilate to notions of psychology rooted in psychoanalysis. Therefore, reading Robbe-Grillet's novels as structured (as if) by desire will allow a re-evaluation of his claims concerning his own writing practice, some of which have been too readily taken at face value by a number of critics. But when we consider Duras in terms of Brooks's 'desiring machine' model of narrative, we find that she poses a radical challenge to it. We will see in Chapter Three that, without exemplifying *écriture féminine* (a claim so often made on her behalf), Duras produces texts (from the 1950s onwards) that are structured as if by 'female' desire. Thus Brooks's idea of plot as a 'desiring machine' will help us to nuance sweeping claims made on behalf of Robbe-Grillet and Duras; conversely, their writings will help us see the uses and limits of reading novels as 'desiring machines', as proposed by Brooks.

METHODOLOGY

It will be useful to set out, in the remainder of this Introduction, the approach I will adopt in order to reassess the writing of Robbe-Grillet and Duras. I propose to follow Brooks in bringing psychoanalysis and narratology into conjunction, as a way of exposing the workings of 'desire' in narrative; but Brooks's position will be modified, given that he problematically takes 'male' desire as normative. According to Brooks, Freud provides a model for narrative that affords 'ways to think about the movement of plot and its motor force in human desire, its peculiar relation to beginnings and ends, its apparent claim to rescue meaning from

temporal flux'(*RP*, 90). Freudian psychoanalysis provides a dynamic model of psychic processes and Brooks's own readings show that connecting literature with psychoanalysis offers a productive way of bringing attention to plot, whilst remaining within a broadly narratological methodology. But Brooks considers only 'male' desire as shaping narrative. This is problematic: what is 'male' desire? Is it heterosexual desire felt by a man for a woman? If so, does Brooks suggest that plots based on 'male desire' have normative value? What, then, would be a plot based on 'female' desire? Would it be non-linear? Would it be less 'classical' or less satisfying than a 'male' plot? And what of a subject that desires objects of both sexes? Or of his/her own sex only?

I will also be guided by Brooks's insight that purely structural models do not acknowledge that narrative is in some sense libidinal. To enable narrative to escape from the constraints of form, the linking of sexuality and textuality opens up new opportunities for the investigation of the articulation of desire in language. Psychoanalytic criticism amplifies and develops the literary text, submitting the source of knowledge that is psychoanalysis and the body of language that is narrative fiction to each other, thereby expanding self-conscious ways of reading. As Shoshana Felman states in *Literature and Psychoanalysis*: 'In much the same way as literature falls within the realm of psychoanalysis (within its competence and its knowledge), psychoanalysis itself falls within the realm of literature, and its specific logic and rhetoric'.[10] The psychoanalytic terms and notions I use in this thesis are not meant to be reductive but rather to suggest patterns in the subject/characters that aid an understanding of motivation in the narrative. This is consistent with what I see as the inescapable necessity of treating character and narrative structure in terms of each other. It also adheres to Brooks's stated objective of 'reconnect[ing] literary criticism to human concern' (*RP*, xiv). The accounts offered of my chosen authors' work aim to shed light on the complexities of applied psychoanalytic theory; this move allows the incursion of the psychoanalytic discourse into narratology away from static 'formalisms' and maintains the traditional interpretative project of elucidating the literary text as an aesthetic object.

In researching both authors, I encountered certain general objections to literary psychoanalysis and/or narratology, and it will be useful to address them here. First, it is often said that the psychoanalytic reading of a literary text leads to ignoring its literary specificity.

[10] See *Literature and Psychoanalysis, The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, Shoshana Felman, ed. (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 6, 7. Felman also states: 'The question [in the psychoanalytic analysis of a text] is less that of the meaning of sexuality than that of the complex relationship between sexuality and meaning, a relationship which is not a simple deviation from literal meaning; but rather, *a problematization of literality as such*'; p. 110.

But this is no more or less a danger than in any other method or approach. In establishing the interpretation of a text on psychoanalytic concepts, its explicit statements can also be articulated taking into account its distinctive syntax, the various voices in it, the literary subject/character as artefact and the text's exploration of the creative process. A similar objection is often levelled at narratology (as it was, before, at structuralism): does the search for general structuring principles not rob each (literary) text of its specificity? But this is no more valid than objections to Saussure's synchronic analysis of language-signs that it eliminates history because it ignores the development of language through time. However, Saussure explained important aspects of the structural features of language by making the distinction between *langage* and *parole* an expedient analytical tool. In other words, he introduced this distinction in order to carry out a synchronic analysis of a phenomenon which has *in effect* a temporal dimension. A similar case can be made in defence of narratology. As Mieke Bal states, 'the often-alleged opposition between historical and systematic analysis is a false one'.[11] Narratological methods do allow for the convergence of historical and formal critical approaches: Bal argues that in narratology, beyond a static formalism 'more important issues, mainly historical and ideological, have taken priority' but not at the expense of more formal narratological concerns.[12]

Debates on narratology over the years have covered a variety of theories. In 1973 Gerald Prince published his *Grammar of Stories*, proposing a formalist approach to narrative; subsequently, literary theorists revisited the classic structuralist works.[13] But as the developments of structuralism were being reviewed, other theorists were considering how narratology might be reformulated and widened to include new methodologies and media outside the written text.[14] The result of this variety in methodologies became clear in the assortment of subsequent publications.[15] A turning point was then marked in 1984 with Brooks's *Reading for the Plot*, a work that, as James Fowler points out in *Voicing Desire*,

[11] See Bal's *Narratology*: *Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2007), p. 13.
[12] *Ibid*., p. 13.
[13] Culler for example, in his *Structuralist Poetics* (1975) discusses Barthes' *S/Z* (1970), a text that, whilst fundamentally structuralist, has also been seen as anticipating his increasingly post-structuralist approach in *Le Plaisir du texte* (1973).
[14] Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse* (1978) is an example of this approach.
[15] For example, Genette's *Discours du récit* was first published in English in 1980 as *Narrative Discourse*, and forms part of three volumes of essays under the general title *Figures*; Prince published another formalist classic, *Narratology*: *The Form and Functioning of Narrative* in 1982. Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* came out in 1983 and provides a summary of what is now seen as 'classic' narratology.

'was largely responsible for introducing psychoanalysis into Anglo-Saxon narratology'.[16] In the 1990s there was a reaction to this type of anti-formalist development from traditional narratologists who began to revise as well as to re-state some of their earlier methodologies, adding to their arguments by expanding them in new directions.[17] Such developments in narratology serve to defend it from accusations of reductionism. Although it is often seen as moving towards the most abstract realms, narratology retains a connection with mimetic theories of literature. Stated in the most general terms, narratology investigates the ways that narrative structures human perception, both of cultural artefacts and of the material world. Indeed, the organization of time and space in narrative forms constitutes one of the principal ways we construct meaning generally, including meanings 'about' the world.

Recognizing with Rimmon-Kenan the continuing centrality of Genette's work to contemporary studies of narratology, in this thesis I approach my readings of Robbe-Grillet and Duras on the basis of his tripartite division of narrative: *histoire*, *récit* and *narration*. The third aspect is often conflated with the *récit* into a two-part division, but as Genette argues in *Narrative Discourse Revisited,* the two-part division cannot contain the phenomena of *mood* and *voice*.[18] Genette distinguishes *récit* as specifying the syntactic and semantic aspect of the discourse, and *narration* the situation within which the discourse is articulated. He adds that in narrative fiction the narrative situation is a simulation 'which is perhaps the best translation of mimesis'; this simulation or pretence is exactly what characterizes the fictional text. It seems eminently sensible here to acknowledge Genette's argument that 'the narrative act initiates, that is, invents, both the *histoire* and the *récit* which are then completely indissociable.' Brooks, however, insists on the *fabula/sjuzet* division, an opposition that Genette finds incomplete conceptually, confusing terminologically and which he dismisses as belonging to 'the prehistory of narratology'.[19] Regarding *mood* and *voice*, these character-bound notions should be considered *de rigueur* for the analysis of narrative fiction, thus raising Genette's distinctions to basic principles that include a representation that originates

[16] See Fowler's *Voicing Desire*: *Family and Sexuality in Diderot's Narratives* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2000), p. 145.
[17] Chatman's *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (1990), is a case in point. In this work, Chatman considers the narrator function within a still traditional narratological framework which reworks the concept of the implied author proposed by Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). Genette's *Fiction et diction* (1991) and Rimmon-Kenan's *Glance Beyond Doubt: Narration, Representation, Subjectivity* (1996) are further examples of the move to reinforce previously proposed arguments.
[18] See Genette's Introduction in *Narrative Discourse Revisited,* p. 15. In Russian Formalist terminology *fabula* is 'the set of narrated situations and events in their chronological sequence' as opposed to plot – *sjuzet* – which is the set of narrated events in order of presentation. See Gerald Prince's *A Dictionary of Narratology* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), pp. 29, 30.
[19] Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited,* pp. 13, 14.

from the epistemological point of view of the 'character'. As Blakey Vermeule argues, despite the 'highly literate distaste for people who too passionately identify with fictional incarnations, an emphasis on form tends to help the reader to do what s/he would do naturally, that is, provide more and better information while deepening the puzzle of what [a character] is really like, what he really wants, and what he really thinks'.[20] Genette's model further implies inbuilt perspective which suggests a *communicative* structure. My working definition of narrative, then, is a traditional one: narrative is a communicative sequence of events that includes the textual-existential grounding of a character figure or figures.

A feminist analysis that is based on representations of women in a sociological context is greatly enhanced by a psychoanalytic element. Freudian psychoanalysis as aesthetic discourse is justified as applied to narratives of desire, as convincingly argued by Brooks, but psychoanalytic concepts are also useful to the construction of female representations in the literary text from the point of view of the critic. The tools of psychoanalysis enable me to expose the consistent significance of patriarchal culture underlying the elaboration of female representations in Duras's texts. These include female madness and the female character in contexts of sexual violence. These features expose the psychic and mythical forces which are integral to patriarchy and which account for female positions as adopted in society. The post-Freudian/feminist engagement with Robbe-Grillet's and Duras's texts in this study needs explanation given that Freud has been both rejected and acclaimed for his views on femininity.[21] As Elizabeth Wright explains, Freud's theory of 'penis envy' generated much feminist criticism because 'it invited and still invites so literal an interpretation'.[22] Although Freud acknowledges that it is because of her sexuality that woman is 'enigmatic', he does not reduce women to their sexuality and, as he states at the end of his lecture 'Femininity' (1933), woman conceptualised as 'female sexuality' is basically a theoretical construct, no more than an 'object of study'.[23] Indeed, the point of the whole lecture on femininity is to remove the opposition between men and women and to privilege bisexuality. In brief, in his emphasis on female passivity and masochism, for example, Freud does seem to play into the hands of patriarchy, but in underlining the

[20] Blakey Vermeule, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters*? (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), p. xi.
[21] See Sarah Kofman's *The Enigma of Woman*: *Woman in Freud's Writings*, trans. Catherine Porter (London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 11.
[22] Elizabeth Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reappraisal*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Polity and Blackwell, 1998), p. 175.
[23] See Freud's lecture, 'Femininity' (1933), in *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, in *The Standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 2001), Vol. 22, pp. 112–136.

universality of human bisexuality, he appears to contest the rules of patriarchy. Freud states that absolute femininity and absolute masculinity are theoretical constructions: 'I am prepared to grant […] that most men fall far short of the masculine ideal, for all human individuals, as a result of their bisexual disposition and of cross-inheritance, combine in themselves both masculine and feminine characteristics'.[24] Emphasising the complexity of Freud's undertaking regarding the 'feminine', Sarah Kofman argues that Freud's thesis on bisexuality 'makes it possible to displace the metaphysical categories that it renders problematic, since it proclaims the purely speculative character of the masculine/feminine opposition'.[25]

The psychoanalytic and linguistic theories of 'French' feminism as put forward by literary thinkers Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, are clearly relevant to my discussion of narrative fiction. The notion that a particular feminine psyche generates a particular feminine use of language is supported by these theorists (in differing ways). I give a brief account of their theories and of the criticism they have encountered at the end of this section. Despite some of the apparent disadvantages, I find that certain aspects of 'French' feminist thinking offer a useful device for exploring Duras's texts as indeed does the strong historicist and gender-based alternative model in Anglo-American feminist thinking which has moderated to an extent the effects of the three theorists in question. Both French and Anglo-American branches of feminism are culturally and intellectually relevant and so I will be referring to both in this study. There is a certain amount of consensus amongst feminist literary critics who support the idea that Duras, in her work from the early sixties onwards, breaks away from the control of masculine language and makes apparent the 'feminine' in a manner which is both innovative and politically revolutionary. This is a problematic position but, on the other hand, to insist on a wholly constructionist view of gender is to allow what is particularly female to be left out of the argument. A rigorous anti-essentialist position sidesteps the necessity to account for the ways in which the term 'woman' has functioned to establish the social construction of women at particular historical periods and how the term has been used to support male power structures. Diana Fuss, for example, argues that it is the utilization of the term 'essentialism' that should interest feminist theorists rather than a total denunciation of any position seen as essentialist.[26]

[24] Freud, 'Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes' (1925). Cited in Kofman's *The Enigma of Woman*, p. 13.
[25] *Ibid*., p. 15.
[26] See Fuss's *Essentially Speaking*: *Feminism, Nature and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. xi.

The question of gender brings us to the political stakes of the writings to be considered here. Robbe-Grillet and Duras reject the notion of a spontaneous interaction with an immediately observable reality. Nevertheless, while their texts cannot be seen as unambiguous examples of the larger, complex cultural formations with which they are associated, I read both authors as emerging from a particular historical context. This aspect of their work affects to a degree the claims of the *nouveau roman* movement with which they have been associated, to have abandoned historical elements or political messages in their search for writing forms that articulate subjective rather than concrete reality. To cite Leenhard once again:

Plutôt que de poursuivre une littéralité intemporelle, il devient aujourd'hui urgent de déterminer sur des critères littéraires ce qui fonctionne comme 'littérature' à chaque moment de l'histoire, c'est-à-dire les conditions d'admissibilité d'un type de production textuelle dans l'ordre littéraire. La reconnaissance de ces conditions littéraires ne dispense certes pas de se pencher sur la structure sociologique du micro-milieu qui assume la production et la consécration des textes.[27]

The historical element in my authors' writing helps the reader to understand not just the aesthetic frameworks and debates within which their writing took shape, but also the wider intellectual territory of that writing; the presuppositions and values which may have been consciously or unconsciously held by the two authors regarding personal identity, the social and political fields, gender and those many other components of knowledge that create the point of contact between narrative fiction and the real world. With such questions in mind, throughout this thesis I consider the sex/gender distinction that is so central to feminist theory – and which has clearly relevant implications for the debate between feminism and psychoanalysis – and the way that this distinction is inscribed in Robbe-Grillet's and Duras's texts. I will therefore investigate to what extent, if at all, Robbe-Grillet and Duras articulate female agency in their narratives and how they illustrate relations of power between the sexes. The desire of given characters, as far as it can be inferred from textual evidence, can then be seen, not as having the unique function of shaping the plot, be it in a 'masculine' or 'feminine' way, but rather as finding its place within sexual/textual politics.

[27] Leenhardt, *Lecture politique du roman*, p. 11.

***Écriture Féminine*:**

Hélène Cixous

According to Cixous, it is 'impossible de *définir* une pratique féminine de l'écriture, d'une impossibilité qui se maintiendra car on ne pourra jamais *théoriser* cette pratique, l'enfermer, la coder, ce qui ne signifie pas qu'elle n'existe pas. Mais elle excédera toujours le discours que régit le système phallocentrique'.[28] This position suggests that writing the feminine puts the writer beyond judgment because it operates outside the 'phallocentric system' and fights its hegemony by not using its discourse. In addition, the realm of the body is seen here as somehow resistant to social and gender conditioning, a view which is difficult to reconcile with a notion of femininity as a social construct. Nevertheless, there is value in a hypothesis whose impulse is to dismantle the stranglehold of the binary man/woman system on which other oppositions such as activity/passivity and culture/nature depend. Despite the evident weaknesses of her postulation, Cixous's view of the female body as the main site of female power is obviously valuable in the exploration of the social and political manipulation of women through their sexuality. A useful insight that arises from her work is that, for one of the terms in a binary system to acquire meaning, it must obliterate the other. The terms masculine/feminine for example cannot be left whole. The pair becomes a battleground where the fight for signifying dominance is perpetually re-enacted.[29] This provides a useful framework in which to read Duras.

Luce Irigaray

Irigaray criticizes the 'poverty' and phallocentrism of psychoanalysis in her work.[30] For Irigaray, women have a language of their own which is connected with their sexuality. In her view, this language is not just repressed but suppressed, a suppression that she says is vital to the survival of patriarchy. If language were not suppressed in women, it would be distinct from men's in two main ways: the first difference is syntactic: female language has nothing to do with the conventions of syntax. This point is reminiscent of Duras who states that 'le mot compte plus que la syntaxe. C'est avant tout les mots, sans articles d'ailleurs, qui viennent et qui s'imposent' (*LP*, 11). The second point reflects the alleged multiplicity of female sexuality and it relates to meaning. For Irigaray feminine language would dismantle

[28] Cixous, 'Le Rire de la Méduse' in *Le Rire de la Méduse et autres ironies* (Paris: Galilée, 2010 [1975]), pp. 37–68. (p. 43).
[29] Cixous and Catherine Clément, *La jeune née* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1975), pp.117–118.
[30] See Irigaray's *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* where criticism of Freud's theories are pervasive. *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977).

the single meaning of words which governs discourse.[31] This view is of course a radical challenge to Saussure's influential linguistic theory where the one-to-one correlation between signifier and signified secures the unity of the sign in language. Of Freud's thoughts on femininity, Irigaray states that 'cette conception relative et au primat du pénis et au caractère forcément mâle de la libido commande […] la problématique de la castration telle que la développe Freud', and goes on to criticize the sexist implications of this model for women as a central theme of *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*.[32] It should be noted that Kofman claims that the French translation of Freud's original lecture, 'Femininity', is hardly satisfactory. In her view, feminists' critical positions on Freud, including Irigaray's, are inadequate because these critics have not read the original German text. According to Kofman, Freud's text is more complex and multifaceted than the French translation allows for and accuses Irigaray of persisting in reading a faulty French translation so as to advance her argument.[33] Furthermore, Toril Moi argues that Irigaray analyses 'woman' in 'idealist categories', much like the male philosophers she criticizes in *Spéculum de l'autre femme* and elsewhere.[34]

Julia Kristeva

In her theories on language and the unconscious Kristeva defends Freud from feminist accusations of biological reductionism and says that, on the contrary: 'A la fois énergie *et* sens, biologie *et* communication avec l'autre [la sexualité] inscrit d'emblée l'animalité dans la culture [dans laquelle] se noue indissolublement […] le corps et l'esprit, l'instinct et le langage'.[35] She further praises psychoanalysis as the discipline that defies 'la rationalité classique en l'élargissant par la prise en compte de l'imaginaire qui étaie le lien entre deux êtres parlants'.[36] According to Kristeva the discourses of art, poetry and madness, are inspired by the disordered semiotic rather than the logical symbolic aspects of language. The writings of Lautréamont and Mallarmé, Joyce and Artaud, for example, constitute a subversive form of writing: with features such as ellipses, breaks and obvious lack of logical construction, they explode 'the subject and his ideological limits' because they undermine social structures and their 'ideological, coercive and necrophilic manifestations'.[37] Kristeva's 'feminine' is

[31] Irigaray, 'Women's Exile', *Ideology and Consciousness*, Vol. 1 (1977), p. 62–76.
[32] Irigaray, *Ce sexe*, p. 36.
[33] See Kofman's *The Enigma of Woman*, p. 14.
[34] Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Minuit, 1974). See Moi's section on Irigaray in *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 144–148.
[35] Kristeva, *Le Génie Féminin* (Paris: Fayard, 2000), pp. 15,16.
[36] *Ibid*., p. 15.
[37] See Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), p. 15.

accessible to both men and women but the fact that her model also allows for males is a disadvantage for K.K. Ruthven because, as he states, this position leaves no *specific* category for women. It follows that if this is the case, there would be no point in having a feminist movement to protect women's interests: 'Kristeva's analysis of the construction of the subject in language […] is too corrosive for comfort, for in deconstructing phallocratic theories of language acquisition she deconstructs feminism as well'. The result is, for Ruthven, that from a marxist-feminist outlook, Kristeva has to be approached with caution for two reasons: politically Kristeva's theories might destabilize the view that women need protection in the patriarchal social system, and there is also the danger that she 'idealises and romanticises the discursive ruptures of the avant-garde'; she thereby risks 'privileging and feminising the irrational'.[38]

THESIS STRUCTURE

This thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter One is based around Robbe-Grillet's statements in *Pour un nouveau roman* (1963). Here, I undertake close readings of two of his early novels: *Le Voyeur* (1955) and *La Jalousie* (1957) to ascertain to what extent he adheres to his own project for a novelistic change to reflect the contemporary world; and it will emerge that his claims to have moved beyond 'plot' and 'character' as such need to be reassessed. In Chapter Two, I consider *La Maison de rendez-vous* (1965); Robbe-Grillet's three 'autofictions' (1984–1994); *C'est Gradiva qui vous appelle* (2002) and *Un roman sentimental* (2007). According to Roch C Smith, something 'new' enters Robbe-Grillet's writing with *La Maison de rendez-vous* as this novel 'marks Robbe-Grillet's initial contribution to what has come to be called the "*New* New novel"'.[39] In fact, we will see that *La Maison de rendez-vous* offers an example of the 'cinematic' in Robbe-Grillet's writing. These new developments in Robbe-Grillet's work (the autofictions and the 'cinematic') strengthen the case for reading *Pour un nouveau roman* critically, especially its statements concerning plot, character and representation.

The third chapter focuses on Duras, who shows how desire in the 'feminine' might look. I analyse the female characters in her texts, both in terms of mimetic/thematic representation and of the position of 'femininity' in the structure of the Durassian narrative. Taken as a whole, Duras's work reflects a conflict between different perceptions of the term 'woman' which is apparent in two distinctive currents of feminist thought. The tension here is

[38] K.K. Ruthven, *Feminist Literary Studies* (Cambridge: University Press, 1984), pp. 99–101.
[39] Smith, *Understanding Robbe-Grillet* (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), p. 62.

one between a representation of woman who fits masculine fantasy and desire, and one where we find female agency. Chapter Three shows how Duras increasingly problematises the 'masculine' plot of desire, by showing that 'female' desire (i.e. the desire of her female characters) exceeds the masculine plot evoked by Brooks. Meanwhile, this involves rethinking Duras's relation to *écriture féminine*, and the relation (often assumed) in Duras, between formal experimentation and writing that challenges patriarchal discourse. I argue that while there are points in common between the characteristics of *écriture féminine* and the stylistic features in Duras's later work, it is not possible to propose a definitive correlation between gender and narrative form in her work as a whole. By taking a deliberately integrative stance and drawing on questions raised in feminist debates, we can arrive at a series of critical re-evaluations that suggest there is further work yet to be done concerning the specificity of Duras's texts in narratological terms and the place Duras's work occupies/could occupy in feminist textual theory.

CHAPTER ONE

Alain Robbe-Grillet and the Politics of Representation

Introduction

In this chapter and the next I focus on Robbe-Grillet's work with particular attention to his representations of the feminine. My analyses also demonstrate the complex dialectics between the traditional and the experimental that features prominently in his work. I will argue that there is no simple, polarized classification of realism against experimental writing, given the overlap of the two categories. In addition, an important aim in the investigation of the novels in these two chapters is to test Robbe-Grillet's actual strategies against the tasks he sets for himself in *Pour un nouveau roman*. After a discussion of the author's thoughts on contemporary fiction as set out in *Pour un nouveau roman*, I go on to analyse two of Robbe-Grillet's early narratives: *Le Voyeur* (1955) and *La Jalousie* (1957).[40] These two texts present particular aesthetic issues from the earlier period of Robbe-Grillet's writing career. In general terms, *Le Voyeur* is a novel where the narrative is produced mainly by the exploration of an apparently objective reality, but mediated by the relationship between the subject and the object; here, my interest lies particularly in narrative perspective (or focalization in Genette's terms). In *La Jalousie* the catalyst for the subject/narrator's *narration* is clearly jealousy, a human emotion which performs the function of causal agent. Although the subject/narrator who in traditional fiction had a familial history, a personal past and a place in the social network is here reduced to a gaze, 'meaning' still flows through a recognizable 'character' suffering from a recognizable anxiety.

Pour un nouveau roman

Thinking that his work was often misrepresented by the critical establishment, including the negative reception of the two novels under discussion, Robbe-Grillet published a series of essays to dispel misunderstandings of his project (*PNR*, 7). The result, *Pour un nouveau roman*, is a collection of polemical essays – 'poussé toujours par le désir de convaincre' (*PNR*, 8) – originally written between 1953 and 1963. These essays focus on ways to create a new kind of novel that leaves behind the '*notions perimées*' of the past and that would convey more accurately what it is like to live in the twentieth century (*PNR*, 25). The readings gathered under 'Éléments d'une anthologie moderne' will not be studied here as they are readings of other authors' work. The focus is on the other articles, in which Robbe-

[40] *Le Voyeur* (Paris: Minuit, 2000); orig. publ. 1955. *La Jalousie* (Paris: Minuit, 2000); orig. publ. 1957.

Grillet reflects on his own ideas concerning the novel and/or his own novels and films. Of special interest is the first essay, 'À quoi servent les théories' (*PNR*, 7–13) and the last one 'Du réalisme à la realité' (*PNR*, 135–144), both of which are dated '1955 et 1963' and which illustrate Derrida's contention in *Dissemination* that the preface may as well come last.[41]

Speaking generally, Robbe-Grillet makes a persuasive case that whilst the *Nouveau Roman* is not a school, it is a useful label for a group of experimental writers sharing certain tendencies. Above all, the *nouveaux romanciers* want to break away from the Realist tradition that peaked, for Robbe-Grillet, with Balzac. Robbe-Grillet sees himself and others such as Claude Simon, as writing within a 'tradition' – although he avoids that term and argues that 'tous les écrivains pensent être réalistes.[…] C'est par souci de réalisme que chaque nouvelle école littéraire voulait abattre celle qui la précédait' (*PNR*, 135). Essentially, Robbe Grillet criticizes the fact that the novel was always compared 'aux grands romans du passé, qui toujours étaient posés comme le modèle sur quoi le jeune écrivain devait garder les yeux fixés' (*PNR*, 7). He consistently returns to the notion that the novel, from Stendhal to Joyce, has always evolved – hence the absurdity of using past standards to evaluate contemporary fiction: 'Pour écrire comme Stendhal, il faudrait d'abord écrire en 1830' (*PNR*, 9). Far from representing a refutation of the past, then, Robbe-Grillet's search for a new novel is thus consistent with the history of a genre which, by definition, must always be transformed to fit its time.

The *nouveaux romanciers*' break with realism turns out not to be a break with realism but rather 'un nouveau réalisme' (*PNR*, 13). The *nouveaux romanciers*, Robbe-Grillet argues, de-emphasise the mimetic function of literature in favour of a kind of writing that draws attention to the writing process itself. He uses various terms to express this shift: it is a shift from content to form which becomes the 'subject' of the novel; in other words, what the novel is 'about' is now the writing process. By the same token, the writing process consists in 'art for art's sake' as opposed to 'committed literature', 'socialist literature' or the 'roman à thèse' (*PNR*, 8). According to Robbe-Grillet, every novel is a self-contained work of art which cannot be reduced to some external meaning or truth that is known beforehand (*PNR*, 137). The reality of a work of art is its form and to separate style from content is therefore to take out the novel from the realm of art. Art, Robbe-Grillet argues, is not just an appealing way of putting forward a message: it *is* the message. Like the physical world, a novel is

[41] Derrida argues that 'preceding what ought to be able to present itself on its own, the preface falls like an empty husk, a piece of formal refuse'. See Derrida's *Dissemination*, 4th edn., trans. Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 2004), p. 8.

autonomous and expresses nothing but itself; its essence is not to do with its usefulness or any kind of function (*PNR*, 137).

Robbe-Grillet explains that nineteenth-century literary tradition sees the novel as a form of expression in which the author outlines his relation to the external world. The author does this by rationalizing the world in terms of himself, by finding in the concrete world correspondences to his own frame of mind and sensibility. More specifically, he claims that Balzac has a 'bourgeois' vision of the world – '[Il y a] une étroite relation […] entre le roman balzacien et le triomphe de la bourgeoisie' (*PNR*, 34) – in which the world is full of fixed meanings and the individual (hero) can possess the world: 'L'homme était la raison de toute chose, la clef de l'univers, et son maître naturel, le droit divin…'(*PNR*, 119). Robbe-Grillet maintains that the novelist has nothing to say: 'Le seul engagement possible, pour l'écrivain, c'est la littérature' (*PNR*, 120). The writer, therefore, may as well describe effectively the concrete world instead. His position on the novelist here might be broadly described as 'phenomenological', that is to say, a view of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. Phenomenology, as Robbe-Grillet states, was important in contemporary thinking although he (problematically) connects this to the loss of status of the middle classes: 'Pendant que la classe bourgeoise perdait peu à peu ses justifications et ses prérogatives, la pensée abandonnait ses fondements essentialistes, la phénomenologie occupait progressivement tout le champ des recherches philosophiques' (*PNR*, 120). Two problems require further comment: the problem of representation and the problem of the subject or character.

The Problem of Representation

Robbe-Grillet believes in a concrete reality separate from man and therefore with no particular meaning: 'Désormais […] les objets peu à peu perdront leur inconstance et leurs secrets' (*PNR*, 20); things do not serve 'un instant de support aux passions humaines' (*PNR*, 20). He insists that novels do not represent but create; however, at the beginning of his writing career he is more attentive to the nature of the external world than he is to arguing for the specific narrative techniques to be used in describing it. Does the new novel 'represent' the world? No clear answer can be inferred from *Pour un nouveau roman* as a whole: 'Le monde n'est ni signifiant ni absurde. Il *est*, tout simplement. […] Autour de nous, défiant la meute de nos adjectifs animistes ou ménagers, les choses sont là' (*PNR*, 18). The world is simply 'there'; objects are simply 'there'. It is easy for him to distinguish this view from the Realist enterprise as he (not very rigorously) defines it:

Tous les éléments techniques du récit [réaliste] – emploi systématique du passé simple et de la troisième personne, adoption sans condition du déroulement chronologique, intrigues linéaires, courbe régulière des passions, tension de chaque épisode vers une fin, etc. – tout visait à imposer l'image d'un univers stable, cohérent, continu, univoque, entièrement déchiffrable. Comme l'intelligibilité du monde n'était même pas mise en question, raconter ne posait pas de problème. L'écriture romanesque pouvait être innocente. (*PNR*, 31)

In Robbe-Grillet's reading of Balzac, that author portrays a world saturated with meanings. Less easy, but just as important for Robbe-Grillet's claim to originality and 'modernity', is the task of distinguishing his practice from that of writers such as Camus or Sartre, associated with existentialism and the notion of the 'absurd' (*PNR*, 140–141). Robbe-Grillet argues that the 'absurd' which such authors encounter in a Godless universe serves as a source of meaning too: the 'absurdity' of the world is like a call to humanity. By this he means that objects do not embody significance for human beings, neither in the way realism had them 'mean' something, nor the existentialist challenge to make some sort of moral sense of the world. Robbe-Grillet claims to be different in refusing representation in the 'traditional' sense, in which the best of authors represent the world as accurately or as objectively as possible. In the *nouveau roman*, man gazes at the world but the world does not gaze back which bars both transcendence or the literary symbolism that suggests it. The task of the *nouveau romancier* is to describe the physical world, not to adopt it or project himself onto it. In other words, the new novelist should document the distance between man and objects without interpreting this distance as an emotional division; the *nouveau roman* asserts 'cette passion de décrire' instead (*PNR*, 13).

Accusations of cold description and 'chosisme' followed as part of the reception of his work but, Robbe-Grillet suggests, his work is less 'objective' than the God-like presence of the traditional omniscient narrator: description in his novels is entirely *subjective* and comes to the fore; whereas in Balzac's work for example, description simply gives the story the impression of authentic reality. But whilst he insists he does not represent the world, he does insist he represents something: the relation between 'man' and the world. Indeed, he claims that all novels represent this relation. But what distinguishes novels that have value from those that do not, include a necessary (but not sufficient) condition: that 'good' novels embody (represent/create) a *modern* view of that relation. He calls for the creation of a new form of fiction that reflects the more *modest*, less anthropomorphic contemporary world: 'Notre monde, aujourd'hui, est moins sûr de lui-même, plus modeste peut-être puisqu'il a

renoncé à la toute-puissance de la personne, mais plus ambitieux aussi puisqu'il regarde au-delà (*PNR*, 28). Balzac, in his time, represented a view of that relation that was modern in his time, and can be approved of for that. But Robbe-Grillet insists that for a modern-day writer to continue to 'do a Balzac' is sterile: 'Le romancier du XXe siècle qui recopierait mot pour mot le *Don Quichotte* écrirait ainsi une œuvre totalement différente de celle de Cervantès' (*PNR*, 9).

Now, Robbe-Grillet argues that Balzac used a form, or we might say a range of techniques, appropriate to the embodiment of his vision. These were plot, individual hero and so on. He equally argues that all of these notions are now 'perimées' (*PNR*, 25), but are resolutely clung to by 'la critique' (*PNR*, 25–26). So what is needed now for novels to have value are new forms or new techniques appropriate to 'our' vision. By this he means the most modern, disenchanted vision in which the world is simply 'there'. In fact, Robbe-Grillet is conflating several things here. First, the world has, objectively, changed; our social structures, institutions, etc. are no longer those of the nineteenth century. Second, our relation to the world has changed, as it must. But third, we cannot state that the novel as a whole has changed or stayed the same. Robbe-Grillet wants to write in such a manner that he represents the relation to the world 'accurately', i.e. in conformity to what is, objectively, our new relation to a changed world. But some novelists insist on using forms/techniques that allowed Balzac to do that in his own historical period. As the world has changed, and our relation to the world has changed, only new forms of the novel can authentically embody that new relation to the world. Therefore representation continues, but it should be (and should always have been) representation of, first, an objective relation of man to the world; and second, a subjective view of that objective relation which is contemporary and therefore valuable. Whenever an author imagines a future book, it is always *a way of writing* which is at the forefront of his mind. This leads Robbe-Grillet to suggest that an author has nothing to say: he only has a method of speaking and that 'à la place de cet univers des "significations" (psychologiques, sociales, fonctionelles), il faudrait donc essayer de construire un monde plus solide, plus immédiat' (*PNR*, 20).

The problem of the 'subject'

According to Raylene Ramsay, 'the importance of [Robbe-Grillet's] description of objects and the apparent exclusion of the reflective consciousness in his early novels of the late fifties and sixties led to the imposition of the label 'chosiste' and to a rather loose phenomenological interpretation that ignored the intention present in any act of

observation'.[42] Ramsay's phenomenological interpretation of Robbe-Grillet requires the presence of an observing consciousness and indeed Robbe-Grillet does not want to be accused of 'chosisme'. In *Pour un nouveau roman* he states that in the new novel 'l'homme y est présent à chaque page. […] Même si l'on y trouve beaucoup d'objets, et décrits avec minutie, il y a toujours et d'abord le regard qui les voit, […] la passion qui les déforme' (*PNR*, 116). But he omits to point out what is of interest in this study: the relation to the world which he depicts/creates in his writing is primarily sustained by the viewer's desire; more specifically, a desire to reduce other subjects to the status of (ideal) objects.

As Robbe-Grillet represents 'man', he represents, typically, a biological male (*vir* not *homo* in Latin).[43] And that man looks at the world, in search of meaning. He (not she) interrogates objects and among the objects he interrogates are human subjects, that is 'objects' who can think private thoughts, feel secret desire, and return gaze for gaze. Robbe-Grillet's consistently male viewer interrogates, not primarily through language but as though human beings were objects. He interrogates their gestures, their expressions, and so on. But his gaze is not free of interpretative intent: it is selective, and it is sexualized.[44] It seeks to perceive conformity between the desire of the subject (Mathias in *Le Voyeur*, the jealous husband in *La Jalousie*) and the external world. Meaning is sought in the form of answers to implied questions: is my wife faithful? Or: is it possible to ensure, somehow, that A… behaves precisely according to my own desires? Can I shape the world to suit my desire? Or does the world, perhaps, after all, exist for me? Perhaps if I look well enough, if I assert my domination sufficiently, the world will be moulded to my desire, primarily sexual desire and by extension, desire for domination and fixed gender-roles. But this is a search for *meaning* – not moral meaning as with the existentialists for whom absurdity stimulates search for meaning – but sexual and relational. Robbe-Grillet betrays himself when he writes about the relation of 'man' to the world, as though he were simply saying the relation of 'humanity' to

[42] See Ramsay's *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity* : *Science, Sexuality and Subversion* (Miami: University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 7.
[43] In most instances, *homo* does not refer to the male biological sex, but rather to a human male, mankind or male person. For example the sentence 'all humans are one' is translated as *omnes homines sunt unus*, without a male/female distinction. *Vir* is a strictly male term and it is distinguished from the more neutral term *homo* because it has connotations of courage, strength, honour, etc.
[44] In representing female bodies as pure objects, Robbe-Grillet takes away the possibility of representing female agency because the body 'is the place of one's engagement with the world' and therefore of action in the world. See Lois McNay's *Gender and Agency*: *Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 33.

the world, (this is before feminism had challenged 'maleness' as a supposed substitute for 'neutral').[45]

These questions take us to the centre of Robbe-Grillet's concerns. Feminism allows us to focus on the fact that the human objects which Robbe-Grillet's focalizers interrogate have (although his focalizers do not wish to see this) equal claim to the status of subjects. But at the same time Robbe-Grillet's characters gaze, but not at a world entirely filled with lifeless objects, or such objects and animals only, as in the seagull looked at by Mathias in *Le Voyeur* (*LV*, 17). Their gaze is intersubjective, in spite of themselves; it is primarily directed towards human 'objects'. At this point, as he breaks from virtual *chosisme*, Robbe-Grillet begins to use descriptions in a new way. Objects become 'objective correlatives'. They inform us of the viewer. The description of the banana plantation in *La Jalousie* becomes a description of a man who monitors his estate but who would ideally monitor his wife, with similar results. Two points arise from the above statements: first, psychology must necessarily be applied to such a viewer; the language through which his point of view is expressed – and it is through displacement – invites this kind of interpretation. This entails a post-Freudian psychology in which language and meanings do not cohere until we invoke displacement, disavowal and so on. The second point is that the role of desire points in the direction of the same panoply. The gaze is selective, and is directed (as if) by desire. This is the desire of a male heterosexual for female objects. But more specifically, the desire of a male who wishes to dominate the object, possibly torture or kill it, and above all to deny its potential to function as a subject in its own right.

To conclude, for Robbe-Grillet 'man' is on one side, the physical world is there too and it is the distance between the two which lies at the heart of his new novelistic project. Although there is a 'reflective consciousness' in Robbe-Grillet's novels outlined by different narrative strategies, as is apparent in the close readings, he says he does not think of the concrete world as a projection of the human individual or as a dream or illusion. His argument appears to develop into an appeal for objectivity in observing the world but at the same time he admits that such a project is not possible; the inevitability of a subjective view is an important idea in *Pour un nouveau roman*. From a 'subjectivity' position, the mind/body imposes on the individual a first-person perspective as he engages with the contents of his consciousness.

[45] See 'Nouveau roman, homme nouveau (1961)' in *Pour un nouveau roman*, pp. 113–121.

Robbe-Grillet seems to find a way to interact with reality on two levels. The realism (by other means) that is apparent in the close readings, contradicts an anti-realism that always probes and questions the reality this realism is supposed to evoke. His position suggests two simultaneous but apparently contradictory views: the objective and the subjective. Do objectivity and subjectivity contradict each other? Can Robbe-Grillet's position on the objective, separate status of the world make space for the subjectivity he wishes to express? As he asks rhetorically, 'Comment […] un roman qui met en scène un homme et s'attache de page en page à chacun de ses pas, ne décrivant que ce qu'il fait, ce qu'il voit, ou ce qu'il imagine, pourrait-il être accusé de se détourner de l'homme?' (*PNR*, 47). Here he includes *imagination* as part of the character's experience. In other words, by placing imagination as part of, rather than in opposition to experience, he reconciles objectivity and subjectivity. Making use of (male) fantasy, therefore, Robbe-Grillet is able to suggest 'meaning', seemingly resisting the anti-referential statements about narrative he espouses elsewhere in *Pour un nouveau roman*. His work is an articulation of the individual (male) imagination in relation to the real world and to the non-real at the same time. Robbe-Grillet's position seems to hover between the world as existing separately from man *and* as a coherent projection of man's subjectivity; this he does by his descriptions of characters' psyche as with Mathias in *Le Voyeur* and the husband/narrator in *La Jalousie*, for example. His fiction, then, does not articulate precisely the thinking in *Pour un nouveau roman* because he cannot liberate his characters from a 'complicity' with the concrete world. In taking the human subject as an 'object' among other objects that can be represented, Robbe-Grillet is inevitably depicting a special subset of objects, the sentient object which views other objects, and this is done subjectively. His representation of a human being cannot perceive the world as anything but in a 'human' way; this is the only way that Robbe-Grillet can explain concrete reality.

There is here a connection with Maurice Merleau Ponty's phenomenology: in his *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945) Merleau-Ponty developed the notion of the body-subject as an alternative to the Cartesian 'cogito'.[46] This distinction is particularly relevant in that Merleau-Ponty considers the world *existentially*: consciousness, the concrete world and the human body as a perceiving organism are closely interconnected and mutually

[46] Here, Cartesian dualisms of mind and body are substituted with the notion of the *univocity* of mind and body. According to the Merleau-Ponty scholar Remy C. Kwant, 'the affirmation of the "body-subject" as the ambiguous unity – not union – of bodily being and subjectivity is the most fundamental affirmation of Merleau Ponty's philosophy'. See Kwant's *The Phenomenological Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1963), p. 11.

implicated.[47] Writing at a time when phenomenology largely dominated philosophical thinking in Europe, Robbe-Grillet's thinking on the relation between subject and object is a complex one, as we have seen.

Le Voyeur (1955)

Objective Correlatives

We now turn to *Le Voyeur*, a novel in three parts about a watch salesman – Mathias – who arrives on an island he claims is his birthplace. Whilst there he rapes and kills Jacqueline, a thirteen-year-old girl.[48] The first line of the novel is: 'C'était comme si personne n'avait entendu' (*LV*, 9); it is given extra prominence by the fact that it occupies the whole of the first paragraph. It expresses surprise that there has been a noise, but that no one has reacted to it. This is our introduction to the predominantly visual world of *Le Voyeur*. Whilst Mathias's surroundings have no independent meaning, objects and images are specifically selected to suggest meaning and to make of Mathias a character whose motivations can be apprehended by the reader. From the end of the first page to the close of the novel, we see events and settings through the eyes of Mathias. And the narrator offers no commentary as he intermittently describes events and settings from the 'third person' point of view. This quasi-objective point of view is needed to present the 'normal' social background to which Mathias's distorted psyche needs to be compared by the reader: descriptions of the islanders going about their everyday business for example. Mathias's state of mind takes on its warped quality *relative* to the background setting. As the story develops, Mathias's mental state increasingly inhabits more of the narrative so that the final segments operate almost entirely from his subjective point of view. Generally speaking, Mathias does not interpret what he sees. Does this justify calling the novel 'chosiste'? Consider the following descriptive passage:

[47] As Merleau-Ponty states in *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 'La phénoménologie, c'est l'étude des essences [mais] c'est aussi une philosophie qui replace les essences dans l'existence. […] C'est une philosophie transcendentale […] mais c'est aussi une philosophie pour laquelle le monde est toujours "déjà là" avant la réflexion'. *Phénoménologie de la perception*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 7. Orig. publ. 1945.

[48] Jacqueline is also named Violette in the novel. Ramsay contends that Robbe-Grillet's women are young, beautiful and practically interchangeable; none of them has a sustained role, character or name. The name Violette recurs throughout Robbe-Grillet's work, attaching itself to various female characters: 'the Eves, Angelicas, and Lolita-Violettes exert their greatest fascination as sacrificial young virgin and beautiful captive.' Ramsay, *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity*, p. 113.

Le quai, rendu plus lointain par l'effet de perspective, émet de part et d'autre de cette ligne principale un faisceau de parallèles qui délimitent, avec une netteté encore accentuée par l'éclairage du matin, une série de plans allongés, alternativement horizontaux et verticaux: le sommet du parapet massif protégeant le passage du côté du large. […] Théoriquement on devrait voir encore dans l'eau du port l'image renversée de l'ensemble et, à la surface, toujours dans le même jeu de parallèles, l'ombre portée de la haute paroi verticale qui filerait tout droit vers le quai. (*LV*, 13)

Such a passage seems to suggest that the objects of the physical world are simply 'there', without any intrinsic relation to the viewing subject, without meaning for humanity. We might use the term 'there-ness' to express this. But this turns out only to be true, if at all, of certain descriptive passages. For as we will see below, the majority of objects that enter Mathias's field of vision have the function of 'objective correlatives'. In 'Nature, Humanisme, Tragédie (1958)' (*PNR*, 45–67), Robbe-Grillet expresses reservations concerning the role of metaphor in the (realist) novel:

La métaphore, en effet, n'est jamais une figure innocente. Dire que le temps est 'capricieux' ou la montagne 'majestueuse', parler du 'cœur' de la forêt, d'un soleil 'impitoyable', d'un village 'blotti' au creux du vallon, c'est, dans une certaine mesure, fournir des indications sur les choses elles-mêmes: formes, dimensions, situation, etc. (*PNR*, 48)

Robbe-Grillet argues that the difficulty with this technique, implicitly used in the traditional/realist novel to add vividness to a description, is that it has a kind of surplus effect:

'Mais le choix d'un vocabulaire analogique, pourtant simple, fait déjà autre chose que rendre compte de données physiques pures, et ce qui s'y trouve *en plus* ne peut guère être porté au seul crédit des belles-lettres'. (*PNR*, 48, 49; emphasis added)

With the aimed-for vividness, such 'analogic' vocabulary brings investment in pathetic fallacy, even if this was not (consciously) intended by the author:
Plus ou moins consciemment, il ne peut s'agir, pour les écrivains qui usent d'une semblable terminologie, que d'établir un rapport constant entre l'univers et l'être qui l'habite. Ainsi les sentiments de l'homme sembleront tour à tour naître de ses contacts avec le monde et trouver en celui-ci leur correspondance naturelle, si ce n'est leur épanouissement. (*PNR*, 49)

It is intriguing that Robbe-Grillet wrote this passage after publishing *Le Voyeur*. For in that novel, we find precisely such a use of metaphor, or (more broadly) analogy between objects and feelings, employed to establish a 'communication souterraine' (*PNR*, 49) to suggest Mathias's mental state. As Bruce Morrissette states, the discourse in *Le Voyeur* is 'une présentation ambigüe […], floue, qui par son imprécision évoque mieux le désarroi du protagoniste que ne le feraient les paroles brutes'.[49] The protagonist's surroundings therefore fulfil an important symbolic function in *Le Voyeur*: the precision of the descriptions fixates on various objects that suggest Mathias's state of mind, making it possible, and arguably necessary, for the reader to discern a disturbed and obsessive psyche. Although the *nouveau roman* is often associated with the 'death of the author' as the 'birth of the reader' (to use Barthes's contemporaneous formulation)[50], the reader does not enjoy any particular freedom in this respect. For s/he can only grasp an understanding of Mathias's 'personality' through repetitive descriptions of objects closely connected to him; indeed, if the novel is to be 'readable' at all, and not just a connection of discrete sentences, s/he is obliged to reconstruct Mathias's personality as it is reflected in (or on) the objects that enter his visual field. Such objects include: an unmade bed (*LV*, 77); a painting representing a young girl kneeling (*LV*, 78); a dead 'frog', which turns out to be a dead toad with its legs apart (*LV*, 91); and other disquieting imagery. The evocation of such objects, and sometimes whole settings, is saturated, so to speak, with Mathias's emotions and at least some of them *must* be recovered as metaphors if the narrative is to be 'naturalized', and so function as a narrative at all. Most or (arguably) all of these images inform the reader of Mathias's obsessions, and provide the elements of a motivation for sexual assault and murder. To put this another way, the function of these objects seems to be to provide the elements of a subjectivity, and so a character: Mathias the eponymous 'voyeur' is in this sense the one through whose eyes all things in this novel are seen, or, in narratological terms, 'the focalizer'.

Much of the power of the descriptions in *Le Voyeur* rests in the imitation of perceptual processes which conform to visual experience and function as clues, directing the reader to interpret the narrative as the product of a single mind, that is, Mathias's psyche as it 'processes' sense-data. All the images sum up Mathias's precarious situation more succinctly than would explicit 'zero-focalization' descriptions of his state of mind or emotions. The images become more numerous as the narrative progresses, and are imbued with Mathias's exaltation and fear as alternating moods/modes of a fictional consciousness. This is novelistic

[49] Morrissette, *Les romans de Robbe-Grillet* (Paris: Minuit, 1963), p. 95.
[50] See Barthes, 'La mort de l'auteur', in *Œuvres Complètes I* (Paris: Seuil, 1993), pp. 491–495.

representation of 'psychology' by attention to how objects appear to the protagonist's gaze. Looking establishes Mathias's interaction with other characters, points to his state of mind and/or motivates action, in particular when he sees and/or recalls a disturbing object. The phrase 'objective correlatives' is suited to describe such objects in order to indicate that they offer a correlative to the subject-protagonist's thoughts and emotions.

Metaphor and Metonymy

To decipher *Le Voyeur*'s objective correlatives in the manner just described involves reading them as metaphors and/or metonymies. The moment when Jacqueline's life is extinguished is never described, although late in the novel we are given certain details of the rape: Jacqueline's arms and legs being tied; her blouse being stuffed into her mouth and so on. The moment of the death is, instead, alluded to by metaphor and metonymy; these serve both to express and conceal this moment. This is the key passage, which occurs at the opening of Part II; only as we read on does the first-time reader understand that the murder has been elided between Part I and this opening:

Un trait d'ombre, rectiligne, large de moins d'un pied, barrait la poussière blanche de la route. Un peu de biais, il s'avançait en travers du passage sans fermer complètement celui-ci: son extrémité arrondie – presque plate – ne dépassait pas le milieu de la chaussée, dont toute la partie gauche demeurait libre. (*LV*, 91)

At first glance, such a passage may seem 'chosiste'. However, the main verb of the first sentence has a 'metaphorical' function of the type which Robbe-Grillet questions in 'Nature, Humanisme, Tragédie', as stated above: if the shadow 'blocks' the route, implicitly it poses an obstacle to escape (from the scene of the crime). The next sentence, however, seems to offer an escape route all the same: the shadow did not 'close' the passage (or way through). This metaphor may remind the reader of the child's game in which one must avoid stepping on a crack or a line – in another passage, in fact, Mathias falls into such a game near the statue in the town square. It depends on the illusion that the shadow blocks the path being interpreted as a literal blocking – and the work of interpretation is done by the choice of the verb 'barrer', which can only be understood metaphorically here.

The next sentence employs metonymy and metaphor together to similar effect: 'Entre cette extrémité et les herbes rases bordant la route, était écrasé le cadavre d'une petite grenouille, cuisses ouvertes, bras en croix, formant sur la poussière une tache à peine plus

grise' (*LV*, 91). Here, the dead body of a frog (later, it will transpire that it is a toad) serves to recall the dead body of Jacqueline. This is metonymic, in that the 'frog' is juxtaposed with Madame Marek on the next page (her son first gave Mathias the idea of calling at the Leducs' house, to sell watches); the body is 'juste à côté' the case of samples he rests on the ground, and so also 'à côté de' Mme Marek (*LV*, 102). It is also metaphorical as the patch on the road signifies 'violent death'. (This effect works regardless of whether the reader has already guessed that the murder has taken place; for if this realization only comes later, the effect will work retrospectively). And if this metonymy/metaphor betrays Mathias's anxiety, his further 'analogic' thoughts on the dead 'frog' seem designed to allay it:

Le corps avait perdu toute épaisseur, *comme s'il* n'était resté là que la peau, desséchée et dure, invulnérable désormais, collant au sol de façon aussi étroite que l'aurait fait l'ombre d'un animal en train de sauter, pattes étendues – mais immobilisé en l'air. (*LV*, 91; emphasis added)

We have seen that Robbe-Grillet's analysis of metaphor and 'analogic terminology' as bringing a surplus that resembles pathetic fallacy implies his rejection of it. Yet it seems to apply, precisely, to the above passage. The body of a 'frog' is not literally 'invulnerable' – it could be scraped off the path, for instance, and disposed of in any number of ways. Clearly, Mathias projects 'invulnerability' onto the frog, as though one need not pity but perhaps envy it. He further compares the 'frog' with a shadow (it is not literally a shadow) so that he can imagine the frog jumping, and so still alive, although this idea is made problematic by the necessity of imagining that the frog is jumping yet immobile. Neither alive nor dead, neither jumping nor not jumping, but certainly not suffering, this 'frog' seems designed to disavow, or minimize, the suffering and death which Mathias has just inflicted on Jacqueline. And so, on reflection, this description becomes a kind of 'screen' onto which Mathias projects his state of mind following the murder of Jacqueline (elided between the end of Part I and the opening of Part II).

Condensation and Displacement

Since metaphor and metonymy, applied to the objective correlatives in Mathias's visual field, serve to reveal the (dysfunctional) functioning of his psyche, we can more usefully refer to

them as 'condensation and displacement'.[51] But condensation and displacement, used as defence mechanisms, are not restricted to objective correlatives. Sometimes we observe the same mechanisms at work in Mathias's thought processes, even when he is not selecting and 'processing' visual images. Meanwhile, as Mathias becomes progressively more apprehensive, his use of such (defence) mechanisms becomes more obsessively and disturbingly precise. Consider the following scene, in which Mathias seems strangely indifferent to the fact that he has just missed a boat to the mainland:

L'aubergiste, qui a regagné son poste d'observation derrière la vitre, lui annonce le départ du petit chalutier. […] Vous auriez pu être rentré chez vous vers les quatre heures, dit l'homme sans se retourner. Bah! Personne ne m'attend, répond Mathias. (*LV*, 247)

Immediately, however, and with no apparent transition, the reader is taken from the scene of departure back to Mathias's activities on the island: 'Mathias se lève de table. Une dernière raison […] l'incite à demeurer là jusqu'au lendemain: il veut encore, avant de quitter le pays, finir sa tournée de prospection' (*LV*, 247).This passage is intriguing precisely because of the 'gap' that is the murder of the girl.[52] Any model of the mind as self-aware, coherent, and conscious seems inadequate to this character's thought process. Above, the narrator affords us an explicit 'extract' from the character's thoughts: 'il veut encore, avant de quitter le pays, finir sa tournée de prospection'. But the reader knows by now that Mathias has committed a murder. S/he is invited, therefore, to notice that escaping the scene of a capital crime does not enter the protagonist's conscious motivation, at least as far as this is recorded by the narrator. Instead, we are offered the most workaday of reasons: Mathias wants to finish his 'tournée de prospection'. He wants to finish it, not (only), as when he first arrived, to sell watches, but to cover his tracks by picking up potential clues to the murder (discarded cigarette butts and sweet wrappers, etc). This is a displacement of emphasis.[53] The reader, then, is obliged to rely, not only on objective correlatives but also on filling the 'gaps' and correcting the

[51] The unconscious is governed by its own laws: its images do not obey the sequential logic of consciousness. Instead, the images in the unconscious condense onto each other or are displaced onto something else.
[52] As Smith notes, the reader of *Le Voyeur* 'sees everything through the eyes of an apparent rapist and murderer – everything, that is, except the crime itself, which is never shown'. See Smith's *Understanding Robbe-Grillet*, p. 30.
[53] Freud thought that it is a characteristic in the psychology of the obsessional neurotic to make the maximum use of the mechanism of displacement whereby something that is important and disturbing is displaced onto what is insignificant and inconsequential. See Laplanche and Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la Psychanalyse*, 3rd edn. (Paris: Quadrige, 2011), p. 117.

'distortions' of displacement. Here, Robbe-Robbe-Grillet's narrative seems to invite a broadly psychoanalytic understanding of character, for unless we invoke the concept of displacement it is impossible to 'make sense' of such a passage. Indeed, not to read Mathias's thought process as involving displacement would amount to a failure to follow the 'story' that is his mental process, with the result that the novel becomes unreadable; once again, it would disintegrate, if not into disconnected sentences, then certainly into so many disconnected passages. In the above passage there is a displacement of 'normal' emphasis which results in what appears to be an excessive upholding of the law – duty towards work – after the excessive stimulation of desire that caused the crime.

Condensation and displacement, then, are at the service of repression, or Robbe-Grillet's representation of such a process. Indeed, immediately following the murder (i.e. from the beginning of Part II), Mathias must be read as having 'repressed' his memory of that event. This is indicated in various ways. Towards the end of Part II, so following the murder, Mathias reaches into the pocket of his canadienne, expecting to find the string he had picked up on the boat that morning: 'Mais n'y trouvant pas la pelote, il s'était alors souvenu… Il s'était souvenu qu'il ne l'avait plus sur lui' (*LV*, 159). Here, an ellipsis marks the point beyond which Mathias's memory does not, for now, extend – to remember simply that he no longer has the string serves to 'forget' that he used it to tie Jacqueline down. This same technique is used to indicate the censorship function of repression a few pages further on. Having just missed the boat, Mathias climbs the slope leading up to the sea wall, where:

Il mit sa main droite, libre, dans la poche de la canadienne. Il y rencontra la fine cordelette roulée en forme de huit – une belle pièce pour sa collection. On lui avait souvent raconté cette histoire; il en possédait jadis une pleine boîte – vingt-cinq ou trente années, peut-être, auparavant. (*LV*, 163)

This passage relates a kind of delusion in which Mathias believes he touches the string tied to resemble a figure of eight; but this, we know, is impossible, as he used it for the murder. But there is a telescoping here of two separate times in Mathias's life – the 'now' on the island, and the 'then', also on the island, of his childhood, when he collected string. At the same time, this associative leap into the past negates the murder, and so returns him to a time of 'innocence' when his collection of string had no obvious link to rape or murder. But the next paragraph returns him to the worrying reality, in which he no longer has the string because he has become a murderer, and a murderer who has missed the boat that was supposed to take

him far from the scene of the crime: 'Il ne se rappelait pas ce qu'elles étaient devenues. Avait également disparu, dans la poche de sa canadienne, la fine cordelette ramassée ce matin même. Sa main droite n'y rencontra plus qu'un paquet de cigarettes et un petit sac de bonbons' (*LV*, 163, 164). The effect is increased at the opening of the next paragraph: 'Pensant que c'était le moment de fumer, il tira le paquet et vit que plusieurs cigarettes y manquaient déjà – trois, exactement. Il replaça le paquet dans sa poche. Le sachet de bonbons était entamé aussi' (*LV*, 164). These objects are there to tell us that his memory is (so to speak) 'troué' because the holes serve to obscure his crime. Later, killing time in the harbour café he recalls his visit to 'la dernière maison à la sortie du bourg' (*LV*, 117), which is occupied by Jacqueline's mother. There is an extraordinary 'circularity' to his memory of this trip. He recalls being let in, and going through the conversation he had rehearsed, and opening his case of watches:

La grande cuisine, la table ovale au centre de la pièce, la toile cirée aux petites fleurs multicolores, la pression des doigts sur la fermeture de la mallette, le couvercle qui bascule en arrière, l'agenda noir, les prospectus, le cadre rectangulaire posé sur le buffet, le support en métal brillant, la photographie, le sentier qui descend, le creux sur la falaise à l'abri du vent, secret, tranquille, isolé comme par les plus épaisses murailles…. comme par les plus épaisses murailles… (*LV*, 117)

Here, one memory 'leap-frogs' over another. For as he recalls noticing a photograph of Jacqueline next to his case of samples, without a break he recalls the moments before the murder, which only happened after he left the house, and which are indirectly evoked by 'le sentier qui descend […] les plus épaisses murailles'. The passage continues as follows:

la table ovale au centre de la pièce, la toile cirée aux petites fleurs multicolores, la pression des doigts sur la fermeture, le couvercle qui bascule en arrière comme mû par un ressort, l'agenda noir, les prospectus, le cadre en métal brillant, la photographie où l'on voit… la photographie où l'on voit la photographie, la photographie, la photographie, la photographie…. (*LV*, 117)

This passage suggests repression as the syntax goes into a loop, via repetition of two words: 'la photographie'. This loop begins as the narrator, recording Mathias's inner monologue, stops short of naming Jacqueline as the object of 'voit', and so suggests that Mathias cannot

pursue the memory beyond this point, beyond which Jacqueline becomes the object not only 'seen' but murdered. But then, the repression lifts somewhat. This happens as he smokes a cigarette and watches the smoke rise, forming 'deux boucles égales' – which marks the obsessive return of the figure of eight that can evoke handcuffs (*menottes*), and so the binding of children's hands (*menottes*), and the shape of the string 'soigneusement roulée en forme de huit' (*LV*, 10) that serves to bind them. It is this sequence of associations that suddenly leads to a lifting of the repression around the details of the murder: 'C'est alors qu'il pensa, pour la première fois, aux trois bouts de cigarettes oubliés sur la falaise, dans l'herbe, sous le tournant des deux kilomètres' (*LV*, 178). The lifting of repression increases with the image of cigarettes and torture (*LV*, 185) – but it remains incomplete:

Le temps anormal, en trop, suspect, inexplicable, atteignait quarante minutes – sinon cinquante. Il suffisait amplement pour couvrir les deux trajets l'un après l'autre: l'aller-et-retour jusqu'à la ferme – y compris la petite réparation à la bicyclette devant la porte close – et l'aller et retour jusqu'au bord de la falaise, y compris… (*LV*, 203)

Thus Mathias walks a tightrope between remembering too much and forgetting too much. The latter is dangerous because if he were capable of forgetting his crime completely, he will not remember to cover his tracks by thinking up an alibi, removing evidence and so on; and then he will be in danger if others, including the gendarmes, reconstruct the forgotten events. Thus objective correlatives, condensation and displacement allow him to 'remember' enough to defend himself, but not enough that he has to remember the details of his guilt. But is this 'guilt' a moral guilt? Does Mathias reproach himself, or merely fear the consequences of being judged 'guilty' by others? It seems that the latter is the case. For once he is out of danger, having not been accused of the murder and being about to leave the island, objects in his visual field seem to be restored to 'order'. Whilst previously the young waitress in the auberge was clumsy and inexperienced, now he notices that her performance works (so to speak) more or less like clockwork: 'Elle connaît à présent la place que doit occuper chaque chose, et ne s'égare plus dans les hésitations ou les erreurs du premier jour. C'est à peine si un peu trop de lenteur trahit encore son application à bien faire' (*LV*, 245). And without hesitation or doubt, for the first time in the novel, he can 'read' the other's gaze (or so it seems to him), as though its meaning were written on its surface: 'Quand elle a terminé l'arrangement, elle lève ses grands yeux sombres sur le voyageur *pour voir s'il est satisfait* – mais sans insister plus d'une seconde, le temps d'un battement de cils. Il semble cette fois

qu'elle lui ait souri, imperceptiblement' (*LV*, 245; emphasis added). This motivation – to see if he was satisfied – which he projects onto the girl's gaze, puts him in a position of importance and power; and her gaze is so fleeting and submissive (like the scarcely perceptible smile, if there was one) that she poses no challenge by holding his stare (unlike Julien Marek's gaze, as we will see below), still less by staring him down.

It is at this precise point that Mathias finally recalls details of the rape scene. This time, an analogy between the waitress and Jacqueline serves to bring forth an undisguised memory. The analogy is indicated by a simple transition via 'la main petite', a hand that belongs to the waitress but also, suddenly, to Jacqueline:

Après une ultime inspection circulaire de la table servie, elle tend un peu son bras en avant, comme pour déplacer un objet – la cafetière, peut-être – mais tout est en ordre. La main petite, le poignet presque trop fin. La cordelette avait marqué profondément les deux poignets de traces rouges. (*LV*, 245)

The continuation of this passage supplies further details of the scene, from the girl's struggling to the tying of her legs, one to each of two posts for tethering sheep, 'en les tenant écartées d'un mètre environ', with the 'bon morceau de cordelette' he had picked up on the boat that morning. The memories continue to surface clearly and apparently easily. They culminate in a contrast between the sheep Jacqueline had been watching – 'Ils décrivaient des cercles précipités au bout de leur corde raidie' (*LV*, 246) – and Jacqueline's body (still alive or already dead?): 'Elle, en revanche, se tenait bien sage désormais, les mains cachées derrière le dos – sous elle, au creux de la taille – les jambes allongées et ouvertes, la bouche distendue par le bâillon' (*LV*, 246). The opening of the next paragraph is 'Tout devient plus calme encore'; this seems to refer both to Mathias's sudden calm after the murder (once he has rendered his victim 'bien sage'), and his new-found calm in the café, where 'Mathias boit *tranquillement* le reste de café au lait dans son bol' (*LV*, 246; emphasis added). To judge by this sudden calm, and by the use of 'sage' in this passage, it seems as though Mathias feels that his victim deserved her fate, and that his anxiety was due to the guilt others might find in him, rather than any self-reproach.

According to Robbe-Grillet in 'Sur quelques notions périmées', any flagrant 'hole' in the story ('trou dans le récit') would have been seen in the realistic novel as a major fault (*PNR*, 29). But *Le Voyeur* is structured around the filling of such a hole: the initially unrecorded and unremembered moment of the murder itself. This 'hole', we have seen, is

largely filled as Mathias drinks a last coffee on the island, 'tranquillement'. From the moment of the murder to this point, Mathias is involved in strenuous attempts to conceal his crime, to mislead suspicious islanders and to account for the lost time when he carried out the murder. He wants to 'combler la lacune' which is *not* a gap in 'reality', but in the information that it is safe for others to know. At a critical moment in Part III, Mathias is anxious because in spite of his efforts to establish an alibi, and the help apparently offered by Julien Marek, 'Un trou demeurait toujours dans l'emploi du temps' (*LV*, 202). The 'hole' corresponds to the rape and murder, and only 'remains' as long as it is not filled, either by a perfect alibi that covers it over, or the restoration of the censored facts. This involves Mathias in a double perspective. On the one hand, he knows the 'real' story, even whilst holding some of it under repression, which is that he paused during his tour of the island to rape and murder Jacqueline, before resuming his tour, partly now to create a plausible 'cover story'. As Ben Stoltzfus points out, it is clear that Mathias wants to remain alive and does everything possible to hide and flee the island, devoting 'all his efforts to the creation of a plausible alibi'.[54] This seems to necessitate creating a gap in the original events by 'erasing' or 'repressing' those events that were punishable transgressions (the rape and murder), and filling that gap with imagined but non-transgressive events. In brief, *Le Voyeur* cannot be understood without recourse to concepts such as condensation, displacement and repression, for these allow us to 'make sense' of Mathias as a subject struggling to live without excessive danger in an intersubjective world.

With regard to 'character', Olga Bernal misreads when she states that in *Le Voyeur* Mathias and Jacqueline 'n'ont pas d'identité, pas de passé, pas d'avenir'.[55] But this is not the case: not only is the reader consistently taken back to Mathias's past through recollections of his childhood in order to establish motivation, but this is done through mental processes that help defend against too much clarity, until the subject feels safe enough to 'see'. Regarding Jacqueline, the reader knows about her because s/he is informed by the islanders of her circumstances: she had a widowed mother and two older sisters (*LV*, 33) and she spent some of her time looking after their sheep (*LV*, 245 and passim); she possessed a 'tricot en laine grise' (*LV*, 205); she often amused herself by playing amongst the rocks on the cliff (*LV*, 119 and 175). We are also informed of her 'personality': she liked sweets, 'Jacquie achetait toujours des caramels' (*LV*, 212); and in the following sentence: '[Jaqueline] donnait beaucoup de mal à sa mère. On ne parvenait pas à la tenir en place et elle comptait, en dépit

[54] Stoltzfus, *Alain Robbe-Grillet and the New French Novel* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), p. 64.
[55] Bernal, *Alain Robbe-Grillet: le roman de l'absence* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 135.

de son âge, un nombre inquiétant d'admirateurs' (*LV*, 32); she is described as 'un vrai démon' (*LV*, 32); and also, 'c'était pas une sainte' (*LV*, 195). As Rimmon-Kenan argues, 'the repetition of the same behaviour "invites" labelling it as a character-trait'.[56] The examples above suggest Jacqueline's sexual precocity coupled with her youth in the allusions to play and taste for sweets, allowing the reader to form a view about her 'personality'.

The Power of the Gaze

As stated above, the use of objects in the visual field as objective correlatives allows Mathias to incorporate the murder within his thoughts, but in distorted form. This use of objects is Mathias's symptomatic way of dealing with a situation of great anxiety, in which he has followed his forbidden desires to their conclusion. (Robbe-Grillet could only write in this manner, to this extent, and be understood, because (post-)Freudian ideas had become widespread, though in a diluted and often distorted form). But the tendency to select certain objects among all objects within the visual field and use them as objective correlatives also poses a threat, because among those objects are other individuals or subjects, capable of looking back. These subjects have thoughts, desires and tendencies of their own. It is impossible to reduce them to objects among other objects in the visual field. Mathias exists in an intersubjective world, but finds this intersubjectivity threatening to his desire to reduce everything to objects that serve as a screen onto which he projects his desires and soothes his anxieties.

This situation is dramatized in the first two pages of the novel. Mathias has just noticed a bundle of string on the deck of the boat: 'C'était une fine cordelette de chanvre, en parfait état, soigneusement roulée en forme de huit, avec quelques spires supplémentaires serrées à l'étranglement' (*LV*, 10). Here Mathias interprets the extra threads serving to tie the bundle into a figure of eight as a 'strangling' – creating a metaphorical link with sexual violence which the first-time reader of *Le Voyeur* will only understand later. But the reader can immediately notice the first interaction in the novel between Mathias and another individual character or subject. Mathias bends to pick up the string, and at this point notices a young girl observing him:

En se relevant il aperçut, à quelques pas sur la droite, une petite fille de sept ou huit ans qui le dévisageait avec sérieux, ses grands yeux tranquillement posés sur lui. Il esquissa un demi-

[56] Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, p. 39.

sourire, mais elle ne prit pas la peine de le lui rendre et ce n'est qu'au bout de plusieurs secondes qu'il vit ses prunelles glisser vers la pelote de ficelle qu'il tenait dans la main, à la hauteur de sa poitrine. Il ne fut pas déçu par un examen plus minutieux: c'était une belle prise – brillante sans excès, tordue avec finesse et régularité, manifestement très solide. (*LV,* 10)

As the girl stares intensely at Mathias, she does so calmly. He is aware of being the *object* of her steady stare. His response is to attempt friendliness, but it is a weak attempt: 'Il esquissa un demi-sourire'. This is also an attempt to establish an intersubjective relationship – something that is conspicuously absent in this novel, and indeed in Robbe-Grillet's novels more generally. The girl does not make the effort to respond ('elle ne prit pas la peine de le lui rendre'); instead of returning smile for smile, she looks instead at the string. But as everything in this novel is seen through Mathias's eyes, the reader cannot know if the girl is staring at him 'avec sérieux', or if her eyes are 'tranquillement posés sur lui', or if she really does not want to 'make an effort' to return his smile, or even if she is really looking towards the ball of string. All we know is that this is how Mathias interprets the scene. And so we can say that he projects his own unwillingness or an inability to enter an intersubjective relation onto the girl. We could put this another way: when it comes to using another subject as an 'objective correlative', he can only endow that subject with his own characteristics; and this puts him in a precarious situation. He is drawn to the ball of string, we eventually infer, because of his obsession since childhood with pieces of string, which is linked with his sexual impulse to tie up and torture victims. Later we learn that he is carrying a cutting in his wallet, referring to a 'fait divers' which is the violent murder of a young girl (*LV,* 120). And this tells the reader that he carries his murderous desires onto the island. In this context, the girl's fixed stare carries a risk of discovery; it becomes an accusing stare. But there is reassurance when she is transformed into a double for Mathias; she seems to see him as just another object in the visual field; and she seems to share his responses to objects in the world. She is less an accuser than a kind of double.

Here, the refusal of the reciprocal gaze leads from danger to safety. But from the beginning of Part II, i.e. after the murder, the danger is exponentially increased. Rather than being suspected of criminal intentions only, he can now be suspected of the actual crime. And so it is important to master the visual field, and not be 'mastered'. The reciprocal gaze can go either way; but a non-reciprocal gaze puts the observer in a position of mastery over the observed:

Pourquoi la jeune fille aurait-elle parlé de lui, sinon parce qu'elle l'avait aperçu cheminant sur la lande – 'sous' le tournant – où rien ne justifiait son passage? Le fait qu'il ne l'ait pas vue, lui-même, ne s'expliquait que trop aisément. Leurs deux sentiers, séparés l'un de l'autre par des ondulations de terrain assez importantes, ne possédaient que de rares point privilégiés depuis lesquels deux observateurs pouvaient se découvrir mutuellement. À un moment donné ils avaient occupé, elle et lui, des positions favorables; mais elle seule s'était alors tournée dans la direction voulue, si bien que la réciprocité du regard n'avait pas joué. (*LV*, 121)

Gazing, a central point in the structure of *Le Voyeur*, denotes eye direction, expression and also concerns the interaction of characters to form visual networks and themes. The question is 'favorable' for whom? One or the other in turn, depending on who sees whom without being seen; 'la direction voulue': 'wanted' or 'intended' by whom? By no one, in fact, except some hypothetical person who might have wanted one of them to see the other; 'voulue' translates more or less as 'required'. Non-reciprocal gaze can be Mathias's undoing if he was the one *seen* rather than *seeing*, for the one *seen* without seeing has no power. There is Jacqueline's friend looking at him as he revisits the scene of the murder: 'Il la vit qui reculait, tout en le fixant de ses yeux écarquillés' (*LV*, 184). But then he decides she may be looking elsewhere: 'La jeune femme le regarda, en ouvrant des yeux étonnés (*LV*, 184).[57] By dramatizing the viewers, Robbe-Grillet focuses not just on the thematic locus of the probable murder space but onto the very act of the power of the gaze. Furthermore, by placing the reader in a position analogous to the gazing characters, he establishes a multifaceted site of interpersonal interaction. Nevertheless, approaching each of of the 'gazers' separately, allows the reader to differentiate between them: the young woman, her eyes fixed and questioning on Mathias and the latter becoming the viewed and the viewer throughout the novel. It is undeniable that these 'cinematic' instances are reminiscent of the viewer/spectator of a film. As Smith contends, *Le Voyeur* is highly cinematic because of its heavy reliance on sight and sound, especially on the framing, detail and movement of the visual descriptions'.[58]

Julien Marek's Eyes

The most dangerous play of *reciprocal* gazes occurs between Mathias and Julien Marek. Following the murder, and having missed the boat home, Mathias is obliged to spend several days on the island. During this time, he continues to re-create and try to delete any traces of

[57] Cf. the young girl on the ferry at the beginning of the novel. See pp. 10–11 of *Le Voyeur*.
[58] Smith, *Understanding Robbe-Grillet*, p. 30.

his crime. On one of his retracing walks, he is almost overcome by a migraine near the Marek farm, and so goes there to ask for aspirin. As he enters, he overhears Robert Marek accuse his son Julien of behaving suspiciously; given that the watch salesman went by the farm and found no one there, where was Julien at the time of the murder, he asks. Listening and watching unobserved from the dark corridor, Mathias suddenly experiences 'une chaleur subite'. The reason is that 'Il venait de se rendre compte d'une modification qui s'était produite (mais à quel moment?), entre les assiettes et le calendrier, dans ce regard lui faisant face – fixé sur lui, maintenant' (*LV*, 195). It is on this calendar that Mathias sees an image of a little girl playing blind man's bluff.

As Julien has just been accused of murdering Jacqueline on the basis of Mathias's alibi, this reciprocal gaze comes at a critical moment. Here are two potential murderers whose stories contradict each other. How can each, then, have an alibi? Will one accuse the other? Will they support each other's story, from solidarity? After all, each is in trouble, in his own way; perhaps they can form an alliance. Philosophers refer to this kind of situation as the 'prisoner's dilemma'. The dilemma faced by the prisoners is that, whatever the other does, each is better off confessing than remaining silent. But the outcome obtained when both confess is worse for each than the outcome they would have obtained had both remained silent.[59] Pressed by his father, Julien claims to have been present at the farm after all, whilst continuing to stare, as if significantly, not at his father but at Mathias: 'J'étais dans le hangar, au fond de la cour, prononça-t-il sans détacher ses yeux de ceux du voyageur' (*LV*, 198). Julien continues by supplying unnecessary details to this story: 'Vous êtes descendu de vélo et vous avez frappé à la porte. Après, vous êtes allé voir à la barrière du jardin. Et avant de partir vous avez pris une clef, dans une petite sacoche accrochée sous la selle, pour resserrer un truc à votre changement de vitesse' (*LV*, 199). Mathias at first is reassured: 'Tout cela ne faisait, en somme, que renforcer son propre alibi. […] Il se trouvait hors de cause, désormais' (*LV*, 199). But then he wonders: why all those unnecessary details? Without them, if Mathias had actually been at the farm at the time of the murder, he could have believed Julien's story himself. But Mathias was not at the farm; therefore Julien could hardly expect to have guessed what he would have done had he been there. So these extra details may suggest that he is happy for Mathias to know that he (Julien) knows that this 'joint alibi' is false concerning both parties: 'Or, si Julien connaissait cet état d'infériorité du voyageur, c'est

[59] See the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/prisoner-dilemma.

évidemment parce qu'il se trouvait, lui, à la ferme au moment de la prétendue visite; il savait donc très bien que personne n'etait venu frapper à la porte' (*LV*, 200).

That 'évidemment' seems to be based on Mathias's faith in his own logic, applied to the words spoken by Julien. But here, as often in this novel, no logic is enough to render those words unambiguous (are they offered as support or accusation?). To supplement the evidence of words, Mathias turns to the gaze yet again: 'Aussi dévisageait-il l'étranger avec insolence tout en accumulant ses précisions fictives' (*LV*, 200); and once again, 'dévisager' is used to suggest a penetrating and perhaps accusing gaze, a reduction of the observing subject to the status of observed object. But the gaze still gives no certainty. The question remains:

Quel intérêt le garçon avait-il, dans ce cas, à soutenir la thèse de Mathias? […] Avait-il peur, seulement que l'on croie ce dernier plutôt que lui? Non. Du moment que Julien mentait – avec tant d'audace, même – il paraissait plus vraisemblable de reconstituer le scénario différemment: Le garçon ne se trouvait pas à la ferme, en cette fin de matinée. (*LV*, 200)

Once again, the gaze is to give confirmation either way: 'Afin de solliciter le concours de Mathias – pour qui rien de tout cela n'importait, pensait-il – Julien l'avait regardé droit dans les yeux, espérant lui faire comprendre sa détresse et obtenir sa complicité. Ce que Mathias attribuait à l'insolence était en réalité supplication'.

But once again, uncertainty awaits: 'Ou bien le jeune homme comptait-il l'hypnotiser?' (*LV*, 201). His next encounter with Julien occurs at the scene of the crime, to which he has returned to remove the evidence of the cigarette stubs; these were too long to count as finished, therefore suspicious (in fact, he had used them to torture Jacqueline that is why the stubs were long, i.e. not smoked). Here, Julien's gaze seems threatening once again, and once again this is because he cannot know whether it screens an accusation: 'Julien le regardait sans rien dire, avec toujours les mêmes yeux fixes' (*LV*, 207). Julien had been observing him retrieve a knitted garment (*un tricot*) which Jacqueline had been wearing on the day of the murder and which Mathias had clearly used to stuff in her mouth: what he sees, and thinks Julien might also see, is 'un morceau d'étoffe grise, déjà enroulé en bouchon' (*LV*, 207). Mathias sees the garment caught on the cliff-face, and so climbs down to retrieve it (*LV*, 209). In this situation, Julien is described as 'le guetteur', a word normally used for a 'lookout' or 'watch', and so the word may connote officialdom and justice. The encounter is one of mutual threat, in Mathias's eyes. Perhaps he is on the point of pushing Julien off the

cliff: ‘A quoi voulait-il donc réfléchir? En fait, il avait seulement reculé devant la ménace, espérant peut-être que l’autre en dirait de lui-même un peu plus long’ (*LV*, 209). And when Mathias approaches offering a cigarette, Julien ‘se recula d’un pas’, as if feeling threatened too (*LV*, 209). As before, Mathias is drawn into an oscillation between anxiety and reassurance, and to judge by the attention he pays to Julien’s eyes, he hopes to find the truth there concerning whether or not the boy is a threat to him. Once again, however, the other’s eyes will not reveal the wished-for certainty:

Julien parut se raviser. Il regarda le sac, puis le voyageur, et encore le sac. Mathias comprit, à cet instant, ce qu’il y avait de singulier dans ces yeux: ils ne trahissaient ni effronterie ni malveillance, ils étaient affligés tout simplement d’un très léger strabisme. (*LV*, 210)

Although ‘Cette constatation le rassura’ (*LV*, 210), Mathias soon becomes troubled, once again, by Julien’s gaze: ‘Un défaut de vision, certainement, troublait l’expression du jeune homme, mais il ne louchait pas. C’était autre chose…’ (*LV*, 210). Ruling out short-sightedness, he hits on a new explanation ‘[Julien] le dévisageait de nouveau… Ou bien était-ce un œil de verre, qui rendait si gênant son regard?’ (*LV*, 210). In the ensuing conversation it transpires that he has various ‘elements’ that point to Mathias’s guilt: he may know that Mathias never came to the farm; he knows the *tricot* belonged to Jacqueline; he found a sweet wrapper in the grass the day before (*LV*, 209). There is no respite from Julien’s gaze. If it is a knowing one, Julien seems to be playing a cruel game of ‘cat and mouse’ with Mathias. Thinking of Julien’s behaviour both here and at the farm, Mathias concludes that if he is so sure of himself, it can only be because he witnessed the actual crime, although this is conveyed somewhat indirectly: ‘Il fallait autre chose que des soupçons – même précis – pour autoriser une telle assurance. Julien avait “vu”. Le nier ne servait plus à rien. Seules les images enregistrées par ces yeux, pour toujours, leur conféraient désormais cette fixité insupportable’ (*LV*, 214). Having ‘seen’ confers absolute power over Mathias, or so it seems to Mathias. Thinking back to the scene at the farm, he reflects: ‘Là comme ici, il proclaimait son pouvoir sur Mathias: il détruisait ses traces avec la même facilité qu’il lui en suscitait de nouvelles, modifiant à son gré signes et itinéraires du temps révolu’ (*LV*, 214). And yet, these eyes that hold such power in Mathias’s view are, he tells himself, ‘des yeux gris très ordinaires – ni laids ni beaux, ni grands ni petits – deux cercles parfaits et immobiles, situés côte à côte et percés chacun en son centre d’un trou noir’ (*LV*, 214). This seems like an attempt at ‘chosiste’ description – perhaps if the eyes can be seen as banal objects, they will

seem less powerful. But the 'neutral' description ends on a disturbing *metaphor*: each eye has a 'hole' at its centre. The hole is the place that contains Mathias's guilt because it contains (in the narrative gap of the novel) the murder scenario which is not offered to the reader, which the reader has to discern from metaphors and objective correlatives, and around which the narrative is constructed.

And so Mathias continues to feel threatened by Julien's eyes. He tells himself they are unconscious, blind or stupid: 'Il regardait Mathias droit dans les yeux, de ses yeux rigides et bizarres – comme inconscients, ou même aveugles – ou comme idiots' (*LV*, 215). But in a final 'staring contest', Mathias loses:

Gardant le mégot dans le coin droit de la bouche – sans l'allumer – et les yeux de verre sur le voyageur, la figure pâle attendit, sous la casquette à la visière un peu penchée, vers l'oreille, du côté gauche. Ce fut Mathias qui finit par baisser les paupières. (*LV*, 217)

Although Mathias had speculated earlier that Julien had a glass eye, since he has sight they cannot both be '[des] yeux de verre'. His 'glass eyes' have become objective correlatives in the manner described above: perhaps they remind Mathias of a camera that has taken permanent images of the crime; certainly, their 'glass-like' nature refuses to return human gaze for human gaze. As throughout, it seems that Mathias cannot experience the world intersubjectively; instead, he imagines an observer holding absolute power over the (human) object observed.

Memory and Desire

Let us refer to the level of the story that begins on page 1, with the boat coming into harbour, as Mathias's 'present', in relation to which retrospective analepses furnish material from his 'past'. The second paragraph explains that the noise in question is the siren of a boat, that it sounds a second time, and that no single passenger reacts. This includes Mathias who, instead, contemplates a piece of cord which absorbs him entirely, as it triggers a recollection of his childhood:

On lui avait souvent raconté cette histoire. Lorsqu'il était tout enfant – vingt-cinq ou trente années peut-être auparavant – il possédait une grande boîte en carton, […] où il collectionnait des morceaux de ficelle. Il ne conservait pas n'importe quoi, ne voulant ni des échantillons de

qualité inférieure ni de ceux qui étaient trop abîmés par l'usage. […] Il rejetait aussi les fragments trop courts pour pouvoir jamais servir à quoi que ce soit d'intéressant. (*LV*, 9, 10)

This is the first of many *récit*-level shifts between Mathias's present and his past. On page 1 the transition is clearly signalled: 'On lui avait souvent raconté cette histoire'. And again, on page 18: 'On lui avait souvent raconté cette histoire'. But more generally, it is not. The first example of an unsignalled transition between past and present is on page 20. A description of Mathias's room in the past is followed, at the opening of the next paragraph, by: 'Le niveau montait et descendait, dans l'angle rentrant, au bas de la cale'. We have returned to the present. Mathias, we are given to understand, frequently remembers his past, and this works by association: a piece of string on the boat's deck takes him back to his childhood collection of string. But Mathias is sceptical, it seems, about memory as such: 'il devait encore compter avec les imprécisions et exactitudes de sa propre mémoire, dont l'expérience justement lui avait appris à se méfier' (*LV*, 25). And just as he has few childhood memories, so, he suspects, do others: 'Les gens n'ont pas tant de mémoire' (*LV*, 32). He remembers that when young and a collector of objects, these were mainly taken from him by his parents despite his protests, for 'puisque lui, de toute façon, n'en faisait rien' (*LV*, 30). Is this an anecdote told to Mathias by his parents or did it really take place? The obsessive recurrence of certain *tableaux* of recollection, each time changing very slightly, adheres to Robbe-Grillet's technique of repetition to articulate Mathias's psyche from an early age, a screen memory apparently – this much is implied by the obsessive return, with variations – but one we cannot get behind:

Il est assis sur une chaise massive, surmontée de deux dictionnaires. Il dessine. Il dessine une grosse mouette, blanche et grise. […] L'oiseau est de profil, la tête dirigée vers la droite. On reconnaît la commissure sinueuse du bec et sa pointe recourbée, le détail des plumes sur la queue, ainsi que sur le bord de l'aile, et jusqu'à l'imbrication des écailles le long de la patte. On a l'impression, cependant, qu'il lui manque encore quelque chose. (*LV*, 22)[60]

A paradoxical feature of this kind of recollection is that they are less childhood memories than memories 'about' childhood. They are characterized by their precision and the apparent

[60] The concept of screen memories was first presented by Freud in his paper entitled Screen Memories (1899), an addition to his work on mnemic symbols and the recollection of trauma in hysteria, a paper written as he was developing the idea of unconscious fantasy. He concluded that screen memories, as long as they were skilfully interpreted, provided the most accessible source of knowledge about the 'forgotten' childhood years. Any memory could be a screen memory inasmuch as one aspect of it concealed something intolerable to the ego. See 'Screen Memories', in Peter Gay's *The Freud Reader* (London: Vintage, 1989), pp. 117–126.

unimportance of their content. Fundamental facts are not recalled; instead, their significance is displaced onto strongly related but less important details. Displacement is, again, the principal psychic mechanism here although condensation might also be present. Play, for Mathias as a child, is the in-between space between fantasy and reality and is a way of solving the discrepancy between the two. Mathias is aware that reality is outside his reach and so institutes a relationship with objects that will inhabit this middle space between unconscious and external reality. As a psychic space between fantasy and reality and as a point between an apparent external reality and the protagonist's internal reality, the narrative in *Le Voyeur* is not dissimilar to this transitional medium as a way of achieving what some psychoanalysts call 'ego integration'. Thus, Mathias's play and games with objects allow the exploration of sexuality under the guise of childhood play but such games, it is implied, are never entirely innocent as Mathias invents a childhood on the island in order to persuade the islanders that he had indeed lived there:

Il faudrait qu'il ait joué autrefois, sur la falaise, avec beaucoup plus de petits camarades qu'il n'en avait jamais connu. Ensemble ils auraient exploré, à marée basse, les régions rarement découvertes que peuplent des formes à la vraisemblance équivoque. Il apprenait aux autres l'art de faire s'épanouir les sabelles et les anémones de mer. En haut des plages ils ramassaient d'incompréhensibles épaves. […] Il leur confiait même ses ficelles et inventait avec eux toutes sortes d'amusement compliqués et incertains. (*LV*, 32; emphasis added)

The *narration*, in *style indirect libre*,[61] describes the way in which Mathias imagines this game: it is highly eroticised, as the players touch the sea anemones sensually, the playful, childlike exchange full of erotic meaning.[62] The above passage emphasises the connection between the private world of childhood and the adult world of obsession as well as underlining the prohibited libidinal drives which compel Mathias's behaviour. Here, within a 'quintessential' *nouveau roman* supposedly focussed on *écriture*, 'the nightmare quality of the true horror exists – the impression of being entrapped in a situation from which there is no escape and of endless repetition, a true Sisyphian hell, an inner vision of hell'.[63]

[61] *Style indirect libre* or free indirect discourse represents a character's thoughts and shows at least some of the features of the character's enunciation, i.e. a first person's as opposed to a third person's discourse. It has the effect of making the reader feel 'closer' to the character. See Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology*, p. 34.
[62] Children's play can be seen as the result of a bid to control retrospectively the original trauma, turning passivity into activity by repetition. See Gay's *The Freud Reader*, p. 600.
[63] Stoltzfus, *Robbe-Grillet and the Fantastic*: *A Collection of Essays*, eds. Virginia Harger-Grinling and Tony Chadwick (London: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 5.

Despite the absence of a reliable assessment of 'reality', *Le Voyeur* offers the reader a very 'real' example of repressed sexuality and an incitement to violence. As Eagleton states, 'the human subject who emerges from the Œdipal process is a *split* subject, torn precariously between conscious and unconscious; and the unconscious can always return to plague it'.[64] The narrative in *Le Voyeur* contains imaginary elements constructed by Mathias and it is clear that these amount to 'perspectives hallucinatoires […] au centre desquelles le lecteur s'installe comme observateur désorienté'.[65] Childhood narratives are explored and only partially elucidated: for Mathias, any number of objects can have been or can become a source of pleasure. The integration of the Freudian perspective, then, requires instances of Mathias's childhood. Indeed, it turns out that Mathias's return to the past is to a single scene, in which he spends the afternoon drawing a seagull and, in a more general way, to everything related to his collection of string, in a shoebox in a cupboard, used by his parents as a form of control. This is highly selective memory and the selection the reader is obliged to infer is done on the basis of sexual fantasy. Mathias remembers, apparently involuntarily or automatically, only drawing the seagull in relation to the string collection. The seagull is remembered as an object in the visual field, with an eye that does not gaze back. The string is a reward; it is for 'something', but that 'something' is unspecified. What emerges from the past points towards the strangling (with rope or string) of a living being (a female) to whom independent subjectivity is denied.

The obsessive return to this 'memory' suggests that Mathias's present is governed by his past *as a sexual history*. The network of images which go back to childhood games include bits of string in figure of eight shapes which progressively reveal his sexual impulses.[66] The figure of eight is of particular interest in the novel: handcuffs are shaped in a figure of eight; *menottes* means both handcuffs and small hands in French: small hands as those of a young girl's *inviting* handcuffs. Strategically positioned and recurring references to the figure of eight means that the word *menottes* in its two senses becomes symbolic and invested with signification within the metaphorical contexts in which the figure appears. This motif, evocative of Mathias's childhood, never interferes with the narrative flow, however, precisely because references of this nature feature consistently in Mathias's fantasies and therefore its excess is plausible, indeed expected.

[64] Eagleton, *Literary Theory*: *An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 136.
[65] Morrissette, *Les romans de Robbe-Grillet*, p. 79.
[66] For Freud, sexuality is 'polymorphously perverse' as there is always a wistful yearning for the infantile *flexibility* of sexual satisfaction: 'La libido est d'abord relativement indéterminée quant à ses objets et reste toujours susceptible d'en changer'. Laplanche and Pontalis, *Vocabulaire*, p. 316.

Above we examined Robbe-Grillet's use of objects apparently described in their 'there-ness' but also saturated with meaning. Now we can see that this underpins one of the text's central themes: the discrepancy, but also the link, between Mathias's fantasies and reality. As Smith states, 'Mathias's preoccupation with tying up young girls, evident from the opening scene and repeated throughout, provides a clue as to motive, namely a sadistic obsession that focuses on barely pubescent young women'.[67] Here, rhetorical strategies provide the key to Mathias's unconscious as it reveals, in an exchange between the pathological and the aesthetic, the operations of desire. This too makes sense in a post-Freudian perspective. Unconscious defence mechanisms redirect energy invested in something now felt to be unacceptable to a situation felt to be safe and acceptable, warding off the uncontrolled drive. Mathias's return to a working 'mode' after the murder and which we saw above to be a displacement of emphasis in relation to the murder, serves to channel his libido, which relieves anxiety and the intensity of aggressive sexual impulses. The lawful world of work and duty, the Lacanian symbolic, redirects the real of the drive of which he recently lost control. Mathias finds himself in a situation where he has moved between a terrifying omnipotence – the ability to rape and kill – and the reassuring safety and authority of the symbolic which was always already there.

Desire 'in the Masculine'

The desire that is represented as active in *Le Voyeur* can be called desire 'in the masculine', if by that we mean the desire felt by a male subject for a female object. Of this kind of desire we have a 'representation' via Mathias's gaze and actions. Of 'desire in the feminine' experienced by a girl or woman for a male object, we have no direct representation. Any such desire is either projected by Mathias or inferred from what the islanders say (about Jacqueline, mainly); in that sense it is less directly 'represented' and, arguably, its ambiguous presence is not represented at all except in the 'mind's eye' that serves Mathias's fantasies. We have examined the protagonist's fascination with eyes and the power they confer on the observer over the observed. In Mathias's mind, this power is closely linked with sexual aims and sexual objects. He only truly enjoys his 'power' over any given object in the visual field if that object is young and female, and so qualifies as a desirable sexual object for him. His gaze selects certain objects of sight and transforms them into objects of desire. But that desire is always determined by the same factors: the object's sex (she is female); her age (she is

[67] Smith, *Understanding Robbe-Grillet*, p. 37.

young); her physical attributes (her body, especially her wrists and neck look fragile); and her apparent submissiveness or vulnerability. All these factors apply to the series of girls who draw Mathias's attention. In addition, he assimilates them to dolls, articulated toys ready for 'de-articulation' and entirely submissive to the whims of the owner, in games that involve no real suffering. This takes us far from the aspirations set out by Robbe-Grillet in *Pour un nouveau roman*, which concerned moving beyond realist writing into experimentation with form and form alone (as suggested by Robbe-Grillet's vehement rejection of all kinds of 'engagement' as opposed to 'l'art pour l'art'). The narrative in *Le Voyeur* is infused from beginning to end with desire in the masculine. Such desire motivates the protagonist; 'drives' and structures the story; and creates an 'atmosphere' of suspense.[68]

We have seen that the novel opens with Mathias noticing a young girl whose eyes seem at first to look at him, then his ball of string. However, already on the following page he seems to have lost the ability to follow her gaze:

L'enfant regardait toujours dans sa direction. Pourtant il était difficile de préciser si c'était lui qu'elle observait, ou bien quelque chose au delà, ou même rien de défini; ses yeux paraissaient presque trop ouverts pour qu'ils pussent recueillir un élément isolé, à moins qu'il ne fût de dimensions très vastes. Elle devait seulement regarder la mer. (*LV*, 11)

Is it an over-interpretation to suggest that under Mathias's gaze these eyes have become 'doll-like'? Certainly, they are preternaturally open – 'presque trop ouverts'; in Mathias's imagination; they have been denied vision, except of objects that are 'très vastes' (as a grown man would appear to a doll that could, in fact, see). Either way, an obsession with girls as dolls, and dolls as girls, is indicated in the pages that follow. Soon afterwards, we see the lining of his case of watches through his eyes:

L'intérieur était tapissé d'une garniture en cretonne imprimée dont le dessin ne ressemblait qu'à première vue à ceux que l'on a l'habitude de trouver sur des tissus de ce genre, même dans des bagages de femme ou de jeune fille: au lieu de bouquets ou de petites fleurs, le sujet décoratif parsemant le fond consistait en de *minuscules poupées*, comme on pourrait en voir sur des rideaux pour chambre d'enfant. (*LV*, 23; emphasis added)

[68] One of the five 'codes' in Barthes's method of literary analysis as described in *S/Z* (1970) is the hermeneutic code. Barthes sees this system of codes as producing all possible actual narratives; the hermeneutic code poses problems or enigmas which provide narrative suspense. See *S/Z* in *Œuvres Complètes, Tome II*, pp. 707–736.

The reader knows, then, that every time Mathias opens his case – and this act is described many times throughout the novel – he sees these tiny dolls (e.g. p. 72). Thus they are, in a sense, his secret; first because no-one else, perhaps, is looking at them; but second, because looking once would never be enough to reveal the 'actual' design, even though it is at the surface: 'si l'on ne regardait pas de très près, on ne distinguait rien: seulement des taches de couleurs vives pointillant une toile crème – qui était aussi bien des bouquets de fleurs' (*LV*, 23). Once again, such a description is anything but 'chosiste': the attention Mathias continues to pay to this fabric conveys (or 'betrays') his obsession with a certain kind of sexual object, viewed in a certain way.

The same obsession compels him to convert flesh-and-blood girls (or very young women) into dolls that will submit to his violent fantasies. Sitting in the café 'A l'Espérance' before the murder in an attempt to sell his watches, Mathias overhears part of a conversation between sailors, concerning Jacqueline. The waitress's reaction is described as follows: 'La fille se redressa brusquement en tordant la taille. Le temps d'un éclair, Mathias aperçut ses prunelles et l'iris aux reflets sombres. Elle pivota sur ses talons, comme une marionnette, puis alla rapporter la bouteille derrière le comptoir, ayant aussitôt retrouvé son allure lente et fragile de poupée articulée' (*LV*, 63, 64). Shortly afterwards, during his visit to the shop mentioned above, he notices:

Un mannequin pour étalage: un corps de jeune femme aux membres coupés – les bras juste au-dessous de l'épaule et les cuisses à vingt centimètres du tronc – dont la tête s'inclinait un peu, en avant et de côté, pour produire un effet 'gracieux', et dont une hanche saillait plus que l'autre, dans une pose dite naturelle. Elle était de proportions menues, plus petite que la normale autant que permettaient d'en juger ses mutilations. Elle tournait le dos, la face appliquée contre un rayon chargé de rubans. Elle était vêtue seulement d'un soutien-gorge et d'une étroite ceinture à jarretelles à la mode de la ville. (*LV*, 71)

In the shop he notices the 'petites poupées de couleurs vives couchées dans le fond' (*LV*, 72). And in his description of the scene between the large man and fragile girl, he describes the waitress again as having '[de] long cils courbes de poupée', a description that clearly refers to this same young woman because she is described in the same way earlier on page 56. And later Violette's body is described as a 'mannequin de son rejeté au rivage' (*LV*, 175). These

doll-like girls have an air of mass production about them.[69] In addition, Mathias describes the appearance of a young *paysanne* as follows:

Sur le moment, Mathias s'imagina voir à nouveau la petite Jacqueline. En même temps qu'il se rendait compte de l'absurdité d'une telle apparition, il constata que la nouvelle venue comptait certainement quelques centimètres et quelques années de plus qu'elle. Observé avec attention, ce visage ne ressemblait d'ailleurs pas à celui de Violette, quoiqu'il ne lui fût pas inconnu non plus. (*LV*, 79)

It turns out to be 'la jeune femme qui vivait chez Jean Robin' (*LV*, 179). Next, he describes her costume, which is 'celui de presque toutes les filles de l'île'; it is adapted from traditional dress on the island, whose 'encolure arrondie degageait complètement le cou'. Even 'les fillettes' or little girls wear a variation on this design, apparently, though in their case the dress is much shorter, and often sleeveless. This sequence of descriptions of little girls, adolescents and fully grown women who look younger than they are, unless 'observé avec attention', shows how Mathias's desiring gaze distorts the objects of the visual field so that they become closer to the objects of his fantasy. In the process, they are all implicitly assimilated to mass-produced dolls in virtually identical clothes. The sequence begins with the illusion that Jacqueline is approaching; but she is 'split', already, into Jacqueline and Violette, two 'individuals' of the same series. The rest of the female figures then fall into line behind 'her'. Like dolls, too, the fragile girls and young women who draw Mathias's gaze do not speak; or if they do, he manages to forget they have: 'Toujours sans répondre, et sans se retourner' (*LV*, 152); Jacqueline's friend who is 'la plus belle' (*LV*, 152), speaks but then he forgets: 'Sans rien dire, elle le précédait de marche en marche' (*LV*, 171). About this girl, again, the narrator states that Mathias 'ne se rappelait pas, du reste, l'avoir entendue prononcer un seul mot' (*LV*, 180).

Le Voyeur and the 'œil caméra'

In *Pour un nouveau roman*, Robbe-Grillet compares the 'new novel' with the potential of cinema. He takes the example of a cinematic adaptation of a 'traditional' novel:

[69] In 1972 Robbe-Grillet gave an interview where he talks about influences in his work: 'le "pop art" américain utilise […] ces images plates de la publicité et des *comics*. Et le mot de "gadget" employé […] à propos de la *Maison de rendez-vous* désigne en effet un des constants de l'art moderne: l'utilisation systématique des produits manufacturés (ou des résidus hors d'usage) de la societé de consommation'. See *Alain Robbe-Grillet le voyageur: Textes, Causeries et Entretiens (1947–2001)*, Christian Bourgois, ed. (Paris, Points, 2001), p. 115.

Le cinéma, héritier lui aussi de la tradition psychologique et naturaliste, n'a le plus fréquemment pour but que de transposer un récit en images: il vise seulement à imposer au spectateur, par le truchement de quelques scènes bien choisies, la signification que les phrases commentaient à loisir pour le lecteur. Mais il arrive à tout moment que le récit filmé nous tire hors de notre confort intérieur, vers ce monde offert, avec une violence qu'on chercherait en vain dans le texte écrit correspondant, roman ou scénario. (*PNR*, 19)[70]

But his blind spot here, as elsewhere in *Pour un nouveau roman*, is gender, and, alongside gender, the male gaze as that which *orders* (both 'commands' and 'organizes'). In her ground-breaking essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), Laura Mulvey suggests that the assumption of a 'neutral' camera is spurious, or that it may only be achieved in certain cases according to directorial choices.[71] Mulvey's essay is crucial for the analysis of point of view: psychoanalytic theory appropriated as a political weapon, as Mulvey states.[72] It would be useful at this stage to contextualize how the system of the gaze and pleasure in looking operates in cinema, given the importance of voyeurism in Robbe-Grillet's texts; the 'cinematic' images that generate so much of his narrative; and his evocation of psychoanalytic notions throughout his work. The three 'looks' of the gaze – the camera, the look of the spectator and the one within the film's diegesis are all conventionally perceived as male: the filmmaker/cameraman; the look within the diegesis which is agenced by the male protagonist who looks at the female deliberately positioned to be looked at; this system constructs the spectator psychically as male too. Robbe-Grillet's 'cinematic' texts seem perfectly designed to illustrate that Mulvey's analysis can be applied to his texts. The reader cannot read but through the 'direction' of Mathias's desire.

Mulvey's gaze system is replicated by Robbe-Grillet in his cinematic images: how then, by extension, can the female reader derive pleasure from reading his narratives given that she can only adopt either a masochistic positioning – thereby identifying with the objectified, passive female protagonist or that of the transvestite and identifying with the active male protagonist? Mulvey starts from the idea that cinema gratifies a primal wish for pleasurable looking. Making use of Lacan's account of the specular moment when the child recognizes its image as a crucial moment in the constitution of subjectivity, Mulvey argues

[70] Robbe-Grillet wrote the scripts for a total of eleven films, from *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* in 1961 to *C'est Gradiva qui vous appelle* in 2006. He directed all of these except the first, which was directed by Alain Resnais.
[71] See Mulvey's essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Feminism and Film Theory*, Constance Penley, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 57–68.
[72] *Ibid*., p. 57.

that the pleasure of looking in cinema as a process is driven by two opposing desires: the pleasure of looking at another as an object, and the narcissistic pleasure of identification with a character on screen; the former is the libido's desire and the latter that of the ego. In the field of narratology Wayne Booth rejects the idea of identification with a fictional character as a hindrance to sophisticated aesthetic pleasure.[73] Mulvey, however, presents identification as a way of approaching narrative as one of the locations in which the construction of subjectivity is at issue. She therefore discards two central premises of Booth's thinking: the belief that identification is a naïve phase before properly sophisticated aesthetic pleasure *and* the notion of a reader/spectator as part of a homogeneous group.[74] For Mulvey, the viewer – and by extension the reader – is an individual for whom the relation of pleasurable looking and identification changes according to how s/he is constituted as subject:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness.*[75]

The most important element in Mulvey's position is that considering spectators (and by extension, readers) as a homogeneous group does not take into account gender difference. Mulvey suggests here that 'an active/passive heterosexual division of labour has controlled narrative structure'.[76] The subjectivity of the spectator is thus involved in the sense that s/he identifies with a particular gender position in the narrative. As my discussions of Robbe-Grillet's narrative point of view make clear, his textual gaze functions like the cinematic apparatus of objectification of females under the gaze of male voyeurs. In *Le Voyeur* and other works by Robbe-Grillet, agency and desire (and suffering) are denied to women and girls, whilst agency and desire (and the power to inflict suffering) are the business of men. Robbe-Grillet's male protagonists tend to display two distinct functions: first as the focus of narrative action, the subject who makes things happen and second, as the possessor of the gaze, actively looking at the sensual image of the female character. Even in *La Jalousie* where the husband narrator *only* looks, it is the male gaze that transforms situations in

[73] Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 248.
[74] *Ibid*., p. 248.
[75] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure', p. 62.
[76] *Ibid*., p. 63.

everyday life into erotic tableaux and in this sense, this otherwise passive narrator makes things *happen* in the mind of the reader. Generally speaking, then, readerly identification is established with the narrative action itself; regardless of whether the reader is male or female, s/he is the subject of 'his' own story (via identification with the male protagonist), in contrast with the passive representation of the female character. The opposition between man and woman rests on the assumption of a link between woman and femininity. The pleasure in looking produced by scopophilia, according to Mulvey, inscribes sexuality within the codes of the dominant patriarchal order: the 'male gaze' as a structuring element of visual culture leaves no place for the gaze of the female spectator nor for the representation of active female desire in narrative. In Robbe-Grillet's work the female characters embody feminine traits which are opposed to that of the male characters who, instead, impart masculine ones. The presumptive status of gender as preceding and underpinning subjectivity is thereby perpetuated. Such a dramatization of femininity and masculinity shows precisely that gender roles are constructed by the text, as indeed they are constructed in society.

Mulvey wants to create a new language of desire which would take account of female desire and subjectivity in film. Her exploration can also be applied to the situation of the female reader who, in this view, takes up a position on the passive side of the passive/active division. Whilst Booth writes of a non-gendered implied reader as an entity that positions the real reader in relation to the fictional events, Mulvey sees the implied spectator as a position in which the real male spectator is the male heterosexual voyeur, someone who, for example, can unproblematically identify with the male characters. On the assumption that readers of Robbe-Grillet may also be female, how does the female reader decode novels which so obviously stage a sexualized, dominant, male point of view? According to Mulvey, the female reader can be assumed to adopt a male point of view too as we state above. Mulvey revisited the problematic of gender agency in narrative and film after criticisms of reductionism. The central accusation was that male visual and narrative identification in cinema and the female as object of the male gaze do not accommodate a narrative with a strong female protagonist or one which objectifies a male character. Mulvey admits that her focus on the masculinity of the spectator (regardless of his or her actual sex), might have closed off some lines of questioning. She does not withdraw her earlier arguments but in 1981 she returns to the question of identification in cinema with a conception based on

Freudian theory and the possibility of transexual identification.[77] According to Freud, female subjectivity is characterized by both feminine and masculine modes of identification, a complex process which is not simply biological: female identification entails a conflicting interplay of different subject positions which take precedence at different junctures of a woman's life. For instance, in the pre-Œdipal phase, masculinity takes over femininity so that identification with a male subjectivity becomes, later in life, a longing for an earlier mode of subjectivity. In the context of cinema and the female spectator, the shifts between masculine and feminine subjectivity become an alternation between identification with the subject and with the object of the filmic narrative, that is, with active and passive positions in turn. For the female spectator the pleasure of identification is a conflicting process of looking and being looked at.

La Jalousie

Throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s, Robbe-Grillet continues his experiment in 'neutral' writing, the construction of a textual 'œil-caméra' designed to represent the relation of 'man' to the world as that of the 'numéro matricule':

Les créateurs de personnages, au sens traditionnel, ne réussissent plus à nous proposer que des fantoches auxquels eux-mêmes ont cessé de croire. Le roman de personnages appartient bel et bien au passé, il caractérise une époque: celle qui marqua l'apogée de l'individu. Peut-être n'est-ce pas un progrès, mais il est certain que l'époque actuelle est plutôt celle du numéro matricule. (*PNR*, 28)

Let us now examine *La Jalousie* as affording another famous example of this, and note in what ways it offers a different, more radical approach to solving (broadly) the same problems. According to Rimmon-Kenan, the reconstruction of the textual character is achieved by means of a 'hierarchical structure in which elements are assembled in categories of increasing integrative power'.[78] This entails establishing patterns by connecting two or more details about a character to form a 'unifying category'; for instance, as soon as we connect Colonel Chabert's 'vieux garrick' to his hangdog face, we are following textual clues in order to construct his character; and when we see a spark in his eye, we adapt our

[77] See Mulvey's essay 'Afterthoughts on '"Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" inspired by *Duel in the Sun*' in *Feminism and Film Theory*, Constance Penley, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 69–79.
[78] Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, p. 37.

understanding to the new 'facts', and so on throughout the novel, until we understand the Colonel qua character (with all that word connotes in terms of *personnage* and *caractère*).[79] Moving from plot to character and back, using combinations of generalizations and more specific qualities made explicit, the reader recuperates the character. The question here is what the reader of *La Jalousie* will do, given the narrative disruption of conventional representation of the subject/character in its social setting and the objects in it. The familiar and immediate identification with the 'I' as the protagonist or with an omniscient narrator proves disorienting, at least initially, for the reader of more traditional texts. However, there is an immediate reference to diegesis coupled with temporality in the very first sentence: 'Maintenant l'ombre du pilier – le pilier qui soutient l'angle sud-ouest du toit – divise en deux parties égales l'angle correspondant de la terrasse' (*LJ*, 9). The temporal reference 'maintenant', immediately draws the reader into a moment that suggests an experiencing self. The narrative then retreats to a more objective perspective that offers the opportunity to explore the significance of form in determining the atmosphere and emotional impact of *La Jalousie*. The impersonal narrator strategy results in a seemingly anonymous enunciation whereby the 'truth' is assured by the narrative itself rather than an omniscient narrator. Indeed, one of the main problems Robbe-Grillet found in classic realism is that it sees reality as truths and facts outside of man, a world to be imitated by fiction. This was contrary to his own philosophy, which was based on the subjective nature of reality and the division between man and the physical world as we have seen above.

Robbe-Grillet's concept of human perception is based on Einstein's contemporary theories of time and space in their interaction.[80] His desire to write for his time is therefore influenced by a theory of time as relative, non-chronological and quantifiable in discrete moments rather than in continuous, one-directional sequences.[81] His notion of reality is dependent on contemporary theories of time and human relationship to it in the same way as he suggests that other 'écoles littéraires' were influenced by the thinking of their own time (*PNR*, 135). By focusing on form Robbe-Grillet suggests that formal experimentation can make the reader see the world in a new way and, simultaneously, he uses his innovative strategies to dismantle the various novelistic clichés, as he sees them, and which he identifies in *Pour un nouveau roman.* Here he argues that the novelistic form should not only be

[79] Balzac's *Le Colonel Chabert* (1832) is a novella which forms part of *La Comédie humaine*.
[80] See Ramsay's Introduction to *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity*, as well as pp. 7–12 of her first chapter. See also p. 21 of Smith's *Understanding Robbe-Grillet*.
[81] See Robbe-Grillet's chapter 'Temps et Description dans le récit d'aujourd'hui' in *Pour un nouveau roman*, pp. 123–134.

renewing itself to complement a changing world but also that new forms will make the reader aware of previously unnoticed relations between the novel and reality. Although he is unwilling to align himself with any specific ideological position, he does show a contemporaneous interest in the way in which people's interpretation of the world is conditioned by cultural codes: 'A chaque instant, des franges de culture (psychologie, morale, métaphysique, etc.) viennent s'ajouter aux choses, leur donnant un aspect moins étranger, plus compréhensible, plus rassurant (*PNR*, 18).

Because of the narrator's extremely subjective point of view in *La Jalousie*, his environment becomes an important symbolic dimension of the novel, the obsessive precision of the descriptions pointing to his 'state of mind'. As he becomes increasingly jealous, the narrative becomes increasingly histrionic, the images more preposterous:

La porte de l'office est fermée. Entre elle et l'ouverture béante du couloir, il y a le mille-pattes. Il est gigantesque: un des plus gros qui puissent se rencontrer sous ces climats. Ses antennes allongées, ses pattes immenses étalées autour du corps, il couvre presque la surface d'une assiette ordinaire. L'ombre des divers appendices double sur la peinture mate leur nombre déjà considérable. (*LJ*, 163)

The reader is faced not with what the character thinks, but with what he sees. Whilst the world as put forward by Robbe-Grillet in *Pour un nouveau roman* has no independent significance, objects and images are specifically selected to suggest meaning in *La Jalousie*; jealousy and sexual obsession are easy to discern because they are rooted in human emotional life. As Stoltzfus argues: 'The reader may find that Robbe-Grillet's story of a triangle, and of fierce jealousy, has taken him through a reading experience more intense than he may find in many more comprehensible books'.[82] In allowing objects to function as objective correlatives that support a psychic state, meaning is still channelled through a human subject. The 'dissolution' of the traditional character is evident in *La Jalousie* but there is still passion in all its universal splendour, contrary to the author's wishes that a protagonist should no longer have the status of 'l'universel.' What we learn of the narrator does in fact allow the reader to 'le juger, […] l'aimer, […] le haïr' (*PNR*, 27). This is in spite of Robbe-Grillet's statements in the section 'Le Personnage' (*PNR*, 26–28) which is part of his essay 'Sur quelques notions périmées' (1957) published in the same year as *La Jalousie*; in this section of the essay he states that any character 'psychologizing' is an out-of-date notion. But the novel's meaning,

[82] Stoltzfus, *Alain Robbe-Grillet*, p. ix.

as ever, emerges channelled through a subject/character. In addition, despite the absence of direct authorial intervention in the shape of an omniscient narrator, the reader is still forced to adopt a position from which s/he interprets the text: authorial intervention becomes a function of form. In this way, Robbe-Grillet may have believed, in the late 1950s, that he had merged form and content, one of his declared aims in *Pour un nouveau roman.* The narrator clarifies the psychoanalytic conception of desire as he outlines the operations of desiring fantasy that is not expressed in words but in the projection of his desire onto his physical surroundings.

The Female 'Subject' in *La Jalousie*

I shall discuss in this section the role of the female protagonist, A…, her position in the narrative structure and what this representation tells us about female agency in Robbe-Grillet's work in this novel as well as more generally. As we see above, the text in *La Jalousie*, no less than in *Le Voyeur*, grounds the subject/character in the libidinal through the insistence of desire as motivation, its abundance of erotic metaphors and images and within the 'blind spot' which afflicts Robbe-Grillet in his role as author of *Pour un nouveau roman*: the gendered power structure that subtends the narrative. The novel contains a recognizable image of the contemporary world and in particular an aspect of the relationship between men and women that his minimally delineated, or 'backgrounded' (as opposed to foregrounded) subject does not manage to collapse. The role which the reader is led to adopt in *La Jalousie* involves identifying with desire in the masculine as evoked by the husband's obsession, jealousy, and a particular relation to the (female) sexual object.

As we pay attention both to Robbe-Grillet's 'backgrounding' of the thinking subject and the operation of desire in the masculine, we confront a number of questions about the ideology of sexual difference, as well as the construction of human (inter-)subjectivity that depends on that difference. The female body is continuously seen in fragments by the eye of the narrator through the *jalousie* blinds; the husband's gaze further reifies and de-personalizes A… through the constant and detailed description of her hair: 'Les boucles noires et brillantes s'immobilisent, dans l'axe du dos, que matérialise un peu plus bas l'étroite fermeture métallique de la robe' (*LJ*, 15); or the movement of her hand and mouth: 'La mémoire parvient […] à reconstituer quelques mouvements de sa main droite et de ses lèvres, quelques allées et venues de la cuillère entre l'assiette et la bouche, qui peuvent être considérés comme significatifs' (*LJ*, 24). And so the narrative subscribes to the tradition of the female body in pieces as seen in western pornographic representations: the tendency of this kind of pornography is to control the female body by denying subjecthood and agency to its (now

dispossessed) 'owner', and in that sense attempt to control her and her movements: 'La silhouette de A…, découpée par la jalousie […] a maintenant disparu' (*LJ*, 41). However, the instability of the male self-image is also apparent in the implicit fears of the narrator. A… is therefore marked with potential liberation as she appears to move away from the narrator's control whenever she disappears from his controlling gaze (in a variation of the Freudian fort-da game).[83] In pursuit of the possession of this elusive object of desire, the narrator's discourse hovers around the truth of his fear but he never articulates this directly. Instead, he displaces his feelings onto obsessive description of his surroundings or Franck's (A…'s supposed lover) distressing faults:

Il absorbe son potage avec rapidité. Bien qu'il ne se libre à aucun geste excessif, bien qu'il tienne sa cuillère de façon convenable et avale le liquide sans faire de bruit, il semble mettre en œuvre, pour cette modeste besogne une énergie et un entrain démésurés. Il serait difficile de préciser où, exactement, il néglige quelque règle essentielle, sur quel point particulier il manque de discrétion (*LJ*, 23).

The husband, then, is represented as a diminshed masculine figure in the grip of debilitating and excessive desire. In *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that 'woman' is the mythical focus of cultural discourses, a projection of both fantasy and fear. She also demonstrates that women are positioned as the site of sexuality while still marginal in other discourses.[84] In this sense, *La Jalousie* re-asserts this view: there is the assumption on the part of the reader that A…'s identity is already caught up in essentializing ontological pronouncements. The narrator's discourse constitutes a constructed femininity as the locus of desire so his discourse is already dependent on woman as an object of desire: 'A…s'est entièrement changée après avoir pris sa douche. Elle a mis la robe claire, de coupe très collante, que Christiane estime ne pas convenir au climat tropical' (*LJ*, 93–94). By determining A…'s identity as deriving from an already established masculine subjectivity, the discourse is engaged in the very enterprise of 'othering' her in relation to a masculine

[83] '*Fort*!' and '*Da*!' are words that Freud heard his eighteen-month old grandson utter while playing with a reel attached to a string, which he repeatedly threw away from himself out of view and then pulled towards him to see it again. This pair of words which mean 'gone' and 'there' respectively, have become shorthand for the compulsion to repeat in trauma.The reel game, Freud concludes, is linked to the boy's mother's disappearance and return. The fundamental question is the contradiction, which here is seen to emerge early in life, between the compulsion to repeat and the pleasure principle. How is it that satisfaction can be derived from repeating actions that have been sources of unpleasure? See Freud's 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), in Gay's *The Freud Reader*, pp. 594–626. (p. 599, 600).

[84] Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe I (*Paris: Gallimard Folio, 1976.), p. 17. Orig. publ. 1949.

norm so 'normal' that it becomes coterminous with 'the' human subject. Once the narrative is read as supporting an essentialist concept of femininity, A…loses her potential as subject. There is no locus in the novel for anything resembling a feminist message which would be more in line with Robbe-Grillet's contemporary 'historical moment', something which is clearly an objective in *Pour un nouveau roman*. It is impossible to find a basis in the text for arguing that A…'s real or imagined affair with Franck can be recuperated as a bid for freedom; real or false, it only amounts to becoming the object of this man rather than that one. The narrative puts into play essentialist gender categories, but the reader has to do the work of exposing them; at least, nothing in *Pour un nouveau roman* helps highlight the textual indices that matter in this respect.

The 'histoire' in *La Jalousie*

In *Pour un nouveau roman*, Robbe-Grillet advocates an escape from the realist novel's preoccupation with a linear plot. Sarcastically, he writes about the 'story' in the traditional novel:

Un vrai romancier, c'est celui qui sait 'raconter une histoire'. Le bonheur de conter, qui le porte d'un bout à l'autre de son ouvrage, s'identifie à sa vocation d'écrivain. Inventer des péripéties palpitantes, émouvantes, dramatiques, constitue à la fois son allégresse et sa justification. (*PNR*, 29)

But there is still a story in *La Jalousie*: there are 'events' described by the narrative which is structured by the field of vision and on the location of the subject and object of the gaze, which points to 'happenings'. The *péripéties* need not be in logically sequential order to be understood and many are dramatic in the novel. The *récit* follows the chronology of mental events instead. In fact, one of the functions of the disordered chronology is to highlight and insist on some events, making Franck's and A…'s day in town the main 'péripetie palpitante'. The words surrounding this event invite the reader to interpret it and focus on its various aspects: this is what the traditional novel does by more direct means. When A…'s and Franck's delayed return from town becomes unbearable, the panic in the narrator is clear despite the carefully controlled narrative:

Néanmoins les causes probables de retard ne manquent pas. Mis à part l'accident – jamais exclu – il y a les deux crevaisons successives, qui obligent le conducteur à réparer lui-même

un des pneus: enlèver la roue, démonter l'enveloppe, trouver le trou dans la chambre à air à la lueur des phares, etc. (*LJ*, 154)

It is not difficult to determine that the above is an exercise in wishful thinking which suggests, covertly, the distress of the narrator about a possible event involving infidelity. As for the 'justification' of the story in the traditional novel, there is no difference between the purpose in *La Jalousie* which is to express human emotion and the objective of affective response that can be found in the conventional novel. The author can arrange the incidents in many ways, he can describe some fully but not others, he can adhere to chronology or alter it: the result is still a 'story' at the heart of the novel.

And so, in spite of the claims which Robbe-Grillet makes in *Pour un nouveau roman*, to the effect that he and other *nouveaux romanciers* have freed (or will free) themselves from the exigencies of 'story', there is a story in *La Jalousie*, with a crisis and a movement towards resolution. The drive towards resolution – the desire in narrative that Brooks writes about so enthusiastically – implies a subject: inherent within the structure of narrative; in the movement from one equilibrium to another and in its relations to cause and effect, the subject is a prerequisite for change from a stable situation to a state of turmoil and then to a second period of stability when order is re-imposed. In *Le Voyeur*, the narrator was effectively omniscient, but focalised entirely on the protagonist Mathias, and a variation on classic *style indirect libre* is the result. In *La Jalousie*, it is impossible to state categorically whether Robbe-Grillet dispenses with *style indirect libre* or uses nothing else; this, along with other techniques, seems designed to take the 'psychology' out of the 'character'. Robbe-Grillet wishes to avoid 'la sacro-sainte analyse psychologique' (*PNR*, 15), but *La Jalousie*, like *Le Voyeur*, is a novel of the male gaze, of desire in the masculine. The novel indirectly poses questions about subjectivity that entails issues of sexuality and sexual identity. But as Irigaray emphasises, theories of the subject always seem to end up being theories of the male subject: this is what actually defines the universal, transcendental humanist subject.[85]

Narrative Structure in *La Jalousie*

The narrator in this novel presents the kind of challenge to the reader that defines much of the author's work. The strategy is to construct the subject anti-mimetically: the *narration* is carried out by a disembodied voice recounting the events of the *histoire* which are recovered

[85] Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre femme*, p. 165.

by the reader through a labyrinth of repetition at the level of the *récit*. The stresses that experimental writing produces in the reader are frequently resolved in certain adjustments that this type of fiction has been adept at creating. Nevertheless, subjectivity, undergoing a re-formulation in *La Jalousie*, maintains its potential for expression; the strategy produces a system of codes through which the subject and his environment gain *symbolic* power. Despite its rejection of verisimilitude, the emotional detachment that the narrative conveys as the narrator observes and describes his environment, recedes when he is most influenced by his obsession. As Franck's and A…'s day in town approaches, the reader apprehends that the narrator's descriptions of Franck express his resentment of him and that his desire for A… is reflected in the sensual descriptions. This effect is contrary to Robbe-Grillet's wish to avoid 'la sacro-sainte analyse psychologique' (*PNR*, 15) but it re-appears in *La Jalousie* in the use of the subjective monologue which structures the narrative. As Stoltzfus argues:

Even though superficially this technique of the visual would seem to negate any concern with depth psychology, it does in fact project the subconscious onto these objects. This is done in two ways: first of all in terms of the selectivity of the protagonist (the tendency to perceive what is most meaningful to a particular state of mind) and secondly in terms of the objective correlatives which the author manipulates in order to reveal the state of mind of the protagonist.[86]

La Jalousie proposes a different way of conceiving desire and a different way of conceiving character in literature. No longer based on the transcendental individual, Robbe-Grillet's subject offers an image of the deconstruction of the self.[87] The apprehension of character here does not depend on mimetic precision or the diegetic credibility of what is being narrated, but it can still be argued that for all its originality, the novel remains attached to an accessible 'reality'. Realism by other means? Inevitably, the realist character has the effect of supporting the traditional novel's tendency towards conservative solutions. Even the most 'non-realist' fictional text is dependent on what we call reality. Because of the prerequisite of reference, and by extension context, in the reading process, the urge to 'humanize' the subject in narrative fiction is always present. As Culler states, '[the individual subject] may no longer be the origin of meaning, but meaning must move through him'.[88] The subject as merely a

[86] Stoltzfus, *Alain Robbe-Grillet*, p. 10.
[87] I refer here to 'deconstruction' as a general term which describes the change from the notion of the stable, coherent individual to the subject as a linguistic construct and not to the very specific use of the term as put forward by Jacques Derrida.
[88] Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 35.

system of linguistic differences is not enough for the reader who is compelled to extract intelligibility from some sort of human subjectivity.

Concluding Remarks

The technical aspects of Robbe-Grillet's work have been discussed by Smith, Stoltzfus, Morrissette and others. All converge on the idea that whilst in many respects his narrative fiction does innovate in relation to the traditional novel as he (loosely) defines it, what is most apparent in these texts is the interplay of the two elements – the innovative and the traditional. This interplay results in a range of pressures and oppositions which, as Smith states, illustrates:

> The pull and tug between order and freedom, between control and creativity, between detailed description and fragmentation, between the language of ideology and the subversive word, between his respect for the grammatical conventions of language and his challenge of narrative conventions.[89]

Robbe-Grillet emphasises that even when the novel evolves with its time, there must and should be continuity as well as disruption in relation to its precedents. So on the one hand 'chaque nouvelle école littéraire voulait abattre celle qui la précédait' (*PNR*, 135), but on the other the 'nouveau roman' is a 'nouveau réalisme', implying continuity with realism as well as an 'advance' to keep step with modernity. However, for a novel to be 'of its time' in Robbe-Grillet's positive sense of 'modern', it must break with the 'right' things to ensure continuity with the 'right' things. And we cannot simply rely on Robbe-Grillet's own account in *Pour un nouveau roman* to assess how far he achieves this. To close this chapter, therefore, I will measure Robbe-Grillet's practice, as explored in my readings of *Le Voyeur* and *La Jalousie*, against the aspirations he expresses in *Pour un nouveau roman*.

The readings of *Le Voyeur* and *La Jalousie* contained in the present chapter partly serve to confirm the aforementioned account of Robbe-Grillet as an author impressively treading a tightrope between innovation and tradition in respect of technique; within those parameters he succeeds in writing 'modern' and 'experimental' texts. The reader of *Le Voyeur* and *La Jalousie* does not, as arguably with Balzac, have direct access to the representations of character, but is forced to construct a portrait of the protagonists based on

[89] Smith, *Understanding Robbe-Grillet*, p. 145.

textual fragments, such as Mathias's childhood 'recollections' and the husband/narrator's mental state in *La Jalousie*. Broadly speaking, then, Robbe-Grillet's technical developments regarding character appear concurrently with contemporary notions of the individual, participating in the discourse that destabilizes the concept of the fixed and coherent subject. The literary character remains, albeit in unfamiliar form; this justifies the label '*nouveau réalisme*' (*PNR*, 13, emphasis added).

With regard to accusations of 'chosisme' which Robbe-Grillet needed to counter, two interpretations face the reader of *Le Voyeur* and *La Jalousie*. The first is to 'read' the objects as devoid of all possible 'meaning' – the objects exist only in themselves. The second is to read the objects as the 'support' of meaning, a kind of screen onto which meaning can be projected (*PNR,* 20). What Robbe-Grillet does not say in so many words is that this is meaning rather than meaninglessness, but it is meaning that cannot be called 'objective' because it arises in an encounter between a given subject and the world. What Robbe-Grillet *does* say in so many words is the following, expressed as a prophecy of future trends in the (future) modern novel:

Désormais […] les objets peu à peu perdront leur inconstance et leurs secrets, renonceront à leur faux mystère, à cette intériorité suspecte.[…] Ou plutôt, s'il arrive encore aux choses de servir un instant de support aux passions humaines, ce ne sera que temporairement, et elles n'accepteront la tyrannie des significations qu'en apparence – comme par dérision – pour mieux montrer à quel point elles restent étrangères à l'homme. (*PNR*, 20)

Robbe-Grillet here evokes a two-stage process: first, 'human passions' find a 'support' in external objects (which therefore become objective correlatives); second, there is a moment in which the objects (oddly anthropomorphized) accept to carry 'significations' as if in order to mock 'man' by showing that they cannot be reduced to 'his' tyranny. These lines do double duty: they describe the reality of the encounter between 'man' and the world of objects as Robbe-Grillet perceives it, and they describe the future modern novel's representation of that reality. On both levels, Robbe-Grillet proposes a broadly 'phenomenological' view of man's relation to the world, or the world's to man. This phenomenological bent throws light on the reader's surprise at the paradoxical hold which the physical world has on human beings as articulated in both novels in different ways: tentatively in *Le Voyeur* and more confidently *La Jalousie*. This is the opposite of what some of his detractors feared which is that 'Le nouveau roman veut chasser l'homme du monde [et]

vise à la parfaite objectivité' (*PNR*, 114). Critics' statements about an attempted disengagement from the real world – the *chosiste* view – cannot be carried through to completion if we see Robbe-Grillet in this light.

At first glance, it would appear that the various techniques used by Robbe-Grillet in *Le Voyeur* and *La Jalousie* seek to exemplify his general thesis in *Pour un nouveau roman* which he wrote after these two novels' publication by way of explanation given the negative reception of his work. With my interpretation of the aims in *Pour un nouveau roman* as reflecting or refracting phenomenological trends, any distinction that is drawn between subjectivity and what was seen as an obsession with objects, crumbles. Even though the starting point in his theory is the question of the relationship between the psyche and the objective world, by favouring the *subjective view of objects* position, Robbe-Grillet is not forced to account for the way in which the world is given; he touches on this when he states that 'il faut ajouter que le propre de l'humanisme, chrétien ou non, est précisement de *tout* récupérer, y compris ce qui tente de lui tracer des limites, voire de le récuser dans son ensemble. C'est même là un des plus sûrs ressorts de son fonctionnement' (*PNR*, 46). At that point, of course, the physical world would become a transcendental field which needs to be accounted for, as he suggests. But Robbe-Grillet's position is decidedly intramundane. The belief that external objects elicit responses which vary only with respect to variations in the subjectivity which observes them assumes the value of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological reduction, a notion current at the time: phenomena as experienced and interpreted by the human mind.[90]

We have seen that *La Jalousie* is more successful than *Le Voyeur* in fulfilling the aspirations which Robbe-Grillet expresses in *Pour un nouveau roman* regarding the narrator's omniscience and other 'notions périmées' (*PNR*, 25–40). The later novel also confirms what he develops in his theory but must have already suspected when writing *Le Voyeur*: a consciousness narrates only what is important to itself and in that sense 'filters out' the rest; nothing else is included. The relation of 'man' and 'world' is to be found in that particular consciousness. All objects of the physical world which are considered by that particular consciousness rely on it for the sort of existence they will be allowed. The choice of objects the eye of the narrator/husband perceives is based on their capacity to *suggest*. The

[90] In Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, human 'intentionality is conceived as the giving of meaning, an *act* of signification. The body is construed as its vehicle and is transformed […] into a distinctly "subjective" dimension'. See John F. Bannan's *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), p. 14.

most significant objects to his perceiving mind and the way in which those objects are described establish the state of mind that controls the point of view. Nevertheless, even in *La Jalousie* Robbe-Grillet resorts to figurative language to express the psychological state of the narrator: 'Le chignon de A… vu de si près, par derrière, semble d'une grande complication. Il est très difficile de suivre dans leurs emmêlements les différentes mèches: plusieurs solutions conviennent, par endroit, et ailleurs aucune. […] Le chignon de A…est au moins aussi déroutant lorsqu'il se présente de profil (*LJ*, 52–53). Focusing on something apparently irrelevant (A…'s *chignon*), the detailed description gives away the narrator's obsessive attitude towards her; the complexities of the *chignon* become symbolic of her own (for the narrator) detached and complex character; the use of the word *déroutant* points to the narrator's fears of imminent loss.

Point of view is of course the important 'device' here. Where a textual 'voice' is not introduced conventionally through a presentation of the character and/or using noun phrases such as proper names, alternatives need to be found and these alternatives differ in the two novels under discussion. Whose point of view do we find in the following sentence if not an 'omniscient' one?: 'Pressée de rentrer chez soi, la vieille dame ne mit pas longtemps à se decider' (*LV*, 102). A perceptual centre is sustained when the noun phrase is definite and in subject position as in the above sentence, and also when the perceptual voice is frequently mentioned as is Mathias's in *Le Voyeur*, but not the narrator's in *La Jalousie*. Here, any perception and mental predicates that are associated with the character – and these are constant in the shape of imagery as we saw in my analysis of the novel – also help to maintain that perceptual centre. In other words, characters who are named and pronominalised stay present in the reader's mind but so do characters consistently propped by objective correlatives. Objective correlatives easily associated with the narrator/husband help to maintain that perceptual centre in *La Jalousie* and so Robbe-Grillet no longer needs to resort to omniscience and other points of view as he does in *Le Voyeur*. In this sense, the perceptual voice in *La Jalousie* is developed into a more subtle form than we see above in the sentence from *Le Voyeur*, and this fits in with Robbe-Grillet's developing theoretical purpose and practice. But the 'psychology' of the characters in both novels is essential so that the reader can keep a narrating centre in mind to 'fill the gaps': we see that the author's particular aims are more satisfactorily achieved in the extreme subjectivity of *La Jalousie*.

In *Le Voyeur* we still have a variety of ways of seeing rather than the extreme subjectivity in *La Jalousie*. For example, the description of the wine seems 'chosiste': 'La couleur – un brun rougêatre assez foncé – était celle de la plupart des apéritifs à base de vin.

Remise en place […] la bouteille ne se distinguait plus de ses voisines, dans l'alignement des différentes marques' (*LV*, 107). There are also reflections on descriptions that appear (pointedly) neutral: 'Leurs commentaires se réduisaient à des notions scrupuleusement objectives dont l'inutilité évidente ne semblait pas les gêner' (*LV*, 104). In the following passage, the narrative voice tells us how the focalizer interprets the object in his visual field (the woman's expression), giving us more 'psychology' than Robbe-Grillet will in *La Jalousie*: 'Il rencontra le regard de la patronne, qui l'observait à la dérobée'. […] Elle tournait toujours la manivelle de son moulin, sans cesser de le dévisager – mais avec bienveillance, lui sembla-t-il' (*LV*, 110). And in the sentence, 'Il douta même ensuite d'avoir parlé à voix haute' (*LV*, 114), what we have is the report of a thought rather than a sense-perception but it still points to the character's *thought*, something 'above' or 'outside' the narrative itself. This is in contrast once again with *La Jalousie* where the narrator's subjectivity is more marked; there are no reported thoughts of the narrator and the reader can 'read' the other characters *only* through the narrator's unreliable conjectures. The passages I have analysed suggest the unreliability of sense-data, but only 'après-coup', forcing the reader to a readjustment, but the examples in *Le Voyeur* have more 'psychology'. In other words, they describe more emotion of fear, and source of fear than *La Jalousie* will allow: 'Mais il eut peur soudain de le connaître et redouta dès lors la reprise de l'entretien, comme si leurs paroles risquaient de le concerner lui-même, à leur insu' (*LV*, 108, 109). The point is that in both novels character 'psychology' is essential for the reader, whichever way this is articulated. *La Jalousie* manages to divest itself of explicit psychologizing (that is to say, direct reporting of thought processes of the protagonist, including his own reflections on what he and others do and say); but in the process it is clear that Robbe-Grillet renders the psychoanalytic reading *all the more necessary*, so that we can 'fill the gaps' as we read. Robbe-Grillet's fictional work entails a consistent psychological narrative system which connects it to models such as Brooks's Freudian narrative prototype as explained in *Reading for the Plot*.

So far I have emphasised in what ways the readings of *Le Voyeur* and *La Jalousie* contained in the present chapter confirm the findings of critics such as Smith, Stoltzfus and Morrissette. But in my readings, I have also sought to bring out two quite different conflicting themes in Robbe-Grillet's work. This conflict arises between his stated 'nouveau roman' aspirations and the implications of the texts themselves; I contend that this tension has a socio-political resonance of the type Robbe-Grillet claims to eschew (*PNR*, 35, 36). In the experimental form of his narratives Robbe-Grillet indeed undermines literary tradition

and disrupts reader expectations; but in his portrayals of men and women he reasserts the dominant praxis, simply re-inscribing what is already 'there' in many cultural artefacts produced before and during his own time. Many previous readings have tended to be over-generous in this respect; therefore, a realignment is necessary. It is true that Robbe-Grillet innovates in terms of technique, and on that level he enters a relationship of continuity/disruption that makes his novels 'modern': *nouveaux romans* indeed, with an emphasis on 'new'. But as author of *Pour un nouveau roman*, he makes a false claim: that his technical innovations represent 'man' in relation to 'the world' in a way that avoids (alongside more literary phenomena, such as the absurd or sticking with realism) psychoanalysis and phenomenology. Robbe-Grillet's claim to have eschewed psychoanalysis and phenomenology is staked on the 'numéro matricule' and the 'violence' of the 'neutral' representation of objects as (supposedly) in a cinematic adaptation of a novel. Robbe-Grillet's argument seems to develop into an appeal for a neutral 'objectivity' in looking at the world: 'Le Nouveau Roman ne propose pas the signification toute faite' (*PNR*, 119). But simultaneously he admits that such a project is impossible; the inevitability of subjective vision is an overriding note throughout: 'Le Nouveau Roman ne s'intéresse qu'à l'homme et à sa situation dans le monde' (*PNR*, 16). It is precisely for this reason that the main problem in *Pour un nouveau roman* is Robbe-Grillet's claim that the relation of 'man' to the world is that of 'le numéro matricule'; that is what the Nouveau Roman 'should' depict. This turns out to be an unfulfilled claim in Robbe-Grillet's novels. The 'rapport' these describe in this phase of his writing is in fact inflected by the ambient psychoanalytic and phenomenological influences that permeated the milieu of the 'modern' intelligentsia of his time, as suggested above – although often without a 'country of origin' sticker. This has been proven by the readings above.

But another more radical re-alignment is necessary. This brings us to the other problem highlighted in this chapter: as author of *Pour un nouveau roman*, Robbe-Grillet has a 'blind spot' concerning gender. Just as Mulvey has shown that the camera's 'gaze' can be (and so often is) positioned to fix women to be looked at and the male viewer as the bearer of the (desiring) look, so is the 'œil caméra' in Robbe-Grillet's novels. Of course, 'modernity' is impossible to define beyond fear of contradiction, and no claim to 'modernity' can be beyond challenge; but Robbe-Grillet is particularly open to challenge on this count. Indeed, as author of *Pour un nouveau roman* he has lack of awareness concerning gender, already expressed by his unreflecting use of 'l'homme' for 'humanité', as already suggested. To put the matter concisely: as he analysed the thinking of a Sartre, he ignored that of a Beauvoir. And so when

we turn to the question of 'sexual/textual' politics, we find that he merely perpetuates what is already there. In this respect, Robbe-Grillet's narrative fictions resist change, upholding *idées reçues*.

CHAPTER TWO

Robbe-Grillet's Work After *Pour un nouveau roman*

Introduction

In this chapter I consider *La Maison de rendez-vous* (1965); Robbe-Grillet's three 'autofictions' (1984–1994); *C'est Gradiva qui vous appelle* (2002) and *Un roman sentimental* (2007). *La Maison de rendez-vous* is a good example of the 'cinematic' in Robbe-Grillet's writing: using images to generate narrative, Robbe-Grillet challenges the reader to re-assess the way s/he approaches reading. As we will see, visual techniques and focalization strategies contribute to define character in this novel. In particular, Robbe-Grillet's cursory but 'pregnant' reflections on cinema in *Pour un nouveau roman* suggest a kind of unfinished business (*PNR*, 19–20). Not only has Robbe-Grillet become a film-maker in his own right – by this time he had written the script for *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961)[91] and directed *L'Immortelle* (1963) – but between those discrete genres 'cinema' and 'novel', he experiments with two 'intermediate' genres: the published scenario and the 'cinematic' novel; that is to say a kind of text that could become a scenario if filmed. But short of that, this kind of text remains generically ambiguous: read in one perspective, a scenario; and read in another, a novel in the form of a scenario.

The overtly personal nature of Robbe-Grillet's three so-called 'autofictions' or *romanesques*, a term suggesting novel-like, is also explored in this chapter: *Le Miroir qui revient* (1984); *Angélique ou l'enchantement* (1988); and *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* (1994).[92] Robbe-Grillet had begun to write *Le Miroir qui revient* in 1976 but put it aside to finish off writing *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* (1978) and *Djinn* (1981), as well as completing his 1983 film *La Belle captive*. He then went back to his 'autobiographical' project with the publication of *Le Miroir qui revient*.[93] *C'est Gradiva qui vous appelle* was published as a *ciné-roman*. In this text Robbe-Grillet makes use of Wilhelm Jensen's *Gradiva* (1903) and Freud's 1907 essay on that novella.[94] In Robbe-Grillet's novel, Jensen's and Freud's texts become part of proliferating sequences of images of the abuse of the imprisoned female body

[91] *La Dernière année à Marienbad* was the product of the collaboration between Robbe-Grillet as scriptwriter and Alain Resnais as director.

[92] Self-conscious narratives (as opposed to formal, canonical autobiography) which challenge the possibility of a 'truthful' account of the self, include the *roman autobiographique* and *autofiction*. These are narratives where the author 'eschews the autobiographical, "contractual" act of self-identification/nomination, thwarting the reader's will to construe his/her story as referential or veridical'. Alex Hughes, *Heterographies: Sexual Difference in French Autobiography* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), p. 3.

[93] See Smith, *Understanding Robbe-Grillet*, p. 127.

[94] In his essay Freud subjects Jensen's protagonist to psychoanalysis. See Jensen's *Gradiva*: *A Pompeiian Fancy*, trans Helen M Downey (New York: Moffat, Yard & Co., 2009). See also Freud's 'Delusions and Dreams' in Wilhelm Jensen's *Gradiva*' in *The Standard Edition*, Vol 9, pp.7–93.

in a narrative that emphasises the author's apparent preoccupations: sado-masochism, murder, the mythical Orient and a male protagonist's search for a woman who appears and disappears in the 'exotic' streets of Marrakesh. Finally, *Un roman sentimental* goes back, irresistibly, to first-person narration in a framework of embedded narratives, to produce a novel in true Sadist style. The works under discussion in this chapter do not allow 'character' to be constructed so as to create a complex 'psychology' as in the two novels considered in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, they continue to suggest male sexual preoccupations, one way or another, around Robbe-Grillet's trope of *le triangle d'or*, asserting the sexual overdetermination of all writing.[95] As Peter Brooks argues in *Body Work*, 'The body quickened through sexuality remains the object of most intense interest for our culture'.[96]

La Maison de rendez-vous[97]

Although Smith suggests that it is 'utterly impossible' to recuperate a notion of character in *La Maison de rendez-vous*,[98] this novel is a good example of Vermeule's argument that for the reader 'there is a general preference for social information over other kinds of information' and that the most 'valuable' interpretations reveal a human presence.[99] Furthermore, Vermeule argues, citing Leslie Brothers, that the concept of a person is incomplete without engaging it in a wider social context:[100]

There is another dimension to the concept of 'person' – a person always belongs in a network of persons. A network that has been termed a social order. The social order is intrinsically moral, for it is made up of shoulds and oughts, triumph and shame, villains and heroes. Personal behaviour in this moral-social order is interpreted in terms of reasons and shifting

[95] a) Robbe-Grillet's trope *le triangle d'or*, a triangle pointing downwards, is symbolic of the female genital area in his work. See Smith's *Understanding Robbe-Grillet*, p. 105. b) Freud wrote in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) that many features of dreams were often 'overdetermined' in that they were caused by numerous factors in the life of the individual, from superficial memories of recent life events to deeply repressed traumas and unconscious wishes. Freud favoured interpretations which accounted for these features not just once, but many times, and in the context of various levels and neuroses of the dreamer's psyche. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

[96] Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, (London: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 266.

[97] *La Maison de rendez-vous* (Paris: Minuit, 1965).

[98] Smith, *Understanding Robbe-Grillet*, p. 63.

[99] See p. 22 of Vermeule's *Why do we Care about Literary Characters* where she cites Christopher Tyler's study on this topic.

[100] Leslie Brothers is an associate clinical professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences at the UCLA School of Medicine.

status. The glue that binds persons into the social order is narrative – or really, narratives – about good and bad, heroes and villains.[101]

In *La Maison* Robbe-Grillet exploits various themes of contemporary popular fiction: Hong Kong, drug dealing and money laundering; the attractions of Oriental women and wealthy European men involved in the prostitution of young girls are some of the stereotypes selected: with repetitions and modifications, these components structure the narrative. The diversity of characters in the social setting of *La Maison* offers the reader different articulations of individuals in the work as a whole. It is the case that the novel presents the traditional fictional character as 'radically diluted';[102] nevertheless, it is relatively easy to recuperate a notion of 'character' because the different presentations of a 'human presence' can be captured through the narrative space it occupies in its interaction with other elements. For example, the narrative maintains a consistent reference to recurring characters: the American (or perhaps British) Jonstone or Johnstone; 'le gros homme au teint rouge'; 'la servante [qui] est toujours accompagné par le grand chien' and 'le garçon en petite veste blanche'. In each case a sense of character emerges as we have seen that Rimmon-Kenan argues it must, that is, because of the descriptive configuration produced around its position in the narrative. The description of a recurrent character includes the suggestion of a habit or repeated activity typical of the realist model:

Débout contre le chambranle d'une embrasure de porte, telle une domestique bien stylée qui se tient prête à répondre au premier appel […], une des jeunes eurasiennes […] regarde sans ciller vers sa maîtresse. […] Elle est, selon son habitude, attentive et absente, toute en sombres pensées peut-être derrière ses yeux droits et francs, présente au moindre signe, efficace, impersonnelle, transparente, perdue tout le jour aussi bien dans des rêves splendides et sanglants. (*MRV*, 69)

The above description of a person-like representation compels the reader to dwell on it, facilitating insight into a particular 'personality' and providing indications of an experiential self in a social and geographical situation. It is not of course 'identity' as it might be inferred from a realist novel, but in *La Maison*, clearly human entities are exposed to social circles of men and women defined by sexual motivation and financial greed which are characteristics

[101] Vermeule, *Why Do We Care*, p. 23.
[102] Smith, *Understanding Robbe-Grillet*, p. 63.

rooted in human experience. The personalized quality of the account in *La Maison* is maintained by the narrator: 'Je crois avoir dit que Lady Ava donnait des représentations pour amateurs sur la scène du petit théâtre privé de la Villa Bleue. C'est sans doute de cette scène qu'il s'agit ici' (*MRV,* 41). The narrator does not step in to give an explicit retrospective evaluation of any element in the story or the individuals but he does describe Lady Ava and others as well as depicting standards of behaviour in a British colony which is stable, named as Hong Kong (and so having a referent) and apparently orderly. The images, however, threaten the passage's referential function as it is difficult for the reader to know immediately whether or not the scene described is real, the description of a sculpture or a theatrical representation. The heart of the story, however, is clearly discerned by the reader as being the murder of Manneret, an account repeatedly referred to by the narrator:

Je vais donc essayer maintenant de raconter cette soirée chez Lady Ava, de préciser en tout cas quels furent, à ma connaissance, les principaux événements qui l'ont marquée. Je suis arrivé à la Villa Bleue vers neuf heures dix en taxi. (*MRV,* 23–24)

As in *Le Voyeur* in Robbe-Grillet, a (male) narrator comments on the progress of the story. There isn't much difference here from the beginning of a story in realist fiction. The coherent self is not evident in *La Maison* but there are certainly writing practices that have always governed realist fiction. These practices make narrative access possible by organizing the variety of discourses to be like the reader's habitual way of understanding fictional narrative. The example above shows another major theme in the images in *La Maison*: the narrator makes very specific references to 'events'. The statements are quite categorical, as in Balzac's novels, and it is significant that in this novel where the characters are 'utterly impossible' to recuperate according to Smith, the narrative records thought and experience although with the minimum of elaboration.

Another traditional device in *La Maison* is the 'detective-narrator' who unearths and reconstructs the story until he is faced with the body of the dead Lauren, a character with whom the reader is able to sympathize, perhaps, at least as far as with Zola's Nana, given her wish to leave her life as a prostitute and start again in more 'respectable' circumstances. Johnson's gallant quest to buy his beloved Lauren from her fate in the *bordello,* fails: Manneret's refusal to lend him the money he needed to 'buy' Lauren leads to the murder of Manneret and is a traditional narrative resolution that elicits the reader's disappointment at the way that things turned out.

The cinematic *histoire* in *La Maison de rendez-vous*

Because Robbe-Grillet implicitly asks the reader to cooperate in building the intricate narrative structure of the text, in spite of the many discontinuities and contradictions, an *histoire* emerges in *La Maison*, namely the story of the murder of Edward Manneret. This character is a writer and this serves to foreground the thematic significance of the process of writing: 'Il écrit. Il écrit que la servante eurasienne traverse alors le cercle sans rien voir, faisant craquer les éclats de verre étincelants sous ses fines chaussures' (*MRV*, 66). This strategy, a common feature of *le nouveau roman*, typically announces a narrative component that occupies a liminal position in relation to the fictional diegesis: that component belongs partly to the diegesis, partly to the field that orients the reader towards his or her (half intra-textual, half extra-textual) experience as something more than a role inscribed in the text, as a person in the 'real world' and able to refer to that world. The argument of this thesis is based on the premise that the reader is fundamental to the particular structure of discourse which the text establishes, a complex structure involving semiotic mechanisms and referential direction. In other words, meaning is not 'just there' in the text but is constructed by the reader, via reference to the world, however minimal (and necessarily in response to textual prompts); to read is basically to create a reference about the 'real world'. Robbe-Grillet foregrounds this process when he writes: 'Tout le monde connaît Hong Kong, sa rade, ses jonques, ses sampans, les buildings de Kowloon, et l'étroite robe à jupe entravée, fendue sur le côté jusqu'à la cuisse, dont sont vêtues les eurasiennes' (*MRV*,13). Recurrent sentences in general, each time slightly modified, are a rhetorical ploy commonly found in the realist text: Culler refers to Balzac's 'stylistic tics' whose purpose is to consolidate the 'mimetic contract (with the reader) and assure the reader that he can interpret the text as about a real world'.[103] Culler argues that Robbe-Grillet 'shows the same kind of confidence in the representational function of his writing' as Balzac does.[104] Of course, Robbe-Grillet does not share Balzac's assumptions concerning 'reality' but he still manages to give a rich and coherent description of 'a' reality. The reference to the 'real world' is always there, but is embedded in a discourse which emphasises the inability of the text to refer unproblematically, objectively or transparently to reality.

Central to the presentation of narrative as process is an attention to temporality and specifically the temporal duality of narrative, that is, the opposition between story time and

[103] Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, pp. 228, 229.
[104] *Ibid.*, p. 157.

narrative time as analysed by Genette in his chapter 'Ordre' in *Figures III*.[105] The relationship between narrative time and reading time 'makes possible all the temporal distortions that are commonplace in narratives'[106] and *La Maison* provides a good example of the opportunity afforded by this feature for the temporal experimentation typical of Robbe-Grillet's work. With its alternating structure of separate cinematic 'scenes' that generate more narrative, *La Maison* confirms his use of temporality as one of Robbe-Grillet's most significant novelistic innovations. It is this that allows Smith to assert, as we have seen, that *La Maison* signals Robbe-Grillet's first contribution to what has come to be called the New New novel:

The narrative episodes in *La Maison de rendez-vous* are explicitly linked to theater presentations at the Blue Villa, but they increasingly take on the *immediacy and pace* of film, designated by adverbs such as 'then', 'now' and 'afterwards', and expressions such as 'in the field of vision' and 'close-up'.[107]

La Maison is a breakthrough in narrative form because by utilizing cinematic language Robbe-Grillet creates the illusion of narrowing the gap between story time and narrative time, a good basis for the ultimate 'cinematic' illusion of the real. Robbe-Grillet's privileging of the visual and his attachment to the cinematic image are also evident in *La Maison* where he attempts to revolutionize traditional language-centred conceptions of the narrator. His attempt, however, highlights the fact that verbal activity is not easily equated with visual activity, and he must therefore rely, not just on the agency belonging to the narrator but also on the reader's act of construction, involving trans-medial 'translation':

Ensuite vient la scène de la vitrine de mode, à la devanture d'un élégant magasin de la ville européenne, à Kowloon. Cependant elle ne doit pas se situer immédiatement à cet endroit, où elle ne serait guère compréhensible, en dépit de la présence de cette même Kim qui se trouve également sur le plateau du petit théâtre où la représentation, qui se poursuit, en arrive maintenant aux quelques minutes précédant l'assassinat. (*MRV*, 66)

The above passage is presented as a precise, although non-technical, shooting-script and is recognisably cinematographic. It is a description in prose of a film's projected scenes which

[105] See Genette's *Figures III*, (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 77–121.
[106] Christian Metz cited in Genette's *Figures III*, p. 33.
[107] Smith, *Understanding Robbe-Grillet*, p. 62. My emphasis.

encourages an awareness of narration in the reader; the passage implies two associated generic forms: the literary and the cinematic. The image is aimed at the visual perception of the reader, the narrative at his or her capacity to reconstruct images through the textual. The innovations in *La Maison* thus entail the use of specific images which punctuate narrative but they also serve to generate narrative. Constructed alongside and sometimes against cause-and-effect progression, the images become foregrounded to an extent that they become the main structural feature of the novel. As Chatman states, 'So compelling is our need to recognize an overriding text-type that we may see it in a collection of sentences "more appropriate" to a totally different text-type'.[108] Chatman proposes that Robbe-Grillet's descriptions demonstrate 'the actualization of one kind of textual function, narrative, by sentences typical of another' – in the case of *La Maison*, film.

The understanding of the above passage depends on the reader's thinking of the narrator as editor of a film and in the process of selecting a series of scenes; a film editor who is capable of changing the position of the stills to produce the ideal, causally linked sequences of 'shots' for the reader. This is a crucial factor in Robbe-Grillet's exploitation of the narrated image and its relation to point of view. The point of view is marked as subjective in that it assumes the position of a subject-character but the resulting perspective is still 'objective': the objective view of what is seen from the subject position taken (cf. French 'objectif' for lens). Point of view in *La Maison* provides the reader with both what is looked at and the person looking; it depends on an overlap of first person, the familiar 'je' with which the story begins and by which it is punctuated throughout, and third person-camera narration; there is no radical disjunction between subjective and objective point of view in the novel: 'En me retournant, j'ai aperçu d'un seul coup la scène: deux personnages immobilisés dans des attitudes dramatiques, comme sous le choc d'une intense émotion' (*MRV*, 25). The objective point of view is the consistent basis – as in film – against which the subjective point of view can be produced in its particular organization of space and image. The structure of the textual image in *La Maison* with its visual dimension, its emphasis on distance, movement and timing, its suggestion of stills that can become movement through a projector, or which can be suddenly stopped, emphasises the sense of the spectator/reader identification with a 'camera':

[108] Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*, (London: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 21.

C’est juste à ce moment-là que la police anglaise a fait irruption dans le grand salon de la Villa Bleue, mais cet épisode a déjà été écrit en détail: le coup de sifflet strident et bref qui arrête net l’orchestre et le brouhaha des conversations, les talons ferrés des deux soldats en short et chemisette qui sonnent sur les dalles de marbre, dans le calme subit, les danseurs qui se sont figés au beau milieu d’une figure, l’homme restant une main tendue en avant vers sa cavalière encore à demi détournée. (*MRV*, 68)

The reader must *see* and enabling this vision is the fundamental aim of the narrative in *La Maison*: it is the organization of the images/tableaux through the relay of point of view which pulls together vision and textual narrative, a narrative suggesting the movement of film. The cinematic scenes in *La Maison* are exemplary of Robbe-Grillet’s aims, playing fully on their impact to make conventional identification with characters difficult and promoting a pseudo-spectatorial engagement with the narrative instead.

At a high point in the novel, Lady Ava’s Villa Bleue, a notorious place of prostitution, drugs and decadent living, receives a visit from two British policemen, interrupting ‘une réunion parfaitement ordinaire, montée sans doute comme paravent, avec une fausse dénonciation prévenant la brigade des mœurs’ (*MRV*, 20–21). But the police find nothing but elegant couples dancing rather than any proof of wrongdoing. The ‘scene’ finds its centre in two of the characters looking at ‘une ampoule de verre incolore du type courant utilisé en pharmacie, dont une seule pointe a été brisée, le liquide ne pouvant donc avoir été vidé qu’au moyen d’une seringue munie de son aiguille à piqûres’ (*MRV*, 21). Thus centred, the tableau is organized according to the sequential clarity which is such an important feature of realist fiction: the police visit, the appearance of normality concealing transgression, increasing suspense; the subsequent action is driven forward in a movement towards equilibrium. This coherence is sufficiently sustained for the reader to construct a story, establishing the basic person-like figures: the wealthy, pleasure-seeking drug dealers and pimps, the elegant Lady Ava, the beautiful interchangeable women. A faultlessly symmetrical pattern begins to emerge which pieces together the scenes in which the action takes place, from the beginning to the rather conventional end. This unified effect is achieved by a pre-established strategy where the end governs the beginning and the middle of the *récit*. The ending of this novel does provide a kind of narrative/thematic closure, unlike *Le Voyeur* as we see in the previous chapter:

A l'étage au-dessus, la porte de Lauren est ouverte. […] Johnson s'élance, pris d'une soudaine appréhension: quelque malheur serait arrivé en son absence. […] Couchée sur le côté, un genou replié, l'autre jambe étendue, la tête relevée sur un coude, elle le regarde sans faire un geste, sans que bouge un seul trait de son visage lisse. Et il n'y a rien dans ses yeux. (*MRV*, 215)

Lady Ava ages and dies, Johnson is unable to buy Lauren from Manneret and therefore shoots him; Lauren dies too. The end comes round to the beginning, one 'scene' echoing and supporting another towards a resolution. The distance covered by the narrative is registered and space is identified and defined by the dramatization achieved in each *tableau*. Coupled with the consistent alternating first/third person point of view, a coherent whole can be achieved by the reader. The novel ultimately amounts to something very similar to Robbe-Grillet's derided 'histoire' as he states mockingly, 'Le jugement porté sur le livre consistera surtout en une appréciation de la cohérence [de l'intrigue], de son déroulement, de son équilibre, des attentes ou des surprises qu'elle ménage au lecteur haletant' (*PNR*, 29); but *La Maison de rendez-vous* provides all these elements for the reader.

Memories and Desire: The *romanesques* (1984–1994)

Although Robbe-Grillet purports to agree with Barthes's notion of the 'death of the author', from the 1980s onwards he seems to articulate a more ambiguous view with the publication of the *romanesques*. Key terms regarding literary authority are subjected to a radical rethinking by Robbe-Grillet and this change seems to be a way of him 'writing himself out' of some of the false dichotomies and dead-ends of *Pour un nouveau roman*:

Chacun sait [...] que la notion d'auteur appartient au discours réactionnaire – celui de l'individu, de la proprieté privée, du profit – et que le travail du scripteur est au contraire anonyme. [...] L'intention humaine qui en constitue le projet se trouvant à son tour dépersonnalisée au point de ne plus apparaître que comme un avatar local de la lutte des classes, qui est le moteur de l'Histoire en général, c'est-à-dire aussi de l'histoire du roman. J'ai moi-même beaucoup encouragé ces rassurantes niaiseries. Si je me décide aujourd'hui à les combattre, c'est qu'elles me paraissent avoir fait leur temps: elles ont perdu en quelques années ce qu'elles pouvaient avoir de scandaleux, de corrosif, donc de révolutionnaire.[109]

[109] Robbe-Grillet, *Le Miroir qui revient* (Paris: Minuit, 1984), p. 11.

In the passage above, taken from his first *romanesque*, Robbe-Grillet historicizes notions of authorship and reveals the thinking behind the overstated nature of his 'autofictional' works. In this light, the 'defensive' strategies taken up by him in these texts is as much their subject as anything else.

According to Smith, the term *romanesque* suggests the illusion associated with 'idealized fiction' and considers why Robbe-Grillet might have found it 'useful' to approach an autobiographical project in this way. He concludes that Robbe-Grillet acknowledges the inevitable merging of life and fiction, re-asserting that reality is indescribable; given this premise, Robbe-Grillet is able to continue with the *romanesques* the objectives he set himself.[110] To achieve the 'autofictional' project of the *romanesques*, Robbe-Grillet had to modify a number of narrative strategies apparent in his pure fictions. First, he needed to stabilize his identity in the narrative by imposing on the *romanesques* the form of a 'story' (which was one of the 'notions perimées' in *Pour un nouveau roman*). Family traditions and childhood memories that are to be read as 'reliable', entail the narration of a consistent course of events that the topic of serious recollection implies. Second, he had to accept the strong presence of a narrator because one of the 'obstacles' of his fictions is that the reader finds it difficult immediately to identify a narrator and so s/he is not sure how to contextualize the language. As Culler argues, 'As a linguistic object the text is strange and ambiguous. We reduce its strangeness by reading it as the utterance of a particular narrator so that models of plausible human attitudes and of coherent personalities can be made operative'.[111] The *romanesques* can be read easily as a coherent speaker's account of various situations and events, real or imagined, that form the viewpoint of the narrator who looks back in time:

Je me rappelle qu'après la publication de *Dans le labyrinthe*, le premier de mes romans dont la grande presse ait rendu compte avec quelque faveur, Roland Barthes au contraire me reprochait cette neige trop insistante qui descendait lentement sur la ville. […] La trop forte 'adjectivité' de ces flocons, prétendait Barthes, qui recouvraient peu à peu la cité déserte d'un linceul inexorable, leur conférait une sorte de valeur métaphorique, dont nous avions justement condamné l'un et l'autre les effets pervers: la formation sur toutes choses d'une croûte poisseuse qui leur ôtait en fin de compte évidence et réalité.[112]

[110] Smith, *Understanding Robbe-Grillet*, p.131.
[111] Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 171.
[112] Robbe-Grillet, *Angélique et l'enchantement* (Paris: Minuit, 1987), p. 10.

The 'autobiographical' style of the *romanesques*, as in the passage above, authorizes Robbe-Grillet to consider them as texts where he *can* be agent and subject of his own narrative. When it is a question of offering a narrative of real events, the reader must assume the sort of subject who would provide the motivation to record his or her actions; Robbe-Grillet is willing to assume this role, as it is shown in the quotation above. The discourse in the *romanesques*, poses no problems because a clear distinction between real and imaginary is not imposed as it is in a conventional autobiography with its concomitant reader expectations. However, Robbe-Grillet's project to encourage reader awareness of the non-transparency of language – and its problematic relation to the real world – loses some of its force. In writing the *romanesques*, he cannot tell himself he is able to concern himself with the *écriture* detached from the aspiration to represent the world-in-itself. He has to make the reader believe that he is writing something which is objectively there in the first place. This is contrary to his statements in *Pour un nouveau roman* and elsewhere where he insists that narrative constructs a version of events rather than describes a reality already there. If Robbe-Grillet wanted to write a less 'depersonalized' text but continue his objectives (as set out in *Pour un nouveau roman* and elsewhere), it was necessary to take account of the nature of self-narration and the division it involves between the subject and the object of narrative: the 'trustworthiness' of self-narration depends on temporal distance between the narrator and the narrated and to do this he had to divide the 'I' between the past and the present. But here, he had to forego narrative 'self-consciousness' if he was to be believed: the *romanesques* are no longer 'about' the creative freedom of form or the 'constructedness' of narrative. The reference, the object and the lure in these texts is Robbe-Grillet's 'real' life and family and the revisiting of the past by the subject. This applies even when he slides into more fanciful accounts involving Henri de Corinthe, the fabled character who haunted his childhood, a ludic figure who, according to Ramsay, 'is both the shadow of the benevolent and eccentric father-provider […] and the imaginative fantasy of heroic and powerful aristocrat or political paternity':[113]

Mais soudain, dans un bref intervalle obscure entre deux éclaircies, la réflexion du ciel dans les vitres cède un instant la place à ce qui se trouve derrière la croisée, à l'intérieur d'une des chambres; un visage d'homme apparaît – une fine moustache, nez busqué, yeux

[113] Ramsay, *The French New Autobiographies* (University Press of Florida, 1996), p. 84.

profondément enfoncés dans leurs orbites – où le visiteur tardif reconnaît sans mal […] les traits sévères d'Henri de Corinthe, figé lui-même et comme aux aguets.[114]

Although Corinthe never existed, the passage above operates in the realm of memory rather than in that of fantasy; the episodes involving Corinthe are read under the sign of the real rather than that of the fictional as the character lived in the imagination of the child who was Robbe-Grillet, whether an actual childhood memory or a story recounted by family members. A subject who is capable of functioning as the central organizing principle of meaning of a discourse that is realistic, story-like in structure, but who also provides the imaginative element, is perfectly suited to the autofictional project. Every narrative, however apparently complete, and whether realistic or imaginary, is created on the basis of a series of events which might have been included but were left out; this applies to traditional autobiography and its purported real life events, to fiction and to autofiction. The 'truth' in the *romanesques* is clearly only nominally present to the consciousness of the writer, or, more precisely, it is present as an element in the organization of the discourse only because of its absence. As Smith states above, Robbe-Grillet accepts the inevitable merging of life and fiction and so in the *romanesques* we can detect the absence of a principle for allocating particular importance or meaning to real events, or real people: Barthes and Henri de Corinthe; childhood memory and fantasy all have equal relevance in Robbe-Grillet's autofictional accounts.

The *romanesques* mark a change to an *écriture* which constitutes a question that takes centre stage in this period of Robbe-Grillet's career: certain notions once associated with literary activity, authorial intentionality and so on, are now destabilized. Indeed, in the *romanesques* there is not just the subject's 'objective' gaze on objects in the real world but we find the consciousness that sees them *and* the desire that transforms them:

J'envie la perfection, la sérénité des lignes tracées par l'épeire diadème, l'araignée porte-croix de nos jardins. Au petit jour, dans le désordre des chrysanthèmes couchés en tout sens par les vents et pluies d'équinoxe, c'est un repos de découvrir la paisible ordonnance de sa toile toute neuve aux rayons étoilés, réunis en multiples polygones concentriques par des segments sans bavure, progressifs et parallèles, de plus en plus courts à mesure que l'on

[114] Robbe-Grillet, *Angélique et l'enchantement*, p. 12.

s'approche du centre où attend l'artiste dorée, satisfaite à juste titre de sa rigoureuse œuvre nocturne.[115]

The notion of pleasure is implicitly present in the passage above, where the description is charged with significance for the observer. And it is this that obliterates the impulse Robbe-Grillet had before the *romanesques* to work up his discourse into the kind of narrative that was once called *chosiste*. The *romanesques* display a certain narrative form (the 'story') but also a certain content, namely an emotional relationship between 'man' and the social world. But what wish of the author is enacted in these autofictions and what desire of the reader is satisfied, by the possibility that Robbe-Grillet's 'real life' events are represented in the *romanesques* and seen to show the formal coherence of a 'proper' story with an easily identified narrator? Robbe-Grillet suggests with this project that, as author, his is an unsatisfactory present that cannot be totally realized without an articulation of his past; from the reader's point of view, any authentic event in the author's life makes 'the real' desirable and anticipated as Robbe-Grillet writes forcefully of existing places and people, reconnecting the reader to the world outside the text.

The *romanesques* are viewed by Ramsay as 'fictional autobiography'.[116] There is an effort on her part to accommodate Robbe-Grillet's expressed position regarding how to read him. For example, she states that *Le Miroir qui revient* 'offers a colourful and individuated evocation of the geographical and historical contexts of the author's childhood during the first half of [the twentieth] century and above all, the powerful family romance, the relations between child, siblings, and parental figures'.[117] And Ramsay reproduces several photographs of Robbe-Grillet with his family in her book. Critical readings such as this study, which do not attend only to form, are also dependent to some extent on presuppositions concerning authorial intention: the problem here is where to situate that intention. In this respect, the capacity of Robbe-Grillet's statements to provide a full picture of his writing is misleading, given the uncertainties of the authorial figure as a concept. Ultimately, Robbe-Grillet's *romanesques* in combination with his fictions, the essays in *Pour un nouveau roman* and a great number of interviews, are evidence of a dynamic controlling enterprise:

[115] Robbe-Grillet, *Les derniers jours de Corinthe* (Paris: Minuit, 1994), p. 206.
[116] Ramsay, *The French New Autobiographies*, pp. 1–2.
[117] *Ibid.*, p. 1.

C'est en tout cas pour moi seul que j'écris et que je réalise des films. […] On crée toujours pour soi. […] *Sans le savoir de façon consciente*, j'aurais donc forgé des récits pour dominer mes fantasmes criminels devenues trop arrogants (le spectre du marquis de Sade qui venait me tirer par les pieds dans mon lit).[118]

It is of course always difficult to argue with the author as to the sources of his creativity and many critics have capitulated to Robbe-Grillet's pronouncements as to how to read his work. Smith and Ramsay not only often quote or paraphrase the author but also focus strongly on his personal characteristics which they see as reflected in his texts. In his account of his meeting with Robbe-Grillet in 1982, Smith remarks on the author's 'unusual orderliness' in his luggage and states that this characteristic is 'remarkably consistent with what he has written'.[119] And Ramsay states that Robbe-Grillet's 'excessively "realistic" sado-masochistic thematics can be attributed to the author's personal fantasies [which are] close to a lived experience'.[120] In *Le Miroir qui revient* Robbe-Grillet complicates the issue: 'Quant au *moi*, de tout temps haïssable, il prépare ici sans aucun doute une rentrée en scène encore plus frivole: celle du biographisme'.[121] This statement in the opening pages of his first autofiction leads the reader to believe that the subject of the story will be the author himself. Robbe-Grillet suggests here the uncontrolled nature of the *moi* and that every conscious 'intentional' narrative may hide a complementary unconscious one. By a number of intertextual allusions, memories and fabulations, Robbe-Grillet attains his object for both a personalized narrative and, in its instability, a continuation of the aims he set himself.

Freudian traces and the 'Orient' as Misogynistic Fantasy: *C'est Gradiva qui vous appelle*

In this section I explore Robbe-Grillet's sexualized version of Jensen's story where he combines his own brand of erotics constructed around and shored up by the sexual identity imposed on the 'Orient' by the western imagination. Robbe-Grillet's version of Jensen's story has as its setting the 'exotic' city of Marrakesh. For western culture, the Orient is a sexually vigorous place of 'ungovernable fertility',[122] a mysterious world of veiled, acquiescent female beauties in harems, kasbahs and marbled palaces. Following the model of Hanold the archaelogist in Jensen's *Gradiva*, the protagonist in Robbe-Grillet's version is also a European, an Englishman named John Locke, but here he is an art critic on a voyage to

[118] Robbe-Grillet, *Le miroir qui revient*, pp. 184, 185 (my emphasis).
[119] See Smith's Introduction in *Understanding Robbe-Grillet*, pp. 3, 4.
[120] Ramsay, *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity*, p. 60.
[121] Robbe-Grillet, *Le miroir qui revient*, p. 10.
[122] Robert C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 98.

find original orientalist paintings. It is clear that his pleasure in this type of art stems from a particular interest in the pictorial representations of submissive women in idealized 'oriental' pictures. John finds himself in Morocco following in the footsteps of Delacroix, who is the subject of his research and whose painting, 'Mort de Sardanapale', is the focus of John's sexual fantasies which are described in cinema-like images.[123] Narrative-generating innovations based on pictures and paintings start appearing in Robbe-Grillet's work in the late 1970s. In *Topologie d'une cité fantôme* (1976) and *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* (1978), for example, the author integrates plates of Magritte paintings (in *Topologie* Rauschenberg's lithographs and Delvaux etchings as well), a move that clearly renews his narrative structures in a radical way. Making use of these narrative-generating innovations, in *C'est Gradiva* idealized 'Oriental' paintings by western artists produce ekphrasic-like narratives that describe imaginary or actual works of art, that is to say textual representations of a sometimes real, sometimes fictitious visual text composed in a verbal medium, as in the following passage:

Le premier croquis ressemble beaucoup au cavalier turc qui galope avec une belle fille nue attachée derrière lui sur la croupe du cheval, dans une posture qui exhibe toute sa splendeur sexuelle, encore bien plus que sur le tableau célèbre que nous connaissons. Mais la seconde esquisse, plus inattendue, montre une autre captive, […] les cuisses écartelées par deux cavaliers tirant sur des chaînes fixées à leur selle qui enserrent les chevilles. Le sexe entrouvert est tourné vers le spectateur, comme dans 'L'Origine du monde' de Courbet. (*GRA*, 105)

These passages with their use of certain referential strategies (e.g 'un cavalier turc') produce interconnections and cross-references to the 'paradis oniriques qui prospèrent au Moyen-Orient' (*GRA*, 120). The scene above engages the reader by assuming a degree of shared knowledge between him or her and the narrator, based on assumptions that the reader must (at least temporarily) accept in order to make sense of the text (e.g. the libidinous Orient and 'le tableau célèbre que nous connaissons').

[123] *La Mort de Sardanapale* is an oil painting dated 1827, by Delacroix. Its main feature is a large divan on which a naked female slave (surrounded by other women held forcefully by soldiers), begs the king Sardanapale for mercy because he had ordered his possessions to be destroyed and his sex slaves murdered before killing himself when faced with military defeat.

C'est Gradiva reproduces a certain position regarding the cultural other that is implicated in the view 'of the whole of humanity being estimated and evaluated according to a single hierarchy of development leading towards the achievement of high European civilization'.[124] Robbe-Grillet's rejection of any politically or socially engaged literature contradicts his persistent stereotyping of the 'Orient', a label used metonymically to point to a particular cultural identity. As Leenhardt argues in his study of *La Jalousie*, '[Robbe-Grillet] invite au voyage à travers les sentiers battus des vieilles mythologies coloniales'.[125] Robbe-Grillet's text, then, is open to myths and their replication, both in terms of the cultural other and of the female other: 'L'acheteur enturbanné, en vague costume ottoman, est confortablement installé sur un divan d'apparat aux coussins profonds, à demi allongé, caressant d'une main négligente une petite odalisque à genoux près de lui' (*GRA*, 96).

These tropes are of course generally susceptible to imitation and parody but show a facile reliance on pastiche and stereotype in Robbe-Grillet's text. This is the case even if his personal kind of eroticism is offered as providing a desirable aesthetic dimension, as intimated by Ramsay in *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity* (p. 3) and Smith in *Understanding Robbe-Grillet* (p. 140). Whilst we do not find the developed sense of character that would lend the narrative a significant anchor, as Robbe-Grillet wishes in *Pour un nouveau roman*, the western Oriental myth underpins *C'est Gradiva* structurally and places the novel in a particularly static relation to history: an identifiable vision of the Orient emerges which the text offers as a possible means of interpretation, as well as narrative cohesion despite the convoluted narrative.

In the Preface of *C'est Gradiva*, Robbe-Grillet establishes a relationship between the novel and the film of the same title he intends making and which turned out to be his last in 2006. The link between the two, as he indicates, is the theme of a man in love with the 'fantôme gracieux d'une jeune odalisque, assassinée jadis dans des conditions hallucinantes' (*GRA*, 7). The desired phantasmatic woman appears later as violently murdered, 'son beau corps laiteux transpercé à coups de poignard' (*GRA*, 46). The main concern of both novel and film, then, is woman as desired *image*:

On suit John […] dont le projet se trouve contrarié par une apparition: la jeune femme blonde […] dont le visage et la démarche bien reconnaissable (celle de la Gradiva de Jensen)

[124] Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 46.
[125] Leenhardt, *Lecture politique du roman*, p. 39.

figuraient sur les croquis et photographies projetées dans la cellule génératrice. John essai de la suivre et elle l'entraîne vers des chemins écartés, mais à chaque fois qu'il croit la rejoindre, elle disparaît brusquement, de façon peu compréhensible, comme si elle était entrée dans une muraille sans ouverture apparente. (*GRA*, 22)

As in *Le Voyeur*, sight characterizes the libidinal project which constitutes the dynamics of *C'est Gradiva*: the text is a trajectory of the (male) eye in its movements along a sequence of images, generating a forceful eroticism through this movement. The plot develops in a series of scenarios, some of which are 'real' events and others presented as cinematic shots. The cinematic 'takes' are concerned with the camera, with looking through it and with its imprinting of distance and desire:

On voit alors le dessin qui suit: une main caressant entre deux doigts effilés (féminins peut-être) le téton érigé du même sein. D'autres évocations encore plus précises se succèdent sur l'écran, détail d'une bouche féminine ouverte […] dont s'approche un massif pouce masculin d'aspect indubitablement métaphorique, etc. Il y a aussi des croquis répétés d'un pied nu de jeune femme dans la posture exacte de celui immortalisé par Jensen. (*GRA*, 41)

In Jensen's novella, Hanold is enchanted by the Roman sculpture of a woman which he thinks has come alive; as Derrida points out, in the Freudian reading of the story, 'Freud parle […] d'un "fantôme réel"'.[126] John Locke, like Hanold, '*monologue avec* le fantôme de Gradiva'[127], crossing the fictional and conventional boundaries that divide the 'normal' from the pathological, and dream from reality; this context can be easily linked to Robbe-Grillet's rejection of realism and his notion of the real as psychological rather than anything concrete. If we take Robbe-Grillet's invitation to read his story with that of Jensen's and Freud's analysis of it as intertexts, we can say that our author, like Freud, becomes 'a partisan of antiquity and superstition'.[128] As Derrida states, 'Freud […] a tout fait pour ne pas négliger l'expérience de la hantise, la spectralité, les fantômes, les revenants. Il a tenté d'en rendre compte'. […] Mais par là même, il a aussi tenté de les conjurer'[129] : Robbe-Grillet is involved in a similar project with *C'est Gradiva*. In Robbe-Grillet's text, the elusive Gradiva is also called Leïla, a point that underlines her phantasmatic presence and mercurial nature:

[126] Derrida, *Mal d'archive*, (Paris: Galilée, 1995), p. 134.
[127] *Ibid*., p. 133.
[128] Freud, 'Delusions and Dreams', p. 7.
[129] *Ibid*., p. 133.

[John] se retourne et voit arriver vers lui, longeant la mer, Leïla. […] Peut-être court-elle après le destrier de son amant, mais c'est d'un pas gracieux et léger qui ressemble beaucoup plus à une danse qu'à une épreuve de vitesse. Elle paraît ne pas voir John Locke, qui s'écarte un peu pour lui laisser le passage et dirige alors son regard vers les pieds nus de la jeune femme. (*GRA*, 137)

The general context of Jensen's story can throw valuable light on Robbe-Grillet's transformed text, thereby helping with the work of interpretation: the quest for a woman who appears and disappears and the desire surrounding this quest, structures both narratives. But in Robbe-Grillet's story the woman ultimately dies: here, the female image is closely linked to desire but also to death; Robbe-Grillet makes use of this motif in his work generally, but in particular in *Un roman sentimental* as we will in the next section. In considering the principles of selection that operate in *C'est Gradiva* in order to transform Jensen's story, it is clear that some details of that story are overlooked in favour of the ones that focus on the text's erotic meaning. And Robbe-Grillet adds what he views as a pleasure incentive in his misogynist *tableaux*. But despite this transformation, the heart of Jensen's text remains intact: 'The obsession of the hero to bring back to life the buried eponymous girl in Jensen's *Gradiva* is the fundamental psychological element in that story and it was not easily justifiable at first except in his fetishistic attraction to her feet'.[130] In Robbe-Grillet's text too, the very effect that caught Jensen's protagonist's attention, a desire induced by the angle of a female limb, is the place where he installs his protagonist:

[John] regarde quelques reproductions d'œuvres orientalistes. 'La favorite déchue' de Fernard Cormon, retient son attention, à cause de la hache du bourreau. Puis, il revient aux estampes censées être de Delacroix au Maroc, en particulier une esquisse où l'on reconnaît le visage de Leïla et un gros plan de son pied soulevé. (*GRA*, 27)

The flow of fetishistic desire is the key element in the fantasy of both Hanold and John, but it is a different kind of fantasy in each case. For Freud, Hanold the archaeologist suffers from a delusion: he thinks the statue of Gradiva has come back to life. For Robbe-Grillet's hero the fantasy is not a delusion but the arousal of a sixth sense induced by the 'exotic' Marrakesh and the drugs supplied by the art dealer Anatoli (*GRA*, 46). Indeed, Robbe-Grillet suggests in the Preface what the future film version will be like: it will not be about 'reality'; it will be

[130] Freud, 'Delusions and Dreams', p. 11

what to Robbe-Grillet constitutes reality which is 'l'univers mental en train de prendre forme' (*GRA*, 8). Consistent with this project, Robbe-Grillet calls into question the nature of representation by showing new forms of it ('cinematic', or generated by paintings) whilst simultaneously alluding to the original story throughout the text:

[John] aperçoit une cavalière aux cheveux blonds. […] Le spectateur pensera ensuite que cette jeune femme pouvait être Leïla, et plus tard Gradiva. John retourne à sa table et remet son projecteur en marche. Les nouvelles images sont la suite des précédentes, mais maintenant se mêlent aux chevaux et cavaliers de plus en plus fréquentes représentations féminines, comme si elles se trouvaient induites par l'apparition de Leïla sur sa monture dans la ruelle nocturne. (*GRA*, 11)

Robbe-Grillet's own project for his Gradiva story includes strategies 'qui rompent sans cesse le déroulement de l'intrigue et l'illusion réaliste [qui] ne constituent en rien selon [son] point de vue une gêne pour la lecture, ni un empêchement d'entrer dans ce monde imaginaire' (*GRA*, 8). True, but the images of misogyny are particularly insistent and are a fundamental component of the narrative structure. Although Ramsay concurs with the parodic elements and anti-realism of *C'est Gradiva*,[131] the very insistence of these images arguably indicate disingenuous posturing on Robbe-Grillet's part when he ignores the text's misogynistic 'content' in favour of its formal attributes:

Au bout de la chaîne il y a une forme allongée, grossièrement recourverte par le rectangle de drap noir. John en soulève le coin […] jusqu'à faire apparaître un pied nu féminin enchaîné par la cheville, puis la jambe entière d'une adolescente, la cuisse marquée […] des coups de fouet violents. […] L'on peut apercevoir, fugitivement, que la jeune fille est entièrement nue et que son ventre est sillonné [de] cinglons, en longues estafilades rouge vif. (*GRA*, 83)

C'est Gradiva consistently indicates the abyssal constructions emerging from Jensen's 'Pompeiian fantasy' and Freud's analysis of it, ironically. But as Jane Gallop suggests, 'subtleties of irony never leave their user uncontaminated'.[132] For a feminist reading in particular, textual analysis that is not limited to formal features provides an opportunity that has been pre-empted or displaced by the focus on Robbe-Grillet's formal experiments: this

[131] Ramsay, *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity*, p. 70.
[132] Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 144.

focus leaves little room for a consideration of the workings of desire in narrative structure in relation to real life. The parodic stance adds to the difficulty of a feminist objective, as in this *tableau* when Belkis, a Moroccan serving girl, speaks to John, her master:

Vous pouvez me fouetter,…si vous en avez envie…Tous les messieurs font ça, avec leur petite esclave de lit. […] Les filles sont mauvaises, il faut les fouetter de temps en temps, pour qu'elles n'oublient pas à qui elles appartiennent. […] Elle se colle contre lui dans une sorte d'aveu charmant. (*GRA*, 114–115)

Given Robbe-Grillet's explicit invitation to read him with Freud as intertext (from the title of the text onwards), we can see that the passage above recalls female masochism which is, for Freud, an expression of women's passive nature (sadism being its active male counterpart). According to Freud, masochism plays a part in women's strength and not just in her weakness emerging from her 'need for love'. In other words, female masochism is part of the intensity of her sexual pleasure, but also of the strength of her love as a female. As Laplanche and Pontalis state, 'Si l'on a l'occasion d'étudier des cas dans lesquels les fantasmes masochistes ont été élaborés d'une façon particulièrement riche, on découvre facilement qu'ils placent le sujet dans une situation caractéristique de la féminité'.[133] Clearly, the portrayal of a rather coquettish Belkis in the passage above replicates the conventional notion of women's pleasure in domination. Ultimately these images are about pleasure but pleasure is not without political implications, as there are clearly connections between the personal and the political as connoted in the term 'sexual politics'. It is this apparently irresistible meeting point between textuality and lived experience that psychoanalysis has kept active into postmodern times. In the construction of fictional worlds by verbal or visual means, readers have no difficulty in extending their socially constructed ideologies to the ideologies of fictional worlds. Although I am not proposing that the reader is unable to accommodate distinctions, Louis Althusser's theory of literature as an element in identity formation is clearly elicited by fictional discourse; this position intrudes into the political field and gestures towards the point where Robbe-Grillet's work intersects with reality. Althusser provides a useful starting point in the question of the formation of subjectivity. In his essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (1971), he proposes that literature plays a role in the constitution of the subject because of its ideological function within the capitalist

[133] Freud first explained the link between active/passive and masculine/feminine in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). See Laplanche and Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, p. 232.

system. His essay has been relevant for literary studies because of the synergy found between his notion of subjectivity and the concept of point of view in narrative fiction.[134] Narrative fiction compels the reader – *interpellates* the individual in Althusser's terms – to occupy particular subject positions; this notion provides a useful framework in which to think about the female reader's position in the 'masochistic' *tableau* above and in the following passage:

Une troisième série d'images apparaît […] de façon saccadée, plus nerveuse qu'auparavant, sur l'écran mural. Les premières sont des croquis des femmes, ressemblant assez au précédentes, mais beaucoup plus deshabillées. Il y a des détails de jambes et de pieds qui se répètent. Peut-être faut-il (ou ne faut-il pas?) faire figurer dans cette série un ou plusieurs gros plans de pied nu en marche (avec une jambe féminine voilée par quelque drapé) rappelant de façon précise la posture spécifique caractérisant le bas-relief romain connu sous le nom de 'Gradiva'. (*GRA*, 13)

The scene shows the female body cut up into separate parts, a trope that consistently informs Robbe-Grillet's work. Once cut up by the 'camera', it is difficult to perceive the body as integral and to 'read' it in any other way but in pieces, as fetishistic. Robbe-Grillet presents the female body in the constant movement of the cinematic image which both shows and conceals, thereby setting forth fetishistic desire, in an echo of Jensen's story where the foot of a female sculpture initiates desire and fantasy:

The young woman was fascinating, not at all because of plastic beauty of form, but because she possessed […] a realistic, simple maidenly grace which gave the impression of imparting life to the relief. This was effected chiefly by the movement represented in the picture. With her head bent forward a little, she held slightly raised in her left hand, so that her sandaled feet became visible, her garment which fell in exceedingly voluminous folds from her throat to her ankles. The left foot had advanced, and the right, about to follow, touched the ground only lightly with the tips of the toes, while the sole and heel were raised almost vertically.[135]

According to Freud, fetishism is the strategy adopted by the male individual to disavow castration. As Juliet Mitchell explains, 'The instance of fetishism […] indicates the other

[134] See 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)' in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 127–186. (p. 162).
[135] Jensen, *Gradiva: A Pompeiian Fancy*, p. 2.

dimension of the castration complex: fear of the mother, or rather of the mother's genitals – that first proof that castration can occur'.[136] The point of this over-investment in a portion of the body is to make the fragmented parts figure as the absent phallus by perceiving each one as complete. Fear of the feminine-maternal is therefore controlled by imaging the female body in pieces.

A knife thrust into a female breast or groin is also a recurrent image in *C'est Gradiva* but there is an 'authorial' intervention indicating that this imagery is not meant to be realistic: 'Précisons bien que toute la séquence doit être ouvertement une scène de cauchemar, où le réalisme et le vraisembable ne sont pas convoqués' (*GRA*, 84). Stoltzfus contends that violence against women in Robbe-Grillet's work is never 'actually realized' because of the narrative's fantasy element: Robbe-Grillet's fiction offers 'an aesthetic that dovetails with fantasy and should therefore not be read as antifeminist realism'.[137] Genre, however (i.e. the fantasy genre alluded to by Stoltzfus) is only the third level of *vraisemblance* offered by Culler (after Todorov), whereby the text becomes 'meaningful and coherent'.[138] Therefore, whatever his fantasy-generating techniques, Robbe-Grillet's images cannot be isolated because the representational function of language is still there and compels the reader to participate in the preoccupations of the text itself. As Eagleton states, 'The fact that we always interpret literary works to some extent in the light of our own concerns' and that we seem to be 'incapable of doing anything else',[139] means that the reader's response is to construct references from what s/he will recognize of the real world. Stoltzfus suggests this himself when he states that Todorov defines the fantastic as 'a suspension of disbelief, as a hesitation between the possible and the impossible that allows us to "live" realistically within the fantastic as though it were true'.[140] Despite Robbe-Grillet's trademark indeterminacy between what Stoltzfus calls the fantastic element and the real, a range of interpretative strategies are necessary and are based on the reader's experience: 'One can speak of the *vraisemblable* of a work in so far as it attempts to make us believe that it conforms to reality and not its own laws. In other words, the *vraisemblable* is the mask which conceals the text's own laws and which *we are supposed to take for a relation with reality*.[141] What is first grasped by the reader, then, is not a reference to a genre such as the fantastic but the contexts which the text makes immediately available to him or her.

[136] Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 85.
[137] Stoltzfus, 'Fantasy, Metafiction, and Desire' in *Robbe-Grillet and the Fantastic*, pp. 11–34. (pp. 11, 12).
[138] Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 169. See also Culler's section 'The Real', pp. 164–178.
[139] Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, p. 10.
[140] Stoltzfus, 'Fantasy', p. 13.
[141] Todorov cited in Culler's *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 162. (Emphasis added).

C'est Gradiva qui vous appelle is made possible by an aesthetic framework whose foundation is woman as a desired and feared object that needs to be contained. This is the structurally overdetermined element that constitutes Robbe-Grillet's textual coherence generally. According to the author, however, the misogyny is not gratuitous. As he states in an interview with Ramsay,[142] he is dedicated to showing how even his flaunted 'non-political' writing can become part of a gesture towards exposing ideologies: there seems to be here both a deliberate rejection of what he sees as feminist posturing and a (complicit) acknowledgment of the culture's way of viewing women. Arguably, Robbe-Grillet attempts to mix the sexual with the textual, using his interviews and public statements as part of an authorial strategy of response to adverse criticism. As Smith states, 'To the frequent suggestion from journalistic interviewers that "of course" he must include such passages in order to denounce them, Robbe-Grillet replies that "morality is none of my affair and I would not want the word denounce to make me don the prosecutor's robe. These recurring sado-erotic images are something that I point out, that's all"'.[143]

The Discontents of Civilization: *Un roman sentimental*[144]

Robbe-Grillet published this novel through Fayard rather than Éditions de Minuit, a fact that in his essay on the novel, Christian Milat suggests 'peut faire douter de sa littérarité'.[145] Indeed Robbe-Grillet himself states that he does not include this text in his 'œuvre littéraire'; presumably this is a reference to its unremittingly sadistic and pornographic content.[146] In his essay, Milat writes of the wholly negative reception of the novel in France: Baptiste Liger, for example, calls it '[un] roman ignoble'; Raphaël Saurin considers Robbe-Grillet '[un] vieux dégueulasse'; Frédéric Beigbeder lists what he sees as the crimes that make up Robbe-Grillet's fantasies and which are articulated in *Un roman*: 'inceste, pédophilie, sadisme, séquestration, torture et meurtres d'enfants, etc'.[147] Milat acknowledges that 'il est impossible de nier la dimension érotique, voire pornographique de nombreuses scènes *d'Un roman sentimental*'.[148] But no-one amongst this long list of (male) critics, mentions that the 'crimes' committed in *Un roman* are not just sadistic, they are *misogynistically* so. Is this simply

[142] Ramsay, *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity*, p. 249.
[143] Cited in Smith's *Understanding Robbe-Grillet*, p. 141.
[144] Robbe-Grillet, *Un roman sentimental* (Paris: Fayard, 2007).
[145] See Milat's essay on *Un roman sentimental*, 'Le dernier "nouveau roman" robbe-grillétien?' in *Balises pour le XXIe siècle* (Paris: Les Presses Sorbonnes Nouvelles, 2010), pp.483–491. (p. 483).
[146] See Robbe-Grillet's interview with Frédéric Taddeï, *Ce soir (ou jamais*!), recorded on 24th October 2007 on France 3. http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3bOrb
[147] See p. 483 of Milat's essay, 'Le dernier "nouveau roman" robbe-grillétien?' in *Balises pour le XXIe siècle*.
[148] Milat, *Ibid*., p. 483.

chance or is there an implicit disavowal of the *specificity* of the violent scenarios which structure the novel? Unlike the author himself, Milat rightly includes *Un roman* in Robbe-Grillet's literary output, according it literary value. The force of the text lies in the transgressive eroticism of the *tableaux* it describes, but we must also take into account its structure: the narrative is generated, not by any psychological complexity in its 'characters', or any character motivation or quest for the resolution of a mystery, but by the transformation of the narrator's fantasies into of a series of images which obsessively depict the violated, suffering female body. Even at this late stage in the author's career (this was his last novel before he died in 2008), scholarly analysis such as Milat's continues to focus largely on form. In his thought-provoking essay, Milat deliberates on 'la chambre du mental' which he states is represented by the white room where the narrator finds himself and which Milat associates with other similarly represented spaces in the author's work (p. 484); he also writes about the 'hiérarchie de niveaux narratifs' created by the different settings (p. 485); and he considers the two main characters, the incestuous father and his daughter Gigi, as personifications of 'the author' and 'his novel' respectively. In relation to the father/author, Gigi 'peut être considérée comme son texte. […] Elle est presentée comme sa "créature" (252), comme sa "propriété"' (206)'.[149]

Milat argues that *Un roman sentimental* is Robbe-Grillet's last example of the *nouveau roman*, i.e. the *écriture* refers to itself rather than to anything *hors-texte*. But this restricted exploration leaves us with a considerable narrative residue whose insistent inscription of misogynistic violence a critical analysis should endeavour to account for rather than ignore. I shall therefore look beyond Milat's essay to analyse the novel in a different relation to it. I argue that *Un roman sentimental* is an audacious critique of bourgeois society: Robbe-Grillet indeed stages the pornographic (which Milat acknowledges and the other critics censure), but simultaneously he questions the subjective, arbitrary nature of morality. Nevertheless, this questioning revolves around a love-hate relationship with 'woman' which sets the terms of the narrative and which is the governing structure that supports but finally subverts the text.

Robbe-Grillet addresses the feminine so aggressively in *Un roman sentimental* that the novel seems to hinge on a belief that femininity can never be successfully 'domesticated' textually. This is reminiscent of Jane Gallop's reference to Derrida's *Spurs* where he asserts: 'That which…does not let itself be taken (prendre) is – feminine, which should not, however,

[149] Milat, 'Le dernier "nouveau roman" robbe-grillétien?' in *Balises pour le XXIe siècle*, p. 486.

be hastily translated by femininity, by woman's femininity, by feminine sexuality, or other essentializing fetishes which are just what one *thinks* one is capturing (prendre) when one has not escaped the foolishness of the dogmantic philosopher…or the inexperienced seducer'.[150] Here is Robbe-Grillet's version of woman's 'captivating inaccessibility, the ever-veiled promise of her provocative transcendence'[151] which clearly, for Robbe-Grillet, must be desecrated:

Quand ils ont fourré leurs doigts à l'intérieur de sa vulve, elle a voulu se débattre, mais s'est alors rendu compte que ses membres étaient incapables de bouger, maintenus fermement par quatre treuils, aux quatre coins du lit, qui tiraient avec une force croissante sur des chaînes fixées à ses poignets et chevilles par des bracelets en cuir noir. […] Un praticien à l'air soucieux lui malmenait le clitoris, gonflé par les frottages et l'écrasement. (*RS*, 29, 30)

If Robbe-Grillet does not consider *Un roman sentimental* part of his literary output, what kind of supplementary narrative is it in his *œuvre*? In his essay 'Civilization and its Discontents' (1929), Freud focuses on what he sees as the fundamental conflict between civilization and the individual.[152] The main tension stems from the individual's quest for instinctual freedom and society's opposite demand for conformity and the control of instincts. In *Un roman sentimental*, Robbe-Grillet echoes Freud's idea that civilization necessarily represses desire, which results in the individual's never-ending struggle with society. But desire, Robbe-Grillet appears to claim in this text, cannot simply be expelled from the psyche nor indeed from the social order and it always threatens to destabilize both.[153] And the female body is selected in *Un roman* as the site where the tension between the (male) individual and the social order is played out. Stoltzfus writes that 'Robbe-Grillet wants his writings to be a permanent deconstruction of nature because he believes that nature, and by extension society (all societies, [Robbe-Grillet] says, claim to derive their legitimacy from nature or from God),

[150] Cited in Gallop's essay, '"Women" in *Spurs* and Nineties Feminism', in *Derrida and Feminism: Recasting the Question of Woman*, Ellen K Feder, Mary C. Rawlinson and Emily Zakin, eds (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 7–19. (p. 15, my emphasis).
[151] Cited from Derrida's *Spurs* in Gallop's essay '"Women" in *Spurs* and Nineties Feminism', p. 27.
[152] See Freud's essay in Gay's *The Freud Reader*, pp. 722–772. According to Gay, the essay 'argues – and demonstrates – that the study of human institutions must begin with the study of human nature. And Freud offers a unique contribution to this study: the psychoanalytic perspective'. (p. 722).
[153] Elizabeth Wright asserts that 'The Œdipus complex is for Freud the nucleus of desire, repression and sexual identity. Its residue is a life-long ambivalence towards the keeping and breaking of taboos and laws'. For Wright, the value of Freud's theory is that it led to the recognition of the universality of the perpetual conflict and adjustment that the human body must necessarily engage in: 'The struggle to overcome the complex is never resolved'. See Wright's *Psychoanalytic Criticism*, p. 14.

always wants to have the last word'.[154] This wish of the author to 'deconstruct' society is expressed in *Un roman sentimental* as the narrative *mood* (or ideological perspective) mocks prevailing moral standards: 'civilized' drive-control is let loose so that the (apparently pleasurable) misogynistic impulse is vented by a collective male desire that explodes in bloody rituals, executions and degradations of the female body.

The episodes (or *tableaux*) are triggered by the fantasies of the male narrator who finds himself incarcerated in a white room, probably a prison cell. We know he is male because in this room, on page 11, he hears 'une voix d'homme' who, he says, is the protagonist of the story he is about to tell. We find out at the end of the novel that the narrator and the father turn out to be one and the same, even though the narrating voice throughout the novel is an objective 'third-person' voice: on the very last line of the novel, the incestuous father and the narrator merge into one voice: 'ainsi vivrons-*nous* à jamais dans les forteresses du ciel' (*RS*, 253; my emphasis). This striking closure indicates the privilege that the author accords to the narrator's first person 'je' which starts off the narrative. The move between fiction and the real (in the suggestion of autobiography in the use of the pronoun 'je'), destabilizes the boundaries of both, and particularly if we take into account real life interventions by Robbe-Grillet which lead us to believe that the narrator/father's views on women mirror those of their creator.[155]

The narrator's desire transform fantasy into action in a resolute drive forward of the narrative movement to the end. The narrative slides from description to *narration*, creating a series of settings contained within the first space which is described as 'neutre, blanc' (*RS*, 7); a picture on the wall opposite the narrator (*RS*, 9) functions as generator of narrative but also of imprecise descriptions of settings where there is always a feminine figure:

Vers le mur du fond, celui sur lequel mes yeux alanguis errent avec le plus de facilité, je distingue, en premier plan d'un dessin dont l'évidence se confirme rapidement, perspective forestière aux troncs verticaux et rectilignes, une sorte de bassin d'eau […] entre des roches grises aux formes arrondies, douces au toucher, accueillantes. Une jeune fille est assise là. (*RS*, 9, 10)

[154] See Stoltzfus's introductory essay in *La Belle Captive* (London: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 1–9. This large format edition is a translation of Robbe-Grillet's 1975 novel of the same title which he illustrated with seventy-seven plates of paintings by Magritte. The English edition contains twenty-one additional Magritte plates. (p. 5)

[155] See, for example, Ramsay's interview with the author in *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity*, pp. 243–252.

For Freud, 'the motive forces of all phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single fantasy is the fulfilment of a wish, a correction of an unsatisfying reality'.[156] The scenarios created through the 'dessin' constitute the narrator's fantasies of a desired society where 'l'homme est considéré comme propriétaire naturel de sa femme et de ses enfants de sexe féminin, quel que soit leur âge. Il a donc le droit de les prostituer comme bon lui semble sans avoir besoin de leur consentement' (*RS*, 133). The different *tableaux* are numbered from 1 to 239, an echo of Sade's catalogue of perversions in *Les 120 journées de Sodome*. The narrator's desiring *narration* spins sequences which are not only an invitation to the reader to construct a story but also to *dwell* on the sado-erotic depictions. The function of the male gaze for the organization of space is stressed throughout the novel: 'Étendue sur le grand lit, bras et jambes étalés […], il y avait maintenant trois hommes en noir autour d'elle, qui inspectaient en détail sa nudité vulnérable, tremblante d'impuissance et d'appréhension' (*RS*, 29). But hearing (female screams of pain) also punctuate the narrative: 'La fillette pousse un cri que suivent des plaintes retenues de douleur sous les amples va-et-vient du couteau de chair' (*RS*, 186). Freud, *in the Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, has much to say about scopophilia but nothing on the pleasure of hearing or listening. Sade, on the contrary, comments that for the true libertine, it is the sensations communicated through hearing that are more gratifying.[157] His libertines listen to long stories of sadism, build machines in order to amplify sound and achieve orgasm on hearing shrieks of pain. Similarly to Sade in *Les 120 Journées de Sodome*, Robbe-Grillet has his female victims incarcerated in a variety of small spaces: 'des dortoirs classiques de pensionnat' (*RS*, 174), as well as cells in police stations (*RS*, 175) and torture rooms where the victims can be both seen and heard by their torturers: 'La suppliciée ne peut plus émettre que des râles de gorge dont le raclement ajoute encore à sa souffrance' (*RS*, 221).

Despite the confinement of the narrator, the white room (to the extent that it contains and satisfies his desires) is itself an object of desire. It embodies the world of dreams where wishes are fulfilled, however aberrant. Desire, which is by definition impossible to satisfy, is therefore ultimately incompatible with the white room, although desire is the condition of the white room's existence. This phantasmatic space has the effect of underlining the tragedy of the world outside it, where desire is both a forceful presence and a necessary absence, no sooner felt than either (briefly) satisfied or disavowed. It is, paradoxically, in this cell, away

[156] See Freud's 'Creative writers and daydreaming' (1907), *Standard Edition* , Vol 9, pp. 143–153. (p. 146).
[157] Marquis de Sade, *Les 120 Journées de Sodome* (*ou l'École du libertinage*), *Vol. 1* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1975), p. 52.

from society's restrictions, that the narrator can give full rein to his fantasies which are constructed around a dismantling of bourgeois values embodied in female representations. The wished-for society would include the following activities:

Consommer des petites filles sauvages, […] assommer les bébés phoques pour en voler la fourrure, manger du foie gras, descendre avant l'arrêt complet, pratiquer l'amour avant l'âge légal, exiter son papa en se frottant toute nue contre lui, […] faire gicler son pipi dans un urinoir signé, […] chasser à courre telle ou telle variété de biches, rêver de cochonneries, prêter ses charmes intimes contre de l'argent, […] utiliser le connin de sa fille comme humidificateur à cigares, décrire avec soin sa libido, et cætera, et cætera' (*RS*, 251).

It is implicit in the passage above that civilization's rules and regulations, proposals for 'ideal' societies, nostalgic accounts of past golden ages and institutionally prescribed norms represent for Robbe-Grillet as much a form of violence as any other, which provides him with an opportunity for satire. There is here an intense critique of the subjugation of desire as love – and its confinement within bourgeois frameworks such as the family; this is shown, for example, in the incestuous father/daughter couple who are the protagonists, and in the daughter's statement that it is tedious for her to read about 'scènes d'accouplement aux normes conjugales' which she finds boring and repetitive (*RS*, 20). The troubling couple determine the text's represented sexual behaviour, paternal authority and education (which Gigi receives from her father at home):

Gigi, dont l'education est à l'ancienne mode, basée sur la soumission absolue au maître (patron, amant ou mari), […] estime […] plus que normal d'être la servante d'un homme qui a veillé personnellemnt à sa formation. […] Quant aux 'examens' incessants du système paternel, qui remplacent avantageusement tous les concours et diplômes, leur caractère impudique, libertin, de toute évidence sexuel, choquerait certes beaucoup de nos psychologues modernes. (*RS*, 32, 33)

The lawful world of kinship and family, then, is turned on its head. The novel is pervaded by anti-religion rhetoric too, mocking sacred rituals with obscene descriptions which always depict an acquiescent female presence:

Le musée du Vatican […] montre aujourd'hui d'émouvantes images destinées à l'édification des fidèles: une enfant de douze ans aux fesses bien rondes à genoux devant un homme assis

qui lui tient la tête à deux mains, pour qu'elle garde la verge au fond de sa bouche pendant l'éjaculation. […] Une jeune fille plus âgée aux charmes déjà épanouis, […] les cuisses bien ouvertes et le buste se redressant à la renverse, […] lève vers le ciel ses yeux en extase et tout son visage angélique. (*RS*, 24)

Psychoanalysis has often been rejected on the grounds that it attempts to impose a normative master discourse on the diversity of human behaviour and expression; its institutions have been seen as vehicles of social control.[158] *Un roman sentimental*, therefore, taps into Freudian concepts too, in an attempt to contextualize its confrontation with bourgeois society. The starting point for the Freudian story of the burning child (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900), for example, is the subtle echoing between internal and external reality, fiction and the real world (and this is clearly Robbe-Grillet's aim in this particular allusion in *Un roman sentimental*). Among the dreams reported to Freud by others so he could interpret them, there was the following story:

A father had been watching beside his child's sick-bed for days and nights on end. After the child had died, he went into the next room to lie down, but left the door open so that he could see from his bedroom into the room in which the child's body was laid out. […] After a few hours' sleep, the father had a dream that *his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully: 'Father, don't you see I'm burning*?'[159]

Turning on its head the circumstances of the dream above, Gigi's father watches his daughter sleep naked in their bed after a night of violent lovemaking; she appears to have dreamt of Freud and in a distortion of the verb 'to burn' in Freud's passage above, Gigi suggests instead that she burns with desire for the father/Freud image. As she awakes, the father asks:

'As tu fait de beaux rêves, paresseuse gamine?' Gigi répond sans hâte qu'elle émerge à peine en effet d'une suite d'épisodes oniriques, mais plus étranges que beaux…Elle était assise sur le siège des toilettes, toute nue mais les mains attachées ensemble dans le dos. Un homme en noir se penchait sur elle, qui avait les traits de son père avec une expression plus souriante, peut-être moqueuse. […] Il tenait à la main une bougie allumée qu'il approchait d'un sein

[158] See, for example, Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Œdipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* and Foucault's *Folie et déraison* and *Histoire de la sexualité*.
[159] Freud, 'The Psychology of the Dream-Processes' in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, pp. 513–515. (p. 513, Freud's emphasis).

comme pour mieux en observer l'aréole grenue. […] Elle en éprouvait une émotion intense […] et disait seulement à mi-voix: 'Ne vois-tu pas, père, que je brûle?' (*RS*, 27, 28)

In the defamiliarization of 'normal' social order in *Un roman*, the female figure is made to parade as an embodiment of the corruption that can only (it seems) result of the conjunction of both sexes. It is woman's assumption of this role that makes her appealing for the male figures who constantly punish her in *tableaux* that develop into allegories or fables generated by the narrator's fantasies:

Hurlant de plus belle et sanglotant sous son bandeau noir, elle implore le pardon du maître. 'Silence, chienne!', dit celui-ci. Pour la faire taire, il lui courbe le buste vers sa verge volumineuse qui n'en peut plus d'attendre la phase critique et qu'il enfonce dans cette bouche trop petite, au risque d'étouffer l'enfant. […] Sorel ordonne aux servantes d'emmener la jeune princesse déchue dans un cachot de penitence préliminaire, attachée de telle façon qu'elle ne puisse ni se laver, ni accomplir ses besoins naturels.

The passage above openly abandons the logic of romantic desire traditionally put forward by society, exposing satirically what Robbe-Grillet sees as its ideological cover. In choosing to address social constrictions by making use of the imaged female body, Robbe-Grillet opens the way to seeing socially acceptable manifestations of passion as simply unstable structures built in order to control (male) desire in its pursuit of its available object, woman. Let us now address again the point, taking as an example the following passage, that, however innovative in terms of technique, Robbe-Grillet remains traditional in terms of sexual politics:

Souriantes et gracieuses, elles circulent entre les groupes de messieurs élégants, pour leur présenter avec déférence les plateaux garnis de flûtes à champagne. […] Si l'un d'eux en manifeste le désir, la jeune fille désignée dépose son plateau […] pour que son admirateur puisse défaire en partie sa petite robe ajustée afin de lui caresser les seins, le sexe, les fesses. (*RS*, 115)

Represented woman plays no active role in exchanges of desire. The representations of elegant men and those of the 'jeunes filles' is expressed in and through the body and its gestures: the girls circulate gracefully and submissively, and the men personify a 'desiring machine'. Depicted by the narrator through his report on their actions, 'les groupes de

messieurs élégants' are active in two ways: first as the focus of narrative action, they make things happen: the women circulate in order to serve them; and second, as the possessors of the gaze, actively looking at the female characters. The two passages discussed above establish a particular kind of implied reader – a male one. As Naomi Segal states when discussing *Manon Lescaut*: 'The speech which is culturally audible is by and between men and has as its subject and purpose the discussion and exclusion of women.'[160] This concept can also be applied to *Un roman sentimental*. If the female position in film is as Mulvey states, one of a fetishised object, a similar effect is produced in Robbe-Grillet's text by the organization of looks that converge on the female representations. The woman is framed by the look of the camera-like narrative, an image constructed to be 'looked at' by the reader whose look is manipulated through the look of the male characters. In other words, the latter are the bearers of the gaze of the reader. The 'œil caméra' mediates/directs desire in the masculine, an insight that had to wait for Mulvey to find theoretical expression. To cite Segal again: 'In communication where the woman serves as a pretext for desire the renunciation of which is the condition for the collusion of men, there is no place for a woman reader'.[161] It is clear, if we are to take this view, that the text is addressed to 'man', attempting to establish complicity with him.

In *Un roman*, the text's relation to sexuality is fetishistic, that is to say characterized by castration fears, which results in ambivalence towards the feminine and in particular the feminine-maternal. A young captive mother, still breastfeeding her baby, is the victim in this *tableau*:

On la viole et lui fouette les seins depuis une semaine, souvent à genoux et les mains liées derrière le dos, pour voir couler des perles de sang sur la peau nacrée si fragile, se mélangeant au lait qui sourd par les pores des bonbons durcis. Mais, de jour en jour, le bébé pleure plus rageusement, parce que trop de sang se mêle à son lait. […] On place la mère […] dans une position convenable: son corps presque intact, hormis la poitrine, vu d'en haut et de face, est soulévé à trente centimètres du sol par un phallus métallique érigé dont on lui a enfoncé dans l'anus le gland effroyable. (*RS*, 145, 146)

[160] Naomi Segal, *The Unintended Reader*: *Feminism & Manon Lescaut* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2010 [1986]), p. xii.
[161] *Ibid*., p. xiii.

The iconic mother/child image that in more conventional contexts promises bourgeois tranquillity, is the object for desecration in the passage above. The purpose seems to be to dismantle its representational function, emptying it of its emblematic meaning. The question is, why the female body? If we see the literary text as engaging with culture, Robbe-Grillet's narrative does not function separately from other modes: ideology, subjectivity and identity (as Althusser argues). Because of the representational capabilities of narrative, Robbe-Grillet's text (a cultural product), is an appropriate location for the negotiation of the contradictions and anxieties in culture. If the very essence of desire is a continuous quest for an object never to be recovered (the lost object that is the mother's body), the rhetorical operations of the text point to an ambivalence towards the feminine in all its aspects which underpins the sado-erotic structures of *Un roman*. The lost object is represented in this text by unattainable images of female perfection: 'Adolescente à peine épanouie, elle est gracieuse, bien faite, et ses chairs sont si blanches, […] qu'on la croirait plutôt dans une salle de bains nord-européenne' (*RS*, 10). This beautiful body has to be restrained and then annihilated, together with the anxieties of separation and loss which it embodies: beauty and its destruction is certainly a *leitmotif* in the text. To the question why the female as the site of choice for violence in *Un roman*, then, an obvious answer is that the violence or the threat of violence serves to keep woman 'in her place'. As the novel is largely about the dismantling of bourgeois society and as woman is represented as desired but threatening, she must be kept in place through violence, as part of the (male) struggle against social impositions. The point of erotics in *Un roman* is the mastery of the represented society through the mastery of the represented woman. There is an investment in the plundering of the female body as an over-exposed, visible incarnation of society, a corporeality that needs to be vanquished:

Les petites lèvres de la gamine étaient percées, réunies étroitement l'une à l'autre au moyen d'un gros macaron doré muni d'une serrure dont le trou, mis en évidence à dessein, permettait l'introduction d'une clef massive […] qui maintenait en même temps avec fermeté la tige courbe épousant le creux de l'entrejambe, pénétrant l'anus et se terminant en poire à l'intérieur du rectum. (*RS*, 47, 48)

Ultimately, the articulation of sexuality in *Un roman sentimental*, which imputes agency to male sexual desire but passive and/or masochistic tendencies to women's sexuality, is part of Robbe-Grillet's more general discourse of sexual difference which we have seen in the other

novels discussed. Even in the scenarios where the female perspective on her own subjection shows a trace of active mastering, this is shown as part of a conventional male fantasy:

Dans sa hâte à obéir, [Gigi] a donc passé seulement l'essentiel du costume prescrit, […] une guêpière noire à frous-frous de dentelles faisant rebondir ses jeunes seins, dont le petit bout durci émerge ainsi que la moitié supérieure de l'aréole, laissant aussi l'épiderme de lait à découvert depuis l'arrondi des hanches jusqu'à la base en fuseau des cuisses où des jarretières froncées, fleuries de minuscules roses, retiennent ses bas noirs en filet à larges mailles. (*RS*, 13)

To integrate a male scenario of desire such as the one above, in which the female is the desired object, into a particular kind of 'female' scenario in which the female *wishes* actively to be that object, is clearly used by Robbe-Grillet for wholly conservative purposes. This kind of scenario, often used in *Un roman*, does not offer a radical narrative alternative as put forward in *Pour un nouveau roman*. Even when portraying same-sex lust, for example between Gigi and Odile, the point of their sado-masochistic sexual activity is to provide a voyeuristic spectacle for the father and his friend Sorel rather than an assertion of their own sexuality (*RS*, 46–54). Odile also recalls the doll-like representations of women in *Le Voyeur*; she is described as a compliant 'poupée géante' and is a gift for Gigi who is encouraged by the two men to 'play' with her for their voyeuristic satisfaction (*RS*, 39).

Robbe-Grillet suggests in interviews that his work finds its conditions of possibility in contemporary culture so that he can work in the projected light of what that culture itself has allowed. The position of the female representations in the narrative structure of *Un roman* offers a point of experimentation for Robbe-Grillet, but he simply repeats the old logic in which woman, the other who is not like him, can never say 'I'. But whilst the novel is pervaded by the unavoidable presence of the female, as it is indeed in culture generally, an important (unavowed) concern in *Un roman sentimental* is the nature of male sexuality and the violence with which it responds to women's 'jouissance charnelle, prétendue mystique' (*RS*, 25). Searching the text for ambivalence, in its relentless repetition of aggression to the female body, we can see that there is an underlying anxiety around the difficult question of how the masculine originates in the feminine: how can the male, who was once part of the female (as mother), be shown as 'masculine' in the text? As an outranked group that cannot be hidden, there is no place in culture where women are not a presence therefore the only

alternative is to put her in her place. The degradation of the female body is necessary for 'masculinity' to be possible at all in *Un roman sentimental*.

Concluding Remarks

It is perhaps risky to associate the portrayal of the feminine in Robbe-Grillet to an anti-feminist agenda and, as stated above, the formal focus of literary critics of Robbe-Grillet's work, including Raylene Ramsay, downplay this kind of reading. It is conventional to link Robbe-Grillet with Sade, and Ramsay has gone so far as to say that not only is Sade's work a kind of rationalization of Robbe-Grillet's project but 'an empathetic imprinting of Robbe-Grillet on a Sade laid out carefully and amorously on a very narcissistic dissection table'.[162] Robbe-Grillet's fictions certainly reveal male narcissism but also profound ambivalence towards what he clearly sees as a difficult 'feminine': there is violence but also a fascination and a desire to investigate the feminine. In *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity*, Ramsay defines *modernité* as Robbe-Grillet did, namely 'to situate his texts beyond the critical territories marked out by the […] signposts of postmodernism and poststructuralism'.[163] It is clear that neither Robbe-Grillet nor Ramsay use the term 'modernity' in its precise narrow sense but rather to describe the 'contemporary'. But despite his avowed wish to take account of changing, contemporary times, subjectivity in his texts is marked by conventional sexual difference as he elaborates a narrative which allocates certain kinds of activity as suitable to one sex or the other, suggesting that the 'natural' order of society requires this division. The female, increasingly presented in a misogynistic framework, is also fetishised as revered object, an object that cannot be easily understood or interpreted and must therefore be contained as fetish. Contained too because, ultimately, femininity is the other that must come within the control of the upholder of the symbolic. Woman for Robbe-Grillet is contained and controlled when viewed as spectacle, and this position is precisely worked out in his discourse of the visual. In addition, the archaic monster-women of myth endure and thrive in Robbe-Grillet's narratives: they are indicators of topoi through which the male protagonists and their stories move to their purposeful end, positioning woman 'en tant qu'objet mythologique [qui] entretient des rapports secrets avec la Nature'.[164] These witches, sirens and female monsters[165] become, in Robbe-Grillet's texts, a productive (narratively speaking)

[162] Ramsay, *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity*, p. 202.
[163] *Ibid*., p. 43.
[164] Robbe-Grillet in his interview 'La Cover-girl du diable' p. 55, cited by Ramsay in *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity*, p. 111.
[165] See Chapter Four in Ramsay's *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity*, pp. 110–144.

but violent articulation of sexual difference. Robbe-Grillet's meticulously sketched representations result in an unambiguous man/non-man opposition. Confronting this particular form of sexual/textual politics, Ramsay apparently hesitates 'between suspicion, some resentment at the painful dislocations involved, and *seduction*'.[166] Her doubts function in the same way in which all such narrative seductions function: they deny the subtle but insidious power of representation as a carrier of ideology. Ramsay appears to equivocate on the question of misogyny in Robbe-Grillet, justifying it because he finds these images of women everywhere around him: 'Few of these themes and techniques cannot be found in contemporary popular culture', she states.[167] Ramsay does not subject the author's problematic portrayal of femininity to critical analysis. Instead, she simply states that the archetypes of women which abound in Robbe-Grillet's work evoke 'very old cultural coherence and evoke a complex of related and apparently timeless cultural elements'.[168] Some of her terminology operates as a denial of the relations of power which are challenged by contemporary feminist thinking and which are consistently reproduced in Robbe-Grillet's texts. Why this should be so in a text which otherwise identifies these power relations clearly, is surprising to say the least. Rather lyrically, Ramsay sets the tone of her book:

Robbe-Grillet's staging of the hidden fears and monsters in the topologies or simultaneous layers of the historical-cultural constructs of the Western city, that is, in modern mythologies, is ultimately a mise-en-scène of his own battle with the (young) sirens and with the angel of death. His 'erotic dream machine' generates, from the strangely flattened labyrinths of contemporary urban streets, as from the primitive forest and the faery pools of the fascination of the feminine, those tentacles of seduction and the fear of drowning that give rise to a very specialized set of fantasies of rape, criminal violence and domination.[169]

Ramsay fails to acknowledge male domination as women's main antagonist but she explicitly argues for her 'critical distance from and empathy with' Robbe-Grillet's texts, an objective which she achieves with some difficulty.[170] She writes about sexuality in Robbe-Grillet's texts as if his representations of the ideological structures and consequences of patriarchy and sexual difference had no discursive relevance or political implications; the violence exerted

[166] Ramsay, *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity*, p.119 (my emphasis).
[167] Ramsay, *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity*, p. 115.
[168] *Ibid.*, p. 46.
[169] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[170] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

on the female characters by dominant males are simply writing configurations, inconsequential except in its formalist context. In line with Smith, what seems relevant to Ramsay is Robbe-Grillet's practice of writing rather than of representation: the narrative mechanisms through which misogynistic sexuality becomes pleasurable for the male representations involved are, for Ramsay, simply part of Robbe-Grillet's 'deconstructive, subversive staging of "classical" representations, the repressions of the collective unconscious, and his own obsessions':[171]

The representations which become familiar in *Le Voyeur* and *La Maison de rendez-vous* anticipate the tropes that appear later in *C'est Gradiva qui vous appelle* and *Un roman sentimental*. These images, which are now widely associated with Robbe-Grillet, are complex explorations of how social identities are constructed around and supported by particular sexual identities. They are, according to Robbe-Grillet, as revealing of the contemporary imagination as they are of himself: the interest here, he suggests, is in how the literary imagination responds to and is shaped by contemporary culture. This leads him to discuss non-literary material such as visual images emerging from the sex shop and 'a panoply of psychopathological video heroes […] that play to the fear/pleasure of the opening or crushing of vulnerable flesh, the thrill of violent power over the other'.[172] By this kind of statement it is suggested that the texts are fantastical. Ordinarily the term 'fantasy' indicates an individual, subjective process but Robbe-Grillet seems to be saying that it can also be a collective, public occurrence. I acknowledge that his images embody both types of fantasy, his and more generally shared public ones, as Ramsay suggests throughout *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity*. But rather than end with Robbe-Grillet's basic premise that he is just reflecting what he sees around him in the western city, I suggest that *misogyny* is a very specific libidinal politics and the key to understanding Robbe-Grillet's literary project. In addition, his is a representation of 'woman' as a transcendental entity, wherever and whenever she is found: truly essential and ahistorical, the opposite of the post-Cartesian subject.

Given a fictional universe at best indifferent to feminist concerns and his position that he is only representing contemporaneous society, the most obvious question is on what understanding of the real world have Robbe-Grillet's insights been based on? Is it because women identify *themselves* as an object of desire? Perhaps it is because men confuse the object of desire with an actual woman, if woman is seen as standing in as a concrete substitute for the vagaries of an *object-less* desire. It seems that for Robbe-Grillet, woman

[171] Ramsay, *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity*, p. 117.
[172] *Ibid*., pp. 114, 115.

takes the form of the object of desire because women share the impossibility of being known (Freud's 'dark continent'). A feminist criticism of Robbe-Grillet's texts has to reconcile his (supposedly) fantastical representations with the mimetic orientation of most feminist thinking. This distinction is a reminder that the fictional text is located at the intersection of two systems: one of representations of the real world in its specific account of reality, and as a linguistic construct. Writing becomes, in the texts we have explored, the theatre for the male narrators' fantasies; a fictional world conjured according to, it seems, the personal formulae of the author. In terms of narrative fiction as a genre, the novels I have explored constitute a striking affirmation of the connection between the act of desiring, fantasies of omnipotence and the writer's imagination. The main difficulty in interpreting Robbe-Grillet's eroticized fictions is the relationship they create between fantasy and politics. His misogynistic fantasies and his stated ideological commitment are antithetical and present the reader, and in particular the female reader, with the challenge of deciding what it means when an author simultaneously eroticizes misogyny but declares an interest in a modern world that the 'new' novel should reflect.

CHAPTER THREE

Libidinal Politics in the Work of Marguerite Duras

Introduction

As I argue in my general Introduction, in *Reading for the Plot* Peter Brooks does not appear to see women as desiring subjects of narrative: the moment of enunciation and term of reference of desire, energy and symbolization, are masculine. Nevertheless, he seems aware of the need to fit women into his scheme, at least briefly. Describing the 'male plots of ambition' that supposedly pervade his corpus, Brooks states that 'the female plot is not unrelated but it takes a more complex stance towards ambition, which is only superficially passive' (*RP*, 39). He leaves 'women's plots' (i.e. the plots of novels written by women authors) to Nancy K Miller, stating that in one of his chosen stories in *Reading for the Plot* ('All-Kinds-of-Fur'), 'the female plot [implies] a resistance and what we might call an "endurance": a waiting (and suffering) until the woman's desire can be a permitted response to the expression of male desire' (*RP*, 330). To illustrate his point, he also refers to Homer:

> The *Iliad* opens with Agamemnon and Achilles locked in passionate quarrel over the girl Briseis, and the *Odyssey* with Odysseus, detained on Calypso's island, expressing the longing of his *nostos*, the drive to return home. To cite an explicitly erotic instance, Jean Genet's *Notre-Dame des fleurs* opens on an act of masturbation, and the narrative and its persons are called forth as what is needed for the phantasies of desire. (*RP*, 38)

In Greek mythology Briseis, a princess, was captured when Achilles led an assault on her city during the Trojan War. She was subsequently given to Achilles as a war prize; captured women were seen as objects to be traded amongst the warriors. Similarly, the sea nymph Calypso symbolised the forces that divert men from their goals. Calypso seduced Odysseus and kept him for years away from his wife, Penelope. The latter is the faithful wife who constantly spins whilst waiting (desiring) Odysseus's return but her primary role is to resist, rather passively, by deferring the desire of other men during her husband's long absence. These female archetypes have a 'desired' rather than 'desiring' function in the text and provide Brooks's passage above with an intertextual framework within which female representations are to be viewed; as does the reference to Genet which is another 'male' example he offers to illustrate that 'Desire is always there at the start of a narrative, often in a state of initial arousal, often having reached a state of intensity such that movement must be created, action undertaken, change begun' (*RP*, 38). Similarly, in Brooks's analysis of *Faust*

the eponymous hero builds his life's narrative on his capacity to desire: indeed, the striving expressed by *immer streben* is, arguably, born of the gap between need and desire. As Brooks points out, Freud refers to *Faust* in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as 'pre-eminently the representation of man's unquenchable striving' (*RP*, 54). According to Brooks this striving creates narrative – a male narrative in no uncertain terms. Faust's *desire* and *will* transform into narrative action, the determined thrust forward of an unrelenting narrative movement to the end.

The movement of narrative discourse described by Brooks specifies and even generates the masculine position as that of subject and the feminine position as either obstacle or just the space in which that movement takes place. Narrative itself appears incapable of expressing feminine desire according to Brooks's definitions: it is a masculine narrative of desire that Brooks describes as 'the arousal that creates the narratable as a condition of tumescence, appetency, ambition, quest, and gives narrative a forward-looking intention' (*RP*, 103). This structure appears to depend on the image of woman as an object of exchange between one male economy and another. Furthermore, the structure outlines a narrative position for the female, a position fixed by Brooks's concept of how narrative works; this produces a problem for a representation of female subjectivity.

Duras and *écriture féminine*

Below we will see that Duras's writing fundamentally negates Brooks's presentation of 'female' plots of desire as a kind of muted or softened version of the male plot. But, in opposition to a major tendency within Duras criticism, I will show that she should not, on that account, be classified as a practitioner of *écriture féminine* as defined by Cixous. This is important, since Cixous's notion has cast a long shadow; for instance, in her essay 'The Search for an Authentic Voice', Barbara Wiedemann agrees with Cixous, declaring that Duras employs *écriture féminine*.[173] But we will see that Duras's representations of woman, and more broadly of sexuality and gender, are not adequately accounted for by this approach, for two reasons. First, it might be questioned whether *écriture féminine*, at least as defined by Cixous, is a sufficiently well-defined phenomenon to be applied to any writer. Second, even

[173] Wiedemann, 'The Search for an Authentic Voice' in *Marguerite Duras Lives On*, ed. Janine Ricouart (Oxford: University Press of America, 1998), pp.1–10. In her essay 'Le Rire de la Méduse', Cixous calls on women to 'write with their bodies' and mentions Duras's work as displaying the characteristics of the 'subversive' *écriture féminine*: 'Alors quelles sont les écritures dont on pourrait dire qu'elles sont "féminines"? […] Je n'ai vu inscrire de la féminínité que par Colette, Marguerite Duras et…Jean Genet'. See Cixous's essay in *Le Rire de la Méduse et autres ironies*, p. 43.

if we accept for the sake of argument that it is applicable to certain writers, its supposed characteristics are not present in Duras's writing.

The case that Duras's writing affords an example par excellence of *écriture féminine* has been supported by reference to what Gauthier calls 'blancs' in Duras's work. The author herself speaks of creating a 'blanc de la chaîne' in her later texts, which she calls 'ce féminin':

Ces livres sont douloureux, à écrire, à lire et que cette douleur devrait nous mener vers un champ…, un champ d'expérimentation. Enfin, je veux dire, ils sont douloureux, c'est douloureux, parce que c'est un travail qui porte sur une région…non encore creusée, peut-être. […] C'est ce blanc de la chaîne, […] ce féminin. […] C'est peut-être ça qui fait la douleur (*LP*, 18).

An example of the 'blancs' in Duras's writing is provided by the following passage from *L'Amour*:[174]

Elle lève les yeux, regarde le paysage présent, pétrifié. Elle dit:
Je ne sais plus.
[…] De temps à autre elle prononce le mot, elle l'appelle:
– S. Thala, mon S. Thala.
Puis elle regarde le sol.
Je ne reconnais plus. (*La*, 102)

This aspect of Duras's writing lies at the root of her association, in the minds of many, with *écriture féminine*. The critics in question argue that the 'blancs' in Duras's texts induce readers to identify unconsciously with the female protagonists. Admittedly, this hypothesis has a certain explanatory force. In much of Duras's later work, the appeal of the heroines owes much to the suggestion of a wild feminine desire that exceeds language, a desire without resolution, of conflict without end, of trauma without explanation, features which may stimulate the reader's desire itself (and in this respect, incidentally, Duras shows the plot of 'female desire' to be something other, indeed anything but, a pale shadow of the 'masculinist' version, *pace* Brooks). The 'blancs' are central to the view that Duras's writing

[174] Duras, *L'Amour*, (Paris: Folio, 1992). Orig. publ. 1971.

is specifically 'feminine' because they are held to show the failure of conventional language constructions to contain female experience. Following Cixous, for Gauthier it seems that the 'feminine' is beyond language.

This kind of argument has been used to identify two radical challenges in Duras's work: first, a challenge to the novel 'in the masculine', as established by the mid-twentieth century literary canon; and second (by extension) a challenge to traditional 'male' language and ideology. Kristeva extends this to the field of war and holocaust. She finds in Duras 'une rhétorique blanche de l'apocalypse' where the truth of pain restrains any rhetorical celebration and shows instead 'une crise de la signification' in the face of twentieth-century historical catastrophes. Kristeva links 'la passion de la mort' – which coincides with human destiny – with historical disaster. Like Freud, she sees death as the motor of psychical life which is then manifested in political and military institutions that thrive on violence. According to Kristeva, then, the destruction of nature and of life is the outward manifestation of psychiatric disorders: 'psychose, dépression, manie, borderline, fausses personnalités etc', and it seems that silence is the only adequate response of art in the face of 'la crise qui frappe l'identité de la personne, de la morale, de la religion ou de la politique'.[175] In this view, in its confrontation with events such as Auschwitz and Hiroshima – the events Kristeva refers to – it seems that modern rhetoric does find expression (in an effort to bear witness to the memory of horror) in an extremely unadorned style such as the one used by Duras in her later writings. For this argument to work, we have to accept that this refusal of (a certain kind of) rhetoric, borders on silence and so can stand for silence by a kind of metonymy. It is also possible to relate this unadorned style with the represented 'blancs' or gaps which Duras uses in so many texts, as discussed above.

But to infer *écriture féminine* on the basis of Duras's *blancs* and (if we follow Kristeva) the unadorned style of her later writing, is to ignore the fact that in Duras the desire of female characters consistently incorporates the 'masculine' binary (active male/passive female) within its own structure. This is illustrated, amongst many examples, by a quote from a later text, *L'Amant de la Chine du nord*, in which the girl narrator admits to her Chinese lover: 'Dans le bac je t'ai vu comme recouvert d'or. […] Je crois que c'est pour ça que je t'ai desiré beaucoup [et] c'était tes mains. […] Je les voyais qui me mettaient toute nue devant toi qui me regardais'.[176] This presents the image of woman under the male gaze; the girl's

[175] See Kristeva's 'La maladie de la douleur' in *Soleil Noir*: *Dépression et mélancolie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), pp. 229–265; (p. 229).
[176] Duras, *L'Amant de la Chine du nord* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 145, 146.

longing diminishes her nascent independence to the level of quivering desire for the man's sexual and financial appeal. It is a prevalent depiction of the Durassian interaction between the sexes: eroticism is possible as long as the inequality between the sexes is acknowledged, but in a scenario where the girl/woman is at once subordinate participant (to be 'taken'), and external 'voyeur'/witness of her own subordination. The 'voyeuristic' perspective on her own subjection shows her active mastering it as part of a fantasy which (qua fantasy, or if enacted) gives her pleasure. (We should recall that in Robbe-Grillet, the 'voyeur' position is associated with the power and right of the male to 'take' his object, whilst girls' eyes are represented as blank or inscrutable.) This happens so often in Duras's work that the suggestion appears to be that equality might have an anti-erotic effect on desire. And this tendency is not a development of the later texts, introduced with or after those famous 'blancs'; as we will see below, it is a long-term feature of her writing. To incorporate a 'male' scenario of desire (in which the woman is the desired object to the man's desiring subject) into a particular kind of 'female' scenario (in which the woman actively desires to be that desired object) might be used for deeply conservative or deeply radical purposes (and the readings below will explore Duras's use of it). But either way, it does not present the radical alternative implied by proponents of *écriture féminine*.

To clarify: *écriture féminine* as used by Cixous and others is a questionable concept in itself and, when applied to Duras, it risks placing an illusory 'point of transition' in her writing career. According to this scheme, the early Duras, having not yet begun to experiment radically in formal and stylistic terms, supposedly has not yet begun to pose a challenge to masculinist writing; whilst the later Duras quite rapidly discovers, in her radical use of *blancs* and her minimalist style, her own version of *écriture féminine*. The readings below will challenge this account of Duras's movement into *écriture féminine*; but they will also show that Duras, in other ways, poses radical challenges to masculinist writing and ideology. A variety of themes have been fruitfully used by critics to interpret Duras's texts: woman as absence; woman as socially marginalized and therefore alienated; the female body; silence, desire, loss, the mother and so on. Fundamentally, woman as man's Other emerges from many of Duras's texts as a challenge to, rather than a confirmation of, the masculinist position (reflected in Brooks's theorization of plot).

In order to locate signs of female resistance in patriarchal culture, as she makes clear in *Les Parleuses* (1974), Duras occasionally indicates in her texts a narrative voice and/or mood which differs from the assumptions of masculinist thought. Duras herself comments on the problem of gender; as she affirms in *Les Parleuses*: 'La femme qui écrit se déguise…en

homme' (*LP*, 38); but this lends the female writer the power to subvert the masculinist writing she adopts. Earlier in *Les Parleuses*, Duras states: 'Le mot compte plus que la syntaxe. C'est avant tout les mots, sans articles d'ailleurs, qui viennent et qui s'imposent' (*LP*, 11), which clearly does not describe classically 'masculine' discourse. Potentially, Duras's view of language provides an alternative mode of subjectivity capable of 'supplementing' (completing and/or displacing) the traditionally masculinist nature of writing. According to Françoise Barbé-Petit, in Duras's work:

La différence sexuelle […] exprimée de façon lapidaire, permet de multiples interprétations. La différence posée est suffisamment ouverte pour faire entendre tous les probables envisageables. Elle introduit de ce fait une perspective *transformiste* au sein de la différence sexuelle, et en indique la nature instable et précaire. Les positions de l'homme et de la femme sont réversibles et interchangeables.[177]

By extension, there can be no essentially 'masculine' or 'feminine' writing; for as Barbé-Petit implies above, the fact that the character/subject is male or female does not establish his/her position in relation to power in Duras's texts. Duras thus suggests that identity, including gender identity, is a durable but not an unchangeable phenomenon, and in this chapter her texts will be analysed within this perspective. In the readings that follow, I will be building on Barbé-Petit's insight which makes the case that Duras challenges masculinist ideology without reference to *écriture féminine*.

Duras's 'Transition'

The debate is complicated by the assertion that Duras begins to make significant use of *blancs*, and more widely to offer examples of *écriture féminine*, after a certain date, which serves as a transition in her career from 'realist' to experimental writing, and (at the same time) from acceptance of 'masculinist' ideology and novelistic aesthetics to a position of contestation. We have seen that it is only Duras's *later* writing style that deploys, according to Kristeva, 'une rhétorique blanche de l'apocalypse'. Gauthier identifies a radical change in Duras's writing practice in 1964 with *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, and states with regard to Duras's narratives from this point: 'Je crois qu'il y a la question du sujet. […] Je veux dire qu'il est…complètement mis en question, le sujet de Descartes, le sujet traditionnel […], il

[177] Barbé-Petit, *Marguerite Duras: au risque de la philosophie* (Paris: Kimé, 2010), p. 86.

est complètement criblé…(*LP*, 17).[178] Duras's texts from *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* onwards are claimed as examples of *écriture féminine* by critics such as Gauthier and Cixous. But a change in writing practice occurs, according to Duras herself, in 1958, with *Moderato Cantabile*, or before *écriture féminine* was established as a concept (this was done by Cixous in 1972). Therefore, as we rethink Duras's relation to *écriture féminine*, we must rethink the notion of a transition in her writing (which will lead to the conclusion that it is reductive to think of her evolution as a writer in terms of one particularly significant transition).

Below I argue that Duras experiments significantly with the representation of gender not from the mid-1960s in *Le Ravissement* or the late 1950s in *Moderato*, but as early as 1952, in *Le Marin de Gibraltar*[179]. Beginning with Anna in *Le Marin*, Duras portrays female characters with a significantly higher degree of agency than before and at the same time, it becomes possible to argue that their desire drives the plot at least as significantly as that of male characters. The other characters in question include Anne in *Moderato Cantabile*; Lol in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*; 'elle' in *L'Amour*; the woman in *La Maladie de la mort* and the younger narrator in *L'Amant*. And without aiming for an artificially neat synchronization, I also argue that Duras's challenge of conventional novelistic structures begins much earlier than has been previously thought. For it is in manipulating and subverting the traditional forms of the novel that she brings traditional male/female subject-positions into question. In my examination of the Durassian texts that follow, I attend to subtle but significant experiments in narrative form, keeping in mind the links often (reasonably) made between Duras and the *nouveau roman* 'movement'.[180] But, more importantly, I also take into account that from 1952 onwards, Duras's texts suggest, ever more strongly, that patriarchal language reduces and negates female bodily experience and reinforces predetermined positions for women, both narratively and in the real world.

Still, this is a development. We will see that in early works such as *La Vie tranquille* (1944) and *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950), Duras seems to rely, largely uncritically, on a narrative scheme in which the male desires and the woman is desired. Or, more precisely, as far as the woman desires, it is to be desired by the male (without her manifesting separate or 'excessive' desires). But from *Le Marin* onwards, it is no longer possible to assimilate her writing to such a scheme. Admittedly, in some of her later novels, Duras

[178] Duras admits that it was just after 'une désintoxication alcoolique' that she wrote *Le Ravissement* and says that she cannot tell whether the fear she felt was to do with writing or with having to face life without alcohol. See *Les Parleuses*, p. 14.
[179] Duras, *Le Marin de Gibraltar* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984). Orig. publ. 1952.
[180] As Waters asserts, Duras was a member of the Nouveau Roman group during the 1950s and 1960s and this association established her standing as an 'experimental' writer. See Waters's *Intersexual Rivalry*, p. 9.

represents women in ways that suggest that they share a need for male mediation and approval. In *L'Amant* (1984), for example, the mother's quasi-sexual obsession with her elder son is clearly in evidence. As the young narrator asserts: 'Je voulais tuer mon frère aîné. […] C'était pour enlever de devant ma mère l'objet de son amour, ce fils, la punir de l'aimer si fort, si mal (*AM*, 13). Even the cool heroine of *Les Yeux bleus cheveux noirs* (1986) falls into the category of the female who does not care to follow any particular logic: when the man who is paying her to stay with him asks why she has accepted his offer she says that 'toutes les femmes auraient accepté *sans savoir pourquoi* cette union blanche et désespérée'.[181] Such instances in Duras's work put into play traditional ideas about female illogical tendencies and/or subordinate position. Trista Selous, for example, argues that Duras's female figures have 'the power of the catalyst, rather than of the agent'.[182] But increasingly, from the early 1950s onwards, there is a kind of 'surplus' in the desire of her female protagonists which cannot be satisfied by embracing the role of objects of male desire, however willingly. Moreover, Duras's writing increasingly raises the question of the power that the fetishised woman-object may have for the female reader; that is to say, woman existing largely as a male object of desire which is very much part of a social 'construction' of the female in male social order. As Duras says to Gauthier in *Les Parleuses*: 'Il y a un correctif constant dans [la vie de Lol V. Stein], n'est-ce pas, elle fait tout comme si c'était possible; on lui a appris à parler, à marcher, à se marier, à faire l'amour, à avoir des enfants et tout se passe…Je pense que beaucoup de femmes sont comme ça. […] Elles font leur métier comme il est dicté par l'homme' (*LP*, 20). Thus, in contradiction to Brooks's model (illustrated, in its way, by Robbe-Grillet *malgré lui*), Duras's female protagonists increasingly emerge as subjects rather than objects of narrative, and as subjects rather than objects of desire.

In brief, it is difficult but important to disentangle the notion of Duras's development as a writer towards radical experimentation with form (that is to say, with the abandonment of the flow of full, polished sentences, referred to above) from her thematization of the politics of gender. (We saw with Robbe-Grillet that formal experimentation is no reliable marker of his distance from patriarchal ideology or masculinist 'plots' of desire; the same applies to Duras). Not only is it reductive to declare that Duras moves into *écriture féminine* at a given moment of her writing career; it is reductive to produce a neat date after which stylistic experimentation presents a challenge to masculinist *écriture*. In the readings that follow, I

[181] Duras, *Les Yeux bleus cheveux noirs (*Paris: Minuit, 1986), p. 31. (My emphasis).
[182] Selous, *The Other Woman*: *Feminism and Femininity in the Work of Marguerite Duras* (London: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 1.

will take account of formal experimentation in Duras, and this certainly allows us to divide her writing into phases according to the emergence of certain trends. But the representation of gender relations, and of 'masculine' and 'feminine' desire, needs to be charted in parallel. Any correlation with formal experimentation should not be assumed but carefully traced on the basis of textual evidence.

Early Texts: *La Vie tranquille* and *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*

Acknowledgment of the historical and cultural circumstances that may have influenced Duras's work, in particular regarding gender, is crucial in order to explore her creative output because, as I suggest in the general Introduction, texts are always bound up with their historical and social context.[183] Kristeva, for example, takes into account the historical dimension of literary works and emphasises the role of a diverse, multi-faceted speaking subject within a social, historical context, noting that thought removed from its socio-historical framework, from what she calls 'historical turmoil', is inevitably fixed and inactive.[184] Duras's work is thus inevitably marked by issues of feminism and femininity: it was around the time of the movement known as Second Wave feminism which emerged after the Second World War, that the four early texts under discussion in this chapter were published: *La Vie tranquille* in 1944; *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* in 1950; *Le Marin de Gibraltar* in 1952 and the short story 'Le Boa' in 1954. Beauvoir's seminal work, *Le Deuxième sexe* was published in 1949 and included Sartre's pithy epigraph that women are, 'A moitié victimes, à moitié complices, comme tout le monde'.[185] Beauvoir argues that throughout history women have been denied full status as human beings and that they are always viewed as the object but never the subject: 'Les hommes disent "les femmes" et elles reprennent ces mots pour se désigner elles-mêmes mais elles ne se posent pas authentiquement comme Sujet. […] L'action des femmes n'a jamais été qu'une agitation symbolique; elles n'ont gagné que ce que les hommes ont bien voulu leur concéder'.[186] Beauvoir's exploration of the status of women in *Le Deuxième sexe* ranges from the child, the wife, through to the mother and women in love, and proposes that 'woman' is a symbolic Other[187]: what she represents is more significant than what she is but insists that women can

[183] As Edward Said states, 'Literature [cannot be] chopped off from history and society. The supposed autonomy of works of art enjoins a kind of separation which […] imposes an uninteresting limitation that the works themselves resolutely will not make'. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 14.
[184] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, pp. 14, 15.
[185] Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe II*.
[186] Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe I*, p. 21.
[187] *Ibid*., p. 18.

change their condition and that indeed history proves this. According to Duras's biographer, Laure Adler, Duras never showed any admiration for or empathy with Beauvoir although she is said to have been, like Beauvoir and Sartre, 'passionately existentialist' like most young intellectuals in Paris at the time.[188]

In earlier Durassian texts, women's individual, familial and social identities are significantly shaped by sex or (biology) as 'destiny', resulting in an apparent ideological framework of forceful masculinity and compliant femininity. In *La Vie tranquille*,[189] for instance, the protagonist's potential to determine her own fate is compromised by the limitations of gender roles springing 'naturally' from her belonging to the female sex. Duras's appeal here (and in all her early texts) to a natural desire and, as a consequence, a natural form of human relations, is inevitably normative because the forms of sexuality and desire which fall outside the limits of the natural model are viewed as unnatural and therefore without the social validation that a normative model gives. The point of entry to the narrative, the route of access to its inscription of desire, is through the protagonist, Françou, who defines herself to an important extent as existing to complement men, although men are not represented as existing to complement women. She adapts to her fate in a way that *suggests* free will: a fate that 'invites' her to conform happily to its restrictions. All of her motivations to act involve Tiène (her lover), or Nicolas (her brother). Even when the latter has died, she needs him to remind her of who she is: 'C'est pourquoi je repensais sans cesse à Nicolas, pour me rappeler qui j'étais en fin de compte (*VT*, 133); and she acknowledges her fragility without Tiène: 'Je n'étais personne, je n'avais ni nom ni visage; […] j'étais: rien' (*VT*, 71). Thus male and female characters are reduced to their prescribed roles, masculine and feminine. The strong presence of Françou's 'femininity' encourages the reader to accept the ideology offered by the text whilst the patriarchal discourse asserts itself.

Emphasizing sexual difference, Françou openly admits her erotically charged admiration for Nicolas after he has fatally wounded their mother's brother Jerôme:

Pour la première fois, je trouvais de la grandeur à mon frère Nicolas. Sa chaleur sortait en vapeur de son corps et je sentais l'odeur de sa sueur. Elle était la nouvelle odeur de Nicolas. […]. J'avais envie de le prendre dans mes bras, de connaître de plus près l'odeur de sa force. Moi seule pouvais l'aimer à ce moment-là, l'enlacer, embrasser sa bouche, lui dire: 'Nicolas, mon petit frère, mon petit frère'. Il y avait vingt ans qu'il voulait se battre avec Jerôme. Il

[188] Laure Adler, *Marguerite Duras, A Life*, trans. Victor Gollancz (Chicago: University Press, 2000), p. 4.
[189] Duras, *La Vie tranquille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982). Orig. publ. 1944.

venait enfin de le faire alors que la veille encore il était honteux de ne pouvoir le faire. (*LV*, 13)

The ideological perspective (or *mood*) in *La Vie tranquille* is defined by the female figure who is both narrator and protagonist; she voices and maintains the 'masculine' understanding of honour in traditional culture on which male identity is largely based, as in the example above.[190] Masculinity in the novel is based on physical strength and daring, a position which is associated with power and domination. Nicolas was ashamed whilst he was unable to confront Jerôme, establishing the connection between honour and violence which, arguably, is still often viewed as a natural characteristic of men.[191] This uneasy mix of the biological and the cultural dictates Duras's treatment of many of her male and female characters at this stage.

Duras, then, often shows an essentialist side to her characters and this includes her depiction of the mother, a figure that, as is well documented, emerges in much of her work. According to Adler, Duras had great respect for women who were mothers: 'To be fulfilled, a woman had to experience motherhood. […] In her opinion childless women were not real women'.[192] From *La Vie tranquille* onwards, many of Duras's representations of the mother reveal a view that values the woman whose existence is centred above all on the discharge of this function. Duras states that 'children give women certainty and women with their children is the only thing you can look at without feeling depressed'.[193] In *La Vie tranquille*, Françou's maternal instincts surface when she breastfeeds her young nephew abandoned by his mother: 'Le bruit de succion qu'il faisait en tétant, si léger, me faisait découvrir que j'avais un corps resté tout jeune encore. […] Je le sentais parcouru maintenant d'un jeu de frémissements si neufs, si matinaux, que je riais toute seule' (*VT*, 52).[194] Françou, waiting to fulfil her biological destiny, embodies Duras's archetypal woman, one who says that she is 'vivante en femme, pas en n'importe quoi, en femme seulement' (*VT*, 128). Most importantly, motherhood is seen as the *biological evidence* that women have a specific

[190] Françou is the extradiegetic narrator of the narrative in *La Vie tranquille*, but she is also intradiegetic insofar as she operates as a character in the story she presents. See Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology*, p. 46.
[191] As Beauvoir explains: 'Sans doute, dans l'univers des adultes la force brutale ne joue pas, en périodes normales, un grand rôle; mais, cependant, elle le hante; nombreuses sont les conduites masculines qui s'enlèvent sur un fond de violence possible'. *Le Deuxième sexe II*, p. 91.
[192] Adler, *Marguerite Duras*: *A Life*, p. 100.
[193] Jerôme Beaujour and Marguerite Duras, *La Vie matérielle*: *Marguerite Duras parle à Jerôme Beaujour* (Paris: P.O.L, 1987), p. 137.
[194] This image is reminiscent of Freud's essays on infantile sexuality where he writes that breastfeeding is a baby's first erotic experience. See Gay's *The Freud Reader*, p. 263. In the passage Duras depicts her protagonist as also enjoying breastfeeding sensually.

connection to life and nature: the viewpoint is that as mothers it is clear that women are wholly different from men therefore their role in life is 'meant to be' different.

Françou's need to define her identity through her relationship to Tiène and Nicolas, is connected to her seeming inability to see herself except in the third person, as 'elle'. This is dramatized in the episode when she catches her reflection in a mirror:

Là, dans ma chambre, c'est moi. On croirait qu'elle ne sait plus que c'est d'elle qu'il s'agit. Elle se voit dans l'armoire à glace; c'est une grande fille qui a des cheveux blonds, jaunis par le soleil, une figure brune. […] De la très petite valise ouverte, elle tire trois chemises pour avoir l'air naturel devant celle qui la regarde. Tout en évitant de se voir, elle se voit faire dans l'armoire à glace. (*VT*, 121)

Françou discovers her divided 'self' in the experience of (not) looking in the mirror, a scene described by means of two different pronouns, or two uses of the single pronoun 'elle', to emphasise this symbolic splitting: 'elle ne sait plus que c'est d'elle qu'il s'agit'. But this splitting is introduced by a modalising 'On croirait [que]…'; who is this spectator 'On', who would (were he or she present) deny her the security of knowing that she is herself (perhaps self-identical, or self-determining)? Whoever it (or he) is, the hypothetical presence of 'On' renders the image in the mirror her [self] and yet not her [self]; there is something unfamiliar which she avoids looking at. What these instances of the *familier inconnu*, or the 'étrange', serve to illuminate in this early novel is the female character's response to sexual difference: she sees herself as 'her', a necessary identity, yet a precarious one (as confirmed by the questioning gaze of the absent/present 'On'). In the great tradition of the 'masculine' and (therefore) 'classic' or 'standard' text as defined by Brooks, the male protagonist/hero is mainly concerned with defining his own 'self' through his desire either for the female love interest or for his own image mediated through her reaction to him. The passage above is utterly incompatible with Brooks's blueprint. It illustrates, rather, what Laurent Camerini argues regarding sexual difference in Duras; she states that there are 'scènes où l'on tente de saisir, de franchir un entre deux, de ramener deux continents séparés par le gouffre du différent, […] deux continents séparés par cet abîme vertigineux du semblable'.[195] Duras's apparent take on Lacan's mirror stage in the specular scene above depicts Françou's sense of identity as unstable as she catches her image in the mirror, unlike the male characters' strong

[195] Camerini, *Marguerite Duras I, Les récits des différences sexuelles I,* Bernard Alazet and Mireille Calle-Gruber (Paris: Minard, 2005), p. 109.

'ego': 'Qui étais-je, qui avais-je pris pour moi jusque-là? […] Je n'arrivais pas à me loger dans l'image que je venais de surprendre' (*VT*, 122). Françou is looking for one of the men in her life to tell her who she is, to make sense of her past and delineate her future: 'Pour le moment, tout autre passé que le mien m'appartient davantage. Celui de Tiène ou de Nicolas par exemple' (*VT*, 125, 126).

The centrality of the female body as the site of sexuality is one of the most significant motifs in Duras; indeed, her writing illustrates Georges Bataille's claim that 'la figure attrayante de l'érotisme est pratiquement la même pour les femmes et pour les hommes, c'est la nudité féminine'.[196] It is almost *de rigueur* for women in western culture to be defined through their sexuality in conformity to the stereotyped opposition of chaste virgin to provocative whore. Of course this convention misrepresents the reality of female desire but because it is so prevalent, it is difficult for women to define their own sexuality without reference to it, even if very indirectly. Clearly, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* [197] was not written as a conscious articulation of female sexuality but the text does appear to reproduce (more than the rest of the Duras corpus studied here) the conventions of this opposition: Suzanne's 'value' increases if she remains a virgin before marriage so the family prevent her from sleeping with M. Jo until such a time as he marries her. The mother makes this clear to the unfortunate suitor: 'On ne vous force pas à l'épouser […]; simplement on vous prévient' (*BP*, 96). Duras here writes the 'masculine' text, as she says herself in *Les Parleuses* (*LP*, 13). Any subversion of the virgin/whore or male subject/female object opposition produces an implicit criticism (as we will see in *Le Marin de Gibraltar*) of conventional stereotypes. But to criticize the traditional 'masculine' canon is not necessarily to be disconnected from it. The question here is how does Duras articulate a female sexual identity? This cannot be answered adequately without asking other related questions: how does Duras engage with the conventions within which she *must* practise at this stage of her career? We will see in the rest of this chapter that she transforms the conventions radically in some of her texts and she circumvents them in others, but in *Un barrage* she adheres closely to them; however, this foregrounding of a traditional patriarchal ideology exists in an uneasy tension with a problematising of gendered identity that will come to the fore in subsequent texts by Duras.

[196] Bataille, 'L'Histoire de l' Érotisme', in *Œuvres Complètes, Vol. 8* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), pp. 10–165. (p. 131). Duras and Bataille knew each other well, according to Adler, who describes him as Duras's 'friend and model'. She adds that both Maurice Blanchot and Bataille were her literary 'masters' and that their influence on her work, although never acknowledged by Duras, 'was considerable'. See Adler's *Marguerite Duras*, p. 214.
[197] Duras, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (Paris: Folio, 1970). Orig. publ. 1950.

In *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* representation of gender relations inscribes the male active/female passive dichotomy as well as a voyeuristic tendency in the protagonist's suitor, M. Jo, which is an important motivation in the text. But there is also the implication that women take pleasure in their objectivization, reinforcing the culture that targets the female body as a commodity to be simultaneously violated and admired. This is clear in the following passage of *Un barrage*, narrated in *style indirect libre*: M. Jo is trying to persuade Suzanne to allow him to see her naked; before doing so, she considers the advantages of such a move:

Il avait très envie de la voir. Quand même c'était l'envie d'un homme. Elle, elle était là aussi, bonne à être vue. […] Et aucun homme au monde n'avait encore vu celle qui se tenait là derrière la porte. Ce n'était pas fait pour être caché mais au contraire pour être vu et faire son chemin de par le monde, le monde auquel appartenait quand même celui-là, M. Jo'. (*BP*, 73)

M. Jo looks at Suzanne; she looks at herself being looked at; in the process, she learns about and feels the power of her body through the male voyeur. Thinking of future material gain, she makes sure that male desire is kept alive, rationalizes her situation and accepts with not inconsiderable pleasure M. Jo's gaze; nevertheless, the male gaze in this context turns Suzanne into someone who is, potentially at least, interchangeable with someone else. In the context of a society structured around sexual imbalance, the gratification found in looking in the passage above is clearly divided between a passive female who is looked at and an active male whose gaze she is subjected to. Yielding to the evaluating authority of the male observer, Suzanne sees her worth in M. Jo's eyes, re-enacting and ritualizing her lesser status. The relationship between these two characters is clarified in the moments when Suzanne's *body* is in a central position in the narrative.

As I suggest above, at this stage of Duras's career the association of violence and masculinity in her texts perpetuates the notion of the aggressive male as an ideal which greatly reduces the potential for exploring gender in non-essentialist terms. Indeed, these early texts – and some of her contemporaneous statements – suggest nostalgia on Duras's part for the certainties of inflexible gender roles and the dependence of women on men. There is an illuminating dialogue in *Les Parleuses* when Gauthier and Duras discuss female work:

- M.D. – Je pense aux femmes du début du siècle, une grande courtisane entretenue, aux femmes actuellement, aux femmes entretenues du boulevard Haussman, par…des hommes d'affaires. Elles sont payées…
- X.G. – Oui, c'est pas un salaire.
- M.D – Elles ont des appartements…
- X.G – Oui, mais c'est pas un salaire.
- M.D.– On leur donne de l'argent…
- X.G. – C'est pas pareil.
- M.D. – Des autos, des fourrures…Je vois ça comme un salaire. (*LP*, 103)

Male social order designates specific positions for women which exploit and flatter them simultaneously, and prostitution is one of these positions. Female prostitution is seen in Duras either in the 'professional' capacity of Carmen in *Un barrage*, or in the gift of sexual favours by Suzanne in exchange for material reward; or, later, in the more complex desire of the girl for her Chinese lover in *L'Amant*, where she admits that his wealth is very much part of his desirability, as we will see. We can discern in Duras's representations of prostitution one of the points where sexuality intersects with politics in the distribution of power and wealth. But we also see how, in Duras, women as objects are crucial for the enhancement of sexuality. Here she appears to be, again, influenced by Bataille who points out that prostitution is the logical consequence of the erotic: 'L'enrichissement de l'érotisme voulut cette réduction des femmes à l'objet d'une possession. […] Si les femmes n'étaient devenues des objects proposés à la possession, elles n'auraient pu comme elles l'ont fait devenir les *objets* du désir érotique'.[198] The insistence of the early Durassian text on the boundaries set by male-biased culture undermines the possibility of an unambiguous, powerful female subject because the shadow of the patriarchal framework always surfaces and troubles any gesture towards self-assertion.

A recurrent motif is Duras's emphasis on a female sexuality that takes pleasure in the aggressive element of traditional masculinity; this feature is of course indissociable from pleasure in subjection. One of the eroticized elements in *Un barrage*, for example, is the concept of the hunter and is part of Agosti's (a potential lover) and her brother Joseph's sexual appeal for Suzanne. She wants to marry a hunter but cannot explain why (*BP*, 218). As M. Jo perceptively says to Suzanne: 'Ce que vous aimez c'est les types du genre […]

[198] Bataille, *Histoire de l'Erotisme*, p. 121.

d'Agosti et de … Joseph'. Suzanne agrees and replies that regardless of how many gifts she receives from M. Jo, 'ce sera toujours comme ça' (*BP*, 77**).** In his chapter on murder, hunting and war, Bataille states that the act of killing in primitive societies endows the killer, hunter or warrior with a 'sacramental character' because hunting is seen as a necessary transgression.[199] It is the primitive display of masculine potency in hunting that Suzanne is in thrall to, and that is why she treats both M. Jo and Barner (another admirer) with contempt as potential husbands.

Given Duras's focus on female representations, the mode of access to 'meaning' in the two realist texts discussed in this section is woman in her social setting. Narrative mood and voice in these texts result in the discourse of patriarchal society and its specific stance on distribution of power. The ideological and the aesthetic are here inseparable as language always operates in the context of politico-discursive conditions. As Coward and Ellis state when discussing realism, ideology constructs and is constructed by the way we live our role in the social field and by the way that activity is represented in art: 'ideology is a practice of representation'.[200] But despite its status as a 'realist' text with its conventional omniscient narrator, *Un barrage* is not entirely devoid of self-conscious, intertextual allusions to other fictions and their stimulation of desire; as Carmen says, 'Avant de faire l'amour vraiment, on le fait d'abord au cinéma. […] Le grand mérite du cinéma c'était d'en donner envie aux filles et aux garçons et de les rendre impatients de fuir leur famille' (*BP*, 199). The narrator tells us that as young schoolteachers Suzanne's parents had read posters inviting them to leave France: "engagez-vous dans l'armée coloniale" and "Jeunes, allez aux colonies, la fortune vous y attend" (*BP*, 23); these posters were depicted as romantic, exotic places like those the young couple had read about at school (*BP*, 23). The posters depicted smiling colonial couples in glamorous settings while natives worked around them. These 'affiches de propagande colonial' (*BP*, 23) which made the young couple dream, offered fictions of freedom and pleasure that hid not only the realities of exploitation underpinning the colonial project, but also the difficulties that French settlers might encounter, as indeed the represented family in *Un barrage* does. Even after years in Indochina, the mother in *Un barrage* is depicted as a naïve reader of the misrepresentations promoted by the colonial system; she calls the Sea of China the Pacific because 'c'était à l'océan Pacifique qu'elle

[199] Hunting is considered by Bataille as a primitive form of transgression given that animals and man were considered to be on the same level up until 15,000 years ago and then both the transgression of the taboo prohibiting the killing of animals and then the killing of man himself, became official in war. See Bataille's *Eroticism* (London: Penguin, 1962), p. 75.

[200] Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 67.

avait rapporté ses rêves' (*BP*, 33). The indoctrination contained in the posters entailed a discourse that advertised life in the colonies as an accessible reality. What is involved here is that this kind of text does not invoke an implied author; no-one 'speaks' so there is no reference to a narrator either, thereby creating a strong illusion of 'truth'. In other words, the posters are believed because their narrative appears as objective, the 'truth' tells itself. According to the narrator, 'le malheur [de la mère] venait de son incroyable naïveté' in believing the fictions in the posters (*BP*, 25). Duras here raises the question of the nature of narrative, introducing 'self-consciousness' into this early 'realist' novel. The question of the relationship of fiction and reality is a central concern: Duras constructs a fictional world but in her use of allusions to other fictions she exposes it as an artificial construction.

Un barrage contre le Pacifique shows how men and women experience desire differently in the contemporaneous cultural context, and their different relation to fictional influences. Suzanne had learned about love through fiction and so when M. Jo tells her he loves her, the narrator states that:

Dans le seul livre qu'elle eût jamais lu, comme dans les films qu'elle avait vus depuis, les mots: je t'aime n'étaient prononcés qu'une seule fois au cours de l'entretien de deux amants qui durait quelques minutes à peine mais qui liquidait des mois d'attente, une terrible séparation, des douleurs infinies. Jamais Suzanne ne les avait encore entendus prononcer qu'au cinéma. (*BP*, 227)

Suzanne and Joseph manage their precarious financial situation in ways that bring together cultural expectations and private wishes, and these are also largely based on sexual difference. Disillusioned with her life and influenced by the desire provoked by love stories and films, Suzanne waits for a hunter to stop by her house on his way to the forest – 'Un jour un homme s'arrêterait, peut-être, pourquoi pas?' (*BP*, 21). But Joseph turns the poverty and disillusion of the family's existence into a series of jokes – 'la grande rigolade'– (*BP*, 53–64); this gives him power and control over events and reduces his status as a victim of 'le vampirisme colonial' (*BP*, 25), unlike the mother and the protagonist who appear to be more subjected, as women, to the colonial system. Whilst in *Un barrage* the reader is largely restricted to Suzanne's 'consciousness', Joseph, despite being a secondary character, often asserts himself. The storytelling aspect of Joseph (e.g. his main embedded story on pp. 257–278) accords him agency in the narrative because of his control of it in important and lengthy sections of the text.

Developments in Duras's Narrative Technique and the *nouveau roman*

The long-term structure of desire in Duras's fiction needs to be emphasised as it tends to have been obscured by attention to a development in her writing, from (quasi-)realist to a phase that can be assimilated to tendencies within the *nouveau roman* (and therefore Robbe-Grillet). We saw in Robbe-Grillet's work that formal experimentation is not an indicator of a rejection of patriarchal ideology or masculinist 'plots' of desire. There is clearly a connection between the two, however, for Duras: the texts that Duras considers 'douloureux à écrire', the ones that accommodate the 'feminine', *are* associated by her with formal experimentation: 'Cette douleur devrait nous mener vers […] un champ d'expérimentation. […] C'est un travail qui porte sur une région…non encore creusée. […] C'est ce blanc de la chaîne […], ce féminin (*LP*, 18). We will see below, however, that contrary to the above statement, a rejection of patriarchal ideology – and a concominant voice for the 'feminine' – are not always articulated in her later, more experimental writing where traditional male/female oppositions are consistently seen; but *are* articulated in one of her more realist texts. In this particular case, female desire partly drives the narrative which therefore does not conform entirely to Brooks's 'male' model.

Drawing attention to the tension between the realist and the more 'experimental' text, Leo Bersani sees realism as a strategy that helped bourgeois nineteenth-century society by 'containing (and repressing) its disorder within significantly structured stories about itself'.[201] This view aligns realist tendencies in fiction with conservative tendencies in society. In the light of this position, it is interesting to note that Duras begins to reject and parody realist features such as the traditional heroic male character, as well as underline the constructed nature of fiction (in other words, to experiment with form) and make room for a subversive female voice, not in an 'avant-garde' text but in a more realist one, *Le Marin de Gibraltar* (1952). I would therefore modify Bersani's observation by proposing that while he might well be right in that realism attempts to contain what might be seen as socially destabilizing, it can also accommodate the writing strategies to express this subversion. This is done quite effectively in *Le Marin de Gibraltar* by a combination of both realist and self-reflective narrative strategies.

In *Le Marin*, Anna the protagonist, the male narrator, and the crew leave Léopoldville and set sail for the Caribbean, having replaced the burnt-out Gibraltar with a smaller boat. Despite the novel's grounding in the real world and apparently pursuing a mimetic goal, the

[201] Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), p. 63.

last sentence is a self-conscious attempt to point to its artifice: 'la mer fut très belle vers les Caraïbes. Mais je ne peux pas encore en parler' (*MG*, 429). The quotation shows the self-reflexive foregrounding and irruption of an 'author' who is in the process of writing, a common feature in non-realist fiction; the voice appears *as distinct* from the narrator's voice. With her new, self-conscious narrative, Duras begins to broaden what the reader has to contribute as part of the reading transaction, a stated aim in Robbe-Grillet's *Pour un nouveau roman*.

Duras's destabilization of traditional narrative form starts with *Le Marin* but it is not seen fully developed until 1964 with *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*. In this novel, the narrator invents the gaps in Lol's story as he narrates: 'Il faut inventer les chaînons qui me manquent dans l'histoire de Lol V. Stein' (*LR*, 37), often punctuating his narrative with the phrase 'j'invente' thus drawing attention to its status as a constructed artefact rather than a window on the real world, a strategy that was already being used in *Le Marin de Gibraltar*. Speaking generally, the reader looks for sets of rules in the literary work that are ultimately established through a linguistic system and within a variety of contexts for interpretation both within the text and *outside* it. This means than even an experimental text is still limited by convention and tied to a social reality despite the absence of straightforward mimetic representation, as we saw in Robbe-Grillet. Both authors' exploration of form produces insights into the relation of language to reality, increases narrative theory's understanding of the possibilities and problems of the narrative genre, and also generates the reader's pleasure in the narrative disruptions of what Barthes calls the 'writerly' text. The term of course describes an ideal that cannot ultimately characterize narrative: texts produce meaning within a variety of constraints and according to a logic of action (Barthes's proairetic code). Nevertheless, already in 1952, Duras's *Le Marin* cannot entirely be read by the strict decoding strategies of the 'readerly' text (the 'already read'), as we will see in the next section.

New narrative forms: *Le Marin de Gibraltar*

In this novel Duras undermines the status of the traditional male protagonist/narrator, creating a space for the female character's voice and point of view. The framing narrative in *Le Marin* is assumed by a male narrator, whose *narration* frames the story of Anna's previous lover, the lost sailor. This framed story is presented as a fiction composed by Anna herself. She is the link between the framing narrative that imitates the actual world, and the world of the intercalated narrative which is concerned with the story of the sailor. We never find the sailor

or his setting and we only 'know' him through Anna's storytelling. We have reasons to suspect her of unreliability because what seems to be the subject of her story, the lost sailor, is clearly a ruse to say something else: although Anna's position in the narrative structure might be described as that of a secondary narrator, she has a crucial function because she introduces a destabilizing or subversive element into the framing narrative. Although the male narrator is the focalizer of the framing narrative (which includes himself and Anna), Anna usurps a focalizing role of her own within this narrative, and does so, precisely, through irony:

– Dans votre roman américain, dites-moi, parlerez-vous des koudous? Comme M. Hemingway en a déjà parlé, est-ce qu'on ne trouvera pas ça de mauvais goût?
– Sans M. Hemingway, dis-je, nous n'en parlerions pas, alors, est-ce qu'il vaudrait mieux mentir et dire que nous parlions d'autre chose?
– Non, dit-elle, il vaut mieux dire la vérité, tant pis. […] Vous direz la couleur de la mer?
– La couleur de la mer à toutes les heures du jour, ça, assurément.
– Ah, j'aimerais bien que les gens prennent ça pour un récit de voyages.
– Ils le prendront, puisque nous voyageons.
– Tous?
– Peut-être pas tous. Une dizaine, peut-être pas.
– Et ceux-là, qu'est-ce qu'ils croiront?
– Ce qu'ils voudront, tout ce qu'ils voudront. Mais vraiment, tout ce qu'ils voudront. (*MG*, 412)

Despite the fact that Anna only appears in scenes with the narrator while he can operate independently, her ironic perspective consistently suggests a suspicious interpretation of events in the main story. Anna's function is to point to the artificial nature of the realist narrative she is in, a story told in the style of (clearly) Ernest Hemingway. *Le Marin de Gibraltar*, then, is a significant development in Duras's literary output in that she explores her relation to the primarily realist models of imaginative fiction that (very probably) shaped her as an author. It is clear that for Duras the realist text is a 'masculine' kind of text and she suggests that women writers were obliged to work within a literary canon which she sees as the product of a male-dominated culture and therefore complicit with the people in power. Duras includes *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* amongst her 'masculine' texts but she also includes *Le Marin* as both are written in the realist style: 'Je verrais ça comme des livres plus

masculins' (*LP*, 13). Instead of concealing the fictional status of her narrative, then, Duras embroiders the story in *Le Marin* around that very fictionality and produces a parody of realism as understood by the 'male' literary canon; in this case, as exemplified by what she calls 'le roman américain' (*MG*, 204). When asked by Anna why he wants to write an American- style novel in particular, the narrator replies, mockingly: 'À cause des whiskys. Le whisky est un alcool américain' (*MG*, 204).

Although displaying many of the features of the traditional quest novel, *Le Marin*, through Anna, shows an ironic stance towards its literary predecessors. In a long episode set in Africa, for example, the text mocks and rewrites the traditional 'masculine' adventure story that corresponds to Brooks's prototype. Telling the narrator that she had at one point interviewed a man to work on the *Gibraltar*, Anna explains why she had not hired him and states, satirizing realist fiction: 'Il avait mis des livres sur un rayon. Balzac, *Œuvres Complètes*' (*MG*, 202). In this kind of parodic statement the text signals that conventional forms of narrating are no longer desirable or believable. In addition, as the novel progresses, the ostensible object of the quest, the lost sailor, takes on a variety of identities, all overstatements of the traditional literary hero, amongst them the perfect lover, Pierrot, a handsome young man; a criminal (the murderer of a rich American); and an African folk hero. Messages from around the world urge Anna to track the sailor down, instigating new stories about his identity and location. The absence of a proper name for the sailor also undermines the humanist concept of the individual and by exaggerating the heroic male of traditional fiction, the text emphasises his imaginary status:

On l'appelait, cette fois, Pierrot. Tout le monde connaissait Pierrot dans le département. Cependant personne ne savait d'où il venait. Il n'y avait que trois ans qu'il était arrivé dans l'Hérault, tout de suite, en somme, après la Libération. Son nom, Pierrot, n'était sans doute pas le sien, mais comme personne […] ne connaît pas le véritable nom du marin de Gibraltar, qu'importait? *Qu'y avait-il de plus relatif que les noms, propres et autres?* (*MG*, 276, my emphasis)

The *absence* of a hero generates the narrative that shapes Anna's story in this novel; it is because of his absence that her story can begin to be communicated: the whole novel relies on the embedded *histoire* which she does narrate and which is based on the non-presence of the lost sailor and his adventures. While the various improbable stories are told in order to preserve a 'romantic' concept of the fictional text, structurally, through the position of Anna,

the text invalidates the romanticism and mimetic simplicity that realism endorses: 'Ce n'est pas clair, ce que tu dis', says Anna to the narrator, 'Si tu racontes des choses comme ça dans ton roman américain, personne n'y comprendra rien' (*MG*, 216).

Thematically, despite their sexual and emotional relationship, Anna remains a mystery for the narrator and therefore the reader does not have direct access to her 'meaning' either. She is also an exception in that she does not conform to the pain-burdened Durassian female protagonist of most of her work; on the contrary, the narrator concludes that none of her potential lovers would have been able to tolerate 'tant de désinvolture' in Anna: 'Est-ce qu'on pouvait avoir peur de se trouver seul avec une femme et l'horizon avec, parfois, seulement un albatros sur les haubans?' (*MG*, 210, 211). Duras's celebration of Anna, the woman who cannot be possessed, is a confirmation of the female who, unlike the virtuous, compliant woman, does not have a good name and is not dominated by male expectations of what she should be. Anna does not wait passively to be found by a romanticized male lover. On the contrary, she goes around the world on the *Gibraltar*, looking for a sailor she says she had once rescued from death and fallen in love with. She does not conform to a male fantasy, rather it is her own fantasies (fantasy being inextricably linked with desire – it is the conscious articulation of desire) which dynamize and direct the male narrator's desire for a different life, for travel and adventure. Referring obliquely to Anna, and pointing out her autonomy, the male narrator states that despite the fact that 'on pourrait croire que [les femmes des marins de Gibraltar] sont à tout le monde, […] elles ne sont à personne' (*MG*, 161). Duras shows with this novel that a writing style quite different from *écriture féminine* can also be more undetermined than at first sight and in *Le Marin*, she is clearly in pursuit of a more complex account of sexual difference, both structurally and thematically.

Challenging the male gaze in 'Le Boa'

In 1954 Duras published a collection of short stories under the title *Des journées entières dans les arbres*.[202] In 'Le Boa', an adult female narrator recalls part of her adolescence when she was at a boarding school in Indochina in the 1920s. The story is then taken up by her younger self who, in first-person *narration*, becomes the source of the *narration* and organizer of the narrative as well as the guarantor of its 'truth'; she analyses her situation, comments on her feelings and generates metaphors. The distance, geographically and temporally, between the adult narrator and the younger one is established from the start in the

[202] Duras, 'Le Boa' in *Des journées entières dans les arbres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954).

use of the impersonal reflexive construction, 'cela se passait' (*LB*, 99). To a large extent 'Le Boa' displays female narrative agency, and subjectivity in that the girl's dreams and desires drive the narrative forward, articulating a particular interpretation of the female body and of heterosexual relations.

Hampered by poverty, instead of enjoying the active social life of the other pupils, the thirteen-year old narrator spends much of her time with the old owner of the *pensionnat*, Mlle Barbet, a woman '[d'une] virginité très avancée' (*LB*, 101). 'Le Boa' exposes intriguing voyeuristic issues in the scenes that take place between old Mlle Barbet and the young female narrator. In their scopophilic desire – the old woman's to be looked at and the girl to look – there is an intricately structured destabilization of the gaze normally assigned to male spectators since Mulvey's article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' discussed in Chapter One. The gazer and the gazed-upon are both female; their 'otherness' is that of age rather than sex. By this simple device, Duras undermines Mulvey's groundbreaking but over-schematic model of identification; indeed, her practice is more in line with Mulvey's later essay, 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" inspired by *Duel in the Sun*' with its emphasis on the female as also the bearer of the gaze rather than simply on her body as an object for scopophilia. Both Mlle Barbet and the girl participate in the logic of desire which structures the text and which seems to challenge the idea of the merely passive recipient of the gaze, thus bringing the concept of identification more in line with Freud's explanation of the complexity of the process.[203] This, on the face of it, allows for more possibilities for the female look and an opportunity for female agency.

One of the spectacles which Mlle Barbet and the girl enjoy each Sunday is that of a boa who kills a live chicken for the enjoyment of the visitors at the zoo. The animal is sensually described by Duras in an expressive depiction of the dominant boa and the joyful subordinate bird:

Noir, luisant, d'une forme admirable, tendre et musclée, colonne de marbre noir, […] d'une lenteur ondulante, toute parcourue des frémissements de la puissance contenue, le boa s'intégrait ce poulet au cours d'une digestion d'une aisance souveraine. […] Dans ce formidable silence intérieur, le poulet devenait serpent. *Avec un bonheur* à vous donner le

[203] Freud first introduces the concept of 'scopophilia' in 1905 in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. He refers here to the pleasure of looking as well as the pleasure of being looked at. The term therefore has both voyeuristic and exhibitionistic, so narcissistic, connotations. See Gay's *The Freud Reader*, p. 251.

vertige, la chair du bipède se coulait dans celle du reptile, dans le long tuyau uniforme. (*LB*, 101, emphasis added)

After the spectacle of Mlle Barbet's virginal nakedness the girl says that she remained 'dans une sorte d'enthousiasme négatif que provoquait inévitablement en moi la succession des deux spectacles, la visite au Zoo et la contemplation de Mlle Barbet' (*LB*, 106). The figurative language in this passage does much to increase the feeling of the desire of the young narrator: the horrifying tale of the boa as devouring and the chicken as voluntarily subjected, recalls the dichotomy in male/female sexual relationships often articulated by Duras.

It is after the weekly spectacle of the boa and once back at the school, that Mlle Barbet compels the girl to look at her half-naked body. No-one else had seen nor would see this body apart from the girl, who, given her precarious circumstances, was forced to look at her for the length of time decided by Mlle Barbet, a suggestion here of social determinism. The old woman, devoured by 'ce manque de celui qui n'était jamais venu' (*LB*, 104), takes advantage of the girl's social and financial position to indulge in exhibitionism. The girl admits that there would have been no point in complaining as she was indebted to Mlle Barbet for allowing her to study there: 'Nous en étions complices elle et moi. Je ne disais rien. Elle ne disait pas que […] pour payer mes mensualités [ma mère] vendait ses bijoux' (*LB*, 105). But she also admits to erotic excitement: 'personellement […] le boa me faisait un effet considérable' (*LB*, 102). 'Le Boa' is useful in illustrating the mix of violence and sexuality in Duras's work. Moreover, the spectacle of the boa involves a reversal of normative values for the girl who states that the spectacle of the boa made her puzzle over 'le discrédit dans lequel on tient le crime et contre le crédit que l'on confère à l'innocence' (*LB*, 102). This suggests admiration for the violent predator and contempt for its passive, innocent (but happy) victim who turns from a chicken into a serpent 'dans ce formidable silence intérieur' once inside the boa. Despite the self-assertion of her 'female' gaze, however, the girl ultimately believes passionately in her femininity, one that her mother (in collusion with patriarchy) encourages and which brings the girl face-to-face with patriarchal norms: 'Pour trouver un mari il fallait avoir fait des études, savoir le piano, une langue étrangère, savoir se tenir dans un salon. […]. Je croyais ma mère' (*LB*, 107). We can see here that the girl's privileged look in 'Le Boa' is given an initial prominence by Duras in order for it to be then usurped by anonymous male characters.

Linking the phallic, powerful boa to her emerging sexuality, the girl says that there are only two things that give her pleasure in life: the sight of her own breasts and the weekly spectacle of the boa (*LB*, 106). It is alarming for the girl to contemplate life as an outcast like Mlle Barbet. Compared to this tragic possibility the spectacle of the boa is 'dans un ordre rayonnant de simplicité lumineuse et de grandeur native' (*LB*, 108, 109). The boa suggests to the girl the intense pleasures of 'normal' heterosexual sex that will be hers if she continues to smile at the soldiers passing underneath her balcony:

Je me l'imaginais, ce monde, s'étendre libre et dur, je me le préfigurais comme une sorte de très grand jardin botanique où, dans la fraîcheur des jets d'eau et des bassins, à l'ombre dense des tamariniers alternant avec des flaques d'intense lumière, s'accomplissaient d'innombrables échanges charnels sous la forme de dévorations, de digestions, d'accouplements à la fois orgiaques et tranquilles, de cette tranquillité des choses de dessous le soleil, […] sereines et chancelantes d'une ivresse de simplicité. (*LB*, 109)

The girl must accept and assume femininity to achieve the imagined sexual pleasures and in this context, the story can be related to the broader confrontation of the forces of masculine and feminine in Duras where the female characters are unable and/or unwilling to resist the social order imposed on them. Smiling at the soldiers, the girl thought this might be the way to 'rejoindre le vert paradis du boa criminel' (*LB*, 110). Her thoughts of the boa result in her identification with violence as the ubiquitous symbol of virility:

Je n'éprouvai […] l'horreur des assassins; au contraire, je souffrais pour ceux d'entre eux que l'on enfermait dans une prison, non tout à fait pour leur personne, mais plutôt pour leur tempérament généreux et méconnu, arrêté dans sa course fatale. Comment n'attribuerais-je pas au boa cette inclination que j'avais pour reconnaître le côté fatal du tempérament, le boa en étant à mes yeux l'image parfaite? (*LB*, 110)

Expressing sympathy and pity for the marginalized prostitute too, the girl gives in to an alternative fantasy concerning the longed-for husband. This fantasy is prostitution and in her view, if she did not marry at least the brothel would provide a pleasant way to have a life surrounded by men. The brothel seemed to her a temple where girls like her would go 'se faire découvrir le corps par des inconnus' (*LB*, 112). Wearing masks to conceal any individuality, the women would enter this temple to be devoured by an equally nameless

boa/phallus; to be cleansed of their virginity and of the potential loneliness associated with life without a man. Taking heed of the circulating narratives about the fate that awaits women without men, the girl chooses to be 'saved':

Du moment qu'un sein avait servi à un homme, n'eût-ce été qu'en lui permettant de le regarder, de prendre connaissance de sa forme, de sa rondeur, de son maintien, du moment que ce sein avait pu féconder un désir d'homme, il était à l'abri d'une déchéance pareille. De là, le grand espoir que je fondais sur le bordel, lieu par excellence où on se donnait-à-voir. (*LB*, 113)

The revulsion the girl feels towards Mlle Barbet's aged virginal body is replaced by female heterosexuality as defined by male desire. Mlle Barbet is doing what she can to achieve sexual satisfaction, but the question here is whether she is 'devoured' in an undesirable sense, by the 'wrong' kind of scenario, and perhaps too late in life. Where Mlle Barbet shows herself to a girl, as an aged to a young female virgin, in the girl's fantasy she removes herself from such a sterile dyad, which lacks the phallic element. The young heroine, in her acceptance of her subordinate femininity brought to life by the horror/pleasure of aggressive masculinity, fits into Duras's ultimate privileging of heterosexuality, one that glorifies male power and weakens female agency as the girl constructs herself as a sexualized object. The vital implication of Duras's view of female sexuality – sex as capture and possession, domination and subjugation – is that the woman here has power; that her power lies in her ability to provoke violent lust, and so bring about her own subjugation by a male. The boa/prey coupling is 'natural'; the woman/girl coupling lacks the element that would make it so. The notion of female 'power' (the power to choose the submissive role by summoning male desire, conceived as 'naturally' subjugating) in this context is essential to many of Duras's texts, where there is the suggestion that the sexual use of women by men means freedom for both. She wants sex despite the possible violence; he responds to her desire with his:

Certes, le boa me terrorisait, par sa dévoration, autant que m'horrifiait l'autre dévoration dont Mlle Barbet était la proie, mais le boa ne pouvait s'empêcher de manger le poulet de la sorte. De même, les prostituées ne pouvaient s'empêcher d'aller se faire découvrir le corps. (*LB*, 113)

Duras's representation of the strong female on the threshold of maturing sexuality in 'Le Boa' results in the ultimately powerless woman. The girl makes the case that she will be

ultimately empowered by subjugation, which enables her to avoid the fate of a Mlle Barbet. But it is usual for women in male culture to be portrayed as wielding power through their body. In the case of 'Le Boa', the girl sees her own dissolution in positive terms. The assertion of her sexuality depends on the fundamental necessity of her own debasement. This view of female sexuality that takes pleasure in effacement is implicit in the pornographic concept of the female and it is ingenious in that it transforms the evocation of male forcefulness into female sexual pleasure. Despite Sharon Willis's assertion that 'the figure of an exhibitionist female subject should have special force for feminist readers',[204] ultimately the girl in 'Le Boa', like Mlle Barbet, is prisoner of her biological destiny. Here, it is the power of 'woman' which frequently brings with it an inevitable submissiveness; this is what Trista Selous called 'the power of the catalyst, rather than of the agent'.[205] The girl's assertions of an essential femininity undermine any subversive effect because the display of her femininity represents her subordinate status; the girl does not free even the private territory of her sexuality from male authority. As stated above, the confrontation between a broadly realist fiction and the desire to subvert its psychic and social implications produces significant linguistic stress in much of Duras's work from *Moderato Cantabile* (1958) onwards.

The vagaries of desire in *Moderato Cantabile*

The theme of love is central to the plot mechanism in Duras's work; in this respect her texts share a wider feature of narrative fiction which, as contemporary critical work has shown, consistently enacts the erotic quest.[206] But we have seen that Duras often plots this quest along the lines of sexual difference. In considering *Moderato Cantabile*[207] – a work that by Duras's own account represents a turning point – I pay attention to Duras's mapping of sexual difference to assess if and to what extent she effects a change in terms of representation of gender and desire. In *Les Parleuses* Duras states that before writing *Moderato Cantabile* she wrote as if going to the office each day – 'tranquillement' (*LP*, 14). As I state above, although Gauthier dates Duras's change in writing style in 1964 with *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, Duras sees the change in 1958 with *Moderato Cantabile*: 'Avec les autres livres […] j'étais dans un labeur quotidien.[…] Avec *Moderato* c'était moins

[204] Willis, *Marguerite Duras*: *Writing on the Body*, p. 7.
[205] Selous, *The Other Woman*), p. 1.
[206] Besides Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot*, we can cite Barthes's *S/Z* (1970) and *Le Plaisir du texte* (1973) for example.
[207] Duras, *Moderato Cantabile* (Paris: Minuit, 1992). Orig. publ. 1958.

calme' (*LP*, 14). Gauthier suggests that perhaps there was an element in this text of Duras's own problem with alcohol expressed through Anne, the protagonist, who drinks and is disapproved of: '"Je voudrais un autre verre de vin", réclama Anne Desbaresdes. On le lui servit dans la désapprobation' (*MC*, 70).[208] Gauthier also proposes that the stylistic change actually took place in 1964 and was related to Duras's wish to write 'the feminine': 'Est-ce que ce n'est pas à partir du *Ravissement* qu'il commence à y avoir le trou?'. Duras replies that 'La peur a commencé avec *Lol. V. Stein*, un peu avec *Moderato*, je dois dire (*LP*, 14, 15). When *Moderato Cantabile* was published, Duras spoke of the personal crisis she went through while writing this novel and describes the experience as 'une expérience érotique très, très, très violente et – comment dire ça? – j'ai traversé une crise qui était suicidaire, […] c'est-à-dire … que ce que je raconte dans *Moderato Cantabile*, cette femme qui veut être tuée, je l'ai vécu…et à partir de là les livres ont changé…(*LP*, 59).

The main narrative in *Moderato* (which shows some of the generic features of the detective story) frames the embedded scene of a violent crime: a man shoots his female lover dead in a café and then kneels, crying, next to her body; this clearly suggests a crime of passion. As Chauvin, the male protagonist, asserts: 'Ils s'aimaient' (*MC*, 36). Chauvin and Anne partly witness the incident which triggers their fixation with each other. From then on they continue to meet claiming they could not do otherwise: '"Il m'aurait été impossible de ne pas revenir", dit-elle' and he responds, '"Je suis revenu moi aussi pour la même raison que vous'" (*MC*, 45).

The reasons for the murder are never explained, only speculated upon, as Anne and Chauvin invent their own romance. The *patronne* in the café, however, provides a probable explanation as to why the man killed the woman, implying she deserved her tragic fate: she was married to someone else, had three children and was a drunk (*MC*, 37). Ostensibly, the story invented by Anne and Chauvin is about the doomed lovers but it develops into a narrative of unfulfilled desire which takes place in the gap between what they know and what they desire to have happened in the story of the fated couple. Chauvin begins: 'Ils s'étaient connus par hasard dans un café, peut-être même dans ce café-ci qu'ils fréquentaient tous les deux. Et ils ont commencé à se parler de choses et d'autres. Mais je ne sais rien' (*MC*, 54).

[208] Citing research on the subject of alcoholism, Renate Günther argues that alcoholism in men often results from drinking alcohol as 'a social activity, associated with a conventional model of masculinity' but that for women 'alcohol addiction tends to be a secondary manifestation of an underlying depressive state […] frequently accompanied by masochistic and self-destructive drives'. See Günther's article 'Une femme qui boit c'est scandaleux: Duras and female alcoholism' in *The Resilient Female Body*: *Health and Malaise in Twentieth-Century France*, Maggie Allison and Yvette Rocheron, eds. (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 87–100. (p. 90).

Anne is presented as the mother of a small boy and wife of a wealthy and influential man in their seaside town. These roles and her obligations towards her child and husband are the dependable sign of gender identity and of her status as a respectable member of the bourgeoisie.[209] The child also provides the plot with a pretext for Anne to go into the working-class district for his piano lessons, which gives her the opportunity to walk into the café for meetings with Chauvin, a working-class man. We see, however, that from the beginning Anne is in conflict with her imposed social roles and anxious in particular about her role as mother:

Je voudrais pour cet enfant tant de choses à la fois que je ne sais pas par où commencer. Et je m'y prends très mal. […] Si vous saviez tout le bonheur qu'on leur veut, comme si c'était possible. Peut-être vaudrait-il mieux parfois que l'on nous en sépare. Je n'arrive pas à me faire une raison de cet enfant. (*MC*, 42, 43)

Anne fits uncomfortably into the role of mother. Duras dwells on it, sometimes to show Anne's joy: '"Quel enfant j'ai là", dit Anne Desbaresdes joyeusement' (*MC*, 15) and sometimes to show the opposite when Anne says 'C'est un enfant difficile' (*MC*, 13). Duras addresses in this novel the complex issues that surround motherhood and raises the possibility that Anne has needs and desires of her own, without characterizing her as the opposite of the all-nurturing, self-abnegating mother. Towards the end of the novel Anne goes home to host a dinner party and the narrator indicates what would happen: 'Alors que les invités se disperseront en ordre irrégulier […] Anne Desbaresdes s'éclipsera, montera au premier étage. Elle ira dans la chambre de son enfant, s'allongera par terre, au pied de son lit. […] Et entre le temps sacrés de la respiration de son enfant, elle vomira là, longuement, la nourriture étrangère que ce soir elle fut forcée de prendre' (*MC*, 140). Vomiting like a child exposed to unfamiliar food, Anne seems unable to fulfil the role of the child's ideal 'other', the protecting, nurturing mother. Motherhood is a useful biological fact that helps maintain male/female polarization by elevating and idealizing it through discourse that ignores its challenge to female identity in terms of freedom and individual development. By destabilizing this traditional vision, Duras's focus on Anne as mother contests a concept of motherhood as a 'natural' determining factor of femaleness. This is in opposition to Duras's

[209] According to Andrea Dworkin 'women are interchangeable as sex objects [but] women are slightly less disposable as mothers. […] Having children is the best thing women can do to get respect and be assured a place'. See Dworkin's *Right-Wing Women*: *The Politics of Domesticated Females* (London: The Women's Press, 1983), p. 143.

thoughts earlier in her career when, in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, she writes about the native women in Indochina, associating motherhood with the 'natural', and youth as a pre-condition for male desire:

Chaque femme de la plaine, tant qu'elle était assez jeune pour être desirée par son mari, avait son enfant chaque année. […] Cela continuait régulièrement, à un rythme végétal, comme si d'une longue respiration, chaque année, le ventre de chaque femme se gonflait d'un enfant, le rejettait, pour ensuite reprendre souffle d'un autre (*BP*, 117).

This is anti-feminism at its most seductive and, in contrast to woman as sexual object, it puts woman on a pedestal. It is not surprising, then, that Duras, through Anne, in attempting to resist such a model of motherhood, portrays the conflict of emotions rather than the ideal fantasy.

Through her relationship with Chauvin, Anne is drawn towards what appears to be freedom from her confined existence, but in the passage above there is a suggestion that the happiness that love brings (be it for a child or for a lover) can also be painful and overwhelming. She compares the scream of the dying woman in the embedded story to her own scream when giving birth: 'Une fois, il me semble bien, oui, une fois j'ai dû crier de la même façon peut-être, oui, quand j'ai eu cet enfant' (*MC*, 54). Deciding that it was to escape through death the painful side of love that the woman might have wished to be killed by her lover, Anne wonders how she had come to that conclusion: 'Dites-moi […] comment elle en est venue à découvrir que c'était justement ça qu'elle voulait de lui, comment elle a su à ce point ce qu'elle désirait de lui?' (*MC*, 56). Anne and Chauvin make the location of their encounters in the café a kind of stage, performing the roles of the doomed lovers and gradually replacing them.

For the conventional heterosexual romance to 'work' (as a structuring device) in Duras's earlier narratives (*La Vie tranquille* and *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*), the female protagonist assumes the role of a passive spectator of masculine power. And in *Moderato Cantabile* too it is Chauvin who assumes power, coaxing Anne to talk and to embroider her own tragic fate as he admits that he had, before meeting her, watched her and desired her from afar: 'Je vous ai vue souvent. Je n'imaginais pas qu'un jour vous arriveriez jusqu'ici avec votre enfant' (*MC*, 42). Chauvin tries to manipulate Anne into assuming the character of the murdered woman as he fantasizes a pleasurable (for him) scenario of female submission: 'Elle s'en allait quand et comme il le voulait, malgré son désir de rester' (*MC*, 118). The

man's wishes, in Chauvin's fantasy, 'naturally' overrule those of the woman; and Anne accommodates herself to the scenario which his story-telling creates. The essentially passive character of female desire in Duras is shown by the murdered woman's apparent demand for nothing but love, and in Anne's endorsement of this behaviour despite her fear that she too will be so caught up in her (platonic) love affair with Chauvin that she will end up dead: 'J'ai peur, dit de nouveau Anne Desbaresdes. […] J'ai peur, cria presque Anne Desbaresdes' (*MC,* 153). For Anne this romantic fantasizing functions not as a vehicle for sexuality but *instead* of it; she clearly longs to feel the sort of passion the dead woman felt for her lover and sees this passion as necessarily submissive. The murdered woman's subservience generates scenarios of fantasy. Anne accepts to complement or 'play along with' Chauvin's fantasy, as shown by her taking up of the story: 'Quand il l'appelait, elle revenait. Et de la même façon qu'elle partait lorsqu'il la chassait. De lui obéir à ce point, c'était sa façon à elle d'espérer. Et même, lorsqu'elle arrivait sur le pas de la porte, elle attendait encore qu'il lui dise d'entrer' (*MC,* 119, 120). Without this collaboration, Chauvin would lose the power he assumes, over the fantasy and over Anne. Chauvin replies that yes, the murdered woman behaved like a docile *chienne* (*MC,* 120). Anne by now identifies herself totally with the murdered woman as both she and Chauvin become the characters they have invented, with Anne complying like the *chienne* of Chauvin's fantasy.

By foregrounding Anne's adaptation to a scheme of 'male' fantasy or desire, Duras raises the question of whether the relation between the sexes can ever do other than point to a lack on one side or the other – which is to say, a failure to establish a 'sexual relation' as such. In *Moderato* the underlying theme is 'ce qu'on appelle des difficultés de coeur' as the protagonists state (*MC,* 37). But there is here the beginning of a recurrent theme in Duras: the impossibility of the sexual relation. Duras articulates in this novel Lacan's (much later) idea that 'there is no such thing as a sexual relationship'.[210] For Duras, strong sexual attraction and love does not help the interaction between a man and a woman. In *Les Parleuses* she describes this unsatisfied desire as 'un ratage' (*LP,* 40), and in *Moderato* it is articulated in the failure of a physical gesture: '[Anne] posa de nouveau sa main sur la table. Il suivit son geste des yeux, […] souleva la sienne qui était de plomb et la posa sur la sienne à elle. Leurs mains restèrent ainsi, figées dans leur pose mortuaire' (*MC,* 149).

[210] According to Lacan there is no straightforward, direct relationship between men and women: the two sexes are unable to interact with each other as sexed individuals. See Bruce Fink's *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 104, 105.

Although they go through the conventional rituals between two lovers – the secret meetings, the fantasies, the intensity of their look on each other – it is clear from the passage above that in *Moderato* there is only the absence of a relationship between the protagonists. Paradoxically, because of this feature, there is equal narrative status for the female character as they both participate equally in the creation of the story; Chauvin does not tell *her* story, or even *their* story.[211] He is as much a fantasy/object of desire for her as she is for him; in this sense the text resists any division between a subject/voyeur and a female object of the gaze.

We saw above that Duras's very early texts rely on rather than challenge the allocation of a 'feminine' role to female characters; but I have shown how, later, Anna in *Le Marin de Gibraltar* escapes this scheme to a large extent, and in 'Le Boa' there is a certain destabilization of the male gaze. The main female character in *Moderato* is, again, more nuanced than the very early texts and therefore Anne as a representation complicates the issue of a place for the 'feminine' in Duras. From *Le Marin* onwards, she decreasingly relies on, and increasingly problematises, the 'masculinist' scheme, in which female agency and desire are minimized or denied to allow full play to male desire. This results in a tension, as in *Moderato Cantabile*. For in the latter, we find the characteristics of a conventional 'feminine' representation: the drunken, overly emotional woman who, despite the needs of her child, decides to die at the hands of Chauvin: '"Je voudrais que vous soyez morte", dit Chauvin. "C'est fait," dit Anne Desbaresdes' (*MC*, 155). But equally, we find evidence that the roles conventionally attributed to women (love-object, object of male fantasy, mother), if 'natural' to the male are not so to the female, whose agency and desire exceed the bounds of his fantasies.

We have seen that there is a variety of formal positions occupied by the female characters in Duras's narratives. These characters are instituted as subjects and made competent along the trajectory of narrative desire to varying degrees. As I state in the Introduction to this chapter, Selous argues that Duras's female figures have 'the power of the catalyst, not of the agent'.[212] But it is important to note that this is reproduced in the dichotomy challenged by Duras's

[211] See Wright's chapter on Lacan's 'sexuation' theory which she correctly sees as his important (and convincing) contribution to discussions of sexual difference. As Wright states, sexuation 'is the process by which we unconsciously "choose" our mode of being as either feminine or masculine'. The point here is that Duras shows in *Moderato Cantabile* Lacan's proposal that men and women are defined differently by language and that therefore 'neither sex can have or be everything', thereby the basis for his 'there is no sexual relationship' statement. See Wright's *Lacan and Postfeminism* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2000), p. 21. See also Fink on this issue in *Between Language and Jouissance*, pp. 104–125.
[212] Selous, *The Other Woman*, p. 1.

writing since 'catalyst' here places the female figures concerned in an enabling but passive role, as we will see in the next sections.

Later Texts and *Écriture Féminine*

Although in some of her later work Duras continues to represent woman in an essentialist framework, she also explores the constructed character of woman; in other words, she no longer writes only as if that construction articulated a fundamental truth rather than a contingent meaning. She appears to reconsider the sex/gender distinction that is so fundamental in her earlier texts. Duras's thinking at this later stage is linked to her writing through linguistic disconnections where there is a refusal to observe the rules of ordinary, communicative language. In the next sections I continue to focus on the female character that is always at the centre of Duras's work, but I explore the possibility in her texts of the different vision of woman which Günther finds in Duras's cinema, namely a woman positioned in 'a paradoxical dual process, aligning the sometimes deadly desire for regression to the maternal with desire as a progressive and creative force, clearly evident in the radical innovations of *India Song*'.[213]

Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein

Whereas first-wave feminism focused mainly on women's voting rights and overturning legal obstacles to gender equality such as property rights, second-wave feminism widened the debate to a broad range of issues: the family, violence and rape, sexuality, women in the workplace and so on. Women in the United States had started to become more visible from the early 1960s in the professions and the media, largely because of second-wave feminist pressure. Betty Friedan published her seminal text *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, a book which is widely credited with initiating second-wave feminism in the United States. The book shatters the myth of the contented housewife in affluent white America. Although Friedan was criticized for writing from a narrow middle-class point of view, the book is a protest against the fact that *even* privileged white women (who theoretically should wield some power) led lives restricted by a male-biased social order. A year after Friedan's book, Duras published *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*. (In France a strong feminist movement would only appear in the aftermath of May 1968 with the creation of the *Mouvement de libération des femmes*. Within the framework of the cultural and social changes that took place during the

[213] Günther, *French Film Directors*: *Marguerite Duras* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.5. See Günther's analysis of *India Song* in her book, pp. 28–35.

Fifth Republic, the movement campaigned for the right to autonomy, contraception and abortion). Nevertheless, *Le Ravissement* can be said to show a revaluation of female sexuality through a complex negotiation between the needs for authorial expression and the changes concerning women that were taking place in wider society. Duras achieves this negotiation by tracing a story of female sexuality which explores new possibilities. In this section I argue that a celebration of a liberating bisexual desire as illustrated by Lol's desire for Tatiana in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*[214] effectively subverts the represented phallocentric system and at the same time bestows narrative agency on the protagonist. In other words, her desire energizes and shapes the narrative. In the following passage Jacques Hold stealthily observes the two women at a party:

Lol caresse toujours les cheveux de Tatiana. D'abord elle la regarde intensément. […] Lol lève les yeux et je vois ses lèvres prononcer Tatiana Karl. […] Elle fait quelques pas vers Tatiana, elle revient, elle l'enlace légèrement et, insensiblement, elle l'amène à la porte-fenêtre qui donne sur le parc. […] J'avance le long du mur. Voilà. Je me tiens à l'angle de la maison. Ainsi, je les entends. (*LR*, 92)

In manifesting same-sex desire, Lol represents a challenge to the entrenched nature of gender identity, manifested for example in Lol's relationship with her husband. Gender as a fundamental symbolic distinction is used in this novel to articulate other social tensions: the female characters (Lol and Tatiana) have sexual allure but the male ones have the power. Jean Bedford, Lol's husband, was drawn to her because 'elle provoquait le désir qu'il aimait des petites filles pas tout à fait grandies, tristes, impudiques, et sans voix' (*LR*, 29, 30). Jean Bedford puts Lol on a pedestal and protects and cherishes her with material comfort as long as she conforms to his fantasy by remaining passive, without a voice and 'dans [une] virtualité irréprochable' (*LR*, 70). Obstinately pursuing a meeting with Tatiana, however, Lol arrives at the latter's house: 'Elle sonne à la grille. Elle voit pour ainsi dire le rose de son sang sur ses joues. Elle doit être assez belle pour que ce soit visible, aujourd'hui. Aujourd'hui, selon son désir, on doit voir Lol V. Stein' (*LR*, 72). Here, Lol's assertion of her desire gives her emotional direction and disrupts the otherwise heterosexual eroticism in this text. This subversive move by Lol reinforces an understanding of woman-to-woman desire as being at the heart of a revolutionary concept of gender, as put forward by Judith Butler for example.

[214] Duras, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

Asserting her desire, Lol becomes the cause of male and female rivalry: between her husband and Jacques Hold; and between Tatiana and Jacques Hold. The element of female bisexuality in *Le Ravissement* suggests that a way to equality may lead through a progressive indifferentiation of gender. In other words, the specificity of each gender needs to be destabilized in order for each individual to be allowed to manifest active desire, rather than have that desire imputed to her (or him) that can serve the other's fantasy.

In privileged moments of this narrative, not only gender but biological sex seems to fade into insignificance. Jacques Hold, for example, describes Tatiana as dissolving 'jusqu'à perdre de vue l'identité de chaque forme, de toutes les formes et même du corps entier' (*LR*, 134). Rather than Duras's female characters confirming the *disponibilité* of female erotic drives, then, in this text they display a forceful assertion of the heterogeneity of female desire, showing that sexual identity is predicated on a foundation of instability. The figure of woman as 'absence' is unsettled as Duras develops a more substantial female subject at the expense of the male representations. This is particularly clear in *Le Ravissement* where, perhaps in an overshooting of equality, the male narrator's identity is 'seemingly being absorbed by [Lol's],' as Kimberley van Noort argues in her essay 'The Dance of the Signifier'.[215]

In *Le Ravissement* Duras engages with a woman's life in society; the novel is an effective illustration of women who attempt to take a dissident subject position. Duras states that from *Le Ravissement* onwards she was experimenting with the 'blanc dans la chaîne', woman's space in her writing. The novel's central point is that the heroine pursues desire on the side of narcissism rather than the desire emerging from Œdipal law. The desire of the Mother, according to Kristeva, is the origin of everything: it is the desire that is at the basis of the whole structure she associates with subjectivity. As she explains, when a subject repeats the desire of the mother, s/he brings an element of dissidence, of disruption of Œdipal law:

Quant à la fille, […] elle trouve […] de quoi apaiser ses désirs en s'identifiant avec les deux protagonistes du duo: 'je suis l'enfant souffrant et mâle de cette mère qui n'aime que moi', se dit-elle pour satisfaire son homosexualité latente; mais je suis aussi la mère, celle qui a besoin

[215] Kimberley Philpot van Noort, 'The Dance of the Signifier: Jacques Lacan and Marguerite Duras's Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein', *Symposium*, 51:3 (1997); pp. 186–200. As van Noort states, 'In a rare gesture Lacan wrote a short piece, a "homage" to be more exact, on the novel [*Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*] – rare in that it stands as his only such work devoted to a living author. […] What is curious is that […] it seems to have overtaken Duras's novel, on which it is a commentary, as the primary focus of criticism of the novel'; (p. 186). In this fascinating piece, van Noort examines the view that *Le Ravissement* is less Duras's representation of Lol than it is her representation of someone else's representation of Lol, the one put forward by Jacques Hold, the narrator.

de se dévouer à l'autre. Pourtant, cet apaisement ne peut déboucher sur une créativité que si la fille assume sa bisexualité et […] s'autorise à prendre le risque de défier la loi, de *voir* ses objets de désir et de ne pas se satisfaire d'être vue.[216]

In asserting her woman-to-woman desire Lol escapes Jacques Hold's bid to possess her. And she also sees repeated in Hold, her former lover's vulnerability, a weakness that she suspects might be in all men in their relation to women:

Ressemblait-il à son fiancé de T. Beach? Non, il ne lui ressemblait en rien. Avait-il quelque chose dans les manières de cet amant disparu? Sans doute, oui, dans les regards qu'il avait pour les femmes. Il devait courir, celui-là aussi, après toutes les femmes, ne supporter qu'avec elles ce corps difficile, qui pourtant réclamait encore, à chaque regard. (*LR*, 52)

In Duras's earlier narratives investment in the look is largely the privilege of the male characters; with control of the gaze comes power because the eye 'objectifies' and places at a distance. (we saw this clearly in Robbe-Grillet's work). But in the passage above, Lol considers Hold's seductive glance as only superficially mastering. She reverses the act of vision and sees his look as part of his 'corps difficile': he *looks* at women, including Lol, without *seeing* them, as if he were blind to deeper insights. It is she who sets him at a distance, looking at him objectively, comparing him to her former lover, establishing him as a figure of desire. The dramatic potential of this post-Freudian novel is in the attempt to create a very particular setting which encompasses a destabilizing of gender in its bisexual sub-text. As in the passage above, there is an element of a retreating masculine subject, a demanding, problematic figure which depends on women to flourish. In addition, the text shows the possibilities for the female protagonist to take on a variety of roles: sliding in and out of the exchangeable positions of subject, object and observer. The female subject becomes a mobile and changeable entity rather than a gendered individual. In the passage above from *Le Ravissement*, Lol looks at Jacques Hold without him being aware of it; she is the subject and possessor of the gaze. In a later passage Lol is the object being observed: 'Je vois ceci: Prudente, calculeuse, elle marche assez loin derrière lui' (*LR*, 55). Later in the novel she is the voyeuristic observer of Jacques Hold and Tatiana who have met secretly in a hotel room. Lol watches from outside through a window:

[216] Kristeva, *La Haine et le pardon* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), p. 159.

L'ombre de l'homme passe à travers le rectangle de lumière. Une premère fois, puis une deuxième fois en sens inverse. […] Tatiana Karl, à son tour, nue dans sa chevelure noire, traverse la scène de lumière, lentement. C'est peut-être dans le rectangle de vision de Lol qu'elle s'arrête. Elle se tourne vers le fond où l'homme doit être'. (*LR*, 64)

The shifting positions of Lol in the narrative organization constitute progress on some of Duras's other female characters because this structure frequently makes Lol the bearer of the look. There is also a progressive modification in the challenge for Jacques Hold to *know* Lol: interpretation of her is always problematised because any effort to get closer to the protagonist by the narrator – and therefore by the reader – is barred; as Jacques Hold states: 'Moi seul de tous ces faussaires, je sais: je ne sais rien. Ce fut là ma première découverte à son propos: ne rien savoir de Lol était la connaître déjà. On pouvait, me parut-il, en savoir moins encore, de moins en moins sur Lol V. Stein' (*LR*, 81). Jacques Hold's narrative authority is consistently subverted and his identity as the reliable male narrator who tells a woman's story is undermined in *Le Ravissement*.

As we see throughout the novel, Jacques Hold is active in his attempt to possess Lol. However, the love object refuses to comply and instead, he is replaced by another female character (Tatiana) who represents a threat to him but who also represents the possibility of satisfying the protagonist's desire through a homosexual liaison. This second female is a kind of double of the female protagonist and as the story progresses she is merged with the latter. The female protagonist – Lol – then functions simultaneously as her own antagonist. In *Le Ravissement* this is achieved by having dualities built into the characters; there is a splitting of the subject, as Lacan explains in the following citation from his 'Hommage' to Duras:

Ce n'est pas, manifeste dans Jacques Hold, sa division de sujet qui nous retiendra plus longtemps, c'est ce qu'il est dans l'être à trois où Lol se suspend, plaquant sur son vide le 'je pense' de mauvais rêve qui fait la matière du livre. Mais, ce faisant, il se contente de lui donner une conscience d'être qui se soutient en dehors d'elle, en Tatiana.[217]

[217] Lacan, 'Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras, du ravissement de Lol V. Stein', in *Marguerite Duras*: *essays by Marguerite Duras, Jacques Lacan, Maurice Blanchot, Dyonis Mascolo, Xavière Gauthier et Pierre Fedida*, François Barat and Joël Farges, eds. (Paris: Albatross, 1975), pp. 92–99. (p. 97).

Descartes's statement 'Je pense donc je suis' became a fundamental element of western philosophy as it was seen to constitute the basis for all knowledge.[218] Characteristically in *Le Ravissement*, 'l'être à trois où Lol se suspend' does not maintain this 'proof' of existence: the protagonist allows her identity to be defined by Jacques Hold but simultaneously signals the illusory nature of that kind of definition. The female object thus remains elusive which destabilizes the binary sexual paradigm in *Le Ravissement* as represented by the Lol/husband and Tatiana/husband models. Despite Hold's invocation of the female signifier, she slips away and takes on a different form, the form of Tatiana: she appears to be articulating that she is no more than the emptiness to be found in her own internal structure. Duras here critiques the positive, secure identity of the Cartesian subject but without totally eradicating or deconstructing it.

The reality of male domination is clearly exposed in the social disapproval of homosexual relationships: it is interesting to note that an emphasis on biological difference, given that humanity is indeed divided between male and female, automatically privileges heterosexuality: there is in patriarchal society an assumption that heterosexuality is the natural manifestation of sexual desire. Lol in *Le Ravissement* offers a dynamic model of 'femininity' in her desire for another woman. Here, she attempts to escape from a determinist version of female agency by representing female subjectivity as a generative process.

Silence and Madness in *L'Amante anglaise*

It is noteworthy that this novel was published a year before *les événements* of May 1968 about which Barthes and Michel de Certeau said, 'The citadel of language is stormed and liberated'.[219] I argue in this section that in *L'Amante anglaise*[220] there is an exploration of the intricate social and political aspects of the language/silence and sanity/insanity tensions as represented by Duras through her female protagonist. The story of Claire Lannes in *L'Amante* is one of resistance against the imposition on women, as Duras sees it, of bourgeois social norms. There are therefore two closely related and mutually reinforcing strands to the novel: society and its institutions represented by the male characters on the one hand, and Claire's alienation from society through her alienation from language and 'sanity' on the other. Feminists have long argued that language has been historically regulated by men, as it is men who have largely controlled social rituals and public spaces; the myth of 1968 should not

[218] René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode* (1637) (Paris: Flammarion, 2000), p. 66.
[219] Cited in Margaret Atack's *May 68 in French Fiction and Film: Rethinking Society, Rethinking Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 1, 2.
[220] Duras, *L'Amante anglaise* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967).

blind us to the fact that this remained the case in that momentous year when, according to Margaret Atack, women 'were faced with extraordinarily powerful negative images of women and sexist discourse'.[221] An aspect of male culture's concept of 'femininity' is of course 'feminine' reticence under the guise of *pudeur*, modesty and so on, as championed, for instance by Rousseau and his heirs; and an important element of reticence is silence; this is one way in which society promotes as a 'feminine quality' what is in fact the withholding of a privilege.[222]

Claire Lannes, the protagonist of *L'Amante anglaise* is arrested for the murder of her female cousin; she seems to nurture a fantasy regarding the sexuality of that woman, a deaf-mute who appears to embody Claire's own frustrated desire; as Claire states: 'Elle dévorait [les hommes] des yeux quand ils passaient sur les trottoirs pour aller à la messe. Ils lui souriaient à elle. […] À moi jamais personne ne m'a souri' (*AA*, 177). The trauma of her past lover's abandonment is at the root of Claire's *malaise*.[223] And yet the *passive* suffering stops when Claire kills her cousin and cuts her up into pieces which she then places on different trains travelling around France. This act gives Claire the illusory sense that she acts on her desire. The structures of language are marked with social imperatives and pressures; for Lacan, the vital characteristic of the subject is that s/he is alienated by his or her admittance into the symbolic, the realm of language, a system which simultaneously conjoins and divides. Thus with Claire Lannes, Duras represents what Lacan calls alienation in language. Because Claire is not at ease in her culture's language, cutting up the body of her dead cousin is her attempt to express herself, to articulate her desire. She writes two words on fragments of the body: 'Alphonso' and 'Cahors'. Alphonso is the only character in the novel who listens to her, and Cahors is the town where she had been abandoned by her lover. The narrator is the policeman who interrogates her, a man who wants to write a book about the murder; he wants to write a book 'about' Claire too and he takes on the role of 'analyst': 'Je cherche qui est cette femme, Claire Lannes, et pourquoi elle dit avoir commis ce crime. Elle ne donne aucune raison à ce crime. *Alors je cherche pour elle*' (*AA*, 62, my emphasis). After interrogating two witnesses – a café owner and Claire's husband Pierre – he presses Claire for an explanation. He encounters either a wall of silence or a stream of disconnected thoughts:

[221] Atack, *May 68 in French Fiction and Film*, p. 86.
[222] In her analysis of Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly's short story 'À un dîner d'athées', Claudine Hermann states that 'La parole d'une femme ne peut être que redoutable et haineuse. Dans la dialectique de Barbey, les femmes heureuses ne parlent pas: elles s'expriment par le sexe et n'ont pas d'autre langage. Quant aux autres, on les fait taire'. *Les Voleuses de langue*, (Paris: Éditions des Femmes, 1976), p. 111.
[223] This is not without its post-Freudian aspect, given Freud's statement that 'the natural sexual passivity of women explains their being more inclined to hysteria'. See Gay's *The Freud Reader*, p. 96.

J'ai eu des pensées sur le bonheur, sur les plantes en hiver, certaines plantes, certaines choses, la nourriture, la politique, l'eau, sur l'eau, les lacs froids, les fonds des lacs, les lacs du fond des lacs, sur l'eau qui boit qui prend qui se ferme, sur cette chose-là, l'eau, beaucoup, sur les bêtes qui se traînent sans répit, sans mains, sur ce qui va et vient, beaucoup aussi, sur la pensée de Cahors quand j'y pense, et quand je n'y pense pas, sur la télévision qui se mélange avec le reste, une histoire montée sur une autre montée sur une autre, sur le grouillement […] sur le gâchis et tout ce qui se perd, et cætera et cætera, est-ce que je sais. (*AA*, 162)

The narrator listens, observes and deliberates, not rushing to conclusions, confident that when all the 'facts' have been collected, the mystery will vanish and the truth will emerge. Claire, however, refuses to tell where she had concealed the dead woman's head because once she has told this to her interrogator, the interview would end and he would no longer be there to listen to her which is something she desperately wants: 'Moi à votre place, j'écouterais. Ecoutez-moi', she asks the reader in the final sentence of the text (*AA*, 195). As Claire either remains silent or responds incoherently, *her own version* of her life and her own 'reason' for the murder remain inaccessible both to the narrator and to the reader; we learn about her through her husband and the other male characters in the story: this puts the female figure in a particular place in the narrative structure. She has no access to rational language that would give the reader access to her *own* account of herself. Instead, she has emotions; she starts off with an excess of emotion apparently by virtue of being female. It might seem, then, that rather than prevail over the verbal diffidence fostered in her by a society where men have claimed for themselves mastery of the signifier, Claire uses silence as the futile weapon of resistance while her husband encourages her reticence: 'Pierre […] veut l'empêcher de parler' (*AA*, 47). The disclosure of the whereabouts of the dead woman's head, would not have endowed Claire's story with meaning or resolution because the meaning of the story is there from the beginning: in her alienation from language and in her silent response; rational language in this novel belongs to the male characters. As Mulvey argues, 'Woman […] stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of

meaning'.[224] This is difficult to square with Duras's own comments on her work, and with the readings of certain critics who suggest that Duras represents women's silence as a form of power. In *Les Parleuses*, Duras states that 'la passivité est un mot décrié, déconsidéré' and that silence is 'une force considérable' (*LP*, 71). And Susan Cohen states that Duras 'reclaims the vast silences of women as the terrain of her discursive work'.[225] But in *L'Amante*, Claire is aware that if she had not committed the murder she would have continued to be ignored: 'Je serais encore là, dans mon jardin à me taire. Parfois ma bouche était comme le ciment du banc' (*AA*, 166). Claire's statement is a reminder that even though she has a language it is not the *same one* as the dominant discourse. Indeed, Duras said in her interview with Cohen that women 'exist in silence' and their silence stems from the fact that what they seek to express is necessarily defined in male terms.[226] Cohen remarks that the 'language of silence' that Duras writes re-evaluates and expresses fundamental concepts that have been relegated to the 'feminine domain' and Selous notes that this silence allows Duras and her reader to 'avoid unthinking acceptance of conventional ways of seeing and of the traditional meanings that are built into the language she uses'.[227] These are both valid points but they ultimately underline the fact that the capacity to use language is crucial in achieving control and power. This is why historically male culture has discouraged or even forbidden women to speak publicly or during the ceremonies, rites and rituals of patriarchy. In this way, women have been relegated to the domain of the private, i.e. to familial and personal relationships.

As Moi argues, it would seem that the pursuit of a sex difference in language (such as *écriture féminine*) is not only a theoretical impossibility, but 'a political error'.[228] Research carried out by Anglo-American feminists, for example, suggests little or no gender-dependent difference underlying linguistic practice.[229] Whilst this impasse regarding gender difference in language use has been widely documented and Moi's conclusions generally accepted, words *are* powerful. The central insight of the novel is that Claire has a story but does not have the means to tell it. When she murders her cousin she generates a story; the destructive act is the only way she can attempt to appropriate a female subjectivity. Alienated from language, one of Claire's (futile) weapons is silence; the other one is madness.

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[224] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', p. 343.
[225] Susan D. Cohen, *Women and Discourse in the Fiction of Marguerite Duras* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), p.11.
[226] *Ibid*., p.11.
[227] Selous, *The Other Woman*, p. 12.
[228] Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p. 152.
[229] Moi notes that in their 1978 linguistic research, Cheris Kramer, Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley conclude that 'few expected sex differences have been firmly substantiated by empirical studies of actual speech'. See *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p. 152.

Female Stereotypes: The Madwoman

For Foucault the very act of tracing the history of madness and its 'types' underlines the cultural constructedness of the kind of social institution which 'managed' madness. In his work on madness, Foucault foregrounds the repressed, subjugated position of non-institutional speech, that is to say *irrational awareness*.[230] In *Les Parleuses* Duras forcefully establishes a correlation between women and madness which is a trope that can be found throughout her work. She states that, '[La femme] est beaucoup plus proche de la folie…Du moment qu'elle est beaucoup plus proche de toutes les transgressions' (*LP*, 49). But in doing so, she challenges the conventional opposition of madness to sanity, in which madness excludes truth. Similarly to Foucault, the agenda for a radical liberation of irrational speech is evident in Duras's writing project; there is an assumption in much of her work of an original and uncorrupted version of experience existing before the restricting intervention of culture and society which she calls 'l'intolérable du monde' (*LP*, 160).[231] But it is clear that Duras takes into account that the category of 'mad' in her texts echoes standard tropes that are traceable to other contemporary discourses about the feminine psyche. In discussions of the contestatory potential of female madness offered by critics such as Raynalle Udris, the social and cultural concept of madness as a gender construction and how this is expressed in formal terms is at issue.[232] This view holds that the madwoman, by her marginality in relation to the patriarchal culture, contests this culture. However, as Felman has argued, 'far from being a form of contestation, 'mental illness' is a request for help, a manifestation both of cultural impotence and of political castration, [needy behaviour which is] itself part of female conditioning, ideologically inherent in the behavioural pattern and in the dependent and helpless role assigned to the woman as such'.[233]

Duras proposes with her madness trope a specific female psychology conditioned by an oppressive patriarchal culture, suggesting that the yardstick for mental health is masculine. Her implicit claim that madness is liberating, or at the very least that it undoes the masculinist cultural codes responsible for women's repression, is extremely problematic, however: the

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[230] 'Il faut faire l'histoire de cet autre tour de folie – de cet autre tour par lequel les hommes, dans le geste de raison souverain qui enferme leur voisin, communiquent et se reconnaissent à travers le langage sans merci de la non-folie'. Foucault, *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* in *Dits et écrits*, p.187.

[231] Foucault eventually discarded this rather romanticized view of madness and a more rounded view of individuals as agents capable of autonomous action replaces the 'cipher-like status of Foucault's earlier conception of the subject as little more than an effect of discourse power relations'. Lois McNay, *Foucault*, p. 166.

[232] Raynalle Udris, *Welcome Unreason*: *A Study of 'madness' in the Novels of Marguerite Duras* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993).

[233] See Felman's essay 'Women and Madness: the Critical Phallacy', in *The Feminist Reader*, Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, eds., 2nd edn. (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 1997), pp. 117–132.

madwoman's perception of reality is liberated from the framework of narratives, social conditions and belief systems that normally govern consciousness. As Udris remarks, 'Throughout Duras's writing, madness enters into a series of symbolic equivalences whereby "les fous" equal the lepers or the beggars, […] the Jews, […] hungry or abandoned dogs, […] seagulls […] and, especially women'.[234] But as Suzanne Dow explains:

In studies of the relationship between women and madness authored during the 1970s, there is a residual tension never fully resolved between an attraction to the notion of madness as a woman's ill on the one hand, and an awareness, on the other, that such a claim risks positing an essential link between women and madness, to the point of simply reproducing the familiar patriarchal association of femininity with insanity. This anxiety is one that is articulated with reference to the question of agency.[235]

Udris's view that madness is a form of subversion bestows the condition a romanticized allure and raises serious questions about the role that masculine fantasies play in creating the notion of female madness in Duras. In this respect Duras's trope of the idealized madwoman functions to eradicate the mad female character symbolically from the world of the rational, leaving the male characters as the shaping agents of their discourse.

In *L'Amante anglaise* Duras portrays the protagonist's ostensible madness as resistance. Looking for a 'reason' for her crime, the detective questions Claire:

– Et s'il y a une raison mais qu'on ignore, une raison ignorée.
– La folie est-elle une raison?
– Peut-être.
– À force de chercher sans trouver, on dira que c'est la folie, je le sais. Tant pis. Si la folie est ce que j'ai, si ma maladie c'est la folie, je ne suis pas triste. Si, je suis quand même un peu triste d'être folle. (*AA*, 160,170)

Here, a subversive suggestion is hinted at by the coupling of 'folie' with 'raison', which can mean Reason (or ratiocination) as well as motive. Generally speaking, however it is the link between 'madness' and 'unreason' which are the interchangeable terms and, as Foucault

[234] Udris, *Welcome Unreason*, p. 2.
[235] Dow, *Madness in Twentieth-Century French Women's Writing: Leduc, Duras, Beauvoir, Cardinal, Hyvrard* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 11.

pointed out, this is because of the way madness has, historically, come to be viewed in our culture. We may object that the quite explicit moral orientation that excludes Claire from being seen as 'reasonable', as having an apparent motive for the murder of her cousin, is part of the discourse on madness generally. Claire's own experience of madness is reduced to the status of a theoretical construct. But it is not enough to dismantle the existing order and its power structures in a bid to explain female madness. As this argument suggests, Claire has no agency in the represented world. As a symbol of resisting femininity, the character fails as it develops an entirely *passive* position which reinforces notions of women as hysterical and irrational. As Dow suggests in the quotation above, by establishing a correlation between madness and women Duras has succumbed to what male culture sees as almost the prerogative of the female: madness resulting in lack of accountability. The precarious appeal that insanity offers Duras's troubled heroine is formally expressed by the text in the incoherence of her voice which inscribes the exclusion of the female subject from the symbolic order. [236]

Discussing the 'feminine' with Gauthier, Duras argues that what is understood by femininity in society is an artificial construction by men; women should instead focus on femaleness which is a biological and therefore more desirable form of identity, as put forward by Jules Michelet: [237]

Ah, c'est admirable, c'est dans le livre *La Sorcière* […] sur les femmes quand il parlait des menstrues, mais pour lui c'était un…, une source d'érotisme. Oui, il disait que dans le haut Moyen Age les femmes étaient seules dans leurs fermes, dans la forêt, pendant que le seigneur était à la guerre […] et c'est comme ça qu'elles ont commencé à parler, seules, aux renards et aux écureuils, aux oiseaux, aux arbres. (*LP*, 163, 164)

[236] There is a vital difference between narrative point of view (or focalization in Genette's terms) and narrative *voice*. Point of view can be understood as the actual position of a character (i.e. literal position) but in narratological terms it is the *ideological stance* of the narrated events, i.e. the perceptual or conceptual position in terms of which narrated events are rendered. Voice, on the other hand, is the speech or other explicit way in which events and other narrative elements are communicated to the reader. See Chatman's *Story and Discourse*, p. 153.

[237] Jules Michelet (1798–1874) was a French Romantic historian. *La Sorcière* is a text in two volumes on the history of witchcraft, first published in 1862. According to Michelet, medieval witchcraft was an act of popular rebellion against feudalism and the Catholic Church. The insurgency took the form of a secret religion inspired by paganism and organized by a woman who became its leader. See *La Sorcière, Tome I–II* (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1952). As Jeanne Calo states, according to Michelet, 'La femme, infiniment plus proche que l'homme des grandes forces de la nature, non seulement participe au mystère de la création par son rythme cyclique et par sa fonction reproductrice et nourricière, mais comprend les secrets de la nature et joue un rôle de médium'. See Calo's *La création de la femme chez Michelet* (Paris: Librarie Nizet, 1975), p. 248.

Historicizing her thinking, Duras adds that, finding their women talking to the creatures of the forest, the returning men burnt them at the stake as witches 'pour arrêter, pour endiguer la folie, endiguer la parole féminine' (*LP*, 164). The construction of the irrational woman in Duras's work is assumed to bear and express an essential truth, a mystical rather than a contingent meaning of woman and we are back to biology and an essentialist stance. For Duras the speech of the irrational woman is a perfectly organized discourse free of the external (social) constraints, thereby her place as an icon of *écriture féminine*. In her statement about Michelet, power is depicted as a force which operates through taboo and censorship and which has its origins in the practices that characterize pre-modern society. She implies that power was organized by a male authority who exercised control over women through threatening or actual violence. This type of male control is undeniably true but a curious image to infuse with nostalgic longing. With the exaltation of an essential femininity, the downgrading of reason in favour of an instinctive understanding; with the celebration of a kind of wise passivity; and with irrational woman structuring a large number of her narratives, in her approach to madness Duras inscribes the biologically based sexual difference that continues to hold sway.

'*Le marasme de la femme*' in *Détruire dit-elle*

Summoning the *zeitgeist* of May 68, when 'language filled the intellectual field and the complex interplay of language and silence became […] the royal road to social understanding',[238] we can speak of a remarkable convergence between the themes in *Détruire dit-elle* (1969)[239] and this particular socio/historical context. It is in this light, as an intertextually constructed text, that Duras expresses in *Détruire* the kind of sensibility and discourse produced when 'the May 68 generation of women had the impression of inventing feminism, as they discovered the oppressions and repressions of gender'.[240] As in previous texts Duras shows a 'bodily relation to writing':[241] 'Dans *Détruire dit-elle*, déjà, j'ai posé en principe cette équivalence entre le désir et l'amour. Et si tu lis à travers, ça circule en douce à peu près dans tous mes écrits. Ici, sur ce point, je ne parle pas en mon nom. […] On est ici au centre même du marasme de la femme' (*LP*, 221). This 'marasme' appears to refer to woman's position in patriarchy: the 'pro-male bias' that Atack argues women were finding

[238] Atack, *May 68*, p. 85.
[239] Duras, *Détruire dit-elle* (Paris: Minuit, 2007). Orig. publ. 1969.
[240] Atack, *May 68*, p. 85.
[241] Waters, *Intersexual Rivalry*, p. 9.

everywhere[242] and here, the relation of gender to language is particularly relevant: 'the relationship of gender and language poses, with particular acuity, issues of universalism and power'.[243]

Détruire-dit-elle (known as a hybrid text: a mixture of novel, play and film script) is a good illustration of Duras's objective to write, not to inform the reader about the real world, but rather to emphasise the gap that exists between language and what it refers to.[244] As Blanchot states, in May 68 'le Dire primait le dit. La poésie était quotidienne. La communication "spontanée", en ce sens qu'elle paraissait sans retenue, n'était rien d'autre que la communication avec elle-même, transparente, immanente'.[245] The text, therefore, often gestures towards symbolism which operates to skirt around the edges of its rhetoric while failing to bring total 'meaning' for the reader: 'Venez dans la forêt, dit Alissa. […] Non, crie Élisabeth Alione. Pourquoi? demande Bernard Alione. […] Silence' (*DDE*, 126). A 'sensible' but clearly wrong motive for not going into the forest is then given by Stein, a male character, as an answer to Bernard's 'sensible' question: '[Parce que la forêt] est classée monument historique' (*DDE*, 126). This is not, of course, what Élisabeth 'meant'; her irrational fear is deliberately ignored by both male figures. For Duras, 'male' language, as a system permeated by 'masculine' ideology, cannot possibly represent how reality is for women and it is therefore necessarily inadequate to express 'femininity'. In *Détruire dit-elle*, the text suppresses and discloses simultaneously: Élisabeth's 'flacons de pilules blanches' (*DDE*, 9, 10) speak about past tragedy which does not need to be articulated because the pills (presumably for the treatment of depression) represent 'le marasme de la femme'. This specifically female burden is also expressed by Alissa in her (female) existentialist question, 'Comment vivre? (*DDE*, 107). As well as providing a space for femininity in language, Duras's 'blanc' also represents female sexuality: 'C'est sexuel, aussi, ce blanc, ce vide' (*LP*, 19). A man cannot occupy it because for Duras, as well as for Gauthier, 'il n'y a pas d'érotisme commun' between men and women: 'Le corps est différent, […] donc ce qui s'en ressent est different, au départ (*LP*, 19).

In tearing the ideological fabric of language Duras brings up questions about the place of woman in culture and society, showing it to be imbricated in language; 'male' language, then, is unable to encompass woman's surplus meaning, what Blanchot, in his discussion of

[242] Atack, *May 68*, p. 86.
[243] *Ibid.*, p. 92.
[244] According to Kristeva, in Duras's work 'il ne s'agit pas d'un discours parlé mais d'une parole surfaite à force d'être défaite'. See Kristeva's 'La maladie de la douleur' in *Soleil Noir*, p. 234.
[245] See Maurice Blanchot, 'La Communauté des amants' in *La Communauté Inavouable* (Paris: Minuit, 1983), pp. 51–92. (p. 53).

Duras's *La Maladie de la mort* (1991), called 'cet excès qui vient avec le féminin'.[246] This excess is the Lacanian *jouissance* which is the connection between the libido and the death drive. Women do not fall completely under the authority of phallic *jouissance* (i.e. the male sexual function and speaking/language) but have a supplementary *jouissance* that cannot be expressed in words because every act of speech involves a demand and every demand is on the phallic level.[247] But the important point here is that women's *jouissance* is *supplementary*, not *complementary* to man (which is man's fantasy of woman). Female *jouissance*[248] escapes or is left over from the phallic function; woman is therefore positioned beyond the phallus. Lacan states that, 'The analytic discourse attests precisely to the fact that everything revolves around phallic jouissance, in that woman is defined by a position that I have indicated as "not whole" with respect to phallic jouissance'.[249] Woman belongs on the side of the Other, the place of *signifiance* which for Lacan is the movement of language against or away from the positions of coherence which language simultaneously constructs. The Other therefore stands against the phallus – its pretence to meaning and false consistency.[250] This is a useful framework in which to read the discourse of *Détruire*. According to Duras a man would not have been able to write this text because he is not marginal to language and so, from his hegemonic position, 'il interviendrait. Moi, je n'interviens pas' (*LP*, 18, 19).

Duras's approach to woman's place in society is that her subjectivity is always necessarily compromised by her emotions.[251] Thus, Élisabeth is portrayed as fragile and sensitive because she is female: 'Je suis quelqu'un qui a peur, […] peur d'être délaissée, peur de l'avenir, peur d'aimer, peur de la violence, du nombre, peur de l'inconnu, de la faim, de la misère, de la vérité' (*DDE,* 72). On the other hand, as she suggests, her husband is 'logical' and 'reasonable': 'mon mari, lui, lit des choses scientifiques. Il n'aime pas les romans, il lit des choses très difficile à comprendre' (*DDE*, 72). Underlining sexual difference and undoing the romantic myths of love and marriage that much of western literature alludes to, Élisabeth

[246] According to Blanchot woman is the outsider who disturbs the calm continuity of the social bond and does not acknowledge restrictions, See *La Communauté inavouable*, p. 87.
[247] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, p. 107.
[248] In feminist discourses, the term 'jouissance' has come to indicate an additional, specifically feminine form of enjoyment. See Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (eds.), *Feminine Sexuality*: *Jacques Lacan & The École Freudienne*, trans. Jacqueline Rose (London: MacMillan Press, 1983) pp. 51, 52, 53.
[249] Lacan, 'On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, Encore 1972–1973', *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (London: W.W. Norton, 1999 [1975]), p. 7.
[250] Mitchell and Rose, *Feminine Sexuality*, p. 51.
[251] Kristeva describes Duras's writing as 'non-cathartique' where 'la tristesse serait la maladie fondamentale, si elle n'était le fond maladif des femmes chez Duras'. See 'La maladie de la douleur' in *Soleil Noir*, p. 233.

dismantles these and shows instead the heterosexual relationship as ominous for women. In opposition to this view, Stein states:

J'ai vécu avec différentes femmes, […] alors j'ai eu du temps pour les femmes, mais jamais je ne me suis marié à aucune, même si je me suis prêté à la comédie du mariage, je n'ai jamais accepté sans ce hurlement intérieur du refus. Jamais. (*DDE*, 20)

A refusal of social impositions such as marriage is clearly not available for Élisabeth, or so she perceives. In her family space, where her husband and her daughter also live, Élisabeth takes tranquillizers and cries often; as her husband says, 'C'est une femme […] qui ne pouvait pas rester seule…du tout…quand je partais […] c'était chaque fois un petit drame' (*DDE*, 109). Here, Bernard operates in a linguistic mode which appropriates the truth (the 'truth' of Élisabeth is told by him to the others). Never questioning Bernard, Élisabeth has led a life as his emotional and financial dependant: 'Je suis quelqu'un qui a peur de tout, […] mon mari est très différent de moi. Sans mon mari je suis perdue…' (*DDE*, 97). For woman, love as represented in *Détruire*, is threatening and this threat helps to establish differences of gender and the way gender roles are characterized. So the male figures in *Détruire* seem to be aware of the female ones only as either the maternal imago (Élisabeth as the ideal mother) or an object of desire: 'Il avait remarqué l'élégance, la forme, puis le movement […], puis les mains' (*DDE*, 10, 11). Conceived as a source of pleasure, woman also remains an enigma. The male characters establish a kind of inquiry into woman and desire in this text, with the forest representing female sexuality as the place where everyone fears to go. To go through the forest, as Stein comments, 'il [faudrait] fracasser les arbres, foudroyer les murs' (*DDE*, 136); this is also where Élisabeth goes symbolically to vomit her femininity (*DDE*, 112).

Part of the mystery of femininity for the male characters is Élisabeth's and Alissa's attraction to each other, a relationship they watch with fascination, waiting for its consummation: 'Serait-elle allée dans la forêt avec Alissa? […] Que pensez-vous?', Max Thor asks Stein. The latter replies that 'quelques jours de plus auraient été nécessaires […] pour qu'elle se soumette au désir d'Alissa' (*DDE*, 131). The almost wordless rapport between the two women implies that they are able to achieve the sort of bond that they could never achieve with a man, as is suggested in the following passage where there is the implication that in their relationship language would not have such a prominent place because they would retain a place for the sensory:

– Vous vouliez parler de Max Thor, dit Alissa, Et vous avez dit Stein. Vous ne savez même pas parler.
– C'est vrai.
– Elles se regardent dans le miroir, se sourient.
– Comme vous êtes belle, dit Élisabeth.
– Nous sommes des femmes, dit Alissa. Regardez.
– Elles se regardent encore.

Puis Élisabeth met sa tête contre celle d'Alissa. La main d'Alissa est sur la peau d'Élisabeth Alione, à l'épaule. […] Alissa fait glisser la manche d'Élisabeth Alione. Son épaule est nue. (*DDE*, 100)

At one extreme, there is Élisabeth who represents woman's lack of power in her family setting, and on the other, there is Alissa, the archetypal powerful female bearer of destruction: 'La destruction capitale passera d'abord par les mains d'Alissa (*DDE*, 59). It is this difference between the two women which motivates their desire but desire is also fuelled by their position as females, in the same 'marasme' which allows them another kind of communication:

– Vous avez vomi? demande Alissa.
– Oui.
– Comment était-ce? Élisabeth réfléchit. Elle sourit.
– Agréable, dit-elle. (*DDE*, 119)

Gauthier refers to this kind of language as Duras's abandonment of 'cette illusion de parole' in favour of 'ce qui nous travail à l'intérieur de nous' (*LP*, 64). In the passage above we can see the tension produced by the forward, plot-shaping metonymic pull of language with the accompanying generic expectation of closure, and what Duras sees as the metaphoric capacity of language to embody 'femininity', in the allusion to 'vomiting' which clearly both women 'know about'. From this tension emerges a discourse in which it is impossible to disentangle language from the 'femininity' of the two characters: This is the kind of writing said by Duras and Gauthier to embody woman in its blank spaces (*LP*, 18). As stated by Duras, deliberate, conscious, consistent 'male' language is only 'pour meubler […] les trous, les ruines' (*LP*, 64), in opposition to the emotion shown when she writes what is in her view the 'feminine'. Paradoxically, however, the strong 'female' emotions that Élisabeth expresses

at the beginning of the text (and that her husband disparages, as we saw above), creates the springboard for her psychological and physical liberation at the end of the text, 'voicing' Blanchot's view that May 68 was 'une rencontre heureuse, comme une fête qui bouleversait les formes sociales admises ou espérées'.[252] In the early stages of the story, Max Thor appears to be the bearer of the look who observes Élisabeth, but towards the end he states that it was he who was the 'object' of her fascination: 'il y avait dix jours que vous me regardiez' (*DDE,* 128). She agrees. As we find in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein,* the reversal of the observer/observed dichotomy gives the female character agency in the narrative structure. Furthermore, Duras does not pursue romance-plot closure for the narrative. As confirmation of Élisabeth's emerging autonomy, she wants to leave the hotel and for the first time imposes her decision on Bernard, her husband; he wants to stay but 'C'est elle qui sort la première. Bernard Alione ne fait que la suivre' (*DDE,* 129). The teleological focus of the structure of *Détruire* suggests female liberation given that the ending of fictional narratives carries particular weight. The text's ending here undermines the finality of the marriage so that the solidity of the romance closure is thrown into doubt and a sense of open-endedness created.

Destabilizing Language in *L'Amour*

In this *récit,* the setting on a beach, which is a symbolic retreat from the world, points to a more abstract, sensory environment than would be the case in a more traditional text: 'La mer, la plage, il y a des flaques, des surfaces d'eau calme isolées' (*La,* 9). Privileging a dramatic style rather than lengthy pauses for description, Duras presents a series of scenes divided by ellipses that the reader must complete in order to make sense of the text. The narrative assertions are more in the mode of being rather than of action: 'Lumière arretée, illuminante. Ils regardent tout autour d'eux la lumière arretée, illuminante' (*La,* 18). One of the features of the narrative in *L'Amour* is that there are no explicit links between one sentence and another such as conjunctions:

Nuit.
La plage, la mer sont dans la nuit.
Un chien passe, il va vers la digue.
Personne ne marche sur le chemin de planches mais sur des bancs qui sont le long de ce chemin des habitants sont assis.
Ils se reposent. Ils sont silencieux. Ils sont séparés les uns des autres. Ils ne se parlent pas. (*La*, 21)

[252] Blanchot, *La Communauté Inavouable*, p. 52.

But the scenes cohere spatially and this coherence guarantees access to the narrative even when the language becomes quite distorted. Staying close to her tenet that 'Le mot compte plus que la syntaxe' (*LP*, 11), the words in *L'Amour* evoke situations that the reader is likely to be familiar with, such as the beach, sea and sand context. The reader's awareness that the narrative structure or linguistic choices in a given text are either familiar or deviant will result from a comparison with his or her pre-existing models in order to make it intelligible. The fictional world the text projects will be perceived as unusual or conventional, fantastic and so on. If a text – such as *L'Amour* – destabilizes and invigorates the reader's perception, s/he will see it as 'experimental' or 'avant-garde'. Unable to stop the play of meaning in order to organize the text as spoken from a perceptible position by 'someone' with particular attitudes, the reader is forced to recognize the act of writing in *L'Amour*. In other words, the text becomes more intelligible when the writing process is perceived as one of its main projects. Indeed, one of Duras's objectives in this text is clearly to undermine the textual operations and modes of address characteristic of dominant narrative. The purpose, arguably, is to provoke the reader into awareness of the existence of dominant codes, and consequently to encourage a critical attitude towards these codes. Duras exploits the possibility of inscribing another kind of linguistic order in her radical play with language, and here she finds herself involved in a fundamental principle of the *nouveau roman* group. Besides the difficulty of locating a narrator with 'attitudes', there is also in *L'Amour* another important obstacle to easy decoding and that is the challenge of identification with such sparingly sketched characters. In this way *L'Amour* consistenly questions the basic tenets of realism such as its articulation of the integrity of the material world and its persistent theme of human self-realization. Interpretability of a text, however, cannot be explained merely in terms of grammatical detail; the difficulties for the reader of *L'Amour* do not lie solely in linguistic complexities. In opposition to realism's fixed signifier/signified project, *L'Amour* invites the reader to look for the hidden meanings below its signifiers, following the model of a Freudian reading. The text need not be taken as explicitly Freudian, but the decoding activity that is necessary to make sense of *L'Amour* is linked to Freud's idea of a relation between a manifest and a latent content. Duras here refuses the possibility of explicit meaning as the only meaning.

L'Amour returns to and continues the story of Lol in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, Her presence is suggested in a few lines by one of the two male characters and throughout the *récit* she is simply named as 'elle':

Objet du désir absolu, dit-il, sommeil de nuit, vers cette heure-ci en général où qu'elle soit, ouverte à tous les vents, […] objet de désir, elle est à qui veut d'elle, elle le porte et l'embarque, objet de l'absolu désir. (*La*, 48)

There are no character names and ordinary syntax is largely rejected except for a few directions which continuously re-establish the triangle of desire we see in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*:

Un homme.
Il est debout, il regarde: la plage, la mer.
[…] Un autre homme. […] Il marche, il va, il vient, il va, il revient, son parcours est assez long, toujours égal.
[…] A gauche, une femme aux yeux fermés.
Asisse.
[…] Le triangle se ferme avec la femme aux yeux fermés.
[…] Du fait de l'homme qui marche, constamment, avec une lenteur égale, le triangle se déforme, se reforme, sans se briser jamais. (*La*, 9, 10)

But what eventually emerges, as ever, is a discourse which entails a speaker, a listener and a number of third-person referents – 'il', 'elle', 'l'homme', etc – within a specific communicative context. In the passage above a few action verbs indicate direction and a particular *shape* for the three characters as they interact with each other in a triangle that is never broken, destabilizing the notion of the exclusive desire of the heterosexual couple. In the three-subject relationship symbolised by the unbreakable figure of the triangle, Duras deconstructs the traditional idea of love, implicitly proposing a new concept for the configuration of human relationships. Whilst in *Le Ravissement* we saw that Lol is endowed with subjectivity through her assertion of same-sex desire, in *L'Amour* Duras relativizes 'masculinity' and 'femininity' to the point of emptying them of content and meaning; she does more, therefore, than strengthen the 'feminine' at the expense of the 'masculine', either by female desire for a female or by according the female character a radically subversive narrative agency as she does in *Le Marin de Gibraltar*, for example. As represented or constructed in *L'Amour*, the world is not structured around the influence exerted by the

masculinist logic of knowledge through exclusion.[253] Both male and female representations appropriate the gaze in turn: 'La femme est regardée' (*La*, 12); 'L'homme qui regardait ferme les yeux à son tour' (*La*, 13); 'Elle le voit, elle le regarde. […] Elle répond, très clairement: "Je regarde"' (*La*, 15); 'Il lève la tête, regarde ce qu'elle vient de montrer' (*La*, 17); 'Elle regarde' (*La*, 17). The point that interests me here is the narrative position of the female representation, and the related but more general problem of the nature of reader identification: if a female representation in narrative can only be the object of the male gaze, what is the position of the female reader? Developing from Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Film Narrative', during the 1980s film theorists such as Robert Stam developed the concept of multiple points of identification, making use of Freud's paper on masochism, 'A Child is Being Beaten' (1919):[254]

Freud shows the possibilities for the subject of fantasy to participate in a variety of roles – sliding, exchanging and doubling in the interchangeable positions of subject, object and observer. He does this by engaging with different forms of the fantasy *in terms of the linguistic pronouns they imply*: 'My father is beating the child', 'I am being beaten by my father', and 'A child is being beaten' (I am probably looking on). During the three stages of this fantasy, the subject (a woman) takes the place of the father who is doing the beating, the child being beaten, and the viewer of the scene. The subject of the fantasy thus becomes a mobile and mutable entity rather than a particular gendered individual.[255]

Duras shows here the possibilities for the subject by inscribing the power of the gaze as sliding from male to female; both 'il' and 'elle' take up the different positions as the subject, the object and the observer and 'pendant un instant personne ne regarde, personne n'est vu' (*La*, 13). By the possession of 'le regard' – and we saw how powerful looking is in Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur* – the individual is not positioned inflexibly along the lines of sexual difference, in opposition to the concept of the gaze in *Le Voyeur*.

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[253] According to Margaret Atherton, 'the concept of reason has been used in a disturbing fashion to mark a gender distinction. […] On the one hand, the man of reason and, on the other, the woman of passion'. Atherton acknowledges a general notion of reason as a major human characteristic and argues that 'the problem lies in the stereotypical understanding of the nature of women'. Atherton assumes instead that 'the concept of reason is itself gender-neutral'. See Atherton's essay 'Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason' in *A Mind of One's Own*: *Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, eds. Louise M. Antony and Charlotte Witt (Oxford: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 19–34, (p. 19).

[254] Freud, '"A Child is Being Beaten": A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions', *Standard Edition*, Vol 17, pp. 195–196.

[255] Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne and Sandy Flitterman Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Postructuralism and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 154 (my emphasis).

In *Les Parleuses* Duras expresses a wish to abandon the constraints of the language system and to take refuge in the irrational yet meaningful depths of the body, hoping to translate these depths into words without the mediation of ordinary discourse. Indeed, as Renate Günther states, there is such a thing as a feminist project which is actively 'engaged in dismantling the symbolic order that has excluded women'.[256] Such a practice is evident in *L'Amour*:

Ils se taisent. La lumière augmente de façon indiscernable tant son mouvement est lent.
De même la séparation des sables et des eaux.
La lumière monte, ouvre, montre l'espace qui grandit.
L'incendie, à son tour, se décolore comme le ciel, la mer.
On entend:
Pendant un instant elle sera aveuglée. Puis elle recommencera à me voir. A distinguer le sable de la mer, puis, la mer de la lumière, puis son corps de mon corps. Après elle séparera le froid de la nuit et me le donnera. Après seulement elle entendra le bruit vous savez…?
de Dieu…ce truc?...
Ils se taisent. Ils surveillent la progression de l'aurore extérieure (*La*, 131).

An important element of the passage above is the anti-Cartesian stance it suggests in the penultimate line. For Descartes, the existence of God is inferred from the fact that necessary existence is contained in the 'obvious' idea of a perfect being. In other words, the existence of God does not need formal proof: it is a self-evident axiom understood intuitively. In her concept of God as 'ce truc', Duras shows the falling away of the Cartesian subject's cohesion and the impossibility of the existence of God. The concept of woman too is consistent with this anti-Cartesian gesture; woman is not a static reality: it is her body that is the location where she can explore possibilities.[257] Giving pre-eminence to the bodily experience of her characters, this particular feature acquires the power of disruption of sexual difference in *L'Amour*: the narrative discards otherness in the characters' desire for similarity. The text,

[256]See Günther's article 'Fluid Boundaries: The Violence of Non-Identity in Marguerite Duras's Representations of Female Relationships', *South Central Review*, 19: 4 (2003), pp. 85–105. (p. 86).
[257] As Barbé-Petit argues, 'La subjectivité, dans une approche radicalement laïque, aurait des racines corporelles. Partant et s'enracinant dans le corps, la pensée serait d'abord une pensée-corps. Il se pourrait donc, que, dans sa période féministe, à l'époque où elle écrivait *Les Parleuses*, Duras ait, comme de nombreuses autres théoriciennes, associé le matérialisme, avec son questionnement sur le corps, à une évaluation puis une réévaluation de la place des femmes dans la société.' Barbé-Petit, *Marguerite Duras: Au risque de la philosophie*, p. 80.

then, can be explored beyond the binary opposition of an inflexible symbolic, through an anarchic desire based on the three figures' intersubjectivity: 'Le triangle se ferme avec la femme aux yeux fermés. […] L'homme qui regarde se trouve entre cette femme et l'homme qui marche au bord de la mer. […] Trois, ils sont trois dans la lumière obscure, le réseau de lenteur' (*La*, 10, 11). As Slavoj Zizek states, 'the problematic of desire is ultimately the problematic of intersubjectivity, recognition, the symbolic order, language, [and the] subject.[258] With her triangle of desire, Duras problematises the stable representation of sexuality as a binary opposition through which sexual politics functions. In *L'Amour* she disregards heterosexuality; however, it is not a question of heterosexuality being repressed but rather, she implicitly makes *categories* such as heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality, more difficult to uphold.

The Violence of Desire in *L'Homme assis dans le couloir*[259]

In 1981 Betty Friedan wrote *The Second Stage* where she points out how much – and how little – things had changed for women. Her writings, and those of Germaine Greer and Sheila Rowbotham[260] underpinned the growing women's movement in Europe; angry protests against the objectivization of women in popular images gave feminism high visibility in the media, bringing to the fore ethical questions regarding the commodification of the female body, particularly in pornography. Because of Duras's debatable feminism (Selous on the one hand and Wiedemann on the other, for example)[261], one of the important questions with regard to her work is whether or not *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* is a pornographic text. According to Martin Crowley, Duras is not an ethical writer in any 'ready sense' but her writing is nevertheless 'shot through' with ethical questions.[262] Crowley's conclusion is that *L'Homme assis* cannot be reduced to simplistic pornography because of the complexities of the writing and because the male character is not shown to be in command of the scene: he is

[258] Cited in James Mellard's *Beyond Lacan* (New York: State University Press, 2006), p. 153.
[259] Duras, *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* (Paris: Minuit, 1980).
[260] Germaine Greer is widely regarded as one of the most significant feminist voices of the late twentieth century. Her book *The Female Eunuch* became an international feminist treatise and turned her into a celebrated author, bringing her both admiration and opposition. Sheila Rowbotham is a British socialist/feminist theorist and writer who combines Marxist analysis with feminism, criticizing capitalism as a system that oppresses the working class but in particular women: women are forced to sell their labour in order to survive but also have an additional role as housewives supporting the family, the economy, sexuality and maternity. In 1981 she wrote *Beyond the fragments: feminism and the making of socialism*, with Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, a text that has become paradigmatic of socialist feminism.
[261] Selous concludes in *The Other Woman* that Duras, the real author, is more feminist that her protagonists and therefore is a relevant model for the orientation of women towards the particular rather than towards the archetype seen, according to Selous, in much of her work.
[262] Martin Crowley, *Marguerite Duras*: *Writing and the Ethical*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

'devastated by his desire, trembles, is frightened' and is finally reduced to tears by his violence against the woman.[263] Given the relevance of female images in pornography and the media that circulated contemporaneously with this text, in this section I explore *L'Homme assis* to establish whether or not, and to what extent, it might be seen as pornographic. I take as a point of departure Andrea Dworkin's argument against pornography: 'In pornography, the male sexual values that inform and permeate rape and other forced sex acts are articulated without apology. […] The genre insists […] that the woman who wants sex gets pleasure from being used like a thing, from pain and humiliation'.[264] To add to the complexities of Duras's text, in *French Erotic Fiction* Alex Hughes and Kate Ince ask an important question: 'Can […] women's sexual discourse […] be viewed as qualitatively different from that produced by male authors of erotica?'[265] This question leads to the difference between 'erotic writing' and 'pornography' confronted by Crowley. Hughes's and Ince's conclusion is that the distinction that can be made is 'inseparable from the question of the gender of the author' because female-authored texts combine erotic and pornographic elements that distort neat genre boundaries whereas male-authored ones 'all too often exactly coincide with those of commercial pornography'.[266] To what extent, then, is Duras's text like commercial pornography? The female figure is certainly perceived as compliant *and* masochistic: after having been kicked, she remains 'docile, fluide, [le corps] se prête à ces traitements tout comme s'il était évanoui' (*HA*, 19). If we concur with Dworkin's argument, *L'Homme assis* is to this extent pornographic. But the narrator also describes the woman's body as 'dans un éclairement solaire d'une blancheur effrayante' (*HA*, 13). Here the woman is both celebrated and feared: she is described as expressing intense feeling to the point of destabilizing any suggestion of victimization by the man. Intense feeling, emotional narrative detail and desire do not just belong to the man in these instances. In addition, the narrator sees the woman positioning herself in an active, deliberate gesture, for the man's view:

Les yeux toujours fermés, elle lâche la robe, ramène ses bras le long de son corps dans la coulée de ses hanches, modifie l'écartement de ses jambes, les oblique vers lui afin qu'il voie d'elle encore davantage, qu'il voie d'elle plus encore que son sexe écartelé dans sa plus

[263] Crowley, *Duras*: *Writing and the Ethical*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p.191.
[264] Dworkin, *Right-Wing Women*, p. 208.
[265] Hughes and Ince (eds.), *French Erotic Fiction: Women's Desiring Writing, 1880–1990* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), p. 3.
[266] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

grande possibilité d'être vu, qu'il voie autre chose, aussi, en même temps, autre chose d'elle, qui ressorte d'elle comme une bouche vomissante, viscérale. (*HA*, 15)

Here, the woman's body becomes a symbolic body, one whose representation is emblematic of female autonomy; the woman is seen as separate but equal; the Other but whole, not *relative* to man. There is something *beyond* her genital organs that she wants the man to see in the powerful exhibitionist move in the above passage. The woman's appeal, as articulated here, is therefore not simply sexual. In wanting the man to see beyond her 'sexe écartelé' her allure is more diffuse and less erotic: she has cast a wider net which does not encompass only the conventional understanding of 'masculine' or 'feminine'; romantic love is forgotten. The narrator implies that the woman is capable of taking on a variety of roles: 'Ainsi aurait-elle fait parfois. Parfois aussi elle aurait fait très différemment. Différemment toujours. C'est ce que je vois d'elle' (*HA*, 9). The female figure is portrayed here as desire constantly transformed; in brief, the perfect metaphor for desire and a vigorous image of woman. The female figure's pleasure in pain and its connotations of Freudian-style masochism can indeed be seen as anti-feminist but her acceptance of pain as an unavoidable route to pleasure is self-conscious and deliberate, and undermines any representation of passivity: 'Et puis elle dit qu'elle désire être frappée, elle dit, au visage. […] Elle dit: frappe fort. […] Elle dit qu'elle voudrait mourir' (*HA*, 33). In suffering so exquisitely felt, the man is of less importance than desire: 'A elle, à la femme, il n'importe pas' (*HA*, 28). As Bataille states, 'La volupté est si bien apparentée à la ruine que nous avons nommé "petite mort" le moment de son paroxysme'.[267] This state is often enacted by the female figure in *L'Homme assis*, an orgasmic 'ruine'– 'elle est pleine de jouissance, remplie de jouissance' (*HA*, 25) – where she appears to transcend time and space: 'Elle a cette unité de l'immensité indéfinie' (*HA*, 19).

With a boldness which is in considerable tension with her fastidious narrative style, Duras writes a traditional scene in pornographic discourse: 'C'est d'abord sur la bouche qu'il le fait. Le jet s'écrase sur les lèvres, sur les dents offertes, il éclabousse les yeux, les cheveux et puis il descend le long du corps, inonde les seins, […] il s'écrase dans sa chaleur, se mélange à son foutre, écume, et puis il se tarit' (*HA*, 17). There is indeed a reverence for the male body in this frank expression of sexual power where the woman is seen as lacking (as the non-possessor of the male organ); the narrator sees the woman as someone deprived and takes the man's power and the woman's lack for granted: 'Je vois […] qu'il tend à cette

[267] Bataille, 'L'Histoire de l' Érotisme', p. 152.

affamée l'homme qu'il est' (*HA*, 29). Adhering closely to the male fantasy of his own allure, 'Elle aurait ouvert ses lèvres et […] elle aurait pris dans son entier son extrémité douce et lisse. […] Sa bouche en aurait été pleine (*HA*, 26). Even the man's anus elicits her desire: 'La bouche ouverte, les yeux clos, elle est dans la caverne de l'homme, elle est retirée en lui, loin de lui, seule, dans l'obscurité du corps de l'homme. Elle embrasse. Là où il règne l'odeur fétide elle embrasse, elle lèche' (*HA*, 30).

According to Brooks's model, however varied the conditions of presence of the fictional narrative, its movement is that of a transformation predicated on the figure of a hero. Narrative is always a question of desire but the issue in *L'Homme assis* is whose desire it is that the novel speaks of and to whom it is addressed. Inasmuch as 'looking' bestows power, from the beginning the man is in command of the scene and the woman is the object of his gaze: 'Il regarde une femme qui est couchée à quelques mètres de lui sur un chemin de pierres" (*HA*, 7). But 'Elle, elle ne peut pas voir l'homme' (*HA*, 8). On the other hand, the man does cry over the unconscious body of the woman and this is why Crowley thinks he is not quite in command. Love in the context of *L'Homme assis* suggests strict power relations where violence is rationalized as an inherent element of male hegemony; when the man kicks the woman he is apparently expressing love. As Dworkin argues, 'when men target women for sexual violence in pornography, the material, the targeting, and the violence are considered expressions of sexual love'.[268] Violence becomes the language of love: 'Je t'aime. Toi', he says to her as she lies naked and in pain (*HA*, 18). Duras shows a tearful male lover but these tears are symbolic of the conflict where he is torn between two positions: he is sexually dependent on the woman and violence is his revenge for provoking desire he is unable to control.

Leslie Hill states that *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* 'has left many readers wondering […] whether the work might not be best described as pornographic'.[269] Indeed, Duras's complex portrait of woman would leave the female reader struggling to decide how her own fantasies position her in the text. The powerful portrayal of woman in some of the sexual *tableaux* in *L'Homme assis* is obviously attractive but the complexities of the text ultimately render it too ambiguous for feminism to appropriate its material in any straightforward way; but its very complexity means, as Hugues and Ince suggest, that *L'Homme assis* is not like 'commercial pornography' and it certainly blurs neat genre boundaries. At once regressive and subversive, the articulation of female sexuality in this text

[268] Dworkin, *Right-Wing Women*, p. 211.
[269] Leslie Hill, *Marguerite Duras*: *Apocalyptic Desires* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.58.

shows how Duras's feminism is indeed debatable. But as a dramatic meditation on desire, it does show some of the tensions and possibilities of the heterosexual relationship.

La Maladie de la mort

In *La Maladie de la mort*[270] a man and a woman are brought together by a contract whereby she is paid to stay with him for several days. The man, who has homosexual inclinations and is addressed as *vous* by the narrator, wants to learn about heterosexual love, and there are several conditions that the woman must meet. The story is driven by the male character's strong desire to know the essence of 'femininity':

Nuit après nuit vous vous introduisez dans l'obscurité de son sexe, vous prenez sans presque le savoir cette route aveugle. […] Parfois […] l'envie vous venait de la prendre une nouvelle fois, de la remplir encore et d'en jouir seulement de jouissance comme toujours aveuglé de larmes. […] Elle est plus mystérieuse que toutes les évidences extérieures connues jusque-là de vous (*MM*, 19).

Vous dites que vous voulez essayer, tenter la chose, tenter
connaître ça, vous habituer à ça,
à ce corps, à ces seins, à ce parfum,
[…] à cette peau nue, à cette coïncidence entre cette peau
et la vie qu'elle recouvre.
Vous lui dites que vous voulez essayer,
essayer plusieurs jours peut-être. […]
Elle demande: Essayer quoi? Vous dites: D'aimer. (*MM*, 8–9)

Even where there are few clues about an external narrator, the reader tends to assume certain features such as gender or ideological position, delineating a specific authorial narrative situation in order to facilitate the reading process. However, the narrator in *La Maladie* does not offer a perspective, setting or social order; instead, the narrative testifies to a failure to find such an order, showing instead the psychic discontinuities and confusion from which all our fragmented experience ultimately originates:

[270] Duras, *La Maladie de la mort* (Paris: Minuit, 1998). Orig. pub. 1982.

Vous devriez ne pas la connaître, l'avoir trouvée partout à la fois, dans un hôtel, dans une rue, dans un train, dans un bar, dans un livre, dans un film, en vous-même, en vous, en toi, au hasard de ton sexe dressé dans la nuit qui appelle où se mettre, où se débarrasser des pleurs qui le remplissent. (*MM*, 7)

The 'aimlessness' of desire, which is also an 'objectless-ness' (where to place the phallus?) evoked in the passage above precisely illustrates the view that the cause of desire is the lost and/or impossible object: desire is therefore a relation of being to lack; this lack is an ontological condition rather than the denial of anything specific.[271] The dynamics between desire, death and *La Maladie de la mort* is particularly suggestive of the formal and thematic exploration of this issue; the male character cannot take the leap of faith which would connect him to the other as represented by the female character: 'Elle vous demande si elle vous est utile pour faire votre corps moins seul' (*MM*, 12) and here, it is the man who shows vulnerability: 'Vous dites que vous ne savez pas bien comprendre ce mot lorsqu'il désigne votre état' (*MM*, 12). And the solitude of 'votre corps' shown above is expressed by the 'sexe dressé' without a destination – a subversive move in relation to unreflecting phallocentrism.[272] Here, the possessor of the phallus is shielded, protected and enveloped by the woman, and the darkness of their 'intimate' scenes recalls the darkness of her intimate parts, as evoked in the quotation above. The use of the present tense for a sense of immediacy and of second-person narration, *vous*, to address the male character, establishes a particular relationship between him and the narrator who seems to be on his side, almost sheltering him from the threat of the female character's self-containment, or protectively enveloping him to relieve the loneliness of the phallus, full of tears, evoked above:

Peut-être prenez-vous à elle un plaisir jusque-là inconnu de vous, je ne sais pas. Je ne sais pas non plus si vous percevez le grondement sourd et lointain de sa jouissance à travers sa respiration, à travers ce râle très doux qui va et vient depuis sa bouche jusqu'à l'air du dehors. […] Elle ouvre les yeux, elle dit: Quel bonheur. Vous mettez la main sur sa bouche pour qu'elle se taise, vous lui dites qu'on ne dit pas ces choses-là. (*MM*, 15)

[271] See Wright's chapter 'Psyche as Text' in *Psychoanalytic Criticism*, pp. 99–119.
[272] The restrained language used is a defence against the overwhelming force of sensory and affective experience of the male character and an effort to keep desire under control. This restraint is of course the point of Lacan's symbolic order, which encompasses language and which in this case restrains the male character: 'Society's injunction [is] that desire must wait, that it must formulate in the constricting word whatever demand it may speak'. See Wright's *Psychoanalytic Criticism*., p. 101.

What is interesting in this passage is the use of 'je ne sais pas' and the evocation of the satisfaction of female desire and the male tendency to treat that as taboo: this disturbs him because the female subject speaking her pleasure puts her out of his control. Let us now consider how Duras's writing method is related to this scenario. In this text, we notice of course the traditional positioning of woman as prostitute as well as the appeal to myth and mystery regarding her sexuality, but she is also radically elusive in a way which subverts masculine control and prevents her objectification. In opposition to this classic example of the masculinist ruse of placing women close to nature in order to establish a specific difference, there is the image of the woman as the irreplaceable substitute of the absent and/or originally lost object as she appropriates the gaze:

Elle demande: Quelles seraient les autres conditions?
Vous dites qu'elle devrait se taire comme les femmes de ses ancêtres, se plier complètement à vous, à votre vouloir.
Elle vous regarde. Et puis elle ne vous regarde plus, elle regarde ailleurs. Elle dit que dans ce cas c'est encore plus cher. Elle dit le chiffre du paiement. Vous acceptez . (*MM,* 10, 11)

The passage above links with the man's wish for the woman not to speak her desire, discussed above as part of her condition for his pleasure. The woman accepts the conditions for the transaction and gradually perceives how the man's *maladie,* 'cette fadeur, […] cette immobilité de […] sentiment', steadily worsens (*MM,* 46). Equally, he finds the trace of death in her: 'Vous regardez la maladie de votre vie, la maladie de la mort. C'est sur elle, sur son corps endormi, que vous la regardez' (*MM,* 36). The two characters' liaison never suggests conventional images of desire between lovers but rather the persistent pull that death exerts on desire. This text utterly subverts the plot driven by ('male') desire which Brooks discovers in the realist novel and elsewhere. Meanwhile, love, which the male here seeks through sexual union, remains elusive and so may function as the 'absent presence' of the impossible object or the inevitable excess of desire over need. Unlike in the realist novel, male and female are not complementary terms despite the repetition of the sexual act. But, the text suggests, sex cannot generate love, love must come from somewhere else: 'Peut-être d'une faille soudaine dans la logique de l'univers' (*MM,* 52). The man in this novel desires but his desire is *without direction* and results in a non-progressive narrative or a narrative 'loop', in which desire is continuously truncated: 'Elle dit: le jour est venu, tout va commencer, sauf vous. Vous, vous ne commencez jamais (*MM,* 50–51). The female character

understands the treacherous combination of desire and death: 'Vous lui donnez de la jouissance et elle crie' (*MM*, 14). As Bataille stresses, 'it takes an iron nerve to perceive the connection between the promise of life implicit in eroticism and the sensuous aspect of death'.[273] He has fantasies of killing her, 'de la jeter dans l'eau noire […] afin que le lit soit exempt de cette puanteur d'héliotrope et de cédrat' (*MM*, 32). After the woman's departure, the man does not mourn her absence, which serves to reassert the 'différence intégrale' between male and female (*MM*, 52).

Clearly, then, the man's homosexuality does not explain the blocking of desire in the text. Beneath the suggestion of a longing for his own sex, there is the compulsion to locate desire in the other (the same but other) which is what compels the male character to organize the encounter with the woman in the first place: desire is principally a desire for love; this love is to be shown fundamentally in a recognition of one's identity by the other, as Lacan proposed.[274] But the female character in *La Maladie* never recognizes him in this way; to him, she seems elusive and awe-inspiring and therefore genuinely authoritative in her continuous attempt to keep desire and fantasy alive: she, not he, 'commands' the desire that shapes the narrative. The presence of the commanding, stabilizing, containing female character in a text female character in a text so full of sexually charged language points to her embodying the sort of self-sufficient femininity on which fearful masculine desire inscribes itself: 'Vous ne comprenez pas comment il est possible qu'elle ignore vos pleurs, qu'elle soit par elle-même protégée de vous, qu'elle ignore à ce point encombrer le monde tout entier' (*MM*, 28). An important point in this story is that, for all its reliance on fantasy and sexuality, woman as constructed here by Duras cannot avoid touching the traumatic spot where masculinity fails. In Lacanian terms, their relationship is shown as that which the symbolic is never able to capture through its binary differences and which lies outside these enduring, conventional identifications: their relationship resists imposed definitions.

L'Amant

Deliberately distinguishing male and female reader responses, in an interview with Jerôme Beaujour, Duras comments on the effect of the couple in *L'Amant*:

[273] Bataille, *Eroticism*, p. 59.
[274] See Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism*, p. 115.

Pour la plupart [des hommes] ce couple de *L'Amant* […] les remplit d'un désir inattendu qui arrive du fond des siècles, du fond des hommes, celui de l'inceste, du viol. Pour moi cette petite fille qui marche dans la ville comme pour aller au lycée […], pour aller vers cet homme, vers cette obligation servile envers son amant, elle a une liberté que moi j'ai perdue.[275]

The forces that have led the author to write of a woman's 'obligation servile' towards a lover, and who sees this as an expression of *freedom*, find full expression in this declaration. Indeed, *L'Amant*[276], a novel about emerging female sexuality and self-discovery, reinforces dominant narratives by its traditional representation of heterosexual desire with which, according to Duras in the passage above, male readers can identify:

Je lui dis de venir, qu'il doit recommencer à me prendre. Il vient. […] Il est désirable. Je lui dis ce désir de lui. […] Il devient brutal, son sentiment est désespéré, il se jette sur moi, il mange les seins d'enfant, il crie, il insulte. Je ferme les yeux sur le plaisir très fort. Je pense: il a l'habitude, c'est ce qu'il fait dans la vie, l'amour, seulement ça. Les mains sont expertes, merveilleuses, parfaites. […] Il me traite de putain, de dégueulasse, il me dit que je suis son seul amour, et c'est ça qu'il doit dire et c'est ça qu'on dit quand on laisse le dire se faire, quand on laisse le corps faire et chercher et trouver et prendre ce qu'il veut. (*AM*, 54, 55)

For Laurie Vickroy, the mother/daughter relationship in *L'Amant* is 'the point of origin' for the girl's other emotional connections: 'The narrator distinguishes herself from her mother in describing her own dissolution in positive terms such as potentiality, mutability, and abandonment to another in love'.[277] This 'abandonment in love' is, arguably, what Duras refers to when she speaks paradoxically of the enviable freedom of the 'obligation servile' towards a lover, and which is expressed in the passage above. Attempting separation from the mother, the narrator suggests the mother is unable to feel the loss of identity brought about by desire: 'La mère n'a pas connu la jouissance' (*AM* 50). The mother's approval of and obsessive love for her older son is also an important element in the mother/daughter relationship, and violence is what the daughter sees they have in common: 'comme son fils

[275] Duras and Beaujour, *La Vie Matérielle*, p. 37.
[276] Duras, *L'Amant* (Paris: Minuit, 1984).
[277] Laurie Vickroy, 'Filling the Void: Transference, Love, Being and Writing in Duras's *L'Amant*', in *Marguerite Duras Lives On*, pp. 123–136. (pp. 124, 125).

aîné elle dédaignait les faibles' (*AM*, 72). The girl also perceives a complicity between mother and son in their erotic desire to punish her:

Dans des crises ma mère se jette sur moi, elle m'enferme dans la chambre, elle me bat à coups de poing, elle me gifle, elle me déshabille. […] Derrière les murs de la chambre fermée, le frère. Le frère répond à la mère, il lui dit qu'elle a raison de battre l'enfant, sa voix est feutrée, intime, caressante. […] Je sais que le frère aîné est rivé à la porte, il écoute, il sait ce que fait ma mère, il sait que la petite est nue, et frappée, il voudrait que ça dure encore et encore jusqu'au danger. Ma mère n'ignore pas ce dessein de mon frère aîné, obscur, terrifiant. (*AM*, 73, 74)

The brutal mother/daughter dynamics certainly 'leave their mark in the construction of subjectivity and gender' in the narrator, as Vickroy argues in her essay.[278] In the girl's perception, the mother clearly favours her sons and is apparently jealous of her daughter's success at school and her ambition: 'Jalouse elle est. [Elle] n'est pas contente parce que c'est pas ses fils qui sont les premiers en français, la saleté, ma mère, mon amour' (*AM*, 31). The ambivalent relationship with the mother, captured in the phrase 'la saleté, ma mère, mon amour', provides the foundation for the girl's emotional development. It is important, as Vickroy suggests, to see the sexual politics being articulated in this novel as arising out of the narrator's problematic relationship with her mother. But it is the girl's bisexual desire that is the significant issue in determining her identity. The narrator believes that this position on the margins of society is a beneficial one; this becomes clear when she speaks of her choice of clothes: 'Pour les chaussures […] ils contredisent le chapeau, comme le chapeau contredit le corps chétif, donc ils sont bons pour moi' (*LA*, 20). It is in this sexual uncertainty that she discovers her difference not only from the mother but also from Hélène: 'Hélène Lagonelle, elle, on peut la marier, l'établir dans la conjugalité, […] lui ordonner de rester là, d'attendre. […] Elle ne sait pas encore ce que je sais. […] Elle ne saura jamais ce que je sais' (*LA*, 90, 91).

Paradoxically constructing a strong identity on an ambiguous sexuality, sufficient indications are given to the reader of a radical deconstruction of patriarchal discourse; manifesting bisexual desire, the narrator represents a challenge to the entrenched nature of gender identity which constitutes a significant aspect of Duras's work:

[278] Vickroy, 'Filling the Void', p. 123.

Je suis extenuée de désir d'Hélène Lagonelle. […] Je veux emmener avec moi Hélène Lagonelle là où chaque soir, les yeux clos, je me fais donner la jouissance qui fait crier. Je voudrais donner Hélène Lagonelle à cet homme qui fait ça sur moi pour qu'il le fasse à son tour sur elle. Ceci en ma présence, […] qu'elle se donne là où moi je me donne. Ce serait par le détour du corps d'Hélène Lagonelle, par la traversée de son corps que la jouissance m'arriverait de lui, alors définitive. (*AM*, 92)

In the above passage, the verbs *donner* and *se donner* are used to describe both the girl and Hélène in relation to the male lover as the girl changes her narrative position from 'object' to be given, to one of voyeur. The narrator makes use of both Hélène and the Chinese lover as erotic objects in turn: 'Je la vois comme étant de la même chair que cet homme de Cholen' (*AM*, 92). The fetishised image of Hélène – 'Ces seins de fleur de farine' (*AM*, 91) – is an echo of her description of the Chinese lover: 'La peau est d'une somptueuse douceur. Le corps. Le corps est maigre, sans force, sans muscles, […] sans virilité autre que celle du sexe' (*AM*, 49). Both bodies are made more desirable by their innocence: '[Hélène] montre ces choses pour les mains les pétrir, pour la bouche les manger, […] sans connaissance d'elles, sans connaissance non plus de leur fabuleux pouvoir' (*AM*, 91); and the Chinese lover shows his own vulnerability to the presence of the girl: 'lui, il tremble' (*AM*, 47).

Doubly transgressive sexuality (in her desire for the racially different Chinese man and for Hélène) symbolises the inauguration of the narrator into a wider social space. It is not until she leaves her emotional links to her family – 'Dès qu'elle a penetré dans l'auto noire, elle l'a su, elle est à l'écart de cette famille pour la première fois et pour toujours' (*LA*, 46) – and asserts her sexuality, that she is able to become a writer and transcend her unpromising reality. I do not refer here solely to the desire for the Chinese lover, for Hélène or for writing, but to the girl's voice and position in the narrative structure; this character can no longer be defined within the two positions of a conventional sexual difference: on the one side the male protagonist who is the subject and on the other side the female who is the obstacle and/or the object. There is space here for the feminine subject of desire as well as the pleasures of identification for the female reader.

The set of Freudian concepts regarding the family accurately (although perhaps unconsciously) identified by Duras, and the coming of age theme in *L'Amant* are entirely consistent with one another, the former being the condition of the latter: from the mother's body onto the Œdipal drama and onwards to the fully achieved entry of the narrator's younger self into the symbolic, an entry which allows her to leave the closed family space for

the more satisfactory (for the narrator) world of language and creative writing. However, the appropriation of narrative agency by the girl is not carried out by the portrayal of a particularly generous female subject. As James Williams points out: 'Any idea […] that this imaginary encounter [between the protagonist, Hélène and the Chinese lover] is a benign passage of giving and non-possession is contradicted somewhat by the fact that the girl-narrator would be in total control of the other participants' desire'.[279] Indeed, Hélène embodies feminine beauty, passivity and obedience; the protagonist is attracted to her partly for these reasons; she is dazzled by her physical beauty, touched by her innocence and glad of her dependence. The girl, then, recreates the standard male/female relation; her desire for Hélène is generated within the framework of hierarchical gender roles, complete with sadistic fantasies reminiscent of archetypal male frameworks of desire:[280]

Le corps d'Hélène Lagonelle est lourd, encore innocent, la douceur de sa peau est telle, celle de certains fruits, elle est au bord de ne pas être perçue, illusoire un peu, c'est trop. Hélène Lagonelle donne envie de la tuer, elle fait se lever le songe merveilleux de la mettre à mort de ses propres mains. (*AM*, 91)

We see above an undercurrent of hostility mixed with desire but despite this reservation, we can say that the girl in *L'Amant* offers a dynamic model of femininity. On the whole, then, Duras arrives at a critique of patriarchy in *L'Amant* which includes family dynamics (the mother's obsession for her older son), as well as the male-biased, colonial system where the native women are second-class citizens and the European women just wait: 'Elles s'habillent pour rien. Elles se regardent. […] Elles croient vivre un roman, elles ont déjà les longues penderies pleines de robes à ne savoir qu'en faire. […] Certaines deviennent folles. Certaines sont plaquées pour une jeune domestique qui se tait. Certaines se tuent. Ce manquement des femmes à elles-mêmes par elles-mêmes opéré m'apparaissait toujours comme une erreur' (*AM*, 27, 28). Duras attempts with the protagonist of *L'Amant* to escape from a determinist version of femininity by representing female subjectivity as a generative process.

[279] Williams, *The Erotics of Passage*: *Pleasure, Politics and Form in the Later Work of Marguerite Duras* (Liverpool: University Press, 1997), p. 73.
[280] According to Dworkin, there is a cultural force that makes women legitimate and desirable sexual targets. This force 'stylizes and celebrates sexual violence', making women 'the sexual property of men'. See Dworkin's *Right-Wing Women*, pp. 82, 83.

Sadism demands a story: *La Douleur*[281]

As we have seen, in some of Duras's narratives the position of the female characters can be used as a location for the *construction* of meaning, rather than simply a site where meaning can be *revealed*. This aspect of Duras's work can be said to begin to resist the social construction of gender that places women as relative to men. By persistently telling stories about women, Duras points out – but does not always explicitly challenge – the meanings of 'woman' that have been internalized by society. In the texts explored, Duras's female representations make the text signify but within the limits of the patriarchal context in which she has placed them and in which all female authors write. But beyond the initial female-centred depiction, there is in *La Douleur* a reconception of traditional femininity through which a very different female representation develops: an active agent rather than a marginal trace of agency; this is achieved by the representation of sadism. The title of this section is the beginning of a statement by Laura Mulvey in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. According to Mulvey, the sadistic aspect of voyeurism fits well with narrative: 'Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end'.[282] The transformation in Duras's work is produced by her portrayal of an (active) sadistic femininity in *La Douleur*: she provides sadism with a story. In her exploration of the cultural nature of desire (which she sees as patriarchal), Mulvey focuses on the pleasure of judgment in sadistic desire: 'Pleasure lies in *ascertaining guilt*, […] *asserting control* and subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness'.[283] In *La Douleur* we see this pleasure: the subjugation of the male collaborator is through the assertion of control and the exercise of punishment by Thérèse; she has the pleasure of ascertaining his guilt first; the punishment would then be justified. As she states: 'L'important […] est de savoir si ce type est vraiment un donneur' (*LD*, 145). Mulvey insists on the dialectic nature of sadism and reason: sadism, then, demands a defensible story, and this is what we encounter in *La Douleur*.[284] Once the collaborator's guilt is established, Thérèse takes control; she does not want to wait a moment longer before questioning the unhappy victim. Despite one of her colleague's pleas for patience, 'Thérèse dit qu'il ne faut plus être patient, qu'on l'a assez été' (*LD*, 145). She wants (desires) to become the judge and manager of the collaborator's

[281] Duras, *La Douleur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).
[282] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema', in *Feminism and Film Theory*, p. 64.
[283] *Ibid*., p. 64 (my emphases).
[284] Bataille argues for the coextensive, dialectic nature of violence and reason. He acknowledges the normality of human excesses and accepts that we cannot escape our capability for both reason and violence. See Bataille's *Eroticism*, pp. 29–32.

punishment; then the story can begin: 'C'est sérieux, c'est vrai: on torture un homme', she says (*LD*, 156), but notes with approval (and reasonableness) that her *camarades* '[ne] frappent n'importe comment. […] Ils savent frapper. […] Ils frappent intelligemment. Ils ralentissent quand on peut croire que l'autre va dire quelque chose. Ils recommencent juste quand on sent qu'il va se reprendre' (*LD*, 157). As Freud argues, sadism is the active male counterpart of masochism and in *La Douleur*, the female protagonist appropriates it.

Placing the collaborator in Thérèse's field of vision – '[Elle] s'assied de l'autre côté de la table, derrière la lampe. Le donneur reste assis dans la lumière' (*LD*, 149) – puts the observer in a position of mastery over the observed and sets off the forward movement of narrative: 'sadism demands a story' but unlike Brooks's male narrative thrust, the initiating moment here is female. Freud linked scopophilia (pleasure in looking) with taking other people as objects and exposing them to a probing and controlling gaze (we saw this process at work in *Le Voyeur*). Scopophilia later develops into a narcissistic form where 'curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition, the human face, the human body'.[285] Recalling Mulvey's thoughts on the cinema apparatus[286], Thérèse says, 'c'est là que je suis […] dans une pièce noire enfermée avec […] ce donneur de juifs et de résistants. Je suis au cinéma. […] Accoudée à la table Thérèse regarde. […] Les chaussettes du donneur sont trouées, il en sort un gros orteil à l'ongle noir' (*LD*, 150–152). The female protagonist controls the 'stage' and emerges as the representative of power on that stage in which she articulates the gaze and generates the action. The male body of the collaborator is exposed for her (sadistic) enjoyment. Realized as subject through the circuit of the gaze and signalling female fantasy, Thèrése takes control: 'Déshabille-toi, et en vitesse' (*LD*, 149), demands Albert before Thérèse gives the command for the torture (i.e. the heart of the narrative) to begin: '"Allez-y", dit Thérèse (*LD*, 157).

In *La Douleur* (a story in two parts set shortly after the liberation of France), all the characters from the first section remain in the second section, except that the protagonist is replaced by Thérèse, narrowing the distance between the implied author and Thérèse the fictional character. Duras creates an overtly feminist text where the suffering we read about in the first part of the novel (about the waiting, self-sacrificial wife) becomes a narrative of female mastery in the second part: when one of the group asks the *donneur* to undress quickly as there isn't much time, 'Thérèse trouve que le camarade parle faux. Au contraire de ce qu'il dit ils ont tout le temps. […] C'est elle, Thérèse, qui va s'occuper de ce donneur (*LD*, 150). In

[285] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure', p. 60.
[286] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

an *active* scopophilic impulse she subjects the collaborator to the role of objectified other, linking sadism to voyeurism, as Freud does and Mulvey reinforces. Duras's desire to give voice to the female subject's *jouissance* in the sexual excitement of sadism, leads to a rebellion against a homogenizing concept of 'woman' and here, the female subject wins the battle for signifying dominance as Thérèse sustains her own *jouissance*, that is, her status as desiring subject. After we learn of the selfless nature of the protagonist/narrator in the first part of the novel, the epigraph 'Thérèse c'est moi' of the second part, introduces a cruel, politically motivated female, bent on revenge and punishment, a *justificatory* story of sadism: 'C'est fini. La guerre est sortie de Paris. […] Mais pour [Thérèse], ce n'est pas fini (*LD*, 154). The text then becomes fundamentally contradictory, purposefully historical and unavoidably political. This contradiction is apparent, not just in the display of the woman's double nature (caring wife/vengeful resistant) but also in the presence of the past which, for the reader, constitutes a critical and not simply a nostalgic revisiting of the events. The historical 'facts', then, are problematised by critical reflection and the blurring of a variety of textual categories: Thérèse's vengeful cruelty against the collaborator explodes the myth of the principled Resistance fighter and therefore obscures the difference between that noble image and the Nazi aggressor. Woman in *La Douleur* is seen as both merciless and erotically aroused by the enemy. In a later episode in part two Thérèse is seen as sexually attracted to a captured *milicien*:[287] 'Ter a vingt-trois ans. C'est un beau type. Il n'a pas de veste et on lui voit les muscles des avant-bras, longs, jeunes. Sa taille est fine, bien prise dans une ceinture de cuir (*LD*, 182). Duras reverses the traditional 'male/aggressor', 'female/victim' dichotomy and turns Ter into an object of desire: 'Il n'a aucune pensée en tête mais seulement des envies, il a un corps fait pour le plaisir (*LD*, 182). Thérèse's propensity towards (justified) sadism in the case of the *donneur*, in combination with erotic attraction towards Ter, narrows the difference between sexuality and violence and betrays the legendary integrity of Resistance objectives.

Presumably it is the first part of the story that Ramsay is thinking of when she argues that 'Duras identifies the war with the emotions experienced in a feminine waiting for her deported husband [whilst] Robbe-Grillet, like Sade as Barthes interprets him, locates the scream of pain/pleasure outside the "masculine" self in the "feminine" other'.[288] But Ramsay ignores Duras's own location of the other side of female sexual pleasure which is apparent in the second part of *La Douleur*, in the actions of the protagonist with whom Duras (the

[287] See the section entitled 'Ter le milicien' in *La Douleur*, pp. 173–191.
[288] Ramsay, *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity*, p. 234.

waiting wife) also clearly identifies. According to Duras, they are both to be seen as one person, herself. Duras's exploration of the fantasies of sadistic violence is the moment when the author arms herself with a possible concept of femininity as different from the conventional, overturning the mythologising of 'woman'. From the initial iconography of the assertive phallus/waiting female hole, and the invocation of hypothetical goddesses who incarnate 'femininity' in some of her texts, Duras presents a different version: 'Thérèse c'est moi. Celle qui torture le donneur, c'est moi. De même celle qui a envie de faire l'amour avec Ter le milicien, moi. Je vous donne celle qui torture avec le reste des textes' (*LD*, 38). This other side of female sexual pleasure cannot be represented except through the dual metaphor of femininity, that is to say, the theme of the impurity of the female 'angel' which Robbe-Grillet consistently articulates and which Duras shows in *La Douleur*.[289] Thérèse adopts the position of desiring subject, not by manipulating male characters to fulfil her pleasure, but through her own assertion of viciousness as a source of compelling sensations; pleasure and *just* revenge without guilt. These sensations are not those of a violent other introjected through identification: they are her very own kind of *jouissance*:

Ils frappent de plus en plus fort. Aucune importance. Ils sont infatigables. Ils frappent de mieux en mieux, avec plus de calme. Plus ils frappent, plus il saigne, plus c'est clair qu'il faut frapper, que c'est vrai, que c'est juste. Les images se lèvent sous les coups. Thérèse est transparente, enchantée d'images. (*LD*, 160)

According to Wiedemman, *La Douleur* draws even more fully than previous texts on Duras's own experiences, 'demolishing the boundary normally placed between fact and fiction, between author and the narrator. And perhaps this accounts for some of the intensity and power of her work'.[290] As a dramatization of the autobiographical, this way of reading *La Douleur* suggests that the author might not be 'dead' after all: as Malcolm Bowie argues, Mallarmé's 'Prose pour des Esseintes' and 'Un coup de dés' challenge the cautious formalist assumption that works of art are 'self-bounded worlds in which all tensions are internally resolved and all pains internally soothed and that the personality of their creator (if he has a

[289] According to Lacan, woman is necessarily implicated in phallic sexuality but, to the extent that *jouissance* is phallic, woman can be said to belong 'elsewhere'. In other words, woman sustains her very own *jouissance*. See Lacan's 'The Phallic Phase and the Subjective Import of the Castration Complex' in *Feminine Sexuality*: *The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, XX, p. 121.
[290] Wiedemman, *Marguerite Duras Lives On*, p. 8.

personality) is irrelevant to them'.[291] Duras certainly gives the impression that she is deeply connected to her fiction, that her 'self' and indeed her body are in touch with her work, as we can see from the following passage:

Le corps des écrivains participe de leurs écrits. Les écrivains provoquent la sexualité à leur endroit. Comme les princes et les gens de pouvoir. Les hommes c'est comme s'ils avaient couché avec notre tête, pénétré notre tête en même temps que notre corps. Il n'y a pas eu d'exception quant à moi. […] C'est comme ça partout dans le monde, pour tous les écrivains hommes et femmes mêlés. […] Ce sont des objets sexuels par excellence. […] Le talent, le génie appellent le viol, ils l'appellent comme ils appellent la mort.[292]

Duras's delighted endorsement of authors' position between Eros and Thanatos, and the freedoms they can claim because of talent, confirms her fascination with taboo libidinal drives. The author, then, is an absent presence and this is where the concept of the implied author becomes useful: as Chatman argues, 'rather than calling attention to the work as the product of a choosing, evaluating person, [the literary text] is a repository of choices – of already *made* choices, which can be considered as alternatives to other choices that might have been made but were not'.[293] In the case of *La Douleur*, it is clear that the Second World War had great impact on the historical Duras.[294] Her anxious wait for news of her husband's fate as a prisoner of the Germans during the Occupation is described in the first part of the novel where Duras names herself as the protagonist and narrator; however, the novel's suggestion of 'autobiography' should not be taken for granted and the term 'autofiction' or 'une sorte de journal de bord' is useful in describing this text, as Barbé-Petit argues.[295] In *La Douleur* Duras shows keen awareness of history and fiction as constructs, but also of masculinity and femininity as constructs. This is articulated in the conflicting relationship between the text and the dominant, humanist culture: the text questions this culture from within its own assumptions regarding history; morality; and its supposedly 'clear' distinctions between 'good' and 'evil' and between 'masculine' and 'feminine'.

[291] Bowie, *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 154. Derrida too encourages this approach to the author: he pays attention to the mystifying nature of autobiography; he is curious about the life of the author and the matter of his/her survival in the text. See Derrida's 'Living On' in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1979), pp. 75–176.
[292] Duras and Beaujour, *La Vie Matérielle,* p. 77.
[293] Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*, (London: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 82.
[294] Adler, *Marguerite Duras,* p. 111.
[295] Barbé-Petit, *Marguerite Duras: au risque de la philosophie*, p. 31.

Concluding Remarks

I have suggested in this chapter that Duras's writing practice should be removed from the *écriture féminine* cul-de-sac in which it has been placed by certain critics. My overall argument has two components. The first can be broadly termed 'feminocentric': it consists in analysing particular female characters in their social settings.[296] This method is the one that Duras's feminist supporters have mainly used. This is an important method in that it analyses of representations reflect how women are positioned in the private and public spheres; how they relate to men; how women are placed as wife, mother and so on. However, this method has its limitations because it often relies too much on a concept of literature as mimesis, and so blurs the boundaries between the domain of the empirical experience of actual women with that of its textual representation. This is why I have deployed a narratological or 'formalist' approach as the second component of my argument. The methods and insights of narratology applied to feminocentric texts provide a more complete analysis of Duras's work. It has been my experience that exploring the compatibility of a feminist and a formal approach creates a methodological tension: I have attempted to reconcile an abstract, formal approach that is necessarily outside a socio/historical context with the mimetic focus of Duras's work where context is relevant for regulating meaning in the text. A formal approach seems at first to jeopardize one of the basic principles of one span of feminist criticism: that literary fiction, and particularly the novel, is strongly referential and, furthermore, *influential* in its representation of gender relations (in that a powerful representation can serve as a critique inciting change in the real world). But on reflection, it serves to show that to oppose, in Duras, formal experimentation and feminocentric 'representation' of gender relations, is to posit a false dichotomy. As we have seen, attending to the feminocentric aspects of Duras's texts as 'desiring machines' (to use Brooks's term) allows us both to rescue Brooks's insights from the threat of masculinism and to see beyond a split between a 'realist'/mimetic phase lasting until 1964 and a 'post-realist' or experimental phase, associated with the *nouveau roman*, afterwards. Whilst she portrays woman as erotic object, to be 'taken' by the desiring male (heterosexual or would-be heterosexual), Duras shows female characters incorporating that male/female relationship within a larger structure of 'female' desire. This means that whilst evoking the 'masculinist' model of desire (as narrative structure) she makes a place for

[296] This is a term adopted by Nancy K. Miller to distinguish feminism from a sympathetic portrayal of women in the literary text. Miller uses the term to discuss what she describes as the eighteenth century's 'collective obsessing about an idea called woman'. See Miller's *The Heroine's Text: Readings in the French and English Novel 1722–1782* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. ix.

woman as the subject of narrative: there is a space for a female affirmation of agency which is passive only on the surface. Narrative, in other words, can be shaped by a female 'desiring machine' that is not simply a complementary inversion of the masculinist version proposed by Brooks, still less an appropriately 'softened' form of it. To put this another way: plot, as described by Brooks is structured by expectation of fulfilment or problem-and-solution designs. This notion assumes (in essentialist fashion) that this amounts to a male-oriented scheme of desire, in ways that were discussed in the introductory comments to this chapter. Duras's writing negates such assumptions, but not by falling into a feminist-essentialist position.

CONCLUSION

In this study I set out to explore twentieth-century literary representations of the human subject in the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Marguerite Duras and, as planned, both 'subject' and 'representation' have received critical attention. The study was also intended as a contribution to a neglected yet potentially productive comparison between two authors who offer challenging experiments in narrative form, and whose work converges in their illustration of questions of gender and sexuality and in the centrality of the feminine as a structural device of their narratives. A study of theoretical problems through an analysis of literary texts can produce insights which would be impossible otherwise, and so my findings are based on the close readings of a number of my authors' texts from across the years of their writing careers. Focusing on the work of Peter Brooks, who (problematically) considers only 'male' desire as shaping narrative, and therefore as normative, I attended to this issue by attempting to define what is meant by 'male' or 'female' desire and examining how Robbe-Grillet and Duras illustrate this question. With this in mind, throughout this thesis I have considered the sex/gender debate that is fundamental to feminist theory – and which has important implications for debates between feminism and psychoanalysis – and the way that this debate is illustrated in my authors' texts. This required an investigation into the degree to which Robbe-Grillet and Duras convey female agency and how they represent relations of power between the sexes. The motivations and desire of particular characters, as far as these can be deduced from textual evidence, can then be seen, not as having the sole purpose of shaping the plot, either in a 'masculine' or 'feminine' mode, but rather as finding a place within 'sexual/textual' politics.

At first glance a feminist commentary of Robbe-Grillet's work such as I undertake in this study might seem to be no more than a rejection of his texts' own hierarchy of value, bringing to the critical forefront what is subordinated by him to the narrative background. The fact that the vast majority of critical work on Robbe-Grillet is centred on his experimentation with narrative form suggests a potential 'mismatch' between a feminist critical interest and the mainstream tendency in studies of his texts.[297] The following statement of Robbe-Grillet's, however, partly inspired this aspect of my thesis: 'Je m'intéresse à un critique qui propose de mon œuvre une vue très opposée à la mienne, plutôt

[297] See, for example, Dale Watson Fraizer's *Alain Robbe-Grillet: An Annoted Bibliography of Critical Studies, 1953–1972* (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1973).

qu'à celui qui propose une vue ressemblant trop à la mienne, car pour cela je n'ai pas besoin de lui'.[298]

The question of misogyny specifically seems to emerge in the intensity and pressure of Robbe-Grillet's textual language; it surfaces out of the plot and is never absent in his narratives, where desire is channelled to replicate patriarchal power relations. Despite innovative techniques which inhibit protagonists' 'personalities' from developing and which thwart readers' easy access to stories, Robbe-Grillet's narratives move along the conventional track he outlines, and this movement is that of masculine, misogynistic desire. My reading of Robbe-Grillet provides fresh evidence to support Ramsay's claim that 'the binary oppositions that were seen to play an important role in the human symbolic systems of language, literary texts, and myth are everywhere in the writer's [Robbe-Grillet's] work'.[299] This of course also entails the binary opposition man/woman. This aspect of his writing reveals a discursive-structuring impulse which is not found in Duras.[300] Ultimately, the overall issue has been the extent to which Duras, as female author, expresses or interrogates the unarticulated position of female 'objects' as represented by Robbe-Grillet.

The question here is whether Robbe-Grillet and Duras put forward genuinely different versions of 'woman'. While the two authors do not have an entirely different set of concerns, their solutions to the long-standing issue of female representation in the literary text is fairly clear: their work does appear to constitute a difference in the tactical approach they offer to some of the impasses that developed during their respective writing careers regarding woman's place in society. That is to say, the authors make a variety of textual inscriptions that respond to a series of theoretical problems regarding a feminist position. Importantly, in response to the collapse of the category of 'women' in postmodernism, Duras's display of a *variety* of female voices in her texts and her intensely personal investment in each female character begins to show the flexibility and desirability of seeing women as individuals rather than as a category. In the case of Robbe-Grillet, the opposite is consistently the case: whilst Duras foregrounds personalized narratives as regards her female characters in much of her work, sometimes showing a 'multi-perspectival' version of femininity, Robbe-Grillet responds to these contemporary issues by refusing even to skim the surface of feminist

[298] Allemand and Milat, *Balises pour le XX1e siècle*, p. 19.
[299] Ramsay, *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity*, p. 45.
[300] As Celia Britton stresses, structuralism is relevant to the work of all the *nouveaux romanciers* (except for Sarraute). Nevertheless, its influence takes different forms in the work of the various novelists in the group. See Britton's *The Nouveau Roman*: *Fiction, Theory and Politics* (London: MacMillan, 1992), p. 60. See also Waters, who writes of Robbe-Grillet's structuralist 'espousal of an authorless, formally-based approach' as opposed to Duras's authorial 'bodily relation to writing'. *Intersexual Rivalry*, p. 9.

politics. In other words, while Duras begins to reject traditional discourses regarding the feminine (which destabilizes Peter Brooks's model of 'masculine' narrative desire), Robbe-Grillet operates within a much narrower array of discursive locations where the female voice is totally muted.

Critics of the period around the emergence of the *nouveau roman* have often located the energy of the 'new' in its 'avant-gardist' position, in the daring narrative disruptions and stylistic experimentation of the *nouveaux romanciers*.[301] But an examination of Robbe-Grillet's discourses at the time, in interviews and essays, show that the noun most frequently modified by the adjective 'new' is 'man' (suggesting the normative value of maleness). In the decades in question, the advent of the new man, of a new construction of (male) subjectivity was announced, celebrated, examined and debated; Robbe-Grillet's anti-establishment stance feeds exclusively into questions of his writing techniques and themes, and it is the eroticization of male power through representations of sexualized misogyny that is played out in his texts. Part of Robbe-Grillet's response to contemporary culture appears to be that, although he believes in a new place for the (clearly male) subject that would mark progress and renewal in the novel, he feels compelled to engage with the images of women around him too, thereby his claim to 'modernism'. Critics such as Ramsay, Smith and Morrissette have tended to minimize the strong sexual elements of Robbe-Grillet's novels to focus on them as formal constructions unconnected to any social or political reality. But placing his work in relation to the contemporary culture in which the novels we discuss were written, I have traced the continuity which shows a consistent preoccupation with particular motifs, themes and structures with regard to sexual difference. *Le Voyeur* is an early example of a novel which displays such preoccupations and which clearly shows the pattern of Robbe-Grillet's future novelistic direction. In 1949, only a few years before the publication of *Le Voyeur* in 1955, de Beauvoir's well-known pronouncement regarding the constructed nature of femininity shows that the apparent connection between female/feminine and male/masculine is not, after all, mandatory. For women, rejecting the negative side of the masculine/feminine binary was, of course, an important step towards the modern concept of equality. However, Robbe-Grillet's fiction consistently shows that maintaining a difference between the sexes is the principal motivating force that structures his narratives, despite the

[301] According to Allemand and Milat, 'Robbe-Grillet était conscient de la position avant-gardiste de la littérature en la matière: "Ce sont en partie nos premiers romans qui ont amené les réflexions de Foucault sur l'homme. […] Nous étions comme en train de créer une nouvelle philosophie que nous ignorions nous mêmes"'. *Balises pour le XX1e siècle*, p. 16.

progressive tenor of his views regarding the way that the novel should change to 'reflect' its historical and social moment; indeed this is the fundamental way in which he introduces history into imaginative literature.

As they consider the decades of Robbe-Grillet's writing career, feminist critics increasingly insist on the meaning in the literary text of the female body and on the political and ideological implications of its presence. Traditional myths of woman, woman gazed at, objectified and tortured (and some of them are complicit), confirm Robbe-Grillet's fascination with the feminine, a fascination which articulates the simultaneous attraction and anxiety surrounding the sexual Other. His portrayals of male/female relationships are represented as active male/passive female; there is also the feminine as marked by a diabolical beauty as in the angel/devil combination we see, for example, in Jacqueline/Violette in *Le Voyeur*; we also find the consistent beauty/death topos of the raped virgin which is an archetypal model of the feminine in western culture. Robbe-Grillet, then, falls prey to the danger he himself identifies in the 'répétition systématique' of bourgeois ideology; namely, that in attempting to intervene in its project and disrupt it, and despite his new formal strategies, he merely perpetuates its ethos and participates in the patterns of traditional thinking. Robbe-Grillet's particular representation of male/female relations is highlighted by Smith who states that 'the recurrence of certain forms of deviance in [Robbe-Grillet's] work, including especially incest, pædophilia, and sadism, would seem to point to a personal obsession' and concludes that Robbe-Grillet is haunted by some of the sexual proclivities he displays in his work.[302] He nevertheless mentions that 'Robbe-Grillet's defence is that he did not invent such images, that they have long been embedded in our culture, and that their evidence is everywhere around us. [Robbe-Grillet] does not see his role as that of the censor but merely as the observer'.[303] According to this argument, Robbe-Grillet's position on misogyny seems to be simply descriptive, unveiling the social circumstances in which he finds himself but not necessarily endorsing them. The question here is whether or not his reworking of contemporary cultural codes in the corpus under discussion reinforces or subverts convention by means of irony and parody; it is of course the case that exaggerating stereotypes could be seen as designed to challenge the stereotype itself. However, in the case of Robbe-Grillet, the recurrence of the female characters' bodies as tortured and disposable appear as part of an agenda for a particular kind of textual erotics: there is clearly an obsession with the suffering female body and a preoccupation with the

[302] Smith, *Understanding Robbe-Grillet*, p. 143.
[303] *Ibid*., p. 141.

feminine that undermines any parodic impact. Where questions of gender are concerned, Robbe-Grillet's thematics of violence against women constitutes a problematic and regressive aspect of a writing project which overtly seeks to be identified as progressive and liberated from clichéd modes of representation.

In his aesthetic exploration Robbe-Grillet is also proposing a politics of the text on the grounds that the conventions of realism, with their naturalizing reproduction of 'reality', suppress a critical understanding of the cultural and ideological operations involved: realism as the perfect agent of bourgeois ideology. But if a critique involves a rethinking of its aesthetic object, it also means, ideally, a rethinking of the subjects represented and the power relations portrayed. Thus, Robbe-Grillet's work does not live up to the expectations established by him regarding the *nouveau roman*. His challenge to representation is confined to certain aspects of form, whilst thematic aspects are allowed to retain certain ideological clichés without much questioning. The misgiving must remain, therefore, that his was always a lesser political move than is suggested by him with regard to his literary project. It must be taken into account, however, that *Pour un nouveau roman* is a kind of manifesto and needs to be read as such, with due attention being given to the fact that it may well overstate its aims for polemical effect.

It would be convenient to see Robbe-Grillet's novels as the deployment of the author's personal sado-erotic fantasies. Certainly this is both Smith's and Ramsay's view; Robbe-Grillet's work presents itself as a declaration, an assertion, a taking-up of a position within contemporary frameworks of sexuality.[304] In suggesting that the novels under discussion, as well as Robbe-Grillet's novelistic output generally, are both conventional and radical I am suggesting that a possible approach to his work lies in apparently antithetical readings. The concept of Robbe-Grillet's personal involvement arguably connects the formalistic and the sexual: the author can be simultaneously lascivious and innovative. Robbe-Grillet thus enacts the transformation of the novel but falls back on certain aspects of more traditional writing practices, showing an inability to conceive of a framework that would make his own axioms in *Pour un nouveau roman* fully credible. He certainly succeeds in exposing the constructive nature of narrative; this exposition is supported by his own use of innovative forms such as the strong focus on writing itself and new narrative forms to portray the literary character. However, his 'new' novel is a failure to re-configure femininity for a new world. The intellectual framework for his fiction thus remains a closed system of

[304] See Ramsay's interviews with the author in *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity*, pp. 243–252.

conventions about gender, betraying a masculinist signature and rehearsing the conservative kind of patriarchal privilege to be often found in the more traditional novel. His fiction consistently restages the Œdipal drama purely from a masculine position and shows that the narrative and symbolic problem of maintaining a difference between the sexes is one Robbe-Grillet's principal motivating forces, despite the progressive tenor of his theoretical declarations.

The conflicting responses that emerge in this study when analysing Duras's narratives are intensified by deeply held beliefs about women generally and the sex of the writer in particular. This is not only a truism of some aspects of western literature as well as wider society, but more specifically of Brooks's model of narrative as well as Robbe-Grillet's articulation of femininity. Having looked at the variety of illustrations of female subjectivity and how it relates to meaning in Duras, I also looked at the real world through the eyes of Duras by means of *Les Parleuses* (inasmuch as we can infer anything from authors' real life statements). This approach was taken to show that the voice of Duras as a female writer is articulated through a negotiation between her own experience of dominant myths and stories of her culture, and her subversive desire to write destabilizing texts. Acknowledging the postmodern rejection of a fixed identity of self, Duras nevertheless maintains a concept of subjecthood in her writings, however unstable this may be, so that the reader is able to delineate characters in their represented cultural negotiations. Despite the changes in her writing that are discussed in this study, there is no difficulty in reading the figure of woman which emerges as a particularly charged cultural sign and site of social and emotional struggle.

Inevitably, many readers will bear in mind the identity of the author as they read, and so critically assess 'Duras the woman' or 'Duras the writer' by measuring the figure of the woman they encounter in her texts against their own position, and in particular when it comes to the female reader.[305] It seems that this was part of Duras's agenda as an author, given the many interviews she gave throughout her career. The reader's place, of course, reminds us that the literary work provides an articulation of the cultural construction of both writer and text, which cannot be considered outside historical and cultural contexts. The extent of peripheral, intertextual influences on the author's writing in relation to the incursions of the *moi*, shows the extent to which the internal aspects of the text are linked to the external

[305] See Culler's section, 'Reading as a Woman' in *On Deconstruction*: *Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, 3rd edn. (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 43–64.

context. This dynamic, Kristeva argues, 'can reveal the inauthenticity of the writing subject. The writer becomes "le sujet en procès" [a French expression which] means both a "subject in process" and a "subject on trial." As such, the speaking subject is a carnival, a polyphony, forever contradictory and rebellious'.[306]

As I state in Chapter Three, Duras herself, in the early part of her career, characterized her work as 'masculine'; and the early texts (written before the 1950s) broadly deploy a plot of desire conforming, roughly, to the one evoked by Brooks and exemplified by Robbe-Grillet. We also saw that there is an evolution in her writing, such that this plot of desire is incorporated into one where female characters, who at first desire to be desired according to the 'masculine' plot, develop greater agency and clearly exceed the boundaries of that plot, via their modes of desire. Still, these other modes of (female) desire are articulated against, and therefore in relation to, that 'original' plot, and guarantee its problematic presence throughout. Durassian woman, after all, possesses some features of female sexuality that circulate in society generally and are part of our burden of *idées réçues*. Duras cannot escape culture either, and through her expression of femininity in much of her work, we can see that the conventional figure of woman is marked as 'other' in a language in which 'masculine' is an unmarked category, compatible with a 'self' that poses as neutral. We have seen that, despite their central role, Duras's female characters do not always display the narrative force and commitment described by Brooks: theirs is a disordered desire lacking 'man's unquenchable striving' because subjected to it. Many of the heroines remain close to an illustration of archetypal femininity: in her representations of women Duras often makes a connection between women and nature, and this is one of the obstacles which militates against female agency in her work. The attribution of a particular spiritual closeness between women and nature operates to maintain the conception of woman as different to men: if she is 'naturally' different her role in human life must be biologically pre-determined. But in some of her later work, she displays a new approach to the representation and subjectivity of her female figures. Here, Duras begins to create a discourse, a voice and a position for the female as subject of narrative; and does so without falling into the kind of essentialism postulated by reductive theorisations (but not all theorisations) of *écriture féminine*. As Béatrice Didier argues, 'Il y a un point où la spécificité radicale redeviendra un piège. […] L'écriture

[306] Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 10. Orig. publ. in French 2005. According to Toril Moi, Kristeva's theory of language and its *sujet en procès* 'allows us to examine both women's and men's writing from an anti-humanist, anti-essentialist perspective'. See Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p. 171.

féminine ne doit pas être un enfermement'.[307] A combination of Wiedemann's and Didier's views would seem to offer considerable promise for future readings of Duras. The strength of Wiedemann's position lies in her emphasis on language as a material and social structure; as for Didier, she takes account of other conflicting ideological structures that are also part of social change. In both respects, Duras's writing problematises attempts to describe it as *écriture féminine*, and so approaching her work requires careful nuance for it to be given status as 'feminist'. In my close readings of her work, by attending to the male and female voices and describing the subtle but crucial differences between them, I have shown how Duras's writing points towards new forms of autonomy emerging in contemporary society which cannot necessarily be understood through straightforward dichotomies of male dominance and female subordination. We have seen that Duras moves beyond a representation of woman as object, to a performance of woman, effected through a female subject communicating a woman's story.

The subject/character explored in my thesis is not fixed but is generated by a dynamic process; an ongoing, ever-changing state that provides the narrative with an array of 'voices'. Plot (be it 'masculine' or 'feminine') is only one of a number of elements at the author's disposal, one generator of narrative amongst others. Narrative, in this model, involves a subject/character in a represented social environment. Re-defined accordingly, narrative is still a process but its effects are read within an integral relationship of elements which also involves the discourse of a subject occupying a subject position. Vitally, the narrative can be shaped by a female 'desiring machine' (providing we recognize women as subjects of desire). This having been said, I believe that the role of desire in narrative must be explored in close reading, within the specificity of a textual practice where the subject is materially inscribed. This is particularly clear when one considers narrative in the non-traditional novel, as is the case of Robbe-Grillet's and Duras's work, where the question of how the subject/character is constituted is often foregrounded and problematised. Some of the narratological possibilities inherent in psychoanalysis prove indispensable for this area of enquiry. I have sought to explain how desire 'works' within the discursive movement of narrative by considering the various conditions of presence of the subject/character's discourse in my authors' work and the way that desire in the subject emerges in their writing. I have explored how these writers represent the shattering of the traditional (post-)Cartesian subject that is the result of postmodernism and deconstruction, into a new distribution of relationships between the

[307] Didier, *L'écriture-femme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981), p. 38.

elements of narrative that cluster around the subject and the desire of the subject within texts. If we consider narrative along the lines set out above, it becomes possible to understand that plot and character are not only inseparable from one another but that their specific mode of merging is the very condition for any possibility of knowledge of a text.

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