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MARGUERITE DURAS:

A THEMATIC AND TECHNICAL STUDY

by

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for the Ph.D. Degree,  
University of Kent,  
Canterbury.

1971.

(Submitted 1972)

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PREFACE

This thesis attempts to examine the works of Marguerite Duras up to the year 1970. Duras has written novels and plays, and more recently film-scenarios; she has also directed films based on her own works. All these aspects of her output are discussed.

After a brief introduction outlining Marguerite Duras's life and artistic development, the thesis divides into two parts: "Thematic Continuity" and "Technique and Style".

In the first part Duras's works are studied for their close thematic similarities. In her outlook on the human condition, Duras wavers between optimism and pessimism. She writes principally about love, which according to her can offer self-fulfilment and spiritual release; it is an intensely passionate experience; yet its survival is never guaranteed and it may lead to unhappiness (ch.1). Duras is obsessed by the idea of loneliness, though she always holds out the possibility that men and women will enter into contact (ch.2). Human existence is presented as claustrophobic, often painful, yet Duras shows how ordinary people are capable of escaping from it, or of rebelling against it (chapters 3, 4). Time, too, can be both friend and enemy, fulfilling an individual's aspirations, but more frequently bringing change for the worse (ch. 5). A further theme in her work, related to that of time, is the way in which individuals are linked with their past through the processes of memory (ch.6).

Since 1964, the majority of Duras's works have centred on madness, and the next two chapters cover what she considers at present her most important ideas (chapters 7, 8). Madness is seen as a means of self-liberation. The idea is crucial to Duras's present political concerns, since madness offers the key to transcendence and a new form of Communism, as Duras conceives it.

The ninth chapter covers two minor themes: the relationship between parent and child, and the effect of sexuality upon personal development.

The second part of the thesis studies Duras's experiments in form, which throw light on meaning and the writer's attitude to her material.

Duras's novel-techniques have been dictated by her rejection of authorial omniscience and the novel "à la Balzac". The angle of vision is severely restricted. Duras has dispensed with psychological analysis of all characters save the central figure. Conversation therefore assumes capital importance in her aesthetic; it is skilfully fashioned to hint at psychic states and unarticulated thoughts (ch.10). Chapter 11 deals with technique in the plays, which again are totally dependent upon conversation; the tempo of the dialogue gives the plays their shape. Both as script-writer and film-director, Duras exploits the resources of the cinema for dramatic effect and to underline theme (ch.12).

In chapter 13, the essential aspects of Duras's style are examined. The discussion is primarily concerned with style in the novels, but shows how stylistic devices have been transferred from one genre to another.

The thesis concludes by describing Duras's position as a writer today.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to Mrs. Sheila M. Bell, who has supervised my research, made many valuable comments on this thesis at various stages, and suggested a considerable number of improvements. I should also like to thank Dr. Roger Cardinal for offering much useful information on the French Surrealists which formed the basis for several footnotes in the seventh and eighth chapters.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Despite Duras's success and considerable reputation, the amount of serious critical attention she has received is limited. At the time of writing, no general study has been published on her. The only published work of any length is Jean-Luc Seylaz, Les Romans de Marguerite Duras: essai sur une thématique de la durée, Paris, Archives des Lettres Modernes, no.47, 1963. It provided a valuable introduction to the theme of the fifth chapter. There are very few articles of any great length, but collections of articles have been published in Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, no.52, and in the 10/18 edition of Moderato Cantabile. A thesis has been written on Duras's novels up till 1967: John Scott Bratton, "The Novels of Marguerite Duras" (Columbia University, 1968, unpublished). The approach and interpretation coincide with the present work at certain points, and attention is drawn to these.

Particularly valuable to any study of Duras's work are the interviews she has given over the years, and which have been published in a variety of newspapers and periodicals. I have made considerable use of a number of these. I have also consulted numerous books, not concerned with Duras, but which were helpful in studying aspects of her output.

All works consulted are mentioned in the footnotes, as appropriate, and a complete list is contained in the bibliography.

## INTRODUCTION

Marguerite Duras was born Marguerite Donadieu in the former French colony of Indo-China, in 1914. Her parents were French. Her father was a professor of mathematics and her mother a schoolteacher. In her early childhood her father died and the family, including her two brothers, came to live for several years in the Dordogne. When later they returned to Saigon her mother bought some worthless land from the colonial authorities, which led to their ruin. The years of bitterness and abject poverty that followed were to imprint themselves on the adolescent girl's mind, and her experiences would provide the material for the powerful indictment of colonialism in Duras's third novel, Un Barrage contre le Pacifique.

At the age of seventeen she returned to study in Paris. She had originally intended to be a teacher but later took up a post in the French Colonial Office. She studied law, mathematics, and political science. Politics, indeed, has been one of her great passions. With a fierce hatred of injustice, she was attracted like many of her generation towards Communism, and has remained a convinced Communist ever since. For ten years she belonged to the French Party, until her expulsion in 1954, as she herself explains:

You could say I left the Communist Party over a question of culture, the relationship of politics to culture ... because of Sartre, actually. We were told one day to burn Sartre's books so I said 'vive la liberté' and left. And I wasn't even an admirer of Sartre! But the intrusion of political commitment into literary creation is, for me, the beginning of a moral position which is incompatible with literature. (1)

Duras had by this time become a novelist of some stature. She has never allowed external political pressures to dictate her literary activities, although in recent years her own political standpoint is increasingly evident in her works. She has been involved in public events; for example, she was one of the signatories of the Manifesto of the 121, campaigning against the Algerian war. Today she is still committed to the idea of

world-revolution, although she can no longer accept either the debased state of French Communism or the value of militancy: "I am no longer a militant - in the accepted sense. I find militancy, as it is performed now, deadly. It's a monologue. The militant is above all a talker."(2) After the near-revolution of 1968, Duras participated in an action committee of writers and students. It must be said that Duras is a Communist of a highly unorthodox order; her interpretation of Communism, as we shall see, involves far less the concept of property than the reform of the individual.

Duras is also fervently in favour of women's rights. Recently Le Nouvel Observateur caused a furore with the publication of a manifesto demanding free abortion. Duras placed her name alongside those of 342 other women - including Simone de Beauvoir, Françoise Sagan, and Jeanne Moreau the actress - declaring she had undergone an illegal abortion.(3)

It is, however, because of her outlook on love, expressed in nearly a score of novels and plays, that the writer is best known to the public. Love according to the writer has nothing to do with the institution of marriage which can even cause the end of love: she has one son now in his early twenties but, predictably, she has never married:

I have not married. Marriage takes away fundamental independence. Not love, but the ties of marriage. Marriage means being fixed, having a point of attachment. Love is another matter. Ideally, I would have no point of attachment - no house, for instance. (4)

The words exemplify the writer's strong independence, and would be understood by a number of her heroines who thirst for new experience outside of marriage.

Recently Duras explained why she felt compelled to write:

J'écris pour me déplacer de moi au livre.  
Pour m'alléger de mon importance. Que le livre en prenne à ma place.  
Pour me massacrer, me gâcher, m'abîmer, dans la parturition du livre.

Me vulgariser, me coucher dans la rue. Ca réussit. A mesure que j'écris, j'existe moins. La libre disposition du moi, je l'éprouve dans deux cas: à l'idée du suicide et à l'idée d'écrire. Le remplacement physique du moi par le livre ou par la mort. La solution de continuité, livre ou mort. (5)

Writing is a means of transcending her personality, of escaping from herself; in particular it seems to provide an outlet from the personal despair she has often experienced.

Taking as her pseudonym the name of a village in South-West France, Duras published her first novel, Les Impudents, in 1943. Since then she has disowned it as a mediocre and ridiculous work and will not allow it to be reprinted.(6) A whole series of novels followed. The third - Un Barrage contre le Pacifique (1950) - brought her to the attention of the public, and her reputation was built up from there. It is her fifth book - Les Petits Chevaux de Tarquinia (1953) - which is the first to bear all the hallmarks of her most distinctive works: it is limited in scope, concentrates on one emotional crisis, has few characters, and is written in a laconic, lucid style. With the austere conversational novel, Le Square (1955) and the haunting Moderato Cantabile (1958), Duras was linked by critics with the "nouveaux romanciers" - Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute and others - though she has always felt the comparison was inaccurate.(7) She never deliberately attempted to share their preoccupations, and prefers to work in her own individual vein. Her novels are unmistakable because of their particular treatment of themes like love and solitude; their atmosphere is often languorous and claustrophobic; they can be oblique and mysterious like Moderato Cantabile, Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein (1964), and Le Vice-consul (1966). Duras has continually experimented with form, and is particularly known for the use she makes of dialogue.

Duras's initiation into the theatre came through Le Square. Although the book was never conceived as a play, its dialogue form was inherently theatrical and it was suggested to the writer that she should translate it

onto the stage. An abridged version was performed with considerable success in 1956. Her first work written expressly for the stage, Les Viaducs de la Seine-et-Oise (1960), was again largely a dialogue - between an old couple who have committed an appalling murder. Subsequently she has seen several others performed, including comedies, and has written French versions of a number of plays originally in English, among which were adaptations from a novelist she greatly admires, Henry James. In 1968 Duras directed her own works, Yes, peut-être and Le Shaga, which were unfortunately not well received; this was her only attempt at directing in the theatre.

In 1958, Duras was approached by the film-director, Alain Resnais, to write a script for a film he was planning to shoot in Japan. Resnais wanted to work with a distinguished woman-novelist, and had previously approached Françoise Sagan. He desired a literary text, at once lyrical and poetic, which would help create the "operatic" style of the film: "I wanted to make a film for women, and I more or less forced Marguerite Duras into going her own way. She was an essential factor in the 'grand opera' style I wanted to give my film." (8) Duras was given only nine weeks to complete the scenario, which Resnais filmed as Hiroshima mon amour. On its release in 1959 it created a sensation, and along with Resnais Duras gained an international reputation. She has been fascinated by the cinema, for which she subsequently wrote other film-scripts, including adaptations of her own novels.

The fourth phase of her career - as a film-director - began in 1966, when she collaborated in directing the film of her play, La Musica. To date she has written and directed three films, all of which are notable for their spareness and simplicity. Her latest film, Jaune le soleil (1971), was made on a cooperative basis: everyone involved - actors, cameramen, technicians - not only worked but lived together during filming, talking

over the film's problems, making decisions collectively, in short making the film they wished without commercial pressures. It was made with very little actual cash, because the members agreed to hold over their salaries until the film was released.(9)

Duras's career has been full and varied, her output prolific. Few contemporary writers have won critical acclaim in three quite different genres, yet Duras appears equally at ease in all of them. She has transferred a number of her works from one genre to another:

At times I feel like coming out of the book, out of the box. I want to see; I want to hear; very often, though, the reading vision is enough. (10)

Because of her continual fascination with a particular story, or with some of the personages, she has felt compelled to explore the same events from a new angle, in other media.

Duras perhaps owes her considerable popularity to her personal treatment of certain themes. One of the most significant aspects of her work is that the same fundamental themes recur across the whole spectrum, interrelating, and enriching one another. The present study attempts to show this continuing pattern.

NOTES

- (1) Lee Langley, "Marguerite Duras - irreligious Salvationist," The Guardian, 7 September 1968, p.6.  
  
(Many of the articles to which reference is made are contained on a single page. Whenever this is the case - as with the article mentioned above - the source will be indicated, after the first footnote, by the author's name.)
- (2) Nina Sutton, "Asking for the impossible," The Guardian, 13 July 1971, p.8.
- (3) Cf. Le Nouvel Observateur, 5 avril 1971, pp.3ff.
- (4) Dilys Rowe, "The Film of the Book", The Times, 17 November 1969, p.6.  
There is some confusion over whether Duras did in fact marry or not. Lee Langley and Dilys Rowe confirm that she did not, whereas in an interview with Alain Hervé (note 6) she is quoted as saying that she married, some time before she entered the Communist Party.
- (5) Jean Schuster, "Voix Off," L'Archibras, octobre 1967, pp.13-14.
- (6) Cf. Alain Hervé, "L'auteur de Hiroshima mon amour vous parle," Réalités, no.206, mars 1963, p.91.
- (7) Cf. L. Langley, and the concluding section of this thesis.
- (8) Louis Marcorelles, "Rebel with a Camera," Sight and Sound, vol.29, no.1 (1960), p.14.
- (9) Cf. Richard Roud, "Blue Handwriting on the Wall," The Guardian, 13 March 1971, p.8.
- (10) N. Sutton.

PART ONE:

THEMATIC CONTINUITY

Chapter 1

LOVE

The work of Marguerite Duras is centred upon the study of fundamental human emotions; love and desire, the thrill of growing contact and the pain of separation are themes that have haunted her from the beginning of her career. Love, according to Duras, can be an all-embracing experience, raising men and women to peaks of emotional intensity. It also offers the promise of self-fulfilment and renewed existence. Trapped on a barren Indo-Chinese concession or within a tightly-knit family circle, forced to live out a meaningless existence with a partner for whom a character cares nothing (like the heroine of Moderato Cantabile), Duras's protagonists yearn for love which provides purpose and an escape from private suffering. Love may possess the power of a life-force, nowhere more so than in the celebrated film, Hiroshima mon amour, which holds a unique position in her work. Duras also describes, on the other hand, in the personages of Lol V. Stein and the Vice-consul of Lahore, the sterility that results from an inability to love.

Duras writes of the unhappiness as well as the joy of love; indeed she regards them as inevitable parts of the same experience. As one character states, "L'amour, il faut le vivre complètement, avec son ennui et tout."<sup>(1)</sup> Moreover the authoress is fascinated by the dual nature of love, in its moments both of grandeur and decline. If at times she describes the unpredictability of human emotions with a bitter cynicism, she comes over more frequently as a realist, resigned to the fact that the survival of a loving relationship is never guaranteed. Some of her heroines are looking forward to the excitement of a new affair, others are confronted

with the disintegration of their one great passion.

The love that takes possession of her characters is no mere simpering romance; they are driven by violently sexual urges. Men and women often yearn for an erotic passion that contains more than an element of danger, even the possibility of death - and they know it.

The earliest novels are shot through with a gloomy pessimism, for though love may blossom for the young heroes and heroines, promising release from years of unhappiness and futility, it cannot long survive. Marguerite Duras's first novel, Les Impudents (2), which she has now disowned, trades the varying fortunes of a family living in a climate of hate. The Grand-Tanerans, members of the haute bourgeoisie, are a tightly-knit community unable to separate in spite of the cruelty and malice they inflict upon each other. Dominating the whole unfortunate family is the elder son, Jacques, choleric, malicious, causing his mother unbearable pain. He may indeed have felt a genuine affection for his wife, but any sorrow at her recent suicide is short-lived. His twenty-year-old sister, Maud, who comes to occupy the centre of the stage, could hardly fail to be moulded by the atmosphere of disgust and anger. In Maud, too, hatred broods, though she will come to know the one love of her life during the course of the novel. During the family's stay on their decaying estate in the Dordogne, they meet the young landowner, Georges Durieux, who is holidaying on a nearby property. The love that flowers between him and Maud gives meaning and purpose to the life of the girl who for twenty years has lived a sterile existence, the object of constant abuse.

Apart from its frequent longueurs, it is Duras's view of love that makes the novel so unsatisfactory. The young authoress regards it as an

unpredictable emotion and goes to inordinate lengths to prove the case. The story seems totally contrived. There is no rhyme or reason to Maud's feelings, and constantly she falls in and out of love. After longing desperately for the moment when she can have the elusive Georges to herself, it comes as a disappointment; her feelings simply dry up:

Elle attendait cet instant depuis de longs jours, mais elle n'éprouva aucun bonheur à être auprès de lui, comme s'il eût été désormais trop tard pour s'aimer encore. Elle crut de nouveau ne plus rien éprouver pour Georges, et que tout se trouvait détruit, ses illusions, sa volonté d'être heureuse, sa force, sans qu'elle en sût la raison. (p.107)

Her sudden lack of emotion is as inexplicable to Maud as to the reader; one might assume that "love" was a mere illusion that Maud had built up in her mind, were it not that she insisted on the uniqueness of her feelings:

C'était son premier amour, et elle ne doutait pas que ce dût être le seul, parce qu'elle ne pouvait pas se passer de la présence de cet homme. (p.117)

Love between them seems to be largely physical; Georges too later becomes aloof, distant, indifferent to her moments of suffering, yet he needs her physically:

Elle se désespéra de le voir aussi éloigné d'elle, aussi peu attentif à sa présence que s'il vivait dans un songe où elle ne pénétrait pas. Pourtant, il l'aimait. L'acharnement désespéré qu'il mettait à l'avoir chaque nuit sans prendre ce plaisir facile que les hommes s'accordent si volontiers le prouvait assez. (p.187)

The physical need of one individual for another, whilst psychologically there is little or no contact, is a harrowing situation to which Duras will frequently return. More important, love seems a transitory emotion that will come and disappear quite unexpectedly. By the time Maud realises, at the end of the novel, that she is left with no choice but to return from Paris to the Dordogne and become George's wife, their feelings may have disintegrated for ever:

Peut-être Georges l'attendait-il déjà? Lorsqu'ils s'étaient quittés, le matin, il avait l'air calme et presque satisfait. Ils ne s'aimaient plus, probablement. (p.223)

"Aimer" means precious little in the context of Les Impudents: Maud and Georges's feelings are startlingly erratic, and for this reason the characters are somewhat lacking in credibility as human beings. One has the impression that the authoress is behind, pulling the strings, and that she is making her conception of love dictate their behaviour, rather than allowing the course of love to run in accordance with their personalities. She is determined to prove her point, even at the expense of psychological authenticity.

Moreover, at this moment in her career Duras's outlook on love is extremely pessimistic. Many of her later protagonists experience the disintegration of love, many indeed are embarking upon the second great love of their life, but nowhere else is the word "aimer" employed to describe an emotion as vacillating and uncertain as here.

The fortunes of love are at the mercy of the power of time in Duras's next novel, La Vie tranquille (3), and again are unpredictable. Nothing guarantees that the happiness which the young heroine finally grasps with her lover, or the love which has grown to fruition, can continue forever. Time is the Great Creator, but Time can also destroy. Like the previous story, La Vie tranquille traces the decay of a family, the Veyrenattes, through the eyes of a daughter, Françoise, who is twenty-five and has spent her life as a drudge. Françoise has known little genuine contact except with her brother, Nicolas. Now, however, with the arrival of the handsome Tiène, who suddenly offers his services to the Veyrenattes, it seems that her years of isolation will end, for they appear to be falling in love.

Françoise is acutely conscious of the flow of time and the endless cycle of seasons which she contemplates on her family's farm, Les Bugues. Throughout she views experience in temporal terms, measuring her own life by the natural world, a world in continual flux; she feels that nothing can accelerate or hinder the changes time brings. Her acquiescence in the face of

the disasters in her family, and her passivity in contemplating the loss of Tiène forever, stem from her unwillingness to change the course of events. It is essential to understand this in order to appreciate Françou's attitude to love; she waits with calm patience until she is certain that the time is ripe for marriage. This moment comes when she returns to Les Bugues after a period by the sea, where she has been recovering from the shock of her brother's suicide. It is she who announces their coming marriage without even consulting him. Love has reached fruition unnoticed:

En montant, j'ai aperçu Tiène dans la cour [...] Le voir m'a fait me souvenir. C'est vrai que nous nous aimons. A partir de ce moment j'ai recommencé à désirer Tiène. Depuis quinze jours que j'étais à T... je n'y avais pas pensé, mais à ce moment-là, je l'ai suivi des yeux et chacun de ses gestes me rappelait, par son indifférence même, ceux plus secrets que je connaissais. (p.216)

Yet Françou is painfully aware that nothing can survive the ravages of time, not even human affection; change, disintegration, death, all are part of the same pattern. On the day her uncle Jérôme is to be buried, her thoughts wander to the future:

Quand le monde cessera-t-il? Quand les gens cesseront-ils d'enterrer leurs morts avec un soin si parfait? Quand après l'aurore n'aimerai-je plus Tiène? (p.50)

Will they, as Tiène suggests in the final moments of the story, part before the winter? Anything is possible. Love is a natural process, and is as ephemeral as other manifestations of nature.

Duras holds little store by sentimentalised conceptions of the emotions that draw men and women together; in her eyes love offers no permanence and little of the glamour portrayed in romantic fiction. In Un Barrage contre le Pacifique (4) the reality of human emotion is set against popular misconceptions, though in emphasising the physical and hence transitory aspect of love, Duras somewhat overstates her case, and the view which emerges is cynical, gross, and unattractive. One hesitates, indeed, to believe that love develops at all in the hearts of the adolescent

protagonists.

Joseph and his younger sister, Suzanne, pass their days at the roadside on their barren concession somewhere in Indo-China, on which they are living with their mother; they wait impatiently for the car that will whisk them away to the excitement of distant cities:

...Suzanne espérait. Un jour un homme s'arrêterait, peut-être, pourquoi pas? parce qu'il l'aurait aperçue près du pont. Il se pourrait qu'elle lui plaise et qu'il lui propose de l'emmener à la ville [...] Joseph aussi attendait une auto qui s'arrêterait devant le bungalow. Celle-là serait conduite par une femme blond platine qui fumerait des 555 et qui serait fardée. (pp.16-17)

One day Joseph will meet the woman of his dreams, who can offer luxury and thrills, but his feelings are scarcely more profound than those for the many local women of the plain with whom he satisfies his sexual appetite. Love, in this novel, is a largely sexual experience. Gradually absorbing her brother's cynicism, Suzanne comes to regard love as some base emotion, imagining that Joseph "bientôt irait se perdre dans le commun, dans la monstrueuse vulgarité de l'amour" (p.167). It is doubtful, too, whether Suzanne cherishes any lasting feeling for the neighbouring farmer to whom she passively succumbs in the end: she freely admits it could have been someone else. Suzanne refuses to contemplate marriage with him, since escape is her most ardent desire.

Love, as the two children come to know it, offers none of the sparkle traditionally associated with it in romantic novels and films. Duras sets the relationships of Suzanne and Joseph against the popular misconceptions of their age. What little knowledge of the outside world they possess is gleaned from an old film-magazine, with its photos of goddess-like creatures, and from the hackneyed lyrics on a gramophone-record. During their visit to the capital city of the province, Suzanne passes day after day watching cinema romances, packed with the absurdities that captured the minds of their inter-war generation. Duras describes one such film, and punctures the whole mood with humour and some earthy

common-sense; as hero and heroine embrace in the final moments, the audience sees

leurs lèvres se joindre comme des poulpes, s'écraser, essayer dans un délire d'affamés de manger, de se faire disparaître jusqu'à l'absorption réciproque et totale. Idéal impossible, absurde, auquel la conformation des organes ne se prête évidemment pas. Les spectateurs n'en auront vu pourtant que la tentative et l'échec leur en restera ignoré. (p.164)

It is a significant passage, underlining the impossibility of such idealised romance. Sexual passion may be overwhelming, but eternal love is a myth.

In the two succeeding novels, Le Marin de Gibraltar (5) and Les Petits Chevaux de Tarquinia, Duras attempts to demonstrate the true nature of love, again by drawing ironic contrasts with conceptions of perfect romance. In these two books the writer expresses many of her most personal ideas on human emotion: love will inevitably fall short of perfection and will prove ephemeral; all the same, Duras insists that while it lasts it can be a unique and uplifting experience.

The strange heroine of Le Marin de Gibraltar, wandering eternally on the high seas, exemplifies the romantic outlook: she lives on the illusory hope of an ideal romance, a "grand amour", and in the course of the novel she does indeed come to experience a "great love", though it is not as she had imagined.

The novel is a fantasy, a contemporary adventure story. It is related by an unnamed narrator who breaks out of the strait-jacket of a faded romance and a mediocre job, in the hope of transforming his life. A chance meeting with a fascinating and beautiful woman on the Italian coast decides his whole future. Anna, wealthy, mysterious, is travelling the world in her gleaming white yacht in quest of "le marin de Gibraltar", her lover of old who has been lost without trace. On her travels she has picked up one man after another and has had a casual affair with each before he has tired of the endless peregrinations and returned ashore. The narrator

agrees to accompany her, and to be her next temporary lover. Across the Mediterranean and down through Africa the search continues; their journey is not merely a voyage of discovery, but of self-discovery, as their attraction for each other turns into love. Nevertheless, the search must go on regardless, even though the discovery of the sailor will mark the end of their affair. What had begun as a search for love is now an excuse for living their personal love outside of normality, since both the narrator and Anna ardently desire adventure. Even after their yacht has gone up in flames they are compelled to journey on in a new boat, "afin de ne pas se séparer, et pour s'occuper un peu" (p.294).

Anna's love has gradually transferred from a remote, almost unreal sailor to a present companion. The sailor represents for her a kind of absolute; because he is so permanently elusive, she can embroider on the few periods of happiness she spent with him, as well as endow him with all the qualities of a perfect lover. He remains unattainable, an ideal of danger and excitement; he is an outlaw, a criminal, a murderer, worshipped almost as Saviour in parts of Africa. In truth he may exist nowhere but in Anna's fantasies, especially as she is the only person who can identify him. For her he is the unseen spirit of adventure:

-- [ ... ] Comme il lui faisait honneur au monde! c'était l'un de ses habitants le plus à sa mesure, un connaisseur, en somme, de ses profondeurs. Ah, que ça lui allait bien de vivre, celui-là! (p.155)

As the novel progresses the status of the sailor alters radically. From being a creature of flesh and blood with whom Anna yearns to share her life, he becomes a mere abstraction, a symbol of perfect love and of liberty.

Moreover, this change in the sailor's status is paralleled by a change in the heroine's whole outlook. She has traded the ideal of total passion for a love that is very much of the world - transitory, uncertain to last. Hitherto Anna has been seeking, in the narrator's words, to live "le plus grand amour de la terre" (p.168). At one point she reveals what a "grand

amour" signifies to her - a love that is not governed by time:

Elle se tourna vers Laurent...

--A part le mien, dit-elle, est-ce qu'il t'est arrivé de voir de grands amours.

--A terre, dit Laurent au bout d'un moment, il m'est arrivé d'en voir quelques-uns. C'est une chose assez triste à voir.

--Tu parles, dit-elle, de ces amours sur lesquels, jamais, aucune menace ne pèse? que rien, apparemment, n'empêche de durer toujours?

--Installés sur l'éternité, dit Laurent, c'est ça.

--L'éternité, c'est beaucoup, dis-je. [...]

--Dites-moi, dit-elle, quel est le signe annonciateur de la fin d'un grand amour?

--Que rien, apparemment, ne l'empêche de durer toujours, dis-je, non? (pp.258-9)

The narrator's outlook is far more down-to-earth; love without obstacles would simply degenerate if it went on indefinitely. In this one remark, the narrator sums up their whole situation, for the very value of their own love lies in the fact that it is governed by time; it is earthly, human, not an absolute.(6) To accept and enjoy it is to accept the conditions of life.

Duras is suggesting that there is greater worth in accepting human love, with its inherent limitations, than in staking everything on an impossible passion. In truth, the intense emotional attachment between the two people represents Duras's conception of a "great love". They are indeed experiencing "le plus grand amour de la terre", that is, "the greatest love the world can give".

The voyage on which they embark at the end is no longer a quest for the sailor himself, rather for what he represents. This explains the (at first sight) illogical and inconclusive ending of the tale. Anna and her lover can only live where they enjoy exhilaration and liberty, and they feel compelled to continue their eternal search for that impossible absolute freedom. (7)

With remarkable frequency Duras has constructed her narrative on the same fundamental situation. At the centre of a whole series of stories lies an adulterous relationship, or the potentiality of such. Her work is

crowded with weary wives hovering on the brink of adultery, seeking relief from the crass boredom and futility, or the sheer inertia into which conjugal life has dragged them. What better way, after all, of underlining the fleeting nature of any amorous relationship, than to set the narrative at the point in time when one romance has disintegrated and men and women are hoping to experience love for the second time around?

The theme of adultery serves a further purpose; it emphasises the fact that love at its most powerful is an exciting experience. Duras's heroines would like to recapture the first thrilling moments of romance, and they can only find satisfaction, if at all, with a different partner. As the authoress herself succinctly puts it: "Qu'est-ce que c'est que l'infidélité sinon la fidélité à l'amour?" (8) The fact that individuals feel compelled to seek love elsewhere, reveals that it is an experience they cannot forego.

Adultery, the disintegration of conjugal life, and the desire for emotional renewal form the themes of the haunting novel, Les Petits Chevaux de Tarquinia, although the marriages portrayed here are strong enough to survive.

The novel repays close study, since it contains some of Duras's most important statements on the nature of love - its problems, its frustrations, its possible collapse - as well as her view of marital life. The words of the affable Ludi, at the end of the story, aptly resume the moral theme of the work:

-- Il n'y a pas de vacances à l'amour, dit-il, ça n'existe pas. L'amour, il faut le vivre complètement, avec son ennui et tout, il n'y a pas de vacances possibles à ça. [...] S'y soustraire, on ne peut pas. Comme à la vie, avec sa beauté, sa merde et son ennui.  
(p.258)

Duras uses the word "holidays" in both a literal and a metaphorical sense in the novel. Tarquinia is indeed a story about people on holiday, but, more important, it is about "holidays from love". Duras draws a contrast

between the two levels of the story: we can get away from work, but we cannot escape from the problems of love.

The setting is a secluded Italian resort, baking in a heat-wave. Two couples - Jacques and Sara, Gina and Ludi - and their companion, Diana, spend the monotonous days together, getting on each others' nerves, indulging in caustic nastiness at each others' expense, though at heart they are the best of friends. Each of the couples seems to be drifting apart, as their relationship has turned sour. Sara passively allows herself to be seduced by a stranger, though after one night of love she breaks off her liaison with their mysterious companion, known only as "l'homme". Contrary to all the indications, her marriage survives the crisis. For Ludi and Gina, similarly, despite their public quarrels, marital life will continue as before. At first sight Duras would appear to be preaching the virtues of conjugal love and fidelity; the truth is more complex.

Duras's picture of love is totally unromanticised; rather she depicts love in its commonplace aspects, the everyday experience as it is lived by married couples. Their young and unattached friend Diana tells Sara: "Tout amour vécu est une dégradation de l'amour" (p.104). Love as lived by ordinary individuals must fall short of perfection, since it is inseparable from the trivia of normal life, and more especially from the flux of personalities. The love of Sara and Jacques is slowly disintegrating. Jacques has no difficulty in accounting for Sara's dejection:

--C'est rien de neuf, dit-il. Tu en as marre de moi. Il se mit à rire. Elle rit avec lui.

--Comme moi de toi, ajouta-t-il. On n'y peut rien. Il la prit de nouveau dans ses bras. (pp.69-70)

The relationship of Gina and Ludi is equally unstable, a series of petty quarrels and reconciliations verging on the comic, but through which shines a genuine affection;

Ludi et Gina, comme eux [Sara et Jacques] se disputaient beaucoup

[...] des querelles de quatre sous, mais qui empoisonnaient la vie  
[...] Eux, il y avait sept ans qu'ils s'aimaient. Un même désir  
les unissait, toujours, également aux premiers jours. (p.30)

Now that their relationships have gone stale, and love has lost its former brilliance, can Jacques and Sara, Ludi and Gina strike out for a new life of freedom, outside the bonds of marriage? Can a new love compensate for the loss of the old; is it worth tearing up one's roots in order to relive with a new lover the first joyful moments of romance? These questions lie at the core of the novel. All of the characters (except Gina) express a desire for independence, but are caught on the horns of a dilemma; however much they talk of yearning for a new experience of the world - and in their minds it is related to a desire for a new sexual partner - they are held back by a deep need for companionship with the person with whom they have known their greatest love, and are thus tied to a narrower life.

This conflict between personal independence and mutual inter-dependence torments most of them. Sara and Jacques freely admit that they have dreamt of new partners, and the comic, likeable Ludi confesses that his love has weakened over the years, and that his attentions have sometimes turned elsewhere:

-- Mais tu sais, dit Ludi, depuis quelques années, j'envisage dans les choses possibles d'aimer, par exemple, une jeune fille, oui..., c'est ça, une jeune fille. Mais en même temps, je ne peux pas envisager de ne plus l'aimer elle [Gina], de me passer d'elle, ça non, je ne pourrai jamais. Mais avant, bien avant, je ne pouvais envisager aucune autre femme dans la vie qu'elle. Alors, tu vois, les choses changent quand même. (p.174)

The situation of the two couples is paralleled by another figure in the novel - the amiable grocer looking after an old couple on the mountain-side above, where they are keeping watch over the shell-torn body of their son. The grocer's present position foreshadows that of Sara, Jacques and Ludi in twenty or thirty years. He relates how he too had never been able to resolve the conflict between a deep attachment to his wife (recently dead)

and a desire to escape from the sordidness of his marital life with another woman, any woman. The grocer, who had imagined sailing the high seas with a new mistress, is another example of Ludi's perceptive remark that "there are no holidays from love". Love is not simply something you can run away from in its moments of anguish and disillusion; the experience of love must involve the whole personality, and, like life, love provides the rough with the smooth.

It is this basic truth that explains Sara's seemingly illogical behaviour. Her seduction is of course the central incident, indeed the only important event in the entire novel (it is merely suggested and not described in detail). The stranger, who for all the holidaymakers represents "l'inconnu", could have been any one of a million people who offered Sara romance and the opportunity of an easy exit, and she does at least experience briefly what Jacques and Ludi merely imagine. Yet with the same apathy as she drifted into the relationship she acquiesces in its ~~breaking up~~. She seems to have realised that although adultery might have compensated for the stalemate of her conjugal life, in truth it would have been a very temporary solution. Jacques's remark to Sara, when they confess their secret yearning for new lovers, throws light on Sara's motives: "Aucun amour au monde ne peut tenir lieu de l'amour, il n'y a rien à faire" (p.198). Love in any form can never be the total experience, can never match up to some absolute conception of Love, and as surely as in her marital relationship any other would eventually fade. The wiser course is to hold on to the vestiges of her deepest love - for her husband. One leaves the novel with the impression that all of the characters, despite the frustrations they feel, will not desert their present partners, with whom they have known a precious and unique relationship.

The link between Tarquinta and Le Marin is immediately apparent. In both books Duras attempts to define her conception of "grandes amours".

She does think great loves are possible in the everyday world, but she uses the term advisedly: they are not as perfect as many would believe. A great love is love at its most powerful, and it is this, a love that has involved the whole personality, that Sara and Jacques, Ludi and Gina, as well as Anna and the narrator in Le Marin, have known. Yet in both novels characters become aware that "great loves" are not eternal, and the couples in Tarquimia have experienced the sorrow as well as the joy of such a romance; in Ludi's words, it can be a "prison en or", a trap from which the victim is virtually *unable* to escape.

In the case of the holidaymakers in Tarquimia, love on both sides is strong enough to survive; for the heroine of Dix heures et demie du soir en été (9) her husband's infidelity marks the collapse of their marriage. Both thematically and formally Tarquimia and Dix heures et demie bear close similarities. The later novel continues the theme of the disintegration of a great love. It is the study of feelings grown cold, of the widening gulf between a man and his wife, who is tortured by jealousy and by "la lente dégradation de leur amour" (p.81).

The action is concentrated within the twenty-four hours which decide the whole future of the heroine, Maria. In a small Spanish town, the police are hunting for a man who has murdered his wife and her lover. He is caught in a trap, somewhere in the streets. A group of holidaymakers are also caught in the town during a series of freak thunderstorms and are obliged to spend the night in an overcrowded hotel. Among them are Maria, her husband Pierre, their daughter Judith and their young companion, Claire. Maria senses the growing attraction between her husband and Claire which she is powerless to prevent. While they are embracing on the balcony above, Maria catches sight of the murderer, Rodrigo Paestra, on the roof opposite. Gradually gaining contact with him, she succeeds in driving him by car outside the town. The next day she brings the family back to the spot. Maria

discovers, however, that the criminal has shot himself. They journey on, with Maria becoming increasingly obsessed with the inevitable consummation of Pierre's adultery. Feeling more and more isolated, drowning her suffering in alcohol, Maria finally admits that her marriage is ended.

The pathetic fact about Maria's predicament is that she still feels a deep and passionate love towards her husband; her emotion has not waned. She and Pierre have lived together for eight years, and have shared moments of intense happiness which come back to them both with sharp precision; Duras draws poignant comparisons between their present situation and a pleasanter past. They both remember another such stormy night, in Verona, which had been spent in passionate love-making.

Dix heures et demie is unique among Duras's works in that it describes the development of an adulterous relationship not from the side of the transgressor, but from the viewpoint of the injured party. Duras is interested in the emotional state of a woman faced with the unhappy truth that she is losing her great love. Maria can only watch helplessly as Pierre and Claire draw closer together. Her frustration breaks the surface in urgent gestures; as she watches the couple secretly embracing on the balcony above, one can sense her desperate yearning to be there:

Tandis qu'il [Pierre] le fait, elle [Maria] le fait aussi, elle porte ses mains à ses seins solitaires, puis ses mains retombent et s'accrochent au balcon, sans emploi. (p.48)

On several occasions, tortured by jealousy, Maria imagines the moment of consummation has already come, only to reassure herself that the couple have not had sufficient opportunity. Above all she is horrified at becoming an outsider, shut out from an emotional experience.

The closing scenes of the novel leave a bitter taste of regret and loss. The second evening, in Madrid, in Maria's hotel bedroom, she is torn between desire for Pierre and a total despair. Losing self-control, she pleads for his affection. Pierre too desires her once more, and

confesses that any new love would be no more than a "novelty". Even at this stage, therefore, a chance remains that their marriage can be salvaged and that after a temporary affair he will return to his first love:

--Tu es dans ma vie, dit-il. Je ne peux plus me contenter de la seule nouveauté d'une femme. Je ne peux pas me passer de toi. Je le sais.

--C'est la fin de notre histoire, dit Maria. Pierre, c'est la fin. La fin d'une histoire. (p.184)

Although Pierre is speaking sincerely, Maria looks upon this as the moment of truth and is resigned to their parting. For Maria it must be all or nothing. Unlike Sara (Tarquinius) she cannot make do with a compromise, a love that has been "degraded", and will not cling to what is worthwhile in their relationship. It would seem also that, having known the torment of losing her great love once, she cannot face going through the same circumstances again.

Love is an experience that, in decline, leads to so much bitterness and pain that it may seem desirable simply to avoid it altogether. Duras has written two plays, La Musica and Suzanna Andler, which describe the unpredictable nature of human relationships, and the suffering inextricably linked with the collapse of love; in both plays characters are afraid to engage in passionate relationships because they are only too aware what may follow.

The play and subsequent film La Musica (10) again depict the final moments of a marriage on the rocks, yet the emotional situation is fundamentally different. The collapse of marriage is paralleled by the resurgence of love, a love that unfortunately comes too late.

In an hotel-lounge in Évreux a man and woman, Michel and Anne-Marie, meet and talk - perhaps for the last time, for that day they have been divorced. They are polite, rather embarrassed, anxious to avoid tricky subjects, but gradually their thoughts turn back from their present lives to their common past and, strangely enough, both uncover many secrets that

they found impossible to disclose during their years together. Their subsequent dialogue reveals that not everything is over between them. Almost imperceptibly, as their memories come filtering back, their feelings are growing. Only a change of tone, a stray word betray the fact that they are drawn towards each other. At the end, they are conscious that they are falling in love all over again. Unable to bear the thought of never seeing her again, Michel blurts out the truth: he begs her not to leave, or he will be compelled to follow her and her husband.

Nevertheless, she refuses to contemplate any attempt at a second affair: "je suis la seule qui te soit désormais interdite" (p.170).

They remain caught in an impossible dilemma; they cannot reunite because they have made for themselves quite separate lives, as Duras explains elsewhere:

C'est trop tard. C'est trop tôt. Trop tard pour commencer ou recommencer. Trop tôt pour finir. Ainsi, de cette façon infernale, une chance leur est-elle donnée de s'aimer toujours. (11)

(Duras's remarks illustrate her view of the course of love: if left in suspense, love has no chance to flag and grow cold, but retains its intensity by the very fact of being denied).

Moreover, during the couple's conversation it has become clear that there is a much deeper reason for their refusal to resume their affair. They remember not so much the happy as the bitter moments in their life together, and talk of "l'enfer", the sheer hell of their relationship in its later stages. For both of them - at least until Michel changes his mind completely - such torments are to be avoided at all costs. As Anne-Marie insists, "nous ne voulons plus autant d'ennuis, nous ne voulons plus autant de soucis" (p.155). Such unhappiness, they feel, should only come once in a lifetime. All the same, they are aware that each new relationship may eventually bring what Michel refers to as "la fatigue" (p.152). Call it what you will - weariness, hell, "ennui" - it is the same combination of

despair  
tenseness and that accompanies the declining love of the characters in Tarquinia.

When Michel's true emotions finally break surface and he reveals he cannot live without her, he insists they must bear the pain: "Je me fous de l'enfer [ ... ] Toi aussi." (p.169). Yet any attempt to renew their passion is anathema to Anne-Marie, who cannot face the strain.

Ultimately this is the difference that separates them; Michel is prepared to face the return of the old anguish, to face the realities of love here and now, even if it must fade. In an illuminating commentary upon the positions of the two characters in the film (12), Duras insists that their attitudes are fundamentally opposed:

L'aime-t-elle encore autant que lui?

Oui. Mais elle, elle l'aime au passé.

Elle aime l'image de leur aventure, mais elle a renoncé à la revivre, à recommencer la comédie conjugale, complètement. Elle ne reviendra jamais sur l'abandon de cet espoir.

Lui l'aime au présent. Il n'a pas réussi à arracher en lui l'espoir de revivre une deuxième fois une aventure aussi admirable et infernale que la leur.

The fears of Michel and Anne-Marie are echoed by the words of the characters of the more recent play, Suzanna Andler (13). This terse, compressed work traces in scenes of dialogue one day of crisis in the life of a woman recently embarked on an adulterous relationship. This is the first affair outside of marriage for the wealthy and elegant Suzanna, who has become involved with a man a few years younger. The action takes place in a rambling, empty villa in Saint-Tropez, deserted for the winter, which Suzanna has come to view with the intention of booking it for the following summer. She has been staying with her lover, Michel Cayre, but their relationship is ambiguous, has no certain future; their conversations are in part an attempt to trace out for the two of them some kind of future. Both have viewed their affair with cynicism, convinced that it will not survive. Suzanna calls it "[une histoire] sans importance mais elle dure" (p.43).

Suzanna Andler is set among the glittering and brittle society of the idle rich, a world of playboys and promiscuous women; it is a world in which love-affairs seem particularly short-lived. Those who become involved too deeply are bound to know suffering and unhappiness when their partners turn their attention elsewhere. Suzanna and her lover are reluctant to give themselves wholeheartedly to each other because they cannot face the pain that will follow hard on the crumbling of their affair. Suzanna in particular is secretly tortured by thoughts of the superficial relationships she sees all around her. During a conversation with Monique, an old mistress of her husband, Suzanna's words reveal that she views her own affair in the same light:

MONIQUE, (temps): Peut-être qu'il [Michel] t'aime.  
SUZANNA, (élan): Non. Non. [...]  
(tremblante tout à coup): Nous faisons l'amour ensemble. Il n'y a rien d'autre. (p.43)

In a continual torment, Suzanna swings between one extreme and another; one moment she wants to call the whole thing off, the next she looks forward to a brighter future. All the tension of the play is concentrated in her changes of heart.

Michel too seems tense and nervous behind his snideness, his façade of vulgarity and cynicism. Frequently he seeks reassurance, asking intimate questions about the way Suzanna spends her time, for he is afraid of suddenly losing her:

(Silence.)  
(Il s'approche d'elle.)  
MICHEL: Tu as pensé à me quitter Suzanna? (Elle fait non.)  
Une fois (idem) une heure. (Idem.) Le premier jour?  
SUZANNA: Non.  
(Il est effondré. Elle le regarde d'un mauvais regard, pour la première fois.) (p.32)

He admits himself: "Je suis quelqu'un qui ne veut pas souffrir" (p.33).

"Souffrir", "supporter" are words often on their lips. Suzanna's husband, Jean, who has been unfaithful to her for years and has actually encouraged her into adultery, is for once the person who must suffer as he

realises that he will no longer have her companionship to fall back on. When the truth comes out over the telephone, he is hurt in a manner he had never thought possible:

SUZANNA: (à l'idée qu'il souffre, folle): Tu disais que c'était dégoûtant...

JEAN: Oui.

SUZANNA : ... monstrueux ... Tu le voulais pour nous ...

JEAN: Oui. [ ... ]  
Rentre à Paris.

SUZANNA: (avec retard): Non. (Temps) Tu ne le supporterai plus.

(Silence.)

JEAN, (voix éteinte, massacrée): Tu reviendras? (p.57)

Both Suzanna and Jean are anxious to spare each other any torment, (whereas her journalist lover at times feels a sadistic desire to wound her - and can only do it by making Jean suffer also).

At the end it appears that Suzanna and Michel are coming to realise that each feels a genuine love for the other, and they seem more willing to commit themselves; nevertheless, there are suggestions that their love is doomed like all the rest. The final moments of the play are veiled in mystery, and the dialogue becomes obscure and elusive:

MICHEL (temps): Tu n'as pas pensé ... qu'autre chose ...  
une autre histoire, plus, plus lointaine ... intervenait? Mais  
sans qu'on le sache? sans qu'on la voie?

(Elle écoute. Sa tête est sur son épaule. Il a posé son visage  
sur ses cheveux.)

MICHEL: ... et que chaque nuit ... à un moment donné ... après ...  
tu vois Suzanna, après ..., elle entre dans la chambre et nous ...  
nous sommes assassinés .. tu comprends Suzanna ce que je veux dire,  
je suis sûr que tu comprends Suzanna ...

(Silence.)

MICHEL: Comme ... comme un autre amour, tu vois ...

(Silence.)

MICHEL: Je te parle d'un amour mort. (pp.77-8)

Michel has some strange vision of a time when, with the disintegration of their love, they will experience a devastating loss and their life together will be destroyed; they must learn to live with this knowledge.

No matter how much bitterness, pain and disillusion follow in the wake of love, Duras leaves us in no doubt that it offers both excitement and self-fulfilment. Love rescues individuals from the monotony and unhappiness that she sees as the common lot of humanity. Such is the case of the pathetic young maid, condemned to a life of drudgery, who opens her heart to a complete stranger in Le Square. (14) All her hopes for the future are pinned on a loving husband, although she has no conception of the type of man she longs for. Love is essential to give meaning to her eventual escape from her sordid employment; without a companion she would simply have no identity, no reason for reforming her life: "Je dis que seule, je serais comme, je ne sais pas comment vous dire, comme privée de sens, oui. Seule, je ne pourrais pas changer" (p.88). She needs love to start life anew (or, as she insists, to start life for the first time) and to counteract her acute depression.

This need for love and renewal becomes a desperate obsession in the film, Une Aussi Longue Absence. (15) Thérèse, a middle-aged café owner in a Parisian suburb, thinks she recognises in the childlike, aimless tramp who wanders daily past, her husband deported some sixteen years earlier. The tramp has no real identity, has apparently lost his memory completely in the war, yet Thérèse is convinced that he is her husband, Albert. With the help of relations, she tries to prod his memory, not merely because she wants to regain a partner in life - she has, after all, a peaceable if superficial relationship with a lover - but because she is suddenly overwhelmed by a past love that she had completely forgotten. While listening secretly to his conversation in the café, she is overcome with emotion:

Ça a été un évanouissement immense. Une "mort amoureuse" à partir de laquelle va repartir une histoire d'amour. Elle en sort "défigurée", transformée pour toujours. Ressuscitée dans la certitude et le rajeunissement de l'amour. Écrasée, éreintée par sa découverte à laquelle ni Martine ni Fernand ne comprennent rien. (p.41)

Thérèse has re-entered the world of the past, a world corresponding to the tramp's own, prior to amnesia. Love had lain dormant for all these years, and has now revived.

Thérèse's assiduous attempts to reveal the tramp's identity betray a profound need to re-establish contact with the one great love of her life, to find rejuvenation in beginning her marriage again. There is no clash of wills in the film, no conflict; all the dramatic intensity and suspense stem from Thérèse's increasing frustration as the truth she seeks becomes more remote. Her persistence is obsessive. At times she loses all self-control, running out after the tramp into the street, with her hair held back, trying to confront him with a physical image from his past. Thérèse's emotions are so deeply stirred that she is blinded to reality; engrossed in her dream-world, she cannot be convinced of her errors.

The most harrowing moment comes when, after she has invited the tramp to dinner, they dance together like husband and wife. This at least seems to have survived from the past. Suddenly she feels and glimpses the scar on his head which leaves her in no doubt that his amnesia is permanent. She knows he is irretrievably lost, and renounces any hope of contact. As he departs: "Elle ne voit que ça au monde, son mari mort-vivant" (p.99). The film is disturbing and ambiguous, not only because we are almost convinced of the tramp's identity, only to have our beliefs shattered, but because of the nature of Thérèse's feelings: how far is her struggle to establish the tramp's identity the effect of intuition, and how far is it a dangerous kind of obsession, an attempt to satisfy her deepest longing?

It was in the cinema that Duras gave her highest expression to the power of love, with a film that brought her international recognition. Hiroshima mon amour (16) is at once Duras's most poignant romance and a study of the triumph of love over cruelty and death. It is the story of the development of a love between two people separated socially and culturally,

from opposite ends of the earth. The city reduced to ashes by the atomic bomb is already rising anew when a Japanese engineer and a French actress, who has just finished a film on peace, live a one-day affair. Love is still possible in an atmosphere of hate, - this is one of the messages of the film - and it is in the context of barbaric destruction that we watch the course of an affair which Duras deliberately maintains at a banal level. She clarifies her aims in a revealing synopsis to the scenario; it is essential, she feels, to emphasise the very ordinariness of the characters, so that their story does not appear unusual, unique:

C'est la veille de son retour en France que cette Française, qui ne sera jamais nommée dans le film - cette femme anonyme - rencontre un Japonais (ingénieur ou architecte) et qu'ils auront ensemble une histoire d'amour très courte. (p.1)

Hollywood and magazine romances have made a cliché out of a similar situation: the Westerner attracted to the mysterious Oriental; it is precisely this hackneyed situation that Duras wishes to avoid, since it would turn their affection into a mere attraction of one racial type for another. In the film the Japanese appears physically almost European, and Duras's intention was to create an "international" type:

[...] il vaut mieux atténuer la différence de type entre les deux héros. Si le spectateur n'oublie jamais qu'il s'agit d'un Japonais et d'une Française, la portée profonde du film n'existe plus [...]. Il faut que ce film franco-japonais n'apparaisse jamais franco-japonais mais anti-franco-japonais. Ce serait là une victoire. (pp.136-7)

In other words, the love that blossoms between these two people will seem to transcend the barriers of civilisation and inhumanity at a fundamental level, if there appears to be little superficial difference between the two individuals.

The film's profound significance lies, therefore, not in the fact that the couple come to know an exceptional kind of love, but that love should develop at all in such a setting:

Ils vivent une aventure d'une nuit.

Mais où? A HIROSHIMA.

Cette étreinte, si banale, si quotidienne, a lieu dans la ville du monde où elle est le plus difficile à imaginer: HIROSHIMA. (p.3)

Love has been reborn in the city that has become synonymous in our times with hatred and destruction, thus taking on a power and value unknown elsewhere. By incorporating the private drama, the passion of one man and woman, into the horrors of the past, all the intensity of past brutality is, as it were, revived. One of the most important aims is to "faire renaître cette horreur de ces cendres en la faisant s'inscrire en un amour qui sera forcément particulier et 'émerveillant'" (p.3).

The whole course of the narrative is dictated by this dialectic between love and hate, between the resurgence of love and the end of inhumanity. The first moments of the film are unforgettable - images that suggest at once love and physical death. In a half-light we glimpse what appear to be bodies reduced to ashes, and only gradually do arms and hips emerge, covered with scales of dust or sweat. It is as if we were witnessing some great revival, just as a love will be reborn from the ashes of the past. A woman's voice gives a ghastly description of the tragedy of Hiroshima, images of this gruesome tragedy flash before us, before we see that a man and woman are making love in bed. As they lie naked, their thoughts on themselves and on the city which the woman cannot understand, are inextricably linked. Throughout the film these two levels of universal suffering and a private love-affair throw each other into relief. Duras insists, however, that the personal level must have primacy if the rebirth of life and emotion is to be clearly expressed. Other scenes situate the personal drama against the background of the appalling atomic disaster. The couple watch the protest-march which will form part of the film in which the Frenchwoman is taking part, and at the sight of a procession of small girls, the daughters of wartime victims, who look almost as if they were on their way to communion, the woman's face clouds over with pain and despair. At

the same moment, protectively, the Japanese confesses his love. Again, in the railway station near the end, they sit divided by a pathetic old woman, perhaps a survivor of the bomb; the Japanese leans across this woman to offer his nervous, weary mistress a cigarette. The interplay of love and suffering is expressed in such touching details.

The love which flourishes between the couple thus testifies to the triumph of love over inhumanity. Duras has selected as hero and heroine two people who have suffered more than most from the horror of a war in which their compatriots were on opposing sides - he in losing the rest of his family in the nuclear holocaust, she in losing her first love. In her case, her present love represents equally the triumph of a new love over a dead love in the past. Hitherto, as we shall see in a later chapter (17), she had simply shut her first love from her mind, and her relationship with her husband did not compensate for her loss.

Love in Hiroshima is linked with love in another city, in another time, - at Nevers in France. The woman gradually remembers her first affair with a German soldier during the Occupation, and as she relates the details she and the Japanese are in a sense re-enacting a past drama of passion. They feel their way towards love through this past love, he "becoming" her German lover shot dead at the Liberation:

(Ton extasié. Il lui lâche la tête, écoute très intensément).

LUI. - Quand tu es dans la cave, je suis mort?

ELLE. - Tu es mort ... et ...

(Nevers: L'Allemand agonise très lentement sur le quai.) (p.71)

A new love has arisen to replace the old; nevertheless, she senses that this present love is just as hopeless as that in Nevers. Death robbed her of her beloved, and the present romance is doomed to end with her departure. Even as love at Nevers had to end in oblivion, so she bequeaths the present love to oblivion:

ELLE. - [ ... ] Du temps viendra. Où nous ne saurons plus du tout nommer ce qui nous unira. Le nom s'en effacera peu à peu de notre mémoire.

Puis, il disparaîtra tout à fait. (p.95)

She relegates him to the past - to a name, "Hiroshima." Oblivion in effect guarantees the survival of their love; it is as if it were suspended for all time: "Amour sans emploi ... Donc relégué déjà dans l'oubli. Donc perpétuel. (Sauvegardé par l'oubli même)" (p.8).

Love, then, has the capacity to exercise the painful experience of losing a previous love; the Frenchwoman's love for the Japanese enables her to embark upon life as a complete individual once more, for until this point she had been subconsciously haunted by the spectre of her first lover's death. Moreover, love is depicted here as the most powerful force in the world. Hiroshima occupies a unique place in Duras's output, and is a kind of statement of faith; she situates love in a universal context, as a power that will withstand and rise above death and man's inhumanity to man.

Sexual appetite drives Duras's characters as urgently as the need for rejuvenation or freedom. Her conception of love is one that involves the whole personality, body and soul; Maud and Georges, Anna and her sailing companion, Maria, Pierre and Claire, and many others are moved by profound physical desires. Love is libidinous, passionate, and at times verges on perversion, for Duras specifically links it with the idea of self-immolation and death. She remarked in one interview: "This isn't romance, it's love - an emotion that leads to death, 'un sentiment mortel'." (18)

In several works the protagonists' desires contain an element of perversion, even a kind of sado-masochism. In Hiroshima, the heroine seeks to be mutilated at the hands of the Japanese:

ELLE: [ ... ] Quelle douceur.  
Tu ne peux pas savoir.  
Tu me tues.  
Tu me fais du bien. [ ... ]  
Dévore-moi.  
Déforme-moi jusqu'à la laideur. (p.27)

Again, her memory has remained imprinted with that traumatic moment when she kissed the blood-stained mouth of her dying lover during the War. Previously she had enjoyed making the soldier's hands smart as she bandaged them in her father's shop; and during her period of madness when she was incarcerated in a cellar, she fed hungrily on her own bleeding hands scraped against the wall, in an attempt to bring back the sensation of the blood on her lover's lips.

Love is a fiercely sexual emotion, linked mysteriously to the idea of death, in the claustrophobic world of Moderato Cantabile. (19) The crime of passion whose aftermath the heroine, Anne Desbaresdes, witnesses at the opening of the novel, seems to strike some dark, unknown chord in her subconscious. Drawn by the scream and commotion that interrupt her child's piano-lesson, Anne takes an unusual interest in the events in the café below. Forcing her way to the front of the crowd, she sees a young man bent over his wife's body, and refusing to be led away. There is a peaceful smile on his face, as if death had brought them closer together. Anne Desbaresdes watches the passionate scene in silence, and we learn nothing of her reactions, though she must be moved by the brutality of the episode:

Dans la lueur du magnésium, on put voir que la femme était jeune encore et qu'il y avait du sang qui coulait de sa bouche en minces filets épars et qu'il y en avait aussi sur le visage de l'homme qui l'avait embrassée. Dans la foule quelqu'un dit:  
--C'est dégoûtant, et s'en alla. (pp.24-5)

That evening she takes her child home as if nothing had happened; she feels compelled, nevertheless, to return the next day to the scene of the crime, where she engages in conversation with a stranger. Nervous, seeking support in wine, she at first asks apparently casual questions about the motives for the crime. The personal interest she is taking, begins to show

through:

--Je n'ai rien dit, répéta l'homme. Mais je crois qu'il l'a visée au coeur comme elle le lui demandait.  
Anne Desbaresdes gémit. Une plainte presque licencieuse, douce, sortit de cette femme. (p.44)

Here is one of the first indications that she has been sexually excited by the passionate scene she witnessed, for it revealed the possibility, as the man suggests, of a love so total that it must end in death.

So far only a few commonplace remarks have passed between Anne and the stranger (only later does he reveal his name, Chauvin), but during the evenings that follow their intimacy increases. Little by little, in their clipped, tense conversations the reasons for Anne's peculiar fascination with the crime emerge; she needs to experience another love but at second-hand. Duras weaves their whole conversation out of two separate themes - the dulling, isolated existence Anne must lead in her grand house at the far end of the town, and the relationship of the other couple; the protagonists' minds wander constantly between these two ideas.

Anne has been aroused by the crime into seeking to experience herself an erotic passion that her narrow, sterile environment cannot provide; she is offered escape from a husband she never mentions. This love, moreover, she associates closely with a desire for death. Duras elucidates her sensual yearning: "She wants to die of love, and anyone who has the sense of a fatal love will do, to provide her with this - the stranger, for instance, who knows the story of the murder." (20) Notice that Duras specifically employs the words "fatal love," for Anne has discovered the allurements of sexual masochism, culminating in immolation at the hands of a lover. The scene in the café exemplified love at its strongest degree, lived out to its absolute limits, where the only outcome is violence and death. One of Chauvin's remarks lingers in her mind: "... Vous me disiez la dernière fois qu'il l'avait tuée parce qu'elle le lui avait demandé, pour lui plaire, en somme?" (p.55). Behind her words we sense her own desire for death; her

fascination for it dictates the whole course of her conversations with Chauvin.

The crime provides the pretext for continuing an elaborate dialogue, which probes ever deeper into (what they imagine to be) the causes of the wife's murder. In effect, as he remarks at their first meeting, he is ignorant of the actual motives:

- J'aimerais pouvoir vous le dire, mais je ne sais rien de sûr.
- Peut-être que personne ne le sait?
- Lui le savait. Il est maintenant devenu fou, enfermé depuis hier soir. Elle, est morte. (p.36)

Why, then, should they fabricate an entire past history for these two unknown people? The startling truth is that Anne and Chauvin are inventing their own potential present; their dialogue is the means of living out in fantasy a passion similar to that which possessed and finally destroyed the other couple. This strange couple are drawn together (unlike Duras's other protagonists) not simply by a need for contact or the thrill of a new love-affair; certainly they arouse each other sexually, and Anne finds in him a means of escape from the drab bourgeois conformity of her marriage, but on a much deeper plane they are both acting out roles, going through the same train of circumstances (they imagine) which culminated in the other woman's murder. Anne Desbaresdes experiences the same moral disintegration, through alcoholism, which Chauvin attributes to that woman. Chauvin may be the ideal partner for Anne's fantasy; he remains shadowy, sinister, insinuating, with an uncanny knowledge of Anne's background - where she sleeps, her late-night activities - so that he seems almost a voyeur. Like an evil tempter, he coaxes her into realising dark desires she had not even imagined. Combatting her inhibitions with drink, he "seduces" Anne with intimate questions and subtle insinuations - a secret interest in the workers passing below her window, for example - to which she readily agrees.

As Anne and Chauvin allow their imaginations free rein, we watch their

gradual incarnation of the roles they have chosen. The situation of the other couple, in their mind, parallels their own: they met in cafés, indulged in long talks. Anne views Chauvin as accomplice, lover, and killer; at a climactic moment the feverish sensuality building between them erupts in the first violent gesture. Chauvin tells her:

-- Puis le temps est venu où il crut qu'il ne pourrait plus la toucher autrement que pour ...

Anne Desbaresdes releva ses mains vers son cou nu dans l'encolure de sa robe d'été.

-- Que là, n'est-ce pas?

-- Là, oui. (p.121)

Their desires are destined to remain at white-heat for the moment, however; Duras delays the inevitable climax by setting the penultimate chapter in the world that forms the antithesis of the darkening café where Anne's passion has developed. While her erotic longings are at their most acute, she must suffer an evening as hostess at a dinner-party for her bourgeois acquaintances. The viewpoint switches constantly between the formalised, stuffy life indoors, and a man (surely Chauvin), who wanders like an animal outside. Both are prey to carnal longings that remain unsatisfied because of duties to an alien society, as represented by the dinner-party.

Their sexual hunger increases during the meeting we anticipate will be their last (this time Anne has left her child at home). Their disintegration and lack of will-power, their moral decadence are manifest in their physical appearance: she seems almost slovenly, he is unshaven. Both desire to bring passion to its consummation, and after a few brief exchanges they become more audacious:

Leurs mains étaient si froides qu'elles se touchèrent illusoirement dans l'intention seulement, afin que ce fût fait, dans la seule intention que ce le fût, plus autrement, ce n'était plus possible. Leurs mains restèrent ainsi, figées dans leur pose mortuaire. (p.149)

The words "c'est fait" mark, over and over again in Duras's work, the climax of a ritual, the irreversible act performed once and forever that seals the protagonists' fate. These words will occur twice more, at capital

moments in the fulfilment of their passion, as they move dangerously close to the brink of death. The touch of hands is the first stage, its deadly significance emphasised in "leur pose mortuaire."

They talk again of how, for reasons known only to her, the other woman longed for death. At this point both Chauvin and Anne, who has urged him on, are terrified at the prospect of the act he must commit. It is Anne who makes the decisive move which he dare not make:

Elle s'avança vers lui d'assez près pour que leurs lèvres puissent s'atteindre. Leurs lèvres restèrent l'une sur l'autre, posées, afin que ce fût fait et suivant le même rite mortuaire que leurs mains, un instant avant, froides et tremblantes. Ce fut fait. (pp.152-3)

Their first kiss is the avowal of passion; yet Chauvin still seems resigned to stopping short of the final act: Anne has already risen to leave when he pronounces the ultimate, devastating words:

--Je voudrais que vous soyez morte, dit Chauvin.  
--C'est fait, dit Anne Desbaresdes. (p.155)

Just in time she resists the temptation to sit down and let him act out in fact what they have imagined. A moment later she leaves, forever.

Duras's particular achievement is to have created an intense situation out of nothing, for the whole drama is suspended on an act that never takes place, that was perhaps impossible from the beginning. Just as the whole fantasy was lived within their minds, so the situation is resolved mentally. Their physical intimacy never went further than a touch of hands, and a final kiss. Chauvin's words are sufficient for Anne, because the whole time she has been living a passionate relationship second-hand; the novel is about death, or more precisely, as Duras has said, "about the idea of the allurements of death." (21) In experiencing death mentally the heroine can return to her bourgeois marriage; she can know "l'amour fou" without suffering its fatal consequences.

One discovers the same desire for love at its most erotic and violent in other Duras heroines. The pathetically lonely Maria, for example, in

Dix heures et demie, who must watch her husband drift away from her, is a woman of fiercely sexual drives; her yearning for Pierre is brutally physical. Her imagination runs riot, as she thinks passionate scenes are taking place behind her back, and this merely fans the flames of her own physical yearnings:

[Claire] va vers [Pierre] et se tient contre lui tout entière, de la tête aux pieds, de ses cheveux à ses cuisses, tout entière elle s'en remet à lui. [...] Maria entrouvre ses cuisses où bat son coeur, un poignard. (p.170)

Maria's reasons for saving Rodrigo Peastra, who has murdered his wife and her lover that same afternoon, are complex and only vaguely defined, but they have much to do with the violent and erotic streak in her own nature. The crime of passion, which is on everyone's lips, appears to have made a profound impression on her - just as Anne Desbaresdes was drawn to a similar crime.

Robbed of her one great love, and simultaneously placed in a position to know the criminal, the two events become associated in her mind; she sees the couple's shadows projected across onto the roof where Peastra is lying motionless, suggesting a link between their situations. For Maria too is the unhappy creature discovering her husband in another's arms, the difference being that, despite her violent nature, she is powerless to prevent the couple's union by a criminal act. (There is the suggestion that, by bringing Pierre face to face with the Spaniard, she might instigate his death at the criminal's hands).

It is Maria's physical needs, and her fascination with this man who represents unbridled passion, that drive her to him before all else. Maria mentally transfers her passion from its original object onto "l'assassin de l'orage, sa merveille" (p.147). Her motives have more than a hint of sexual perversion, for her fascination with Peastra's masculinity stems in part from the violence of which he is capable. As she gazes at him asleep in her car:

At an hotel where blazing sunshine pours through dining-room windows, and holidaymakers idle away the days, unseen, in tennis-courts or parks, a man called Max Thor is spying with peculiar fascination on the every movement of an unknown woman, whilst he himself is being watched by another individual, Stein. They meet and talk: both confess to being ill-at-ease. With the arrival of Max's wife, Alissa, events take a sinister turn. An ambiguous sexual relationship develops between Thor, Alissa, and Stein, and they share a common interest in the lonely woman, Élisabeth Alione. Alissa penetrates Élisabeth's intimate secrets before drawing her into their web of desire. It is only a matter of time before Max and his wife both try to woo her affection. When her husband comes to collect Élisabeth, the others insinuate that he too could join in their amorous relationships. Both, however, decide to leave. Stein and Max plan to follow the couple and reconstitute elsewhere, at Leucate, their intimate little group. The final moments of the tale are perhaps the most hauntingly mysterious of all - a vision of some great primeval force crashing through the forest which Stein, Max and Alissa must await calmly. Music is heard, and Alissa, half-asleep yet smiling, says: "C'est la musique sur le nom de Stein" (p.137).

Is this force love? is it destruction? Essentially they are one and the same experience in this story, for love is a mysterious and deadly power, omnipotent, disruptive, capable of annihilating the personality. The characters themselves seem only dimly aware of the ritual they are performing, though they are attempting in effect nothing less than the breaking-down of the boundaries of personality and individuality. Their attachments are multiple and constantly vary, as they turn love and desire from dual into communal experiences:

Max Thor tend la main et prend celle glacée d'Alissa, sa femme écartelée dans un regard bleu.

-- Ne souffrez plus, Alissa, dit Stein.

Stein se rapproche, il pose sa tête sur les jambes nues d'Alissa. Il les caresse, il les embrasse.

- Comme je te désire, dit Max Thor.
- Comme il vous désire, dit Stein, comme il vous aime. (p.42)

Stein, Max, and Alissa feel a need to love everyone and at all costs, because love and desire are the only antidotes to their spiritual unrest:

- Qu'est-ce qui est possible? demande Stein.
- Le désir, dit Max Thor. [ ... ]
- Comment vivre? demande Alissa dans un souffle.
- Qu'allons-nous devenir? demande Stein. (pp.106-7)

The characters' behaviour is an attempt to go beyond their own personalities, even wipe them out, through desire. In other words, they wish to transcend the self in order to enter a kind of collective consciousness. Stein foresees a time when Max and Alissa will make love, then: "Un matin, on vous retrouvera, informes, ensemble, une masse de goudron, on ne comprendra pas. Sauf moi" (p.53). Love will have taken them into spiritual ecstasy, leaving only a tangled pile of flesh behind.

Thor and Stein have already progressed far along the path towards the immolation of their personalities, towards that liberation which Duras calls "catharsis." In a detailed discussion of the film she explains: "Il est dans une sorte de catharsis, Thor: il est même dans la catharsis dès qu'il rencontre Stein; et à la fin du livre, et à la fin du film, pareillement, ils sont identiques." (26) The very vagueness of their characters, the peculiar way their words cannot be attributed to either of them (as is also the case with Alissa), testify to the oneness of their identity.

After Elisabeth's departure the two men discuss what the outcome of their ambiguous relations with her might possibly have been; she could have suffered "l'usure" by being submitted to Max's desire, or have found "la mort par Alissa" (p.131). For Alissa plays the role of agent of destruction in their web of desire; she it is who tries to liberate others from their personality by a symbolic "death." She combines the need to love, to communicate tenderness, and an insinuating desire to kill: as Stein remarks,

"La destruction capitale en passera d'abord par les mains d'Alissa" (p.59). She will try to lure Élisabeth into the forbidding forest - a dark, primeval region beyond the park, suggesting death - where she would be symbolically killed, that is, divested of her individuality. (At one point Alissa senses the danger the forest holds, then suddenly cries: "Détruire" (p.34)). Given a few days more, Alissa might have succeeded in her attempts to "destroy" Élisabeth, who has become the focus of all the strange trio's attention, because they hope to strip her of any identity. Assiduously penetrating Élisabeth's deepest secrets, Alissa reduces them to pieces of recitation, thus obliterating their personal value; Alissa insists on the sheer physical similarities between them, even cutting her hair to match Élisabeth's, and since their all-embracing type of love knows no sex-barriers, she can confess: "Je vous aime et je vous désire" (p.101). All four play cards together, and during the game she is prodded with questions from all sides, until Stein calls her "Élisabeth Villeneuve," robbing her of her married status.

Yet Élisabeth resists their temptations to enter the forest, to be seduced, to "become" them; she cannot participate in a collective love because of her seeming incapacity to love. Alissa tells her: "Si vous l'aimiez, si vous l'aviez aimé [her husband] une seule fois, une seule, dans votre vie, vous auriez aimé les autres, dit Alissa, Stein et Max Thor" (p.103). (Duras later felt she had exaggerated this side of Élisabeth's emotional make-up, and in the film she removed at least one reference to her sterility.) Eventually Élisabeth too will reach the stage when "destruction" liberates her into a new collective consciousness. Her sudden departure, according to Duras, is "la dernière panique. Après laquelle la panique disparaîtra. Le dernier sursaut, si vous voulez, avant la mort. La mort à sa vie précédente." (27)

Duras seems to view the conclusion of the story with a certain optimism;

Elisabeth's husband, Bernard, is a further temptation for the others, and they insist that he could join in also:

- Il faut partir, murmure Bernard Alione - il ne bouge pas.
- Vous savez, dit Alissa avec une incomparable douceur, vous savez, nous pourrions, vous aussi, vous aimer.
- D'amour, dit Stein.
- Oui, dit Max Thor. Nous le pourrions. (p.121)

For although the Aliones escape, there is the possibility of pursuing them elsewhere, to repeat their experiment in self-immolation and communal love.

Duras believes that love is the most uplifting human experience, indeed is the most important experience in life. In two recent novels, Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein and Le Vice-consul Duras studies the consequences of the absence of love, and demonstrates how those who are cut off from it may remain empty, barren.

Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein (28) is a mysterious and disquieting novel. The opening chapters, which fill in the background to the story, read deceptively like any piece of romantic fiction (except that they are written in a peculiar and disjointed style). At nineteen, some ten years before the story begins, Lola Valérie Stein had been engaged to a young man, Michael Richardson. One evening they attended a ball at a casino, where Michael met another woman, and at dawn he left with her. Abandoned, Lola experienced complete mental collapse, from which she never really recovered. She drifted through life and into marriage in an almost somnambulistic state. Thus far we are in the world of the novelette; Lola might be any one of a hundred girls suffering from an unhappy love. Yet the cause of her malaise seems far deeper than a tragic affair, and we sense a chilly vagueness about Lol (her name, like her personality, is strangely incomplete).

Now, ten years later, Lol has returned with her husband to her home town, S. Tahla, and is living an apparently ordered quiet life as housewife and mother. She renews her old friendship with a girl from school,

Tatiana Karl, because she has taken an unhealthy interest in Tatiana's affair with her lover, Jacques Hold (who at this point turns out to be the narrator). Lol finds a perverse pleasure in spying on their secret meetings, and deliberately takes Hold as her own lover, revisiting the casino before consummating their adultery. She then returns to watch the love-making of Jacques and Tatiana. She will in future be a voyeur.

Lol, then, would appear to be a victim of emotional deprivation, and after the horrific loss of her fiancé, to have remained in a state of complete mental absence. Her recovery is merely superficial, and in fact she is an emotional paralytic. Her later actions seem an attempt to regain the experience of love; perhaps this is why she drifts into marriage, and why she later constructs a situation parallel to the one which was interrupted on the night of the ball.

Certainly it was the traumatic loss of her first love, which unbalanced Lol's mind, but the whole truth about her mental and emotional life is considerably more distressing. Both her former fiancé and her present husband are little more than shadows throughout the story, indicating that Lol may never have summoned up the slightest feeling for them. Only gradually does one grasp the full significance of Tatiana's disturbing remark:

Était-ce le coeur qui n'était pas là? Tatiana aurait tendance à croire que c'était peut-être le coeur de Lol V. Stein qui n'était pas - elle dit: là - il allait venir sans doute, mais elle, elle ne l'avait pas connu. (p.11)

Lol is a woman without normal human reactions, and she is obliged to search for ways to fill her emotional emptiness. Her only solution is to experience feelings second-hand, in the lives of others. As her imagination plays on the possible outcome of the night of the ball, she pictures herself being raped at the hands of her fiancé, Michael Richardson:

Il l'aurait dévêtue de sa robe noire avec lenteur et le temps qu'il l'eût fait une grande étape du voyage aurait été franchie.

J'ai vu Lol dévêtue, inconsolable encore, inconsolable. (p.55)

Rape alone would not give satisfaction, for with her paucity of emotion it would be a mere physical act, and therefore unfulfilling. Only when another woman took over her position, her very identity, would she experience ecstasy:

Le corps long et maigre de l'autre femme serait apparu peu à peu. Et dans une progression rigoureusement parallèle et inverse, Lol aurait été remplacée par elle auprès de l'homme de T. Beach. Remplacée par cette femme, au souffle près. Lol retient ce souffle: à mesure que le corps de la femme apparaît à cet homme, le sien s'efface, s'efface, volupté, du monde. (p.56)

To become "volupté," pure ecstasy, she must borrow the emotions and the very identity of another individual; so far she has never "stripped" Anne-Marie Stretter (her fiancé's mistress) completely, and so the experience has never been lived out in full.

The passage is crucial to our understanding of the novel, for it outlines Lol's need to compensate for her own sterility by living the emotions of other human beings; all her later puzzling behaviour can largely be explained in these terms. In the first place, as psychology has shown, those who suffer from sexual inadequacy, will frequently seek satisfaction by prying on others. This is why Lol becomes a voyeur. Secondly, her subsequent actions are motivated by the desire to re-create the triangular situation at the casino. Since Jacques has some of Michael Richardson's mannerisms, he will do as well as anyone, whilst Tatiana can assume the role of Anne-Marie Stretter because she was actually present at the disastrous ball. Jacques thus becomes her tool, the key to the private loves of others. Lol plies him with questions on the most intimate details of his sexual relations with Tatiana; what she loves is the man who loves Tatiana, not any individual; "Elle aime, aime celui qui doit aimer Tatiana" (p.154). Lol calls Tatiana "un remplacement," a substitute, and by possessing Jacques she is substituting Tatiana's love for her own.

This compensation might have lead to fulfilment of her past aspirations;

indeed during her final journey to T. Beach and the casino her past is exorcised, destroyed. Yet although her physical love-making with her new lover is the complement to the love held in suspense, even now she is still "procuring" emotion second-hand.

In reliving the previous situation Lol theoretically has the chance to begin life once more; love may be reborn in this new relationship, as it is in so many of Duras's works. Tragically the truth is far different. Lol does not discover any permanent love in Jacques's arms. No sooner has she sated her desires than she returns to her spying position below the couple's hotel window. She is condemned to permanent sterility.

Lol V. Stein is a picture of emotional barrenness and the degrading means to which people may stoop in order to combat it. In the following novel Le Vice-consul (29) a similar incapacity to feel can be detected in many of the central characters, with the result that they seem chilly, remote. Genuine emotion, as opposed to physical lust, seems completely absent from the lives of the diplomats and their wives who form a closed, nervous community in a steaming India. Naked sensuality will assert itself, certainly - as in the urgency of the desire which is seen to consume them at times, or in secret trysts like the series of affairs conducted by the French ambassadress, Anne-Marie Stretter, on the islands of the Ganges delta, though nowhere does she exhibit any deeper sensation than lust for her bevy of lovers.

The story's peculiar and enigmatic anti-hero, Jean-Marc de H., former vice-consul at Lahore is, on his own admission, faced with "l'impossibilité d'aimer." Jean-Marc is hovering on the brink of madness, and like Lol has remained an emotional cripple. Never having felt anything vaguely resembling love or even passion, he enquires of an acquaintance whether he might not "aller au secours de l'amour pour qu'il se déclare, pour qu'on se retrouve un beau matin avec le sentiment d'aimer" (p.76).

What he is seeking is love in the abstract, with woman merely as a sexual object, the simplest way of achieving a new emotional state. A virgin, he has applied himself on several occasions to "l'effort d'aimer," but now for the first time he is successful: he is attracted to Mme Stretter. The cold logic with which he has forced himself into love is characteristic not of sexual awareness but of emotional barrenness. He needs to imagine himself in love to counteract the unhappiness and isolation he has always known: "On dirait qu'il attend de la douceur et peut-être de l'amour" (p.140). Yet his cold, forbidding personality, his absence of feeling and his impenetrable strangeness make him an object of dread, to the rest of the community. Love in Jean-Marc's case is impossible. He is permanently caught in a particularly vicious circle.

Jean Marc and Lol cannot know life's most energizing force. Duras has always believed in the vitality of love, and certainly it must hold some special quality for her personages to desire it so ardently.

In retrospect, what is so noticeable about Duras's work is the way she has consistently examined one fundamental situation from a number of different angles. In Tarquinius marriage is on the verge of collapse and survives, thanks to love; in Dix heures et demie marriage disintegrates in spite of the continuing love of one partner; in La Musica love has apparently disappeared, but the end of marriage is paralleled by the rebirth of love. Duras is interested in exploring all the solutions to an essential emotional crisis. Some of her characters can face up to the reality of "la lente dégradation de leur amour," others do not possess the moral strength to withstand the pain.

The attraction of Duras's stories lies of course as much in her con-

vincing delineation of human emotion as in her ideas. One remembers the genuine affection that hides behind the boredom and the petty squabbles of the men and women in Tarquinia; the jealousy and torment of Maria (Dix heures et demie); the erotic nature of Anne Desbaresdes. It is these personal dramas that linger in the mind.

Duras's interest in the problems of "le couple" has come to a halt. The ways to revolution, and not the ways of love have recently been her principal concern. Détruire dit-elle marked something of a departure in her outlook, with its suggestive liaison between love and self-destruction, but passion no longer seems a necessary preliminary to her ideal of a collective consciousness, and a potentially intriguing idea has been left in suspense.

It remains to be seen how completely Duras has left behind the obsessions of a lifetime.

Notes

- (1) Les Petits Chevaux de Tarquinia, Paris, Gallimard, 1953, p.258.

In this and all published works by Duras subsequently mentioned, quotations are taken from the edition described in the first footnote referring to the work in question.

- (2) Paris, Plon, 1943.

I shall quote at length from this novel, since it has long been out of print and is not readily available.

- (3) Paris, Gallimard, 1944. 22e édition.

- (4) Paris, Gallimard, 1950. Quotations are taken from the 15e édition (1958).

- (5) Paris, Gallimard, 1952.

- (6) On Anna's renunciation of absolute love, cf. Jean-Luc Seylaz, Marguerite Duras: essai sur une thématique de la durée, Paris, Archives des lettres modernes, 1963, no.47, p.18.

- (7) J.S. Bratton finds the novel excessive partly because of this ending. He maintains that, had the search not continued, "the psychological movement in Anna from illusion and idealism to reality would have come full circle, [ ... ] returning to a new form of reality through the strictly terrestrial love Anna feels for him." John Scott Bratton, The Novels of Marguerite Duras, Columbia University, 1968, (unpublished), p.47.

The criticism seems to me unjustified, and to go against the whole meaning of the novel: although the couple reject a fantasy-love, they cannot reject the whole world of adventure because there alone can they find exhilaration and freedom (cf. chapter 3 of this thesis).

- (8) Interview with Yvonne Baby, "L'amour est un devenir constant comme la révolution," Le Monde, 7 mars 1967, p.24.

- (9) Paris, Gallimard, 1960.

- (10) The play was first performed in 1965, and published in Théâtre I, Paris, Gallimard, 1965.

The film was made in 1966, and directed by M. Duras. The script is unavailable, but the second half of the film follows the play very closely.

- (11) Cf. Robert Régent, "Le cinéma. Une certaine humeur française," Revue des Deux Mondes, no.7 (1er avril 1967), p.448.

- (12) M. Duras, "La Femme d'Évreux," Cahiers du Cinéma, no.187, (février 1967), p.43.

- (13) In Théâtre II, Paris, Gallimard, 1968.  
First performed Paris, 1969.

- (14) Paris, Gallimard, 1955.

The stage version (abridged) was first performed in Paris in 1956. The complete version of the play, first performed in 1965, is contained in Théâtre I, Paris, Gallimard, 1965. For the sake of clarity, quotations are taken from the text in Théâtre I, which follows almost exactly the earlier novel.

- (15) Released 1961.  
Scenario and dialogues by Marguerite Duras and Gérard Jarlot:  
Paris, Gallimard, 1961.
- (16) The film was produced in 1958, and the scenario published by  
Gallimard, Paris, 1960.
- (17) Chapter 6, "Memory."
- (18) D. Rowe.
- (19) Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1958.
- (20) D. Rowe.
- (21) L. Langley.
- (22) Directed by Jules Dassin, 1966.
- (23) M. Duras, "La Femme d'Évreux," Cahiers du cinéma, no. 187, (février  
1967), p.43.
- (24) D. Rowe.
- (25) Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1969.

I shall refer jointly to the novel and to the film, directed by  
Duras in 1969.

It should be noted that the book works on two distinct levels:  
the "destruction" of individuality is not only the key to communal  
love, but equally the prelude to a new form of Communism. (See  
chapter 8.)

- (26) Jacques Rivette/Jean Narboni, "La destruction la parole,"  
Cahiers du cinéma, no. 217, novembre 1969, p.50.
- (27) Ibid., p.56.
- (28) Paris, Gallimard, 1964.
- (29) Paris, Gallimard, 1966.

Chapter 2.

SOLITUDE AND CONTACT

The whole spectrum of Duras's work is pervaded with a sense of acute loneliness. Men and women are condemned to permanent isolation, or at best live an existence constantly menaced by the possibility of such isolation. The problem is obviously of deep personal concern to the authoress, who has found her own method of combatting the forces of loneliness: "Pour fuir la solitude, on incarne un personnage comme les comédiens, ou on en crée comme les romanciers, et puis on retrouve la solitude." (1) The antidote to solitude is involvement with others - some may escape through writing, others by adopting new personalities, but the common mass of men must seek personal contact with their fellows, and in work after work this is precisely what Duras's characters set out to achieve.

Duras is optimistic to the extent that she believes that human beings will be offered the opportunity to establish new relationships at some moment in their lives. A chance encounter forms the central core of the majority of Duras's narratives. In her synopsis to Hiroshima mon amour - which itself is basically the story of two people, from opposite ends of the earth, who by some coincidence meet and whose affair blossoms into unexpected love - she writes: "On se rencontre partout dans le monde. Ce qui importe, c'est ce qui s'ensuit de ces rencontres quotidiennes" (pp.1-2). Her words might apply to any one of a dozen stories: such meetings, she seems to feel, are the substance of everyday life. They offer new hope to, among others, that host of disenchanting wives.

The unhappy truth, nevertheless, is that even when men and women do meet and experience physical intimacy there is no guarantee that their relations will progress any further. They find themselves caught in the tragic and paradoxical situation of meeting only on a sexual level, while

mentally they remain worlds apart. Relationships are likely to disintegrate as swiftly as they were formed, "et puis on retrouve la solitude." Hence the movement of Duras's narratives is frequently two-fold, as lonely individuals grope tentatively towards contact, only to experience heart-rending defeat.

Human beings live on the threshold of solitude because of the difficulties of communication. Duras describes the torment of being trapped within one's own personality; for social or psychological reasons individuals like Claire Lannes or Lol V. Stein may be permanently alienated from their environment, and time and again, even when given the chance to express themselves, people feel hemmed in, unable to convey the depth of their feelings. Duras holds out brighter possibilities for some - the pathetic couple in Le Square, or the bizarre creatures who bump into each other on a road-crossing in Les Eaux et forêts. Yet throughout Duras's writing we perceive the mind of a woman poised between hope and dark despair.

In the earliest novels, centred on family life, the family unit, at once claustrophobic and sterile, offers little sense of belonging or community. Its younger members feel isolated within what is superficially and to the outside world a tightly-knit group. Both the Grand-Taneran family of Les Impudents and the Veyrenattes whose fortunes are related in La Vie tranquille exemplify the distrust and disinterest which can turn a family into a house of strangers, and cut off parents and children. In each case events are seen from the viewpoint of a young daughter who most acutely feels the isolation in which they are existing. -The Grand-Tanerans have become a house divided against itself in the

atmosphere of hatred and contempt bred by the eldest son, Jacques. M. Taneran, while apparently loving his wife, simply has nothing to say to her, but constantly retreats to his own apartments without seeing her. Mme Taneran fails to understand the nature of her wayward son on the one hand, and on the other more often than not she imagines only a dark side to her daughter, Maud. Though suffering abuse and nastiness, Maud's position within the family unit is ambiguous. She goes all out to possess Georges, yet she still feels a need to remain within the family group. No sooner has she spent her first night of love-making with him than she returns to the family. Their cold rejection of her, because of the scandal she is causing, brings on a nervous crisis. Faced with a life of peace outside the family, she cannot think what to do with herself: "Son isolement l'impressionnait plus que ne l'avaient fait la méchanceté de son frère, les bassesses de Taneran elles-mêmes dont elle paraît les coups sans peine" (p.173). The horror of being shut out completely is more devastating than the years of patient solitude.

The Veyrenattes too live in their own private worlds, though Françoise, the young daughter, always feels an affinity with her elder brother, Nicolas. Only after his suicide does she realise, with profound shock, that there had never been any real communication even between herself and him. Her uncle Jérôme, the object of all their scorn, for whose death Françoise was in no small measure responsible, was equally alone; she now senses the extent to which he must have suffered inwardly:

Ce qu'il voulait, c'était d'être écouté. Et tout le monde le méprisait. Lorsqu'à table il disait quelque chose, chacun faisait mine de manger avec appétit. (p.195)

The meeting of Françoise and the elusive Tiène promises to free her from the years of loneliness. During her stay at the sea-side after Nicolas's death, Françoise ponders on the way that she has been trapped in webs of solitude; each day brings its measure and takes individuals a little

closer to the intolerable limit:

On croit toujours que c'est aujourd'hui qu'on est le plus seule.  
[sic]. Mais ce n'est pas vrai, on l'est tous les jours davantage.  
On se dit chaque matin qu'on ne pourra pas faire un pas de plus sur  
ce terrain-là et le soir on s'aperçoit qu'on a encore parcouru un  
espace vierge de solitude. (p.158)

For the moment love offers an antidote to solitude, though love is  
ephemeral.

No more than the family does marriage offer a permanent refuge from  
solitude. (2) As we have seen, Duras's narratives frequently centre on  
a disintegrating marriage. Couples have drifted hopelessly apart, so that  
women seek consolation and intimacy with another man who unexpectedly  
enters their lives. Yet contact is tenuous and short-lived, and may  
quickly disintegrate. Faced with the emptiness and dulling frustration  
of her present life with her husband, Sara, for example, (the heroine of  
Les Petits Chevaux de Tarquinia) finds in a fascinating stranger a possible  
lover. He offers an easy exit, one of those "vacances à l'amour" of which  
another character speaks. However their relationship lacks any depth of  
feeling or understanding, and they hardly manage to communicate on a  
personal level at all. In the story he never loses his shadowy vagueness,  
never becomes more than a passing stranger. Only the most casual remarks  
pass between them. They do not achieve any real intimacy, though she is  
allured by his sensuality:

-- J'aime bien cette idée, dit Sara, d'avoir couché avec toi.  
Il se pencha vers elle.  
-- J'ai envie de toi. Je voudrais là, tout de suite.  
Elle lui sourit, mais pas lui.  
-- Je voudrais bien une cigarette, dit-elle.  
-- Peut-être que je suis amoureux de toi. Il regarda au loin  
l'horizon tranquille.  
-- Qu'est-ce que ça fait? dit Sara en riant. (p.159)

This is the only moment when the man's feelings seem any more than sexual,

and Sara quite casually shrugs them off as irrelevant. Nothing profound will be established between them, so that their liaison abruptly ends with Sara's change of mind. She will be content with marital love.

The hapless Maria in Dix heures et demie feels increasingly lonely as she drifts ever further away from her husband, painfully aware that he is unfaithful and that she is shut out from the "bonheur prochain" which unites Pierre and Claire. Her mounting sense of isolation, her addiction to alcohol bring her close to moral disintegration. Cut off from her environment, she perhaps rescues the murderer, Rodrigo Paestra, because of a need to find some compensatory relationship. "Quel divertissement à cet ennui," Maria tells herself, if Paestra should enter her life (p.70).

All the same, Maria's attempts are doomed, for Rodrigo Paestra is presented from the first as lacking the will to live, and his suicide has a tragic inevitability. Maria first glimpses him on the roof opposite as a pile of rain-soaked clothing, an inert creature reduced to animality, no more than an "imbecile" as Maria calls him. Hence no contact is ever established between them; he has withdrawn so completely into his private world that, apart from a couple of sentences, he never opens his mouth:

Il la regarde, la regarde, la regarde. D'un regard nul, d'un désintéret jusque-là inimaginable. [ ... ] S'aperçoit-il seulement à l'instant que rien ne peut plus lui venir encore de Maria, ni de Maria, ni de personne? (p.110)

In no other Duras novel is the attempt to communicate such an utter failure. Maria takes hours even to receive some sign of recognition from him, and not until they are far from town does he manage to ask her the most simple questions. Only after his death does she start to imagine, in her inebriated state, that he might have been her new romance:

-- Je l'aurais emmené en voyage, beaucoup, de voyage en voyage - elle bâille - et petit à petit, jour par jour, je l'aurais vu changer, me regarder, puis m'écouter, et puis ... (p.166)

Maria's action was futile, and her loss is total, leaving her more unbearably alone than ever.

A person can be alienated from his or her marital partner for many reasons; in the case of Anne Desbaresdes (Moderato Cantabile), not only is there no personal contact with her husband, but the trouble is aggravated by her inability to share the values of the society he represents. The urgent, reiterated conversations of Anne and Chauvin oscillate between the past they imagine for the couple involved in the "crime passionnel," and the present life of Anne in her luxurious house at the far end of the port. As Anne fills in the details of the existence from which she escapes every evening, a picture is built up of a life of brittle affluence masking personal solitude. It seems, at least for much of the novel, that Anne seeks an affair with Chauvin that will compensate for the sterility of her marital life. Anne is trapped with a husband she never mentions, in a rambling house where people seldom meet. Chauvin suggests:

-- Au premier étage, n'y a-t-il pas un long couloir, très long, qui est commun à vous et aux autres dans cette maison, et qui fait que vous y êtes ensemble et séparés à la fois?

-- Ce couloir existe, dit Anne Desbaresdes, et comme vous le dites. (p.56)

Her fragmented descriptions offer glimpses of a lonely woman, wandering round her bedroom in the opulent but empty house, hearing only the roar of the sea and the rustle of leaves.

The conflict between Anne's solitude and her emotional aspirations reaches its greatest intensity during the dinner-party of Chapter 7. A stream of faceless figures passes before her eyes as she tries to comfort herself in heavy drinking; random snatches of conversation are her sole link with the others. The dinner itself - a kind of royal ceremonial which means a great deal to the guests - is a ritual totally foreign to her. Anne is enmeshed in this hyper-civilised, luxurious world which underneath reeks of hypocrisy and false values, and has annihilated genuine emotion. At the end of the chapter we catch the only glimpse of Anne's husband: "Une ombre apparaîtra dans l'encadrement de la porte restée

ouverte sur le couloir, obscurcira plus avant la pénombre de la chambre" (p.140). A mere shadow, he has no substance in Anne's psychic life.

The affair with Chauvin offers an intense passion at the opposite pole from her anaemic bourgeois existence, but hardly has the first kiss passed between them than she knows it is all over. The question arises whether she ever sought, or expected, a more durable relationship; apparently not, perhaps because the demands of respectability and more particularly love for her child were too strong to resist. Moreover, there was a limit to what they could communicate, and once that limit is passed, they must return to their separate worlds.

For the beautiful and inscrutable Suzanna Andler, in the play of that name, there is on the contrary every possibility that her first adulterous relationship will survive for some time. Though she is anxious above all not to cause him unhappiness, Suzanna has drifted apart from her wayward husband, Jean. The couple have remained together until now, but they have virtually ceased to communicate for years. Suzanna is told that Jean regarded her as "inconnaisable," except by her desires. She has remained a mystery, someone who can only be known carnally. Duras emphasises the gulf between them in the structure of her play: we never meet Jean, except over the telephone, (which here comes to represent the distance separating Suzanna and Jean: she is unable to reach him directly by telephone, so that she must leave her number and wait for him to phone). One of his remarks is pathetically ironic:

JEAN, (sourire dans la voix): C'est-à-dire ... (temps) ... un jour nous parlerons de nous ... (Sourire, temps) Avant de mourir (temps) il faudra que nous parlions une fois de nous. (Temps). Tu veux bien?  
SUZANNA, (temps): Pourquoi?  
JEAN, (temps): C'est vrai. (p.54)

Much as they have at heart retained affection for each other, they are really worlds apart, and any attempt to communicate is too futile even to contemplate.

On the possibilities of human communication Duras is not totally pessimistic. Individuals find great difficulty in getting through to each other largely because they are trapped within their own psyche. Some, indeed, are condemned to permanent isolation, yet others will at some point meet a person with whom they can hold a kind of dialogue, however inadequate. Communication in the case of many people, Duras appears to be saying, is not so much impossible as imperfect.

The mentality of an individual may cut him off from his fellows. In recent years Duras has been fascinated by the manifestations of madness, and has chosen to study characters who, lacking mental stability, have few links with others. Naturally these are extreme cases, but they provide frightening examples of the extent of human solitude.

The weirdest of Duras's deranged protagonists is Jean-Marc de H., hero of Le Vice-consul, whose unpredictable behaviour and disturbing physical presence terrify the diplomatic community of Calcutta. The vice-consul of Lahore has spent almost all his life in total isolation, and now he is virtually a pariah. For the first time he senses that he has found in the elusive Anne-Marie Stretter, a person who might share his secret anguish - and even become his mistress - but she too shies away from a man who is, on all the evidence, insane.

Mental derangement is the source of the ageing Claire Lannes's alienation from her surroundings. The picture that emerges of the disintegrated Lannes household, during the three interrogations that constitute L'Amante anglaise, is particularly bleak and depressing. (3) The peculiar ménage of Pierre, his neurotic wife Claire and the deaf-mute Marie-Thérèse who ran the house for them, had existed for over twenty years before Claire's feelings suddenly erupted into violence and she killed her innocent housekeeper. Most of this time they had been living virtually as strangers - Pierre had sought the company of loose women, Claire had withdrawn into her

memories and Marie-Thérèse frequented the Portuguese immigrants.

Her brutal act and her own words during her interrogation in the novel confirm Claire's instability, though we feel a deep compassion for her tragically lonely situation, the void of her life. It is true that her husband had been genuinely in love with her, and been hurt by her complete indifference. In spite of his constant plans he had never abandoned her, for she was his greatest love, and the tragedy lies in the fact that Claire never reciprocated in the slightest. The faults lie on both sides.

Nevertheless the story contains implied criticisms of a society and individuals who remain callously indifferent to the needs of others. Claire had always been pathetically alone, nervous, insecure, yet others seem intolerant of her personality and her desire to communicate. In the first interview Robert Lamy, representative of the closed and banal Viorne society which gathers in his café, shows a modicum of understanding but insufficient patience to listen to this woman's rambling chatter: "Quand elle tenait ses discours à dormir debout, on la laissait parler. Quelquefois Alfonso l'écoutait. Pierre et moi on parlait de notre côté" (p.55).

Only the shadowy Italian wood-cutter, Alfonso, gained anything like contact with Claire; only he took the trouble to make sense of her confused talk. Society as a whole apparently shows no interest in the problems of those unable to express their feelings easily. Pierre himself had remained listless and unconcerned about his wife, who had created her own isolation, withdrawing to the seclusion of her garden all day. For years little had passed between them. The narrator asks him:

- (-- Qu'est-ce qu'elle faisait dans le jardin ou dans sa chambre?)
- Pour moi elle devait dormir.
- (-- Vous n'alliez jamais la voir, lui parler?)
- Non, je n'y avais même pas pensé. Il aurait fallu vivre avec elle pour comprendre. Quand on est mariés depuis longtemps on ne se parle plus beaucoup mais nous, encore moins que les autres. (p.80)

According to Pierre, Claire never had any real need of him. At heart he is making excuses, and acting in the most ludicrous bad faith. He completely

fails to understand her. Not only does he know nothing of her secret meetings with her one great love, but he imagines she has virtually forgotten this love, which is in fact still torturing her. He has cruelly deprived her, moreover, of one of her few enjoyments - reading comic books; this, according to Duras, is a kind of murder no less brutal than Claire's own crime: "Pierre Lannes a peut-être tué sa femme le jour où il l'a empêchée de lire les illustrés d'enfants." (4) Men and women, it would seem, are capable of the most heinous crimes because of their lack of understanding.

It is Claire's own insanity, partly created by her unhappy experiences far in the past, that shut her off from life. Claire herself realises her isolation, talking of "les autres," "de l'autre côté," as if all humanity were some amorphous mass of which she could never be part:

-- ... Ils vont tous dire que je suis folle maintenant, comme ils le seraient eux, s'ils l'étaient. Qu'ils disent ce qu'ils veulent, eux, ils sont de l'autre côté à dire n'importe quoi, à bavarder sans penser, sans réfléchir. (p.174)

She shares the common illusion of the neurotic that people are separated from her, that she is "different," somehow excluded.

Duras also describes how individuals can be immured in their own minds, which constitute a separate personal world, and are therefore incapable of communicating with those outside. This is particularly true of the mentally unbalanced such as Claire. Although Claire is frequently self-sufficient, content to sit alone in her garden, there have been times when she has yearned to speak to others, especially about her policeman whose loss has been the cause of so much pain. Like the neurotic, who may have the impression of being trussed up in a strait-jacket, or that the whole world is "weighing down" upon him, preventing any power to speak, Claire feels trapped beneath a mass of solid lead:

-- [ ... ] Dans le jardin, vous savez, monsieur, j'avais un couvercle de plomb au-dessus de ma tête [ ... ] Le plus souvent

les idées me retombaient dessus, elles restaient sous le couvercle à grouiller et c'était si pénible que plusieurs fois j'ai pensé à me supprimer pour ne plus souffrir. (p.160)

Non-communication can be a physical torment strong enough to drive to suicide. Yet in her long rambling testimony has Claire not managed, again and again, to put over feelings, to convey some of her past anguish? Even though the narrator may come away with a knowledge of Claire and her motives that is far from complete, her final plea might stand as a motto for the book: "Moi à votre place, j'écouterais. Écoutez-moi" (p.195). On one level the book is an attempt to understand, to encourage communication, and for a while at least we have listened.

Lol V. Stein is also the story of a woman who is mentally absent from the world. Lol has lived in a private universe since the nervous crisis that followed the loss of her sweetheart. Her substitute-lover, Jacques Hold, realises that the nearest anyone can come to her is sexual contact. Even in his arms, she has thoughts he can never share:

Aucun signe de sa différence sous ma main, sous mes yeux. Et pourtant, et pourtant. Qui est là en ce moment, si près et si loin, quelles idées rôdeuses viennent et reviennent la visiter, de nuit, de jour, dans toutes les lumières? en ce moment même? (p.195)

Not only is she "inconnaisable," but even after their sexual union her feelings will be still-born. She will remain schizophrenic, and her attempts to come close to Jacques Hold are pure illusion.

It is not merely madness that shuts individuals off from their fellows; men and women may be so dominated by some personal obsession that everything else becomes subordinate to it. They are trapped in their own thoughts. Such is the case of the aged M. Andesmas, who undergoes a crisis in his life. L'Après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas (5) is the brief and tender story of an old man living on the threshold of solitude, of the loneliness that is the prelude to death; it is also a study of the power of obsession to shut a man within himself. (6)

From the start, M. Andesmas is physically separated, outside his hillside house, from the rest of the world. In the town below, the young are merrily dancing away the warm afternoon, and snatches of a hit-song, with its message of youth and love, drift up to him, reminding him of what he has lost forever. The loss of youth is nothing compared with his present situation; he is about to be deprived of the one important thing in his life - his daughter, Valérie, who in beginning her first love-affair has grown away from him. The whole narrative is pervaded with his sense of imminent isolation. Although he is offered the chance to begin new relationships on this particular afternoon, they turn out to be purely transitory. He is visited first by the daughter of the architect, Michel Arc, who is to construct a terrace for him, and later by Mme Arc.

Ironically the person towards whom M. Andesmas might be genuinely attracted shows little interest in him. The child is a reminder of what M. Andesmas's own daughter recently was, and she is perhaps the last child to whom he could transfer his love; he tries chatting to her, he even tries to summon up affection for her, but in vain, and he is left alone once more:

Il la suivit des yeux jusqu'à ne plus rien en voir, rien, plus une seule des taches bleues de sa robe, et puis il se retrouva une nouvelle fois dans ce délaissement dont elle n'avait fait qu'accuser par son passage, si discret cependant, la déconcertante immensité.  
(p.33)

Some time later Mme Arc arrives, ostensibly to inform the old man that her husband is coming afterwards. At first aloof, she begins to question him on his past, his divorce, and his love for his daughter. M. Andesmas is reduced at times to a pathetic silence, withdrawn into his own thoughts, yet he senses there is more behind her words than she is prepared to show. In fact, it gradually emerges that Mme Arc needs to communicate and share her personal despair with the person who, like herself, is about to be condemned to solitude. For both of them, this is a capital moment in their

lives when they are brought face to face with a lonelier future. She wants to talk of her anguish at discovering her husband's imminent adultery - with none other than M. Andesmas's daughter. Both are being shut out from their loved one's life.

It becomes evident, all the same, that nothing of significance can arise from their meeting and that, although this afternoon is of vital importance, it must end with their parting. Years later, we are told, he would pass her in the street without receiving the slightest acknowledgement from her. The trouble is that they do not meet on a psychological level. Not only are they very different people, but the mental state of the old man shuts him off from the world. In the first place, considering his advanced years, he is simply unable to summon up the emotional energy to respond to the unhappy woman, let alone engage in a new friendship. The book is, on one level, about the process of growing old, and M. Andesmas's lack of interest, his withdrawal are products of this process. All he can feel towards her is curiosity:

Même en sachant bien qu'elle ne pourrait jamais satisfaire l'avidité qu'il avait d'elle, il souhaita qu'elle fût, près de lui, cet après-midi-là. Près de lui, même en se taisant interminablement ... (p.75)

The last words reveal his real attitude. M. Andesmas needs her presence, but solely for his own comfort, not because of anything she might try to explain.

Secondly, they never really communicate because much of the time he is concerned solely with gratifying his private obsession, in hearing about his absent daughter. Towards the end, when the others may be arriving, he tires of Mme Arc:

M. Andesmas prétendit que ce fut à partir de ce moment-là, qu'il commença à se détacher d'elle, même d'elle, de cette femme, la dernière qui se serait approchée de lui. (p.118)

Whilst Mme Arc has been trying to express her unhappy predicament, M. Andesmas has only listened insofar as Valérie was involved. The

last moments especially are virtually a dialogue de sourds, with each of them dominated by his own preoccupations. Suddenly all her pent-up emotion bursts out in a fit of rage, betraying her jealousy and regret, and a yearning for some new love to fill her now empty life. Yet at the very moment when she lets her true feelings erupt, and she imagines the new men in her life, M. Andesmas could not be less sympathetic:

— Un jour, un jour, un autre homme s'approchera de moi et je sentirai sous son regard les signes d'un premier désir. [ ... ]  
Aucun autre homme ne pourra alors m'approcher, je ne le souffrirai plus, même lui, Michel Arc. Pareillement que lorsque lui ...

M. Andesmas lui coupa la parole.

-- Valérie a traversé la place le paquet de bonbons à la main.  
Et puis? (p.121)

His tone has become indifferent. As the laughter of Valérie and Michel Arc draws ever closer up the hill, he seems to attain a new calm, with a smile fixed on his face. Mme Arc on the contrary becomes increasingly agitated, grabbing his hand urgently, for she needs the physical support of another individual. She must continue speaking, and begs him to listen. Completely uninterested, resigned to events and probably to his imminent solitude, he simply rebuffs her: "Je n'écouterai plus rien" (p.128). Even so, she continues talking.

Little in effect has passed between them; at her moment of crisis he is incapable of sympathy. Their relationship is over in one afternoon, and M. Andesmas will be left alone with his memories.

At the same time as she was working on M. Andesmas Marguerite Duras was also preparing a French adaptation of a play based on a Henry James story, Les Papiers d'Aspern (7) centres on an old woman who, like M. Andesmas, has withdrawn from the world into her own reminiscences, although in her case her isolation is self-imposed. The aged Mlle. Border-eau has become a recluse in her decaying Venice home, where she lives on memories of her youth and beauty and of a time when she was celebrated by the poet Aspern. Apart from one companion her world is one of

insularity and silence. Tina, the companion of Juliana Bordereau, remarks:

Mlle. TINA: [ ... ] Elle ne parle que dans la folie. Autrement, c'est le silence ... Et ces choses me concernent, et je ne comprends pas. (Accablée). Quelle prison! Nous sommes deux pauvres femmes enfermées, c'est vrai! (p.43)

Claire Lannes, Lol V. Stein and others are victims, as we have seen, of their psychological state. Duras demonstrates, on the other hand, that individuals can occasionally escape from solitude and enter into a dialogue with others, though they may never get through to each other completely.

Duras adapted William Gibson's celebrated play The Miracle Worker, and it is interesting to note the contrast it forms with Une Aussi Longue Absence. Both are stories of individuals mentally excluded from the rest of humanity, but in this case the seemingly insuperable barriers are broken down. Miracle en Alabama (8) dramatises the now famous story of the education of a blind deaf-mute, Helen Keller, by a young teacher, Annie Sullivan, in the southern United States in 1887. The play relates Annie Sullivan's efforts to get through to the seven-year-old girl when there seems no possible way. For Marguerite Duras and Gérard Jarlot, who adapted the play together, its central interest lies in "le développement d'une situation qui ne peut à aucun moment se résoudre par le langage, bien que le langage contradictoirement en constitue la seule issue." (9) This is what attracted them to the piece, which is decidedly optimistic as compared with other works by Duras.

Language becomes the means of opening the outside world to the pathetic creature who lives like a brutal animal, and raising her into a recognisable human being. All Annie's hopes are pinned on the deaf-and-

dumb alphabet she painstakingly writes on the child's fingers:

ANNIE: [ ... ] Allez, Hélène, Hélène, petit poussin, il faut que tu sortes de ta coquille, toi aussi. [ ... ] Tu n'as qu'un moyen d'en sortir, c'est d'apprendre le langage. Notre langage. Apprendre à le parler avec tes doigts. (p.29)

Communication is not established by any affection or indulgence, but by sheer physical violence; Annie and Helen Keller fight like dogs, but the struggle yields those final joyous moments when Helen can relate words to the objects around her, and emerges from her closed cell into the world of others. The play contains an important statement on communication. It is communication and intelligence that define people as human beings, that raise them above the level of primitive bestiality. In psychological terms, Helen had never progressed beyond the level of the "id" because she had no rapport with others.

It was in the terse novel and later play, Le Square, that Duras gave one of her most profoundly moving studies of loneliness. Duras recalls that she wrote it because she was "fortement impressionnée par le silence, l'oppression du silence venu du fond des âges dans lequel baigne l'immense majorité des hommes." (10) It is the story of a man and a young girl who emerge, at least for a moment, from their usual "silence." They meet on a bench in a public square, to which the girl has taken a child for an afternoon in the fresh air. They engage in conversation, and soon discover they are both pathetically lonely people. He is a commercial traveller, dragging his suitcase from town to town, she is a maid who has wilfully inflicted upon herself the most tiresome drudgery in order to fortify her resolve to escape into marriage, with the man she longs to meet at the dances she attends regularly. Each tries to explain his own awareness of life - the traveller is resigned to a life of travelling without hope, whilst hope is the very quality to which the maid clings; each points out the limitations of the other's attitude. Evening draws on, and they must part, but perhaps, the next Saturday, they may meet again

at the dance. On the surface nothing has happened, yet perhaps for the first time they have been granted an opportunity to unfold their whole lives.

Though they do not say as much at first, their casual encounter is a blessing, and we sense almost at once their reliance on such meetings to keep their spirit alive:

JEUNE FILLE: C'est un endroit bien indiqué, les squares, pour se reposer, en effet, surtout en cette saison. J'aime les squares, moi aussi; Être dehors.

HOMME: Ça ne coûte rien, c'est toujours gai à cause des enfants, puis, de temps en temps, on y trouve l'occasion de parler un peu.

JEUNE FILLE: Oui, c'est vrai que de ce point de vue aussi c'est bien pratique. (p.54)

The passage is a model of concision and understatement, for couched beneath the seemingly banal words are the two people's deepest needs. The girl appears to be making a casual remark about squares, whereas she is really thinking about the drudgery from which she is escaping, by being "out of doors." The traveller speaks in general terms, yet makes us feel not merely that this is the sole pleasure he can afford, but that he wants, above all, to engage in conversation. There is a certain sadness in his words - "de temps en temps," "un peu," - which underlines that, even in public places, contact is a transitory thing and not always possible. Duras has set her tale in one of the few places on earth where two such people could come together.

In their separate ways they are at the lowest ebb of life. Hers is one of toil and drab solitude in the house of a smelly old woman. She has no idea what sort of man is waiting for her; she never describes one particular man who is a creature of flesh and blood. They are all identical, an amorphous mass from which she is estranged. Stuck "on the shelf," she is in an impossible situation, for she cannot force anyone's hand without running the risk of landing herself with the wrong person. The travelling salesman's situation is no less hapless. Gradually we

piece together a picture of years spent on trains and boats, and nights in lonely hotel rooms with only a newspaper for company. His job is a dead end, leaving him a rootless wanderer.

The couple are united in their sense of isolation from the rest of humanity. Like Claire Lannes, they feel somehow "apart." The words "les autres," "tout le monde" are a permanent part of their vocabulary, emphasising the gulf between themselves and the normal world. They share a distant memory of brighter youth:

JEUNE FILLE: [ ... ] J'étais une petite fille comme toutes les autres, rien apparemment ne me distinguait d'elles. A l'époque des cerises, ah! tenez, nous en volions ensemble dans les vergers [ ... ]  
HOMME: J'en ai volé aussi, tout comme vous, et rien en apparence non plus ne me distinguait des autres, sauf peut-être que je les aimais déjà beaucoup. (pp.73-4)

Not only does the memory bring back to them a time when they were at home in life, but the very similarity of their words underlines the fact that they both long for those happy days of genuine companionship. Another of the salesman's past experiences recurs like an obsession, and was obviously one of the most exhilarating moments of his life. He describes how, one evening, in a foreign town, he came by chance on a zoological garden where he felt a complete affinity with the rest of mankind:

HOMME: [ ... ] L'air sentait à la fois le feu et les lions, et je le respirais comme l'odeur même d'une fraternité qui enfin me concernait. Tous les passants étaient attentifs les uns aux autres et se délassaient dans cette lumière de miel. (p.80)

He looks back with regret on that time when he knew a feeling of fellowship with men, and there were no barriers between them.

In a sudden outburst of emotion the truth appears: for days on end his only conversation consists of brief chats with customers, who are either too busy or too suspicious to take an interest in him. He yearns for a durable relationship; indeed, the difficulty of communication, for both of them, is sheer physical torment, a denial of a basic need:

HOMME: [ ... ] On s'ennuie si fort de bavarder avec quelqu'un et que quelqu'un vous écoute que ça peut vous rendre même un peu malade, vous donner comme un peu de fièvre.

JEUNE FILLE: Oui, je sais, il semble alors qu'on pourrait se passer de tout, de manger, de dormir, plutôt que de bavarder. (p.98)

Yet both are resigned to the most transitory human contact, admitting that when they part they must "rentrer dans le silence" (p.129). Their conversation has been a flash of light in their darkness, with no certainty that it will be repeated.

While much of the time they have tried to sympathize with the other's situation, they sometimes seem obsessed with their own troubles. The salesman's attempts to describe his most important experience seem to fall on deaf ears, since the girl is too concerned with her own plight to pay attention. They seem on quite different wavelengths. Even when he does manage to describe the scene, she is less interested in empathizing with him over a moment of great beauty than picking out inaccuracies in his recollections. These passages testify to the consummate skill in the conception of the work. With great subtlety Duras introduces them for their effect of contrast; they suggest the precariousness of this potential relationship, in that they represent those moments when their contact, always tenuous, has temporarily ceased. Secondly, they underline the impossibility in which human beings find themselves of ever conveying their experience adequately through the everyday channels of language. Words will always tend to distort or restrict, and the salesman cannot convey the quality behind the events. This is why we can never truly share the emotions of others.

Yet one receives the impression that the couple can find, through discovering the similarity of their predicament, a possible rapport. Moreover, they are both, it turns out, fond of dancing - could this be the basis of a more durable friendship? All the girl's pleading, nevertheless, cannot induce him to follow her from the square at the end, since

he lacks the courage to strike out for anything new. It is precisely this cowardice that casts a shadow over any hopes that they can continue their relationship. Perhaps, as the girl suggested, their conversation "ne porte pas à conséquence" (p.59); maybe it will flourish - at the next dance. Duras prefers to veil the outcome in ambiguity.

In her first comic work, Les Eaux et forêts (11) Duras turned to farce to give the lie to her supposed pessimism over the possibilities of human contact. What could be more natural, she appears to be saying, than that three people should strike up a conversation when one of them is bitten in the leg by another's dog? And they do, indeed, hold a conversation in which they happily express their opinions and feelings, and talk of their private lives with complete nonchalance. Beneath their dialogue compounded of heightened prose, inarticulate gabble, and sheer vulgarity we sense hopes and frustrations, sadness and joy. The two women and man who meet on a pedestrian-crossing are quite ordinary human beings at heart, but their conversation is pure farce, shaded grey by the depth of their feelings. Together they can live out illusions for a few minutes; only at the end does the depressing truth come out: one woman has murdered her husband, the other feels hemmed in by inquisitive neighbours, and the man's claims to social position and a Mercedes-Benz were silly day-dreams. Yet they are basically only listening to their own voices, and they remain quite unaffected by each others' sad revelations.

Their dialogue is shot through with humour and gentle irony, so that any potential tragedy is swept away in a gust of good humour:

FEMME 2, (calmée, voix à peine audible): Excusez. Je me répète: avec qui feriez-vous la conversation?  
HOMME: La conversation? Je suis seul humain. Alors je n'ai plus de conversation humaine avec personne. Elle est bien bonne celle-là.  
FEMME 1: Et moi, je compte pour des prunes? (pp.24-5)

And it is certainly true that, although their dialogue frequently deteriorates into nonsense, they do manage at moments to uncover their

deepest feelings. Duras is again suggesting that such meetings are a typical aspect of life; as one woman suggests: "Sur le clouté ou ailleurs, faut bien se rencontrer! Ce ne serait pas moi, ce serait une autre!" (p.35).

If they have no common ground on which to converse, then they have recourse to their imaginations. At times they are quite carried away by their own fantasies and inventiveness, not only waxing lyrical over their first love or lost youth, but actually sharing the same dreams and memories. Amazingly, they soon address each other in the most informal not to say impudent manner, even changing each others' names: "Missis Thompson," "madame Système," "Toto." The characters feel a thrill both in their power to talk to each other and in the sheer sound of words rolling off their tongue. Each in turn feels an almost sensual excitement in being given the chance to describe his background (real or imagined), lingering on the smallest event:

HOMME: [ ... ] J'ai une situation en vue, une femme superbe, une Mercedes-Benz, [ ... ] de l'immobilier de première classe, avec tout l' conf' modern', s.d.b. etc., bibliothèques! au kilomètre! (p.40)

They constantly exhort each other to control their excitement, to regain "du calme;" for quiet orderliness, a natural ease in speaking are precisely what they lack. They cannot restrain their neuroses or the primitive childish excitement which, on a more mundane level, result from that same privileged situation - the chance to talk about themselves - that gives rise to the heightened dialogue of Le Square. The great danger is that they will negate any real dialogue by letting themselves be carried away on the flood of their own words, by what one woman calls "la rage:" "Vous avez la rage tous les deux [ ... ] Vous vous mordez à pleines dents, oui, au lieu de vous faire la conversation, sales égoïstes que vous êtes!" (p.25). In giving way to fanaticism, they have in the last analysis merely played games with each other and their contact cannot

last; they are "sales égoïstes," concerned with their own voices alone, meeting at the verbal level, but not on the plane of emotion, nor even unselfish interest.

Duras's outlook on the limits of human contact and the permanent threat of solitude, is realistic rather than gloomy. She recognises that men and women can only advance so far towards each other before being thrown back on themselves, that they are hemmed in by their own personality, and by sheer self-centredness. In her most recent work Duras has put forward her own highly personal solution to the problem of solitude: for if men cannot approach each other because they are trapped in their own minds, only transcendence of the personality can bring them fully together. Her ideal of transcendence is discussed elsewhere in connection with Détruire dit-elle particularly (12); suffice it to say that, for Duras, happiness stems from a total involvement with others: "le bonheur c'est ça, c'est l'autre qui est soi." (13)

Isolation and the difficulty of communication are of course themes which have become familiar in the literature of recent times; in this respect Duras's work is characteristic of her age. Yet here as in other aspects of her work it is clear that Duras is writing out of a profoundly personal inspiration. Her own life is full and varied, she enjoys enormous popularity and respect among her many friends, but she cannot free herself from her feelings of solitude; she shares her protagonists' dilemma: "Essentially I am alone. It is intolerable, of course. But once you accept that fact it is a habit which is perhaps the strongest one there is: the habit of solitude." (14)

NOTES

- (1) Marguerite Duras/Jeanne Moreau, "Vivre seule," Le Nouvel Observateur, no.46, (29 septembre - 5 octobre, 1965), pp.18-19. Duras in conversation with her friend, the actress Jeanne Moreau.
- (2) cf. J.S. Bratton: "the author intimates that marriage is rarely a panacea for loneliness, that the marriage that may well have been founded initially on love founders on the eventual and fated alienation of the individual." (p.196)
- (3) L'Amante anglaise, Paris, Gallimard, 1967. Quotations are taken from this work. The stage-version, based on the second and third testimonies (Pierre and Claire Lannes) was performed in Paris in December 1968; published in Avant-scène, no. 422 (15 mars 1969), pp.8-24.
- (4) Jacqueline Piatier, "La séduction de la folie," Le Monde (Sélection hebdomadaire), 30 mars 1967, p.11.
- (5) Paris, Gallimard, 1962.
- (6) A similar remark is made by J.S. Bratton, who describes the novel as "the image of human loneliness and isolation, the story of an individual imprisoned in his own mind." Mr. Bratton makes the interesting point that M. Andesmas "is alienated from his own body: his mind and his body are no longer one" (pp.109-111).
- (7) Les Papiers d'Aspern, pièce en trois actes et cinq tableaux de Michael Redgrave (The Aspern Papers), d'après la nouvelle de Henry James.  
Adaptation de Marguerite Duras et Robert Anthelme (1961)  
Published in Paris-Théâtre, 14ème année, no. 172 (1961)
- (8) Miracle en Alabama, pièce en trois actes de William Gibson (The Miracle Worker); texte français de Marguerite Duras et Gérard Jarlot. Published in Avant-scène, no.279 (1er janvier 1963, pp.10-34.  

It is surely significant that Une Aussi Longue Absence, treating a rather similar theme, was also the result of a collaboration between Duras and Jarlot. There the tramp, irrevocably trapped in his own consciousness, has regressed to the mental level of a child.
- (9) Marguerite Duras et Gérard Jarlot, "Pourquoi?", Avant-scène, no. 279 (1er janvier 1963), p.9.
- (10) cf. Claude Damiens, "Marguerite Duras," Paris-Théâtre, 14ème année, (1961), no. 172, p.60.
- (11) First performed in Paris, 1965.  
Published in Théâtre I, Gallimard, Paris, 1965.
- (12) Discussed in chapters on "Love" and "Madness."
- (13) Madeleine Chapsal, "Une Voix," Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, no.52, (décembre 1965), p.46.
- (14) L. Langley.

Chapter 3.

SUFFERING AND THE WILL TO  
FREEDOM

The human condition, as Duras depicts it even in her earliest work, involves pain as much as pleasure. Individuals are trapped in a world of unhappiness, bitterness and strife, often of cruelty. Duras describes the human situation in general terms as one of "souffrance" or "ennui." The pain may be moral or psychological: inertia, monotony, the pointlessness of private existence - these too are sources of irritation and anguish. Françoise's words in La Vie tranquille echo the predicament of a score of characters:

Il reste l'ennui. Rien ne peut plus surprendre que l'ennui. On croit chaque fois en avoir atteint le fond. Mais ce n'est pas vrai. Tout au fond de l'ennui, il y a une source d'un ennui toujours nouveau. On peut vivre d'ennui. Il m'arrive de m'éveiller à l'aurore, d'apercevoir la nuit en fuite désormais impuissante devant les blancheurs trop corrosives du jour qui vient. (p.169)

This is no ill-defined Romantic malaise, but is caused on one level by the wretched conditions of daily life, and on a much deeper level by some inevitable anguish which Duras calls, in connection with Le Vice-consul, "l'ordre divin, si vous voulez, l'absurdité même de la vie." (1)

The authoress is interested above all in her heroes' reactions to their personal situation, and in this and the following chapter I hope to trace the two methods by which they seek an outlet from their suffering. Some yearn for personal freedom; they long to make a radical break with their present lives and tear up their roots. Yet only in Duras's earlier novels is the possibility of such freedom held out. More frequently individuals are imprisoned and can only react by fighting back; as their frustrations reach breaking-point they are driven inexorably to rebellion, often expressed in acts of violence.

The theme of human freedom recurs consistently in Duras's early works. She is concerned not only with the individual's desire for escape but with the problem of self-assertion; the will to freedom, as she depicts it, involves the questions of personal liberty and the assertion of individuality. Duras describes also the opposite temptation: withdrawal, acquiescence in the face of the apparent inevitability of suffering; this is the very renunciation of freedom. Duras is aware that the break is seldom easily made, and that men and women will often choose the security of their present lives, however unpleasant. This dilemma - in which individuals are torn between their aspirations and their need for security - will torment a whole series of characters. The young protagonists of the first novels, though trapped in the conformist life of their family, do not attempt at all costs to throw off its bonds. The Grand-Tanerans may be hostile towards each other, and the Veyrenattes may be agonisingly bored, but the attitudes of their younger members towards their relatives is ambivalent. Only when the situation is completely unbearable, Duras is saying, are men and women courageous enough to break out; the narrator in Le Marin and the maid in Le Square have been driven too far.

As we saw in the first chapter, those seeking escape usually look for refuge in the company of a new partner: it is love which lures men and women and holds out the most fulfilling kind of escape. Love is the key to the new life, as the heroine of Les Impudents discovers. Maud has suffered acutely from the hatred and despair that possess all her family. On the first page we learn that anguish is written on her face: "son visage était pâle et meurtri par l'ennui" (p.1). "Ennui" is a word that recurs constantly in the novel, suggesting not only the boredom and lifelessness of the family's existence, but suffering and pain. The atmosphere of the Grand-Taneran household is filled with disgust and hatred. Yet at

heart they do not wish to breach the wall surrounding them and get out of the family circle. In this respect Maud is typical of them, for she knows she can always find in the bosom of the family a kind of peace, and the thought of escape has remained an idle dream:

Souvent Maud pensait qu'elle ne reviendrait plus chez elle. Pourtant, chaque soir la ramenait. Son attitude pourrait paraître étrange, mais c'était celle de ses frères, celle de son beau-père. [...] Transportés au bout du monde, ils seraient revenus un jour ou l'autre, tant restait grand pour eux l'attrait du cercle étroit de famille, où rien, pas même l'oisiveté, ne pouvait diminuer l'intérêt qu'ils se portaient mutuellement. (p.23)

In other words blood is thicker than water, and this bond will always bring the family back together. Maud's real chance comes when she thinks she has fallen in love with Georges; she feels a desire to take hold of events, perhaps escape at last. Though she goes to live with him and is soon carrying his child, she can still contemplate returning to the fold when the family goes back to Paris. Only after her abortive betrayal of Jacques and her realisation that she can no longer bear his tyranny over the others, does she leave the narrow circle forever.

Duras's third novel, Un Barrage, stands somewhat apart from the main body of her works, largely because so much of the story is autobiographical. Nonetheless, certain themes do find expression, such as the desire for freedom, although there is here no conflict of will. For the two adolescents who have experienced the depths of human misery there is no alternative to permanent escape. Though Joseph and Suzanne never lose their deep affection for their overbearing mother, their utterly wretched condition has nurtured in them a fervent hope for freedom.

It is their mother herself who has engendered in Suzanne and Joseph their yearning for a meaningful life; they look forward to an almost fairy-tale existence of luxury and ease, for the years of poverty have made them fiercely materialistic. With the naïvety and innocence of youth they are certain that they will enjoy some thrilling romance with anyone who

might come along their dusty track and carry them off.

In the meantime they can only console themselves with the few glimpses of high living they gain from their sole possessions: an outdated glossy film-magazine and an old record-player. It is interesting to note how Duras introduces these products of "consumer society" into the narrative in order to suggest both the intensity of the children's aspirations in a way they could not and the purely materialistic nature of those aspirations. The brother and sister seek refuge from grim reality - like all of their inter-war generation - in the hollow glamour and fabricated excitement of hit-songs and films. Joseph shuts himself away from the world with the most precious things in his life - a gramophone and five records. His personal favourite is Ramona, whose stereotyped lyrics, suggesting flight to a world of romance, recur as a leitmotif throughout the novel: "Lorsqu'ils partiraient ce serait cet air-là, pensait Suzanne, qu'ils siffleraient. C'était l'hymne de l'avenir, des départs, du terme de l'impatience" (p.73). The cinema, too, offers a wealth of new experiences, and Suzanne sits through film after film during the family's stay in the capital city, losing herself in impossible romances.

In fact it is in a cinema that Joseph meets the woman who will change his life, and the cinema is described as the realm "par excellence" in which to meet members of the opposite sex and perhaps begin a life of excitement: "D'être ensemble avec un inconnu devant une même image, vous donnait l'envie de l'inconnu" (p.192). Joseph does not hesitate to seize the chance of striking out for freedom and has no qualms about leaving his mother for his rich mistress. As for Suzanne, her final departure will be in tragic circumstances; she will leave behind not only a barren land, but her own mother, buried beneath the infertile soil.

The other early novels of Duras offer a deeper study of the problems of human freedom, and of the conflict between personal liberty and security. La Vie tranquille continues the theme of Les Impudents - the family shut in on itself, condemned to inertia and boredom - and once again the young heroine tries to reconcile her need for personal freedom with a deep-felt affection for the closed community in which she has been reared. Nevertheless, the book bears more significant affinities with Le Marin and later novels, in that the problem of freedom has existential overtones. This is no mere coincidence, for Duras has acknowledged that like her contemporaries she was marked by the intellectual climate of her time, and particularly by existentialism. (2)

The notion that men can break out of a narrow, sterile existence and discover a life that is at once more exhilarating and more authentic, can be found in writers as different as Gide and Hemingway (whose influence on Le Marin, as we shall see presently, is also apparent). There are many indications, however, that Duras's particular outlook, and the language in which it is occasionally expressed, have their source in existential ethics, although they have become diluted in transference. In both Duras and Sartre freedom involves the assertion of individuality and moral courage, and the dramatic situations chosen by the two writers are similar: Duras's characters are forced to face up to their responsibilities towards themselves, once they become conscious of themselves as individuals; they are confronted with the question of what to do with their lives. Yet it is only the initial moral problem that is similar, not the action taken. Duras's characters strive for complete personal liberty and wish to assert themselves but do not, like some existential heroes, commit action that is socially beneficial. Duras has gleaned from Sartre only what suits her themes.

For Sartre a man must perform a series of willed acts that define him

as an individual and give his life meaning; he is free to create his existence at every moment of his life, and must be aware that freedom is his permanent condition. He is thus capable of constant change (of escaping for example from the dulling rut of daily existence). Yet an individual cannot always bear the tremendous weight of such responsibility, and will seek refuge in imagining himself definitively formed - in the state of "en-soi", or like a stone, to use Sartre's terms. By fitting an image created by others, or conforming to a general pattern, he can lull himself into a kind of security that is the negation of freedom.

It is precisely this apathy which reigns over the Veyrenattes (La Vie tranquille). Françoise reflects on the way each member of the family has been incapable of asserting his own aspirations: "dans cette maison habitait le songe patient. Ils rêvaient de trouver le moyen de se quitter pour toujours. [ ... ] Mais, au fur et à mesure que le temps passait, ce désir a pris prétexte de tout pour ne pas se vouloir" (p.142). The key words are "prétexte" and "se vouloir"; they are living under a pretext, making excuses to themselves for not trying to alter their lives; they are shying away from an act of will that would shake them out of their lethargy. They are guilty of what Sartre would call "mauvaise foi," lack of authenticity, deliberate self-deception.

No more than her relatives has Françoise been capable of any definite decision such as leaving the bosom of the family; according to her she has never made a choice, because she has not known what the outside world is like: "Je n'avais pas choisi de rester là, je n'avais pas choisi d'en partir non plus" (p.76). As Sartre points out, to avoid choosing is itself a choice; she has in effect chosen to stay, and has stagnated and never improved her lot. Throughout the novel she seems to be making choices then changing her mind. She is attracted by alternative solutions to the problem of her useless existence and the misery which her family

knows; she makes all the moves to possess her beloved Tiène, then can contemplate losing him forever. After her brother's gruesome suicide she takes flight to the sea, not so much to escape from the family as to find an easy way out of the pain she has suffered over Nicolas's death. For Françoise the sea suggests permanence and is the antithesis of the unpredictability of daily life with its store of misfortunes.

It is at this point that the narrative gives way to philosophical reflections, and the existential content becomes most explicit. Françoise realises that the sea offers the oblivion of death, a much simpler solution than some positive act. She longs to escape into nothingness. In the water she can throw off her identity and all contact with the world, to achieve at least for a moment the inert state of "en-soi":

Trente mètres d'eau vous séparent de tout: d'hier et de demain, des autres et de ce soi-même qu'on va retrouver dans la chambre tout à l'heure. On est seulement bête vivante aux poumons respirants. (p.146)

Reduced for a time to an animal level she is relieved of the burden of thinking, of having to face up to her responsibilities as an individual. Yet she cannot rid herself of thought, which must come flooding back:

Mais très vite, et subitement, la pensée. Elle revient, étouffée de peur, cogne à la tête, devenue tellement grande (tellement grande que la mer y aurait tenu); elle a peur tout d'un coup de se trouver dans un crâne mort. (p.146)

Françoise's experience parallels that of Antoine Roquentin, in La Nausée, who is also faced with the horror of the void of his existence and at one point tries desperately to abandon thought, to divest himself of the consciousness that defines him:

Je me lève en sursaut: si seulement je pouvais m'arrêter de penser, ça irait déjà mieux. Les pensées, c'est ce qu'il y a de plus fade. Plus fade encore que de la chair. [ ... ] Ma pensée, c'est moi: voilà pourquoi je ne peux pas m'arrêter. J'existe parce que je pense ... et je ne peux pas m'empêcher de penser. En ce moment même - c'est affreux - si j'existe, c'est parce que j'ai horreur d'exister. C'est moi, c'est moi qui me tire du néant auquel j'aspire [ ... ] (3)

Existence is not thrown off so easily, except by an act of self-annihilation

such as that which brought Nicolas his final tranquillity.

Rather than make a bid for freedom Françoise is tempted to accept a sterile life and complete passivity before events. Increasingly pessimistic, she perceives that the calm of the Veyrenattes household has been destroyed, and in its place "désordre" and "ennui" hold sway. She yearns to attain to that "vie tranquille" which will bring peace to the soul and shut out the recent unhappiness and chaos - Nicolas's obligatory marriage, the antagonism between Jérôme and the others, his death and Nicolas's suicide. Her parents' solution has been passivity and complete withdrawal from the world, and for a time it would seem to be Françoise's solution as well. She abandons all desire for personal experience, preferring to succumb to the inexorable repetition of events: "Je compte les années qui me restent à vivre dans l'aile gauche de la maison des Bugues: dix, vingt, quarante ans. Rien ne les marquera, rien ne peut m'arriver. Je ne désire plus que rien m'arrive" (p.161). The will may be crushed before it has a chance to assert itself; this is the most disturbing lesson of the novel. Life and freedom may have come too late.

However Françoise cannot maintain this sense of resignation which is at bottom a form of "mauvaise foi," and by another volte-face she comes finally to a decision on her role in life, which is to accept Tiène's love on her return to les Bugues. Françoise never leaves the family circle, but can find happiness (however temporary) within it, with the person she loves. Escape from "désordre" lies in complete union with another human being.

Duras's heroine never emerges as an entirely credible individual, since her behaviour is incoherent and unpredictable. Françoise is used to portray a variety of responses to the human situation - a desire for freedom, passivity, revolt - which make her conduct, particularly towards Tiène, perplexing and contradictory. In her later novels the authoress

succeeds in polarising these opposing responses, often by situating them in separate characters, and the result is a more satisfactory statement.

The dilemma of two diametrically opposed responses to life stands at the centre of Le Marin de Gibraltar: the need to find new experience and freedom by throwing off the ties of civilisation is set against the desire for the security of a restricted existence, to be a cog in the social machine. Le Marin de Gibraltar is the story of a man who has the moral strength to reform his life. During an unsuccessful Italian holiday the young narrator is suddenly forced to face up to the boredom and emptiness of his present existence. Dissatisfied with his routine job, irritated by his fiancée for whom he no longer cares, he abandons both. The opportunity of a new life comes when Anna offers him a position on Le Gibraltar. He is the only man, out of the whole string of lovers with whom she has voyaged at different times, whose resolution is firm enough to resist the temptation to return to the everyday world; he will remain her companion in a quest that may last forever.

At the eleventh hour the narrator has broken out of his sterilising conformity to attain moral and psychological freedom. For the first time he has asserted his individuality. One senses acutely in this situation the influence of Sartrean existentialism: the narrator has drifted through life in uneasy impotence, avoiding decisions, remaining in the state of "mauvaise foi." Yet finally he commits an action that could be called heroic, since what he does requires enormous courage; it is by no means simple to strike out for an entirely new life. The will to freedom can be asserted only with difficulty - as Sartre's protagonists are constantly discovering - and only a few individuals will succeed:

Lequel d'entre moi avait pu si bien, et à mon insu, se mêler de mes affaires personnelles? Je dis si bien, car ça n'a l'air de rien de quitter un emploi stable, fût-il le dernier, celui de Rédacteur 2e classe, ministère des Colonies, eh bien, moi, je savais que - surtout après huit ans - pour ce faire il fallait, ni plus ni moins, de l'héroïsme. (p.42)

The abandonment of social norms separates the narrator from Jacqueline, who will return to her Civil Service position, "dans la dignité et le travail":

J'étais un homme libre, sans femme, et qui n'avait plus aucune autre obligation que de se rendre heureux. Mais on aurait demandé à cet homme pourquoi il avait décidé de quitter l'Etat civil, qu'il aurait été incapable de le dire. Je venais de rompre avec le monde du bonheur dans la dignité et le travail, parce que je n'avais pas réussi à les convaincre de mon malheur. En somme, je ne tenais plus mon destin d'aucun autre que de moi-même, et désormais ma cause ne concernait que moi seul. (pp.86-7)

In that last sentence we hear echoes of Oreste's declaration of liberty in Les Mouches: "je suis condamné à n'avoir d'autre loi que la mienne [...] je ne peux suivre que mon chemin. Car je suis un homme, [...] et chaque homme doit inventer son chemin." (4) Yet there are important differences: the narrator does not know why he fled from his sordid existence if it was not to search for happiness, while Oreste finds his personal freedom in a willed act that engages him politically. For Sartre this is the service to which we should put our freedom. In contrast the narrator's freedom appears self-centred and hedonistic, for he is seeking to experience the joys of adventure and spiritual release. The protagonists of Duras and Sartre resemble each other in their reactions to life but not in the solution they choose.

The vital fact, nevertheless, is that characters in the works of both writers, reject a certain kind of existence in order to gain a new sense of being. Both Sartre and Duras find abhorrent the demands of social convention and the way men will succumb to a vast system without a struggle. The narrator at least wrests himself out of the claustrophobia and conformity of everyday life - symbolised for him by his menial post in the Civil Service - when he realises the utter banality to which he has submitted. He experiences a moment of truth while visiting a Florentine art gallery, and feels he can throw off all the stupidity of the past; suddenly he enjoys a sense of release that is almost physical: "Je pissais mon imbécillité

jusqu'à la dernière goutte. Et puis ce fut fait. Je fus calme. [..] En somme j'étais devenu majeur en une demi-heure" (p.39). Soon afterwards he can shout: "L'État civil, fini" (p.41) and his words do not mean simply that he is going to renounce his thankless job of copying out birth-certificates, but that he is freeing himself from his entire background and social status.

All the tension of the first part of the novel is concentrated in the increasingly strained relations between the narrator and Jacqueline, who stands at the opposite pole from himself. She is the classic case of the individual who has been dehumanised by the social system and *unthinkingly* accepts its values. Jacqueline typifies the majority of men and women who allow themselves to become mere cogs in a machine, accepting a situation they have neither the courage nor the will-power to reject. For Sartre this is the worst of man's crimes, to be tempted into immobility, into the passive state of "en-soi." Man will always try to fit into a pattern, to appear like other men. (There are celebrated examples in Sartre's works: the portraits of the bourgeois "salauds" in La Nausée, who live inauthentically by entertaining false notions such as that of respectability; they implicitly accept their status in society, which becomes a form of protection, an excuse for inactivity. One thinks also of the citizens of Argos, in Les Mouches, who have been dulled into accepting values they did not choose and are guilty of the most blatant cowardice).

Jacqueline is completely at home in the world, has no worries about her job, and is in fact a mere automaton, without genuine interest or feeling for anything. She has built her life on false beliefs, on forms of self-deception which protect her from the truth; in other words she has been living in complete "mauvaise foi" in order to avoid the fundamental questions of existence. It is for this reason she has willed herself into believing, for example, that she is perfectly happy; the leaden heat

of Florence - which Duras often describes to evoke the oppressiveness of living, and which torments the narrator - seems to leave Jacqueline unmoved:

Je découvris [...] qu'il était impossible qu'un humain pût aimer cette chaleur-là, que c'était là le mensonge qu'elle avait toujours fait, le mensonge optimiste [...] Que si elle avait douté que la chaleur fût bonne, en effet, un jour ou l'autre elle aurait douté du reste, par exemple que ses espoirs sur moi fussent aussi fondés qu'elle le désirait. (p.33)

Jacqueline stands for everything the narrator comes to detest; her conformity, her lack of courage are the very negation of the freedom he now seeks.

Anna, and not women like Jacqueline, is the narrator's female counterpart. For him and Anna freedom is synonymous with "le bonheur," since happiness lies in their case in liberation of the spirit. Anna is looking for something outside everyday life, and though her hopes of happiness seem to be pinned on finding her lost sailor, the search itself is far more important; as she confesses: "--Même quand je l'oublie, lui, je n'oublie pas que je cherche" (p.107). Life on the open sea gives her purpose, and compensates for boredom and loneliness. No less than for the narrator travelling is an antidote to suffering and a sterile existence.

The name of Hemingway is specifically mentioned at one point in the novel, in connection with hunting koudous "comme dans les livres de Hemingway" (p.212), and there are obvious affinities between Le Marin and some works of the American author. Anna and her companion are prey to that same restlessness and malaise that threaten Hemingway's protagonists. Like them they find exhilaration in adventure, in the open-air life, and a closeness to nature; they are escaping from civilisation. The later episodes of the novel are dominated by the image of hunting - the hunt for some absolute as much as for the sailor. At Anna's side the narrator gradually assumes the role of hunter: "je commence déjà dès cette traversée à être une bonne graine de chercheur de marin de Gibraltar" (p.236).

Freedom means excitement and a life removed from the everyday world, on the dazzling white yacht that is the most memorable symbol in all Duras's works of the joys of escape.

In fact the narrator is one of the few characters in Duras who manage to throw off the ties of society and live authentically. In the following novels Duras again explores the problem of asserting the will and emphasises the importance of taking hold of one's life. Yet already in the next story, Tarquinius, personal freedom seems less attainable, even futile.

Tarquinius continues the exploration of personal independence and the need to break out of a secure niche, the difference being that unlike the hero of Le Marin, the holiday-makers are held in the bonds of marriage, and more especially love. We saw earlier how all their destinies are bound up in the same dilemma: on the one hand, the desire to experience the world outside - often related to the desire for a new sexual partner - and on the other a desire to stay close to the one person they truly love.

However, they seek independence in a much wider sense than freedom from the bonds of marriage. Most of the characters - Sara, Jacques, Ludi, and the affable old grocer - feel a thirst for "travel" or some new adventure which is at heart a desire for escape. On the most simple level, they cannot wait to escape from the torrid, sun-baked resort where they are virtually trapped. Their holidays are an unqualified failure in this drab, dusty place, with no trees to protect them from the heat and with only one road connecting them with civilisation. The days pass in unbearable monotony, and conversation revolves around the heat, or the next meal. Duras has created an atmosphere of claustrophobia, suggesting in microcosm their everyday existence.

The only escape from the raging inferno and the torpor it inflicts, is the eternal, beckoning sea:

Oui, la chaleur lacérait le coeur. Et seule lui résistait, entière, vierge, l'envie de la mer. [ ... ] Les autres étaient déjà dans la

mer. Ou, s'ils n'y étaient pas, ils allaient s'y jeter d'une minute à l'autre. Des gens déjà heureux. Sara regretta la mer. (p.23)

The sea possesses all the Romantic associations of liberty, excitement, infinity. For Sara, constantly remembering cooler summers, it brings a brief oblivion.

It is the man who appears totally in tune with the sea who offers, if only for a moment, the chance of adultery and freedom to Sara. Racing across the open sea, he represents the independent spirit and for the others he symbolises "l'inconnu," for which they long as ardently as Anna and her companion, or the adolescents in Un Barrage. Yet such freedom must be transitory, given that Sara still loves her husband, and she renounces it at once.

Duras views this lust for freedom as a common human experience. Certainly it is felt by Sara's husband and to varying degrees their friends, and is much more fundamental than a need to keep out of the summer heat. The idea of travel haunts Jacques and Ludi, who are in effect thirsting for new excitement. Ludi would love to visit America, but his wife derides his aspirations. Jacques is interested by the suggestion of a trip to Tarquinia, to see the Etruscan tombs on which are painted the little horses of the title. Diana is the least attached of the characters, drifting from hotel to hotel through a series of casual affairs. Her need for continual freedom dominates her life.

Escape stands not only for the compulsion to get out of a rut; the yearning for new horizons also reveals a need for self-assertion and individuality. Jacques and Ludi go through moments of anguish and frustration precisely because they fear they are incapable of asserting their will-power. They are faced with the same choice as the narrator in Le Marin, except that they are truly in love with their present partners, and feel more permanently tied.

As in the earlier novel, freedom is seen to demand an enormous amount of courage, of which no-one seems capable. Duras delineates their hidden fears with suggestive detail: Jacques and Sara both express a wish to go fishing, though they agree that river-fishing is preferable to fishing on the open sea. As Jacques confesses: "Moi aussi j'aime mieux les fleuves. C'est peut-être parce que les fleuves c'est fait pour les attentes tranquilles, pas la mer" (p.74). The river is eternally peaceful, whilst the sea is moody and unpredictable. Sara can never feel at ease in the sea and dares not swim out of her depth. Perhaps it is the approach of middle-age that robs Sara and Jacques of courage; already they are afraid of uncertainty, though their child, on the contrary, longs to fish on the sea.

Jacques and Ludi experience most acutely this conflict between adventure and peace of mind; both feel compelled to prove their self-reliance by acting independently of their wives, and going to Tarquinia on their own. Yet both lack the necessary determination. They express their need to prove their individuality in identical terms:

-- Non, dit Jacques, non, tu vois, ce qu'il faudrait c'est que je le supporte, que j'y arrive. Je le voudrais de toutes mes forces. Je voudrais de toutes mes forces pouvoir par exemple partir tout seul. Sans toi. [Sara] (p.197)

[Ludi:] [...] Il faut que je cesse de penser que je pourrais voir les choses avec elle [Gina], que je pense seulement aux choses que je pourrais voir, mais sans elle à côté de moi. Je crois qu'il faut que j'y arrive. (p.256)

The novel ends on a note of complete ambiguity. It remains uncertain whether the visit to Tarquinia will ever take place, though Ludi, Jacques, and Sara seem prepared to go. All are afraid of trading their marital security for the great unknown, and cannot break free from their mutual dependence. Love in this case has prevented characters from ever attaining complete personal liberty.

None of them can assert themselves and forego their security, which

despite their various quarrels offers comfort and certainty. In Le Square Duras has polarised this fundamental conflict between the yearning for freedom and the temptation of security, in the characters of the maid and the salesman. The girl lives only on hopes of escape from her drab environment and of some future happiness; she has forced herself to remain static until the day of escape, whilst the salesman, rootless, without hopes, drifts like a straw in the wind. He has negated his individual freedom by refusing to take hold of events and try to alter his life. He prefers the security of moulding himself to his situation. The girl, on the contrary, is hostile to her miserable situation and refuses the possibility of any slight happiness while her drudgery continues. The headstrong maid wants absolute freedom from her present life, and will refuse to believe she is a real person until that day comes: "il me faut un homme pour lequel j'existerai" (p.109); she insists that "Rien n'est commencé pour moi, à part que je suis en vie" (p.72). Again one notices in the attitudes of Duras's protagonists similarities with existentialist thought. In effect the maid is a person who has achieved nothing and has no essence; she has never been able to do anything that would make of her an individual. She feels she can only begin to live when she has found the man of her dreams. She has not allowed any of her actions to mould her, nor any of the small events, - the "détails" as she calls them - of everyday life.

The maid is aware how easily one can fall back into the acceptance of one's present situation since the effort to maintain one's will-power is so great. She is struggling to avoid being anaesthetised by her sordid circumstances. Significantly they use the same words to describe their situation; the girl remarks that: "On se fait à tout, j'en suis sûre, et j'en vois, des gens, qui, après dix ans, en sont toujours où j'en suis. On peut se faire à toutes les existences, même à celle-là, et il faut que

je fasse très attention, moi aussi, pour ne pas me faire à celle-là" (p.73). Her words are an ironic echo of the man's own apathy: "On finit par se faire une raison de mener telle ou telle existence" (p.62).

When he suggests that the only way he could ever change his job, would be if some "grande chance" befell him she puts forward her own solution: "Mais, monsieur, ne pourriez-vous pas, par exemple, le vouloir tout simplement?" (p.57). He is so resigned to his misfortune that any such act of will - so vital to her - is unthinkable. He travels because this is the best way of allowing time to pass without forcing one's will upon it. The whole difference between the two lonely people is summed up in the word "change"; he refuses to believe in the possibility of changing, and thus of developing:

HOMME: ... Vous, vous changerez; moi, je ne le crois pas, je ne le crois plus. Et, que voulez-vous, il n'y a rien à faire, même si je ne l'ai pas tout à fait voulu, je ne peux pas oublier ce voyageur de commerce que je suis. [ ... ] le temps passe et l'on trouve qu'il y a peu de solutions dans la vie, et c'est ainsi que les choses s'installent, et puis un beau jour elles le sont tellement que la seule idée de les changer étonne. (p.116)

The salesman feels a fond appreciation for the girl's moral standpoint, which he even calls "heroic." At the climax of the story, when she encourages him to follow her out of the square, he makes a bitter, degrading confession: "Je suis un lâche, mademoiselle" (p.131). It is a terrible moment, breaking the whole tone of the narrative and revealing the salesman's self-disgust.

Nevertheless, the girl comes to appreciate that each, in his separate way, has done what he can with existence: "C'est vrai qu'on fait ce que l'on peut, vous et moi" (p.133). Duras has inserted a passage into the play which does not occur in the novel, and which seems to me vitally important for the final effect these two individuals make upon us:

JEUNE FILLE: Monsieur, vous allez croire que je ne sais pas ce que je dis, mais voyez-vous, je vous trouve comme du courage à vous aussi.

HOMME: Et à vous, mademoiselle, je pourrais dire ...

JEUNE FILLE (suppliante): Dites-le, monsieur ...

HOMME: Je pourrais dire qu'à vous aussi ...

(Il ne le dit pas).

JEUNE FILLE: Merci, monsieur. C'est un peu ... comme cesser d'être seule que de s'entendre dire cela ... (p.134)

We are left with the impression that not only the girl's wilful determination but the salesman's submission require their own kind of heroism. Duras is deeply sympathetic to the salesman's plight, even though he has abdicated his freedom of choice and is living in a state of "mauvaise foi." Sartre would undoubtedly have offered a wholesale condemnation of such an outlook, yet Duras never criticises him in the way that she implicitly condemns Jacqueline (Le Marin). Sartre would never have used the word "courage" to describe the salesman's attitude. In his case "courage" stands for the resilience he shows in continuing to live a thoroughly wretched existence, in living in spite of despair, when suicide would have been a simpler solution.

After Le Square, in which there is every possibility that the maid will finally meet the man of her dreams, Duras has become increasingly sceptical of the individual's chances of escaping from pain with a new partner. Heroines of later novels are indeed lured into passionate affairs, but insuperable obstacles bar the way to happiness: social convention (Anne Desbaresdes), or non-communication (Maria in Dix heures et demie, and Lol V. Stein).

There exists, however, one other method of escaping temporarily from anguish and boredom: alcohol. Duras's characters drown their sorrows in a flood of whisky, champagne, or cognac (a habit they share with Hemingway's heroes). In drink they find a brief release from their anxieties. To relieve their frustrations and boredom the Grand-Taneran brothers join

Georges Durieux in evenings of drinking and riotous pleasure at the local dance-hall. The whole family in Un Barrage find their lives more tolerable after a glass or two of champagne; the mother drinks it "pour noyer sa honte" (p.76).

Alcohol has the power to increase the determination of Duras's characters to escape from their wretched situation. The narrator in Le Marin finds in wine an aid to self-liberation; he relates how at the crucial moment "à mon dixième verre de vin je ne doutais plus que j'allais partir sur le yacht, cela me paraissait facile ..." (p.80). Again, the vast quantities of bitter campari quaffed by the holidaymakers in Tarquinta not only keep off the maddening thirst but fortify them and renew their confidence. "C'étaient des boissons fraîches, qu'on buvait comme de l'eau et qui rendaient joyeux et plain d'initiative, aussitôt bues" (p.180).

As Duras has pointed out, alcohol does not offer oblivion, the chance to shut out the world, but rather encourages "une sorte de dépassement de soi, l'illusion [ ... ] La plus grande illusion créatrice, c'est l'alcool!" (5) Alcohol expands one's experience of the world by allowing free rein to the imagination. Certainly this is the case with Anne Desbaresdes, whose tongue is loosened and whose inhibitions are banished by the power of wine, so that she is free to elaborate on her sexual fantasy. Similarly the dream-like quality of Dix heures et demie results from the fact that events are refracted through Maria's inebriated brain, and in her tormented jealousy her imagination runs riot, imagining whole scenes of passion between her husband and his new mistress.

Alcohol gives characters a kind of moral courage to face up to the world, yet its effects are short-lived, and can never guarantee permanent escape.

In the novels discussed above, hope of attaining personal freedom is

at least held out. Yet more often the only way in which men and women can react against their alien environment and their private anguish is in rebellion, and this is the course they choose.

NOTES

(1) Jean-Michel Fossey, "Interview avec Marguerite Duras," Paris Magazine, October 1967, p.19.

(2) J.S. Bratton also points out existential elements in La Vie tranquille and Le Square, and quotes an interview with Duras:

"J'ai vécu dans le bain existentiel. J'ai respiré l'air de cette philosophie. Tous les écrivains, âgés de moins de cinquante ans, ont été nettoyés par cette école." (Pierre Hahn, "Les hommes de 1963 ne sont pas assez féminins," Paris-Théâtre, 16e année, 1963, p.35.)

Mr. Bratton compares the situation of Francine and Roquentin: both pass through an identity crisis, have been unaware of the metaphysical implications of life, and felt a profound ennui. Neither Francine nor Roquentin has been totally aware of his independent and solitary existence. In spite of the revelation of existence, life for both is still fundamentally ennui and solitude.

The man and girl in Le Square, according to Mr. Bratton, are negative representatives of the existential hero, he because of his lâcheté, she because through her inaction her "essence" has become the very life she hopes to escape.

J.S. Bratton, pp.25-8; 69-70.

(3) Jean-Paul Sartre, La Nausée, Paris, Gallimard, 1938, pp.128-9.

(4) Jean-Paul Sartre, Les Mouches, Théâtre, Paris, Gallimard, 1947, p.113.

(5) J.-M. Fossey, p.18.

Chapter 4.

SUFFERING AND REVOLT

Men and women are liable to revolt against their wretched situation when driven beyond the point of tolerance; this is the message that emerges from a number of Duras's novels. Private suffering may coerce individuals into strong-willed and stubborn protest, and frequently unleash acts of absurd brutality. Violence tears apart the fabric of their lives, and nothing can be the same again.

No matter how lowly the person or limited his action, they are symbols of a struggle against a harsh and alien life; such individuals portray a kind of heroism which makes them the object of the writer's admiration. Some, like the proud, colossal mother in Un Barrage, or the impudent concierge Mme Dodin are formidable creatures. One perceives, moreover, Duras's concern for common humanity; time and again she demonstrates how quite ordinary people in the lowest echelons of society manage to react against their sordid situation and social injustice, so giving their lives positive value. Duras's attitude toward her creations might seem ambivalent and indeed amoral, for she seldom condemns their behaviour outright; rather their rebellion is held up as an ideal, and merits greater respect than the acquiescence, the apathy into which men - and sometimes those same individuals - are in danger of falling.

Their behaviour is not merely a reaction against the drabness or unhappiness of their personal situation, but points towards a more obscure and less tangible kind of suffering, one that might be termed metaphysical. "Souffrance," "ennui" and "douleur" seem a permanent part of the human condition, an evil inflicted upon mankind.

Two novels, written fifteen years apart, deserve special attention. While in the majority of her works Duras makes little attempt to sketch in a social background against which characters move, Un Barrage and Le

Vice-consul are on a much grander scale. The problem of human suffering looms particularly large because individuals are set against a whole way of life, in Indo-China or India, that is emblematic of metaphysical suffering.

The "ennui" that weighs down upon Jacques and his sister Maud (Les Impudents) has a dual significance. Their lives are darkened not only by their personal sense of aimlessness, but by a deep-seated and indefinable malaise, a feeling of life's utter emptiness; their reactions, however, are far different. Jacques - one of the least attractive of Duras's heroes - has become a creature of malice and anger, and flouts any form of moral or personal standards. He vents his hatred on anyone in sight, and will trample ruthlessly on everyone's feelings in order to keep himself in money and indulge his pleasures. He bears no small responsibility for his wife's suicide and the death of the young girl who became his mistress. He has blackened his sister's life with his callousness, treating her like an animal or piece of property to be sold off to the nearest bidder.

The important point is that there is no apparent cause for Jacques's behaviour. His malice is not innate, but has been constantly willed:

Jacques était méchant par une sorte de retournement sur lui-même. Le bien le décourageait à l'avance et il l'évitait soigneusement.

[...]

Il trouvait donc préférable de s'enfoncer dans la méchanceté, petit à petit, et de frapper chaque jour d'un coup plus décisif Taneran, Maud, sa mère, qu'il tenait bien en main. Sa vie en prenait une unité et une force. (pp.224-5)

Jacques has been drawn further and further into the nets of evil. In effect he is revolting against something that is never named, perhaps against life itself.

Underneath, he is obsessed by the sterility of existence: "L'inanité de l'existence humaine lui était devenue un article de foi" (p.8).

Maud's depressed state, similarly, stems from a fundamental unease, compounded of boredom and a sense of futility. All the same, she has never followed her brother's example and become callous or cruel; her solution has been acquiescence, whose supreme mark is her final decision - marriage to a man she no longer loves.

Yet even if Maud never revolts against the nature of life, she is eventually forced to act decisively against the most immediate cause of the sour, hate-drenched atmosphere - Jacques himself. Maud has bottled up her rage inside her, and remains passive, inert, until she can stand the situation no longer. She strikes at the family's cancerous centre and betrays her brother to the police. The irony is that Jacques is already out of danger and her action is too late. She is left with the paltry consolation of knowing that she had been able to act at all: "L'important, elle l'avait fait. Que le sort de Jacques ne dépendît plus de sa volonté, elle n'y pouvait rien!" (p.239)

In the following novel, La Vie tranquille, this movement from acquiescence to revolt is inverted, for the story opens at the precise moment when violence seems to have terminated an intolerable situation, and the promise of a happier future has dawned. Only later does it become apparent to the youthful François and Nicolas that their gesture of rebellion cannot of itself free them from the tedium and especially the pain of their daily lives. In the context of this novel revolt is no solution; one can only shut one's eyes and withdraw.

The title of the work has a peculiarly ironic ring, considering that it begins with the near-murder and death-agony of one man, and ends with the ghastly suicide of his nephew who throws himself under a train, perhaps in expiation for the attack on his uncle. Though much of the

novel unfolds on the remote farm where the Veyrenattes toil eternally on the land, all the signs are that even so restricted a life constantly brings new hazards, emotional upheavals and disasters. Françou had imagined that the sense of oppression and misery which had pervaded the atmosphere for so long, must inevitably drive them to an orgy of mutual destruction that would end the years of imprisonment:

J'attendais ce qui suivrait: le moment où ces songes surgiraient de la nuit, celui où ces gens s'empoigneraient vraiment, pour embrasser la bouche du plus vaillant d'entre eux. (p.142)

Françou's uncle, Jérôme, had come to symbolise their wretchedness and poverty, of which he was in fact the cause. The act of destruction was therefore aimed at him. Françou induced her brother into attacking him, in the hope that with his death would end "tout ce qui couve entre nous depuis toujours" (p.15), but she soon realises that the suffering will continue. Her act of revolt will remain a unique attempt to alter events. By one of her frequent inconsistencies she reverts to her former apathy.

Since the dire events of recent months threaten her stability, she wills herself into total indifference. Gradually she tries to shrug off the whole tragic past and her present misery:

Je suis la plus à plaindre, pareille à tous, la plus à plaindre.  
[...] On l'aura la vie tranquille, on l'aura. J'aime la pluie.  
Il suffit de bien lui tendre la figure et d'ouvrir la bouche.  
J'aime bien ces frissons dans le dos. [...] Il n'y a rien à  
faire contre l'ennui, mais un jour je ne m'ennuierai plus. Bientôt.  
Je saurai que ce n'est même pas la peine. On l'aura la vie  
tranquille. (pp.204-6)

One frightening consequence of her attitude is her cold passivity in the face of disaster, for during her stay by the sea she calmly watches a swimmer drown without lifting a finger to help. Only later does she realise that she could not bear to spoil those brief moments of tranquillity on the shore. Only by turning a blind eye to human suffering and to the loss of companionship that the death of a loved one brings, can one ever hope to

attain inner calm. Her own future is with her beloved Tiène but she will remain unmoved by the course of events, however happy or painful.

Rebellion, in Françou's case, could never lead to the "vie tranquille."

Much later in her career Duras was to return to the problem of violence as the ultimate protest against a life of inertia and unrelieved boredom. In her first work written explicitly for the theatre, Les Viaducs de la Seine-et-Oise (1), and again in L'Amante anglaise, she drew on the same real-life "fait divers" to explore the reasons why innocuous, respectable individuals should suddenly commit a hideous crime.

The crime in question, a brutal and apparently motiveless murder, has exercised a continual fascination over the writer. Duras takes her inspiration from an actual case that shocked France in 1950 (though she changes the victim; in the original case a wife had killed her husband). A prologue to the play gives a cold, unemotional account of the facts: pieces of a body, found in railway trucks all over France, were discovered to belong to the same person, and a police-check established that all the trains had passed under the same railway bridge. Eventually, by tracing the crime to the town of Épinay-sur-Orge, the police were able to identify the murderers - a retired railway employee and his wife. At their trial they were unable to put forward any adequate reasons for their action.

The play takes place on the couple's last day of freedom, and during the first act Marcel and Claire Ragond try to pinpoint reasons for their turning to crime after leading such blameless lives. Claire simply cannot put her finger on why she encouraged her husband to dismember the body of their deaf-mute cousin, Marie-Thérèse, who had led a peaceable and seemingly contented life with them for twenty-seven years. At best partial solutions are offered to the mystery, and Duras herself is only prepared to go some of the way towards defining their motives.

The whole truth is never uncovered, but it is suggested that their

crime was a violent reaction to their cabbage-like state. They desired to achieve some moment of fame or notoriety that would set them apart forever from the rest of humanity. "Ainsi nous allons sortir de la généralité des cas," Claire assures her husband (p.20). Hitherto they had been useless mediocrities, without any genuine identity:

MARCEL: [ ... ] Quel anonymat était le nôtre, Claire!  
On nous citait dans toute la commune comme des célébrités  
de l'anonymat! On disait: les Ragond, comme on aurait  
dit ... (Il cherche) les artichauts, le temps! (pp.31-2)

In this context their crime can be seen as an existential assertion of individuality, separating them from their previous forty years as "des ressortissants fidèles de la Seine-et-Oise" (p.58). The department is representative of a fixed, orderly existence.

More important, murder put an end to their latent malaise, their indefinable frustration at the nature of their existence. Claire cannot explain their motives in rational terms: "Peut-être parce qu'on n'avait pas le choix. Elle, [ Marie-Thérèse ] elle se trouvait là. La barbe à la fin" (p.31). "La barbe" are words used time and again by Duras's protagonists, to express their irritation and unease; they are on the lips of the nervous, fussy mother in Des journées entières dans les arbres and her counterpart in Un Barrage. For Claire "la barbe" sums up her annoyance at the sterile life which had reduced her and her husband to automata. Marie-Thérèse, on the contrary, drifted through life in apparent ease and contentment, and was at home in the everyday world. She was therefore an affront to the discontented Claire:

CLAIRE, (continuant): J'étais déjà une ruine. Mais il me restait des yeux pour voir et je la regardais. Et quand nous étions dans la cuisine toutes les deux, elle si grosse, moi si maigre, elle profitant du moindre soleil, moi le fuyant, elle si à l'aise dans son malheur de sourde, moi si mal à l'aise dans ma soi-disant perfection, je pensais, je pensais, jusqu'à la douleur, et sans le moindre résultat! ... (p.60)

Marie-Thérèse's satisfaction was an unhealthy state of mind, and one shared moreover by the other friends of the old couple, who appear in the

second act and who have acquiesced in an ordered, respectable and uneventful life.

In truth the deaf-mute just happened to be the person closest to hand, <sup>on whom they</sup> and thus becomes a scapegoat <sup>vent</sup> their frustrations. In killing her they have said no to a life that is spiritually void, and in the process have ensured that their own lives (at least Marcel's) will be terminated very shortly. At the end they accept their arrest with equanimity, knowing what their fate will be.

It was while revising Les Viaducs for an English production (performed early in 1967) that Marguerite Duras began to write L'Amante anglaise, partly because of her extreme dissatisfaction with the earlier work:

Je déteste Les Viaducs de la Seine-et-Oise, qui n'apportent qu'une vue très superficielle du crime. On voulait monter la pièce en Angleterre. J'ai essayé de la refaire. J'y ai pensé pendant trois mois. Je ne suis arrivée à rien. J'entendais pourtant parler mes personnages. Alors j'ai pris des notes. (2)

Though it starts from the same basic situation as the drama, the novel shows a completely different approach both to the facts and the characters. In particular Duras has attempted a much fuller study of the motives behind the crime, and the exploration of character is hence far deeper. Secondly, all the light is directed upon one lonely old woman, Claire Lannes, who has committed the brutal murder on her own and without the knowledge of her husband, Pierre.

The book takes the form of an investigation. By means of three testimonies recorded on tape, a writer-cum-interrogator seeks to reconstruct the hidden facts surrounding the murder, and the motives leading to it. During the first of the interviews, given by the owner of a café in Viorne, the known facts of the case are mentioned: the pieces of a body were found in various railway goods-wagons all over France; all the trains transporting them had to pass through Viorne, the largest railway junction in France; the crime was therefore traced back to that town; the body is

that of a woman, and only the head remains to be found. We hear with the café-owner a heated conversation recorded on his premises, during which Claire confesses to the murder of her cousin, Marie-Thérèse Bousquet, a deaf-mute. In the average detective-story this revelation would mark the end of the investigation, but for Duras and the interrogator it marks the start of an inquiry into the motives of the murderess. As in Les Viaducs, there is no apparent reason why Claire should chop up the body of the woman who had been the Lannes's housekeeper for over twenty years.

In the first testimony, the 'bistrot'-owner, Robert Lamy, takes for granted that Claire is insane. She and her husband were regular customers, but Robert was not interested in her.

The second testimony is given by Pierre, who can think of no earthly reason for the crime except, again, that she is mad. She broke crockery, tore sheets, behaved weirdly in general and lived a withdrawn existence. He had arranged for Marie-Thérèse to keep house, thus leaving Claire free to look after her own affairs. The two women seemed to get on reasonably well together.

Finally Claire herself is questioned, and her responses tend to confirm that she is unbalanced. Yet the picture we gain of her and of the household is far different from Pierre's. She found Marie-Thérèse's sense of comfort and happiness intolerable; she could not express her own feelings, particularly about an old love. Even now, she feels she cannot discover the central reason for her crime, even though she knew she was bound eventually to act out what she had committed in fantasy.

In the end the investigator loses heart and will not continue the interrogation. A satisfactory solution is permanently ruled out.

The vicious murder which has destroyed the Lannes household, was undoubtedly the work of a madwoman, but it also represents much the same kind of revolt that drove the couple in the earlier drama to crime. The

interrogator plays back to Lamy the conversation recorded on the night of Claire's confession, and during which the detective in charge of the case makes a perceptive remark. He suggests that the crime could have been committed "parce qu'on était ensemble dans une situation commune peut-être trop immobile, et qui durait depuis trop longtemps, pas une situation malheureuse pour autant, non, mais fixe, sans issue, vous comprenez" (p.32). Claire may have been tempted to break out of the stagnant and stifling situation which had not altered since her cousin's arrival twenty years earlier. In her interrogation Claire freely admits that she had no particular dislike of Marie-Thérèse; rather one senses that she was prey to a pathological anxiety, a deep-seated fear of objects and people, with Marie-Thérèse at the fore. Her cousin, she says, was "too fat for the house," just as her husband was "too big." (Pierre too reveals that he had felt hemmed in, and had secretly dreamed of killing Marie-Thérèse, or someone, in order to regain personal freedom.) It was the particular circumstances that drove Claire to crime, and the victim might easily have been someone else; the vital fact is that the situation has been curtailed:

-- [ ... ] Je dis que j'ai un caractère à ne pas supporter que les gens mangent et dorment bien. C'est tout. Ç'aurait été une autre qui aurait dormi ou mangé comme elle je ne l'aurais pas supporté mieux. (p.148)

Her words throw new light on the reasons for her revolt, and suggest wider social implications behind the choice of victim. Marie-Thérèse was happy, ate and slept well, and was the kind of person who appalled Claire. Subconsciously, Claire rebelled against the comfort and snug security of a conformist existence. She is contemptuous of the majority of people, whom she qualifies as "de l'autre côté," contented in their narrow, protected worlds. Marie-Thérèse, she says, would have been "la reine de l'autre côté" if she had been able to speak: "Elle les dévorait des yeux quand ils passaient sur les trottoirs pour aller à la messe. Ils

lui souriaient à elle, donc voyez. À moi, jamais personne ne m'a souri, ils s'en sont toujours gardés" (p.177). It is all summed up in Marie-Thérèse's cooking, for which Claire had felt mounting within her a deep revulsion over the years; her cousin's most nauseating concoction was "la viande en sauce." Claire would rush into the garden where she kept her English mint, or "l'amante anglaise" as she called it, which she consumed as an antidote to the food she was served:

— [...] c'est ma plante préférée. C'est une plante qu'on mange, qui pousse dans des îles où il y a des moutons. J'ai pensé ça: l'amante anglaise, c'est le contraire de la viande en sauce. (p.150)

Revulsion to "la viande en sauce" represents revulsion at a whole system of values - ease, acceptance of life, a superficial kind of happiness. In this sense Claire has struck out against an ethic, a way of life she cannot stand. Naturally, given the character of Claire, her reactions were emotional, and Duras makes her speak in terms that are concrete and simple, rather than logical. (3)

Yet Claire's revolt is far more than a reaction against a claustrophobic existence and cosy conformity; it is the act of an individual who cannot come to terms with existence at all. As with the couple in Les Viaducs, so here it is suggested that the murderess wanted to terminate her own life. The detective remarks in the café: "il me semble ici qu'on a tué l'autre comme on se serait tué soi" (p.32). Claire could not only escape from her past suffering, but in the process cause her own self-destruction. Revolt against life itself could not be more total.

Duras does not always depict revolt in such gloomy terms, however. The charming and comic short-story, Madame Dodin, (4) demonstrates that revolt can take many and varied forms, and even become a source of perverse merriment. The tale is related in a far lighter vein than the dark and chilling L'Amante anglaise, though like that later novel it

shows how apparently ordinary people can strike out against their condition in life.

Madame Dodin is a concierge, living on the ground-floor of an apartment block - literally and metaphorically on the lowest rung of society. Above her live the tenants, from whom she exacts a fiendish revenge for the wretchedness of her position. Her revolt is simple and effective: she complains with unnerving regularity about the failure of the prosperous and more influential people above (one of whom is the narrator) to fulfil the elementary task of emptying their bins regularly. She maintains that this would reduce the weight, and no amount of reasoned argument will convince her otherwise.

Superficially she might appear an obstinate and rather silly woman, but her behaviour is an instinctive reaction against the sickening drabness, the cruelty and injustice - as she sees it - of a life the tenants cannot imagine. It is all summed up for her in her dustbin:

Jamais ne l'a effleurée l'ombre d'une résignation. C'est entre elle et la poubelle, une question de vie et de mort. C'est de cela, de la poubelle, qu'elle vit. Mais aussi de cela qu'elle pourrait mourir. (p.120)

Mme Dodin is a kind of working-class Sisyphus, bearing the daily burden which has been imposed on her by those above; but her response to the incessant suffering is not like that of the legendary figure of whom Camus writes, and who spites the gods by laughing at his task. Mme Dodin replies with anger and impudence, nowhere more effectively than when she clatters her dustbin through the court-yard into the street in the early morning, in order to rouse all those fortunate enough to be still in bed.

Above all else, Mme Dodin wants to bring home to the tenants the amount of their rubbish which must pass daily through her hands; they can have no conception of the extent of her suffering nor of the

symbolic nature of her dustbin:

Car il n'en va pas différemment de nos poubelles et de nos idées, par exemple, ou même de nos philosophies, de nos opinions. Notre poubelle n'est pas la Poubelle. Et notre opinion par exemple sur Mme Dodin ne rend pas compte de Mme Dodin. Tandis que la poubelle de Mme Dodin est la Poubelle et l'opinion qu'elle a de nous, rend parfaitement compte de notre situation par rapport à elle. [...] C'est à partir de nos os de côtelettes qu'elle a trouvé cette règle fondamentale: "Les locataires, c'est toujours des salauds rapport à leur concierge. Quoi qu'ils fassent. Et même les meilleurs." (pp.129-30)

She alone has a worm's eye view, a complete picture of her misery. Nor does she find consolation in the belief that her suffering is part of a higher divine purpose. She puts no trust in any permanent values which might console her, and dismisses them with earthy good humour:

-- Le bon Dieu, c'est pas grand-chose de bien reluisant, c'est moi qui vous le dis. Puis, le Fils, c'est du pareil au même que le Père.

Et sur le socialisme, des idées non moins arrêtées:

-- Les communistes, c'est du pareil au même que les curés, sauf qu'ils disent qu'ils sont pour les ouvriers. Ils répètent la même chose, qu'il faut être patients, alors, il y a pas moyen de leur parler. (p.131)

All parties and systems urge patience - in other words, an acceptance of the painful slowness of life, with only vague hopes to get by on. Mme Dodin's answer is different - she believes not in acquiescence, but in open revolt. She must fight life now, not pin her hopes on some happier future. She indulges her need for "emmerdement" even further by committing the most reckless thefts; again, part of the joy comes from the annoyance she creates, for she blatantly lets her tenants know what she has stolen from them.

Her rebellion will continue, regardless of whether dustbins are abolished, for it reaches much deeper than anger at having to carry piles of stinking garbage: "Elle a saisi, une fois pour toutes, dans un fulgurant éclair de conscience, l'ampleur de l'injustice universelle" (p.165). Mme Dodin has grasped the utter absurdity of the world, where injustice and exploitation are rampant.

The concierge is not alone in her active hostility; she is encouraged to keep the fires of hatred burning by another of life's victims - her friend, Gaston, a roadsweeper. They are united by a touching affection and intimacy; Mme Dodin regards him with pride and a kind of love. They meet daily on her doorstep at six in the morning, and share a complicity of disgust. Gaston too ranks among the lowest of humanity, the creature who clears away the debris of others' lives: "[...] de toutes les réjouissances ou les deuils humains il n'aperçoit que l'usure, et il n'intervient que pour en accomplir l'acte dernier, la liquidation des vestiges" (p.152).

This bizarre pair - a choleric old woman and a solitary roadsweeper thirty years her junior - unite in an attack on the world. Every day they perform an extraordinary ritual under the eyes of neighbours eager for amusement; at precisely the same time Gaston approaches the concierge's window, from which she pours a panful of water all over him. In an inverted way, this is their moment of great mirth, a ritual so outrageous and nonsensical that it is an affront to the values of their "respectable" and more prosperous neighbours. They are accomplices in an attempt to "emmerder tout le monde," and their daily scene fulfils their need for revenge. Moreover, Mme Dodin uses it to remind him that he must not fall back into any "lâche bonheur," that is, any superficial contentment or satisfaction with his condition.

Duras is careful not to over-dramatize this small-time revolt, nor to transform Mme Dodin into some shining heroine; she gains our admiration, nevertheless, and her behaviour exemplifies how even the most mediocre individuals can make their mark on a world that has mistreated them.

Pain and unhappiness, then, derive from the individual's position

within an intolerable environment, while being symptomatic of a more profound and vaguer malaise. Two novels - Un Barrage contre le Pacifique and Le Vice-consul - set the individual within a tragedy on a world-scale and testify to what Mme Dodin calls "l'ampleur de l'injustice universelle" (p.165). This is also, of course, true of Hiroshima, in which suffering and misery assume colossal proportions. The dropping of the atomic bomb is a tragedy so terrible that those who have not known it can never empathise with the victims:

Impossible de parler de HIROSHIMA. Tout ce qu'on peut faire, c'est de parler de l'impossibilité de parler de HIROSHIMA. (p.2)

Yet there is never any question of revolt against the magnitude of the suffering; love alone, as we saw in an earlier chapter, has the power to counteract such unspeakable inhumanity. (5)

Although Un Barrage is one of Duras's earliest novels and Le Vice-consul a product of her literary maturity, they bear several close similarities: both paint a detailed picture of squalor and poverty in the Far East, and of the struggle for survival there; both are bitter commentaries on the evils of colonialism.

Duras attempts in Un Barrage to write a novel of epic proportions. Set on an infertile small-holding in Indo-China, it traces the fortunes of a woman of French origin and her two adolescent children who are eking out their lives in the depths of poverty. The mother has spent her life-savings on the plot of land bought from the colonial authorities, but despite her incessant toil the earth will yield no fruits, for every year it is covered by the relentless waters of the Pacific in flood.

The novel draws on Duras's own experiences; she recalls:

Our land was near the Siam border. And it was salt. Just salt. We were ruined ... it was total misery ... I was twelve and I remember it very clearly - the injustice, the unfairness of it ... abominable. There was nothing to be done with that land: it was like trying to grow something in the sea itself - c'était de la mer ... et de la merde! (6)

Even today she speaks of those miserable years with bitterness; and, significantly, her last words are heard also on the lips of the angry Suzanne and Joseph. The family's own tribulations are set against a background of wretchedness and degradation. Poverty has broken the spirit of most of the inhabitants along the coastal strip, and their abject condition is a direct result of the corruption of the colonial authorities. The administration metes out the most unproductive land to a succession of owners, ruining each in turn; sadly, the mother had been unaware that she was dealing with swindlers, and had remained "vierge de toute familiarité avec les puissances du mal, désespérément ignorante du grand vampirisme colonial" (p.20). The faceless bureaucrats in power stand for all institutions which inflict misery upon ordinary men.

More than this, the story summons up a vision of a world alien to man; its most potent forces are the ocean, which every year will sweep inexorably over the land, and the blazing sun - "le soleil-roi" - which beats mercilessly down. The children who play, naked and innocent, in the streams and fields, are the most pathetic victims. Some of the novel's most harrowing passages describe their brief lives which end in starvation or attacks of cholera, unless they drown or are consumed by worms. They are born and die with the regularity of the seasons and the floods. Their deaths are part of a curse that hovers over much of humanity, and not merely Indo-China:

Ils ne cessaient de jouer que pour aller mourir. De misère. Partout et de tout temps. À la lueur des feux qu'allumaient leurs mères pour réchauffer leurs membres nus, leurs yeux devenaient vitreux et leurs mains violettes. Il en mourait sans doute partout. Dans le monde entier, pareillement. Dans le Mississippi. Dans l'Amazone. Dans les villages exsangues de la Mandchourie. Dans le Soudan. Dans la plaine de Kam aussi. Et partout, comme ici, de misère. Du riz de la misère. (p.283)

Even if they survive the hazards of nature, they are certain to be knocked down on the roads by one of the motor-cars that speed the rich

colonialists off to their hunting-grounds. Compensation is a simple matter of distributing a few coins. Human life has no value for the rich and idle, who are ready to sweep up the pieces and move callously on:

Car le dieu des enfants c'était le car de Ram, la mécanique roulante, les klaxons électriques des chasseurs, la ferraille en marche, et ensuite les racs bouillonnants, et ensuite les mangués mortelles. Aucun autre dieu ne présidait aux destinées des enfants de la plaine. Aucun autre. Ceux qui disent le contraire mentent. (p.284)

The children's lives are not part of any higher purpose; no divine power offers consolation or protection from their afflictions, and there is no refuge in faith. Their future is without hope.

Complete passivity has been the natives' only defence. In particular, the ocean has been flooding the land for thousands of years, and they have grown accustomed to accept it. Yet the mother who stands at the centre of the novel has retained her courage and determination, and she alone has fought doggedly on against the land, and against the unseen authorities. Her most energetic struggle has been against the sea itself, and the sea-wall of the title is the symbol par excellence of her unflinching resistance to adversity. Having convinced the peasants that a dam, protecting the land from the floods, would bring new prosperity into their lives, she has employed the last of her resources to construct it. Yet the sea has swept away her defences, and she is now completely ruined.

This ageing woman has refused, nevertheless, to yield to her fate, in spite of having spent six years of her life in pointless toil on the concession, and feels she must constantly embark on some new venture which may lead to a meaningful and prosperous existence. The story takes place at the very close of her life, during her last great struggles before resignation erodes her determined spirit. The mother represents an outlook on human life which is far more positive than the futile

acceptance of the families around her, an outlook summed up in Duras's comment near the beginning of the novel, when the family's decrepit old nag has just died:

Comme quoi une idée est toujours une bonne idée, du moment qu'elle fait faire quelque chose, même si tout est entrepris de travers, par exemple avec des chevaux moribonds. Comme quoi une idée de ce genre est toujours une bonne idée, même si tout échoue lamentablement, parce qu'alors il arrive au moins qu'on finisse par devenir impatient [ ... ] (p.10)

It is our ideas and hopes that keep us alive; without them there can be no "impatience", no attempt to combat adversity, no aspiration towards a more fulfilling life.

The mother is a colossal figure, ranking among Duras's most powerful creations. Her determination, her refusal to concede defeat and act realistically gain our admiration and awe; yet in many ways she is a peculiar creature, driven by her situation to obsessions and to excesses of anger vented on everyone, not least her children. It is precisely her need to keep some hold on life which induces the mother to become literally obsessed by one idea after another: her sea-walls, her fight against the authorities she detests, her determination to sell off a ring (given to her daughter) at a price far beyond its worth. In fact her obsessive determination is in no small way responsible for the disasters that ensue: in particular, her supreme confidence in her own judgment convinces the natives that she must be thoroughly versed in the problems of dam-building, when she had taken no technical advice on their construction or on what type of dam would be necessary.

Her final days, however, are wasted away in abject resignation. Once so active, she falls back into listlessness and will not leave her bed. If revolt is essential in order to take hold of life, then resignation and defeat, it would seem, are a prelude to death. The departure of her son is the final blow, and her death becomes inevitable.

Her last moments are bitter and tragic; even now she cries out against the world in "aboiments de colère et de haine de toute chose et d'elle-même" (p.308). And as she dies, her facial expression leaves it uncertain whether she believes that she, or the hostile forces ranged against her, was the victor.

The spirit of rebellion does not die with her, for it has been inherited by her two children. Moulded by his wretched social position, Joseph has become angry, impetuous, darkly brooding, and his frustration erupts in hostility towards the outside world. Suzanne too begins to mimic Joseph's attitudes and sharp temper. Joseph treats all those who exemplify the wealthy and powerful classes with contempt (all, that is except his mistress). The clumsy and unintelligent M. Jo, who tries to woo Suzanne with a succession of luxuries, is ruthlessly exploited by mother and son, while being the object of their scorn. M. Jo is a product of the leisured classes to which the family can never attain, and Joseph's insane jealousy explodes in malice; he taunts M. Jo constantly over his relationship with his sister:

-- C'est pas qu'on l'empêche de coucher avec qui elle veut, mais vous, si vous voulez coucher avec elle, faut que vous l'épousiez. C'est notre façon à nous de vous dire merde. (p.81)

But it is against "les agents de Kam" that his revolt is chiefly directed, and gradually he assumes the dominant role in the struggle against them, driving them off the family's property with his shotgun. His final words to the peasants, before leaving (after his mother's death) are an active encouragement to them to murder the agents who might try to regain their land.

In her more recent novel, Le Vice-consul, Duras once again sets an individual within a context of affliction and death, and explores his reactions to it. Even more than in Un Barrage, the anti-hero of this opaque and mysterious narrative strikes out at an alien universe.

The European diplomatic community of Calcutta is buzzing with rumours about the enigmatic vice-consul, Jean-Marc de H. This French diplomat has been recalled from his post in Lahore after some scandalous incident, and is awaiting his fate calmly. The French ambassador who must examine him, is trying to uncover the reasons for the extraordinary behaviour which led to his recall: he had fired gunshots into the Shalimar gardens in Lahore, a gathering-place of lepers and stray dogs, and had been heard to scream in his room, and call down death on the city itself. His actions seem to suggest that he is mad.

Since childhood, in fact, he had shown signs of a violent nature, and deliberately indulged in acts of destruction. He recounts his school-days to his confidant in Calcutta, the director of the European circle, and describes the devilish tricks he and his school colleagues played at Montfort: "le bonheur gai à Montfort consistait à détruire Montfort" (p.84). He revels in telling how they rained stink-bombs and excreta on the authorities; in effect, this was his first attack on the world and the established order, and he discovered almost by accident his propensity to "destroy."

To the diplomatic colony, Jean-Marc appears as a kind of force of destruction, or - as they describe him - a living image of catastrophe. As Anne-Marie Stretter, the ambassador's wife, remarks:

-- [ ... ] une catastrophe peut éclater en un lieu très lointain de celui où elle aurait dû se produire ... vous savez, ces explosions dans la terre qui font monter la mer à des centaines de kilomètres de l'endroit où elles se sont produites ...

-- Il est la catastrophe?

-- Oui. C'est une image classique sans doute mais sûre. Il n'est pas nécessaire de chercher davantage. (p.129)

In other words, Jean-Marc's violent behaviour may have been aimed against Calcutta, and not the city on the other side of India.

One question above all needs to be answered: why should he call down death on Lahore?:

Il appelait seulement la mort sur Lahore, mais aucune autre malédiction d'aucune sorte qui eût témoigné que Lahore, à ses yeux, eût pu être créée donc défaite par quelque autre puissance que la mort. Et parfois, la mort lui paraissait sans doute trop, une croyance abjecte, une erreur encore, alors il appelait sur Lahore le feu, la mer, des calamités matérielles, logiques, d'un monde exploré. (pp138-9)

Jean-Marc is prey to some overwhelming anxiety which expressed itself in the curses he poured out on Lahore. The city has taken on the proportions of some Sodom or Gomorrah in his eyes. For him Lahore sums up all the suffering he has experienced and against which he feels compelled to rebel. Duras has pointed out that his anguished cries are a reaction against misfortune and pain:

Pourquoi le vice-consul hurle-t-il? Pourquoi ne procède-t-il que par des cris? Il peut très bien procéder ainsi face à la douleur du monde. La mendicante du début du livre, cette espèce de femme qui n'a rien, qui vit une expérience qu'aucune autre ne peut dépasser, à mon avis cette femme prépare la venue du vice-consul. Si le vice-consul existe, c'est parce que cette femme existe. S'il y a des gens qui hurlent et qui deviennent fous du fait du spectacle de la douleur du monde, c'est que cette douleur existe. (7)

The word "douleur" recurs like a leitmotif throughout the narrative, signifying on one level the suffering of millions in India and the Far East. The background detail - the scenes of squalor and hardship, the descriptions of pest-ridden groups of animal-like creatures - are thus essential to the conception of the novel, since they exemplify the ghastly situation which makes Jean-Marc's drama inevitable. For Duras, India shows to an extreme degree the horror of the under-developed world:

[...] l'Inde, c'est la contrée la plus absurde du monde, la plus malheureuse, la plus horriblement malheureuse. On vous annonce tranquillement qu'il y a trois millions d'enfants qui meurent de faim chaque année. (8)

And despite the objectivity of the writing, the narrative is shot through with the authoress's anger and indignation. She sets her tale "dans une ville au bord du Gange qui sera ici capitale des Indes et nommée Calcutta" (p.35). The city is the very centre of this over-populated

part of the earth, stricken by plague and famine. (Presumably the story takes place at some indeterminate time in the past, before the decolonisation and division of British India, when Calcutta held a more central position.)

Duras personalises the hard fate of masses of humanity by relating the pitiful life of one young girl. The early sections of the novel - seemingly disparate and unconnected with the story proper - are, as Duras has suggested above (note 6), a kind of prelude to the main drama. Both the girl and Jean-Marc have become "fous du fait du spectacle de la douleur."

The girl's story - ostensibly recounted or invented by an Englishman in Calcutta - is in itself intensely harrowing. Cast out from her family when she is found to be pregnant, she wanders aimlessly through vast tracts of the Indo-Chinese peninsula before giving birth to her child. She then walks hundreds of kilometres with her sick baby until she eventually finds a white woman who will adopt it. By the age of seventeen the girl is a physical wreck - her hair falls out through malnutrition and scurvy, her foot turns gangrenous - but against incalculable odds she survives, thanks to sheer stubborn determination.

Ten years later (at the time of the novel) she is haunting the Calcutta streets, having trekked thousands of kilometres across Cambodia, Siam, and Burma. She is now merely a crazy beggar-woman, screaming out an incomprehensible song that further aggravates the already tense nerves of the diplomats. They are forced into an awareness of the universe of suffering outside their cloistered cocktail-party society. She is a reminder of what they would rather forget; they have in particular a pathological fear of leprosy, which runs rampant through the city. Only Anne-Marie Stretter and Jean-Marc appear in any way concerned for the distress around them, she giving the embassy's left-overs

to the lepers, he apparently fascinated by the squalor and poverty.

It is against this background that Jean-Marc's seemingly pointless act of violence must be considered. The vice-consul is a hyper-sensitive individual and his conduct is dictated by what he sees. The degradation and anguish have reached such immense proportions that words are useless to describe them, and the words Jean-Marc cried from his balcony in Lahore were wild and totally incoherent, "sans suite ou rien" (p.97). How, then, could he force an indifferent world to realize the suffering which had appeared to him in all its magnitude at Lahore, except through some absurd act of revolt that measured up to the suffering? He could only communicate the idea of such misfortune through a gesture as outrageous as the misfortune itself.

At the same time his outburst of violence has shattered the peace and complacency of the Europeans, against whom it was really aimed. It is an attack on their values - or lack of them. In that sense it was, as Anne-Marie claims, an explosion meant for hundreds of miles away - in Calcutta. Jean-Marc is seen by the Europeans as a potential threat to their security. One of Anne-Marie's cronies remarks: "nous sommes bien plus dépaysés par le vice-consul que par la famine qui sévit en ce moment sur la côte de Malabar" (p.157). Part of their fear of him stems from the fact that he represents a truth they cannot face. (They are afraid also of his madness).

Yet the "douleur" that overshadows the entire narrative is primarily metaphysical, an experience common to all men however advanced their society. Questioned about the importance of the social commentary in the novel, Duras explained she was attacking the anguish and absurdity

of all human existence:

D'abord je dénonce l'ordre du monde que je trouve affreux, irrespirable, abominable, ensuite l'ordre divin, si vous voulez, l'absurdité même de la vie. C'est ce que dénonce le vice-consul.

On peut très bien dans Le Vice-consul prendre le problème posé quant à l'état actuel du tiers-monde, ça ne me gêne en rien. Si vous voulez croire que l'horreur du monde actuel a été décrite dans Le Vice-consul vous pouvez très bien le faire. Je veux dire que s'il ne vous apparaît pas que le problème posé dans Le Vice-consul est purement métaphysique vous pouvez très bien prendre la deuxième acception c'est-à-dire sociologique. (9)

The narrative is primarily symbolic. Duras's approach and technique are similar to those of Camus in La Peste. Universal suffering cannot be conveyed except through particular examples; by describing actual situations - for example a child dying of plague, or, in Le Vice-consul, the beggar-girl's unhappy travels - with enough effect, the reader is convinced of the novel's metaphysical implications.

Certainly one can accept that Jean-Marc rebels above all against the very nature of existence, since this provides a satisfactory explanation for his behaviour. All the indications point to the fact that his private life had been extremely unhappy, although this could only be detected in his sudden moments of violence and in the cries from his room. Being a sensitive person, he had been acutely aware of the suffering that is an inevitable part of human life, and was driven to despair and madness. He struck out against Lahore because it epitomised for him all the pain he had hitherto endured: "Et quand il a été confirmé dans ce qu'il croyait qu'était Lahore avant de la voir il a appelé la mort sur Lahore" (p.137). His crime is therefore an act of defiance against the pain in his personal life, and against the cruelty of existence as he saw it. The years of helpless unhappiness transformed him (like the Jacques of Les Impudents and Un Barrage) into an angry and violent character. This explains the illogical nature of his behaviour - firing on the innocent and pathetic lepers - whereas his action might have appeared incomprehensible and downright cruel if

motivated only by social conscience.

One other person appears acutely aware of the tragic nature of existence: the shadowy and impenetrable Anne-Marie Stretter. She too is prey to a gloomy despair. Although she has wealth, beauty, a bevy of lovers, fame, there are signs that behind the façade hides a lonely woman, victim of some vague depression. There are rumours that she attempted suicide at one time. She is described as "instruite de l'existence de la douleur" (p.191) and her knowledge of suffering explains her sudden, unexpected bursts of tears. The exact nature of her unhappiness is unknown even to herself, but she apparently has obtained some almost mystical contact with universal pain: "Je pleure sans raison que je pourrais vous dire, c'est une peine qui me traverse, il faut bien que quelqu'un pleure, c'est comme si c'était moi" (p.198).

Her role in the novel becomes clarified in this context. Jean-Marc seeks to become her lover in order to share with another human being his own awful misery, for she at least has known suffering and could empathise. He confesses that "Je la prendrais par la tristesse" (p.80). However, she refuses to believe that she can be of any comfort or assistance. She cannot contemplate even seeing him again, after their first meeting, because she might be dragged with him to the depths of despair. Our final glimpse of her suggests an exhausted, confused woman, stretched out like a corpse in her garden at dawn. Anne-Marie stands as a foil to Jean-Marc; while her sole reactions to suffering are tears and nervous depression, Jean-Marc exploded into absurd and terrible violence.

The novel raises the same question that arises from the majority of Duras's works: is a solution to suffering - whether it be merely boredom and a sense of futility, or a life of pain, bitterness and cruelty - at all conceivable? Her reply to M. Fossey, when asked

specifically whether she could imagine any solution to the misery in the Third World, holds true for her view of existence in general:

Non, ma solution est impossible. [ ... ] Elle est suicidaire, si j'ose dire. Je suis profondément communiste. (10)

Her solution would involve instituting Communism in its fullest sense, that is, it would demand a radical reform of the whole of civilisation, and moreover of man himself, a kind of suicide. (11)

Her vision is purely idealistic. She has retained her admiration for those who, on a personal level, have actively revolted against the conditions of life even if, like Jean-Marc, Mme Dodin, and Claire Lannes, their hostility is absurd and ultimately futile.

Even if her ideal solution is ruled out, Duras believes that in our personal lives we can come to terms with pain and unhappiness by seeing them more objectively:

I think suffering is misunderstood: people think they are special, particularly in unhappiness. Actually all suffering is a kind of megalomania: someone who is very unhappy needs his unhappiness to have a unique resolution, needs to feel his unhappiness is forming his destiny. But when you perceive that the suffering of others is exactly the same as yours ..." (she shrugs) "I think we're all the same, you and I are the same ... l'autre et toi, you and the next person are exactly the same ... you simply have to convince yourself of that, but right down to the bone. If you feel that, life will be more simple, and much more just. (12)

We overstate our own troubles, and life will be more bearable if we accept that, under the skin, we are all equally victims of a suffering that is the lot of mankind, perhaps forever.

NOTES

- (1) First performed 1960.  
Published by Gallimard, Paris, 1960.
- (2) J. Piatier, "La séduction de la folie," Le Monde (Sélection hebdomadaire), no.963 (30 mars - 5 avril 1967), p.11.
- (3) Cf. J. Piatier.  
For J.S. Bratton, this is one of Claire's motives. He also states that Claire killed Marie-Thérèse out of sexual jealousy, because of her cousin's relationship with Alfonso, the wood-cutter, whom Claire associates with her lost Cahors lover (pp.158-62).
- (4) In Des Journées entières dans les arbres, Paris, Gallimard, 1954.
- (5) See chapter 1, "Love."
- (6) L. Langley.
- (7) J.-M. Fossey, p.19.
- (8) Ibid., p.20.
- (9) Ibid., p.19.
- (10) Ibid., p.20.
- (11) See chapters on "Madness" and "Politics".
- (12) L. Langley.

Chapter 5.

THE POWER OF TIME

Duras is fascinated by time, which she portrays as a cantankerous power controlling the destinies of men and women. Time, as Duras sees it, is dual in nature, both creator and destroyer. It can bring men's aspirations to fulfilment, enriching their lives with passionate love and happiness. The writer sees love in particular as a secret process which can only reach fruition with the passage of time, and cannot be coerced. Alternatively, time can lead to the disintegration of love, to old age and purposelessness. M. Jean-Luc Seylaz, whose penetrating essay on Duras's continued interest in the concept of "durée" parallels the present discussion at several points, talks of "un mûrissement nécessaire qui est avant tout l'oeuvre du temps; [...] c'est le temps, plus que l'introspection, la réflexion, ou les propos échangés, qui impose finalement une solution ou permet que se dégage une vérité." (1)

This is why the mood of Duras's works is frequently one of expectation and uncertainty. Characters' hopes or fears centre on some future event that could reshape their lives, but which may never come; anticipation may be followed by disappointment, as individuals realise that desires may be no more than day-dreams, and that time may simply sap away existence without bringing any significant change that would compensate for the loss of youth or love. Frequently the only things that can be expected with any certainty are loneliness, physical decay and death.

These are of course familiar enough themes. What commands our interest is Duras's personal treatment of them, the examples she chooses to study; she shows time's handiwork in the lives of particular people - an old gentleman who is anticipating the end of his life (M. Andemas), a peculiar individual with a highly analytical mind, who discovers that

time controls the development of love (Les Chantiers). Duras is interested also in the way her personages attempt to cope with their situation; some react strongly, others allow events to take shape of their own accord, which, it appears, may often be the wisest course.

It is the early novel, La Vie tranquille, that most fully exposes the ambiguities of time. Time works towards destruction, inflicting misfortunes on the Veyrenattes, and at the same time towards fruition, secretly bringing the love of Françoise and Tiène to its climax. It leaves individuals to stagnate for years before bringing sudden death, as Françoise discovers in her own family. From the outset we are confronted with the presence of death, as Jérôme passes through his last agonising days, and after her brother's suicide the young woman becomes obsessed by the way time separates her from him:

[Nicolas] est mort. Il y a de cela trente-deux jours et maintenant il n'a plus à mourir, tout est silencieux. [...] Et moi, de marcher, d'ajouter les jours aux jours depuis sa mort, sans le vouloir, sans pouvoir faire autrement. (p.205)

At the same time Françoise is aware that gradually something of value is coming into her life. She senses that her love is growing according to some natural process that she can do nothing to accelerate: "C'est vrai, c'est il y a sept mois, en regardant Tiène qui ne parlait pas, que j'ai soupçonné l'ordre silencieux et inabordable du monde" (pp.219-20). This order, which is nothing less than the workings of time, is "silencieux" - inaudible and mysterious - and "inabordable" - one that human beings can in no way influence. (2)

The idea that time dictates the course of love is central to the short-story, Les Chantiers (3), where the writer is at her most optimistic. Here too the protagonist becomes aware of the impossibility of

coercing events. The story is uncomplicated and concise: a man and woman meet by chance beside a building-site (apparently a graveyard) near a hotel in which they are both staying alone. On the days that follow, he observes her from a distance, sensing that his attraction for her is growing. Attraction turns into affection, and affection into genuine love, but he does not bother even to make contact with her and never allows his longing to forestall what he considers the natural course of events. Eventually, ten days after their first encounter, they do meet again and from that point she too is conscious of his presence. During the next four days they exchange an occasional smile, and he knows she is increasingly drawn to him. He refuses to act upon this until he is sure love has dawned. The climax comes as he approaches her by a country lake; their relationship is about to begin.

This charming narrative is less important than the implications underlying it. It evokes, through the gradual contact of these two individuals, the workings of time. The days are marked by a series of capital moments - the man's first glimpse of the woman's mysterious reaction to the building-site; the moment of realisation when he sees her becoming "un événement de sa vie"; the point at which she also desires the culmination of their love. Time is here a friendly power, acting slowly and mysteriously. The man senses intuitively the ordered processes at work, and consequently it is fitting that the tale should unfold from his standpoint. Realising that individuals must stay in tune with the temporal order, he will not hinder or try to quicken time's measured progress. Wisdom lies in achieving concord with time:

Il savait alors que s'il cédaît à l'impatience, s'il rompait l'enchantement, s'il obéissait aux injonctions nocturnes, il troublerait la marche d'une nécessité autrement inéluctable, qui travaillait pour lui. (p.217)

The builders labouring on the graveyard, which reaches completion parallel with the final fruition of love, exemplify the way men must

act. The builders work steadily and naturally, without any sense of haste:

C'était un chantier comme il en existe. D'une destination particulière, il est vrai. Il illustre à merveille le développement de la vertu de la prévoyance chez l'homme, vertu qui trouvait à s'exercer là même avec une placidité tout de même assez étonnante. (pp.206-7)

The man has a similar "prévoyance" - "foresight," an ability to predict the course of events - combined with "placidité" - ease, acquiescence in the flow of time. Hence the man contemplates the object of his interest from afar, never approaching her at meals or elsewhere in the hotel, never trying to take hold of events, waiting for the next encounter which must make her recognise their special relationship.

The man enjoys masochistically the sense of anticipation, seeking to prolong the agony of uncertainty to its absolute limit. He even attempts to turn the screw of the woman's painful ordeal, once she is interested in him, by making her equally aware of the virtues of patience and calm expectation:

C'était un retard qu'il lui accordait afin de lui permettre, à son tour, de s'impatienter et de le rejoindre par un léger effort de patience. Mais jamais elle n'aurait sa patience. (pp.224-5)

Finally significant glances, a change in their physical appearance mark the ultimate realisation that the waiting is over.

Marguerite Duras is interested, then, in the birth and growth of love which are secret processes dependent on the flow of time. She expresses this inter-relationship through the form of her narratives: events and conversation provide an external framework and chronological pattern beneath which emotions are growing - or disintegrating - unseen. The technique is especially evident in Le Marin. During the voyages undertaken by Anna and the narrator, love slowly blossoms between them. The succession of days and weeks spent idly on the deck of her yacht or wandering through Mediterranean and African ports, the banal conversations and the tales of their previous experiences are the superficial level

of their lives and create the sense of passing time. Beneath the events and conversations related, emotion is coming to fruition.

Duras marks the stages in their affair by inserting into the story moments when the unseen feelings break surface, revealing the extent to which they have developed. Such moments are like explosions, disrupting the couple's equilibrium. One night, for example, passion unexpectedly asserts itself:

Dans un mouvement brutal, comme parfois au sortir du sommeil, je la serrai très fort. Je ne sais pas très bien ce qui se passa ni combien de temps je la tins contre moi, serrée dans le noir.

-- Qu'est-ce qui nous arrive? demanda-t-elle très bas.

-- Rien.

Je la lâchai d'un seul coup.

-- Si.

-- Rien, dis-je. J'ai trop dormi.

Je me relevai et je l'entraînai au réfectoire. [ ... ]  
J'avais cru comprendre qu'elle avait déjà compris ce qui se passait. (p.182)

They themselves will not admit what is "happening" beneath the surface, nor how near they are to love. The final confession of their love equally comes out of the blue. Anna's hope and expectation that she will find her sailor turn to fear, and she becomes increasingly nervous until her revelation: "Ce n'est plus lui, dit-elle, que maintenant j'attends" (p.232). Her words are spoken unexpectedly in a Tangier street, and are soon followed by his own confession at an equally surprising moment when they are nearly killed, crossing a road. The important point is that such moments are situated within a framework of visible action, so that they emphasise the invisible progression of love.

Frequently it is the hostile nature of time that dominates the writer's thoughts, most noticeably in her later works. The brief and

delicate story, M. Andesmas, for example, is a study of a man facing the loss of all he holds precious, and anticipating the end of his existence. Ostensibly the story relates the events of one afternoon on which the old man is awaiting the arrival of the architect, Michel Arc, who will construct a terrace on the house for Valérie, M. Andesmas's daughter. The story is thus about expectation itself, and is suspended on an event - the promised visit of Michel Arc - that is never certain to come. Deprived of physical strength by his advanced years, M. Andesmas is forced to wait, alone, at the mercy of the passing hours. Duras restricts the time-span of the narrative to four hours, so that, in experiencing the slow passage of time, we can share the old man's frustration, and his attempts to come to terms with this enforced waiting:

Mais M. Andesmas qui avait prétendu supporter mal d'attendre de la sorte, si longtemps, se fait de mieux en mieux à l'attente. Avec la fraîcheur de l'après-midi finissant, ses forces lui reviennent. [...] ainsi le temps passe pour lui, comme n'importe quel autre, comme celui qui passe pendant d'autres après-midi lorsqu'il attend dans son parc l'heure des repas du soir.

Du vent arriva. Le hêtre frémit. (p.66)

Setting and description reinforce the impression of passing time: with nothing to do but contemplate the landscape below, M. Andesmas notices the most subtle changes in the atmosphere, the rising breezes, and above all the lengthening shadows as the minutes pass away forever.

Expectation has more personal significance for the old gentleman. The dramatic action and actual time-span have been deliberately compressed in order to direct attention onto the memories and hopes of M. Andesmas, who is in fact living through a crisis in his life. The narrative is poised between the past and a less happy future. M. Andesmas reflects on his successful life, and muses longingly over his daughter's childhood, things which through time have been taken from him; he looks forward to the time when Valérie will sit on this same terrace, and fore-

sees his own loneliness. With the approach of evening the evening of his own life appears to him.

He and the unfortunate Mme Arc who joins him later are facing the same loss - of a loved one who means everything. Every minute they are brought closer to that moment when Michel Arc and Valérie will know they are in love - or, as Mme Arc expresses it, the moment someone will tell Valérie she is beautiful: "-- Alors nous en sommes au même point tous les deux en cet instant qui est peut-être celui où elle [Valérie] l'aura appris" (p.107).

Both are waiting for the inevitable climax, which will alter everything. In a sense, that moment is a prelude to death for M. Andesmas. He tries to counteract the imminent emptiness of his life by summoning up some new emotion, and attempts to direct his love away from Valérie onto a new object, in the form of Michel Arc's child. Yet he realises he is incapable of loving anew:

Il reste là encore à ne pas aimer cette enfant qu'il aimerait s'il le pouvait, et il se meurt de ne pas le pouvoir, d'une mort factice qui ne le tue pas. (p.38)

He is condemned to go through a kind of death-in-life. If he must continue to love only Valérie, and she must part from him (though he is still ignorant of the precise circumstances) then his life has effectively come to an end. On that afternoon M. Andesmas is anticipating his own death.

Dix heures et demie, the preceding novel, is also the story of an individual awaiting events that will wreck her previous existence. In the novel we are constantly reminded of the inexorable flow of time, as events move steadily towards the climax. Duras has learnt much from the thriller-novel, maintaining the fever-pitch tension and suspense by constant references to the passing hours. The whole novel is tightly condensed into little more than twenty-four hours, during which the

protagonists live out a crucial period in their lives. The story hinges on that capital moment when Maria catches sight of the hunted murderer, Rodrigo Paestra, on the roof opposite, while her husband and their companion are embracing on the hotel balcony above her. From that point all their destinies are sealed:

Une main de Pierre est partout sur ce corps d'autre femme.  
L'autre main la tient serrée contre lui. C'est chose faite  
pour toujours.

Il est dix heures et demie du soir. L'été. (p.49)

The ritualistic tone of the language underlines the sense of impending doom that darkens the narrative. Maria is faced with the approach of two events, and is caught in a "double attente: de l'aube qui livrera le meurtrier à la police, de l'amour et du désir dont elle guette les signes sur le visage et le corps des futurs amants." (4) Maria is another of Duras's protagonists who is acutely aware of the progress of time, indeed she seems veritably obsessed by the passing hours:

Lorsque Maria atteint le balcon, elle regarde l'heure qu'elle avait sur elle, attachée à son poignet, son heure. Il est minuit et demi. Dans trois heures sans doute, à cette saison-là de l'année, ce sera l'aurore. Rodrigo Paestra, dans la même pose mortuaire que lorsqu'elle l'a découvert, attend avec cette aurore, d'être tué. (p.63)

She knows what will inevitably happen if the situation is not influenced in some way. There is a faint possibility that one of the imminent events - Paestra's death - can be avoided by prompt action, and she attempts to rescue him. Her action therefore represents a revolt against the natural course of events. She is making an effort to change the future; unfortunately her action is ultimately ineffectual, for death comes to the murderer all the same, and from his own hand.

In the case of the growing relationship between her husband and Claire, however, no revolt is possible. It is one thing to avert external events, and quite another to quell or change the emotions of other human beings. Because she senses that the couple's feelings will

inevitably mature, she becomes increasingly listless, lacking the energy even to remark on their affair; inwardly, however, she is haunted by the approach of evening that will fulfil their desires:

Ce soir, Pierre. Elle [ Claire ] a eu peur tout à l'heure lorsque Pierre roulait vite, de mourir dans une telle attente. Maintenant, elle est devenue pensive et cette attente d'une chambre, ce soir, à Madrid, pour ce soir à Madrid, de son lovement contre Pierre, ce soir, à Madrid, nue, dans la chaleur moite des chambres fermées au jour, lorsque Maria dormira dans le sommeil solitaire qui suit l'alcool, l'emporte tout à fait sur sa peur. (p.154)

Maria even wishes that the couple might at last come together, if only to end the pain of waiting. (M. Seylaz maintains (op.cit., p.22) that Claire becomes Pierre's mistress during an afternoon siesta, but it is arguable whether this is the case. The whole episode concerned (pp.168-71) may take place only in Maria's tortured imagination, the wish being father to the thought. Several times she imagines scenes between the couple. M. Seylaz's interpretation would also be out of keeping with the narrative technique, which reveals solely Maria's impressions.)

Maria is the abject victim of time, which will deprive her of love, and can only seek the oblivion of alcohol.

In the writer's opinion time is arbitrary and doubly cruel; not only will it destroy youth and happiness, but nothing guarantees that it will bring any event of significance into an individual's life. Expectation can be utterly pointless. Each member of the Grand-Taneran family (Les Impudents), held under Jacques's autocratic rule, secretly desires an end to their intolerable lives together. Maud, conscious of the power of time, realises they are all dependent upon it: "elle savait que le temps seul apporterait un dénouement à leur aventure" (p.186). The irony is that, although Mme Taneran has dark forebodings of some terrible catastrophe and all the family feels that danger is lurking outside the door, the awful event they both long for and fear, never takes place. The pointlessness of "waiting for something to turn

up," has not escaped the Amazonian Mme Dodin, who scoffs at all those - be they Catholics or Communists - who insist that "il faut être patient." She cannot accept her wretched condition, acquiesce in the slowness of existence, and live on hopes. Life has brought her nothing but old age, and it is time that has denied her happiness: she and her precious Gaston are separated by time, since she is twice his age, and might otherwise have married him.

The maid and commercial traveller in Le Square are also caught up in the flood of time. Anticipation of a brighter future is the girl's prop against despair and defeat; she has stubbornly denied herself any life in the present, convinced that life must grant the romantic future she craves. She has refused to contemplate the possibility that petty, daily events and dulling tasks may be all that life holds. The salesman, more down-to-earth in this respect, suggests that one never "begins" a meaningful life as she imagines:

HOMME: [...] ce temps que vous vivez maintenant comptera pour vous, plus tard. Et de ce désert dont vous parlez vous vous en souviendrez et il se repeuplera de lui-même avec une précision éblouissante. [...] On croit qu'on s'achemine vers une solution, on se retourne, et voilà qu'elle est derrière soi.  
(pp.75-6)

Life, to him, is no longer worth any effort. His philosophy is of course anathema to the maid; since she draws moral strength from her hopes, she is unwilling to accept the truth he offers, unwilling to believe that even when she has found her man life as a whole will not be so very different.

It is the realisation that years may pass bringing little of value that has in part dictated the shocking conduct of Marcel and Claire Ragond in Les Viaducs, though they at least can reflect on moments of happiness that have slipped away into the past. Their crime is partly a reaction against time, which has offered no spiritual compensation for the sapping away of their vitality or the sudden shock of old age. They

remember a time, five years before, when they had been struck by the change in their lives:

MARCEL: [ ... ] Notre vieillesse commençait. C'était grave. C'était soudain aussi, chaque jour. C'était honteux aussi, et tellement qu'on ne pouvait même pas en parler. Nous entretenir ensemble d'un malheur pourtant si commun. (p.57)

They have been slowly approaching decrepitude, and until their crime has been frozen into immobility. The murder of Marie-Thérèse represents an escape-route for their lives will be abruptly curtailed. Hitherto Marcel and Claire have been "patient": time controlled them as it controlled the seasons, and hence they led a vegetable existence: "On disait: les Ragond, comme on aurait dit ... les artichauts, le temps!" (p.32). In this they are indeed "des ressortissants fidèles de la Seine-et-Oise" (p.58), for their acquaintances have ensconced themselves in the course of time. At the beginning of each act, characters are contemplating the rebirth of spring in Seine-et-Oise. The words used by Claire and Marcel in the first act, and by their friends in the café in the second, are very similar, and the conversations are meant to mirror each other (cf. pp.15-16; pp.78-79). In both cases the first spring vegetables are described. The difference is that, whereas the old couple are reflecting on a life from which they are now divorced, spring provides others with reassurances of the continuity of human existence. The café-owner, Bill, and the foreign worker, Alphonso, talk nostalgically of spring and spring foods, whereas Marcel has denied himself any food at all since the murder (eating constantly symbolises living in Duras's works). The inhabitants of Seine-et-Oise are quite at home in the endlessly repetitive existence. This is the significance of the choice of natural background - the seasons - for their movement is cyclic, circular, returning inevitably to the same point; those individuals who fit in with this perpetual revolution may change physically but not develop. Human life is thus the classic example of "Plus ça

change, plus c'est la même chose."

Marcel and Claire have broken out of the cycle in the only way possible (at least in the context of the play): they have opted out of life completely. Claire is in no doubt about the finality of their vicious crime; "Tout ce qui nous restait à faire, tu vois, c'était de gâcher le temps qui nous restait avant de mourir. Nous l'avons gâché. C'est fini. Fini. Comme pour elle. Pareil" (p.65). "Patience" had run out in their case.

It is worth comparing the couple's attitude with that of their successor in crime, Claire Lannes (L'Amante anglaise), though the theme of immobility is only marginal in the novel. Claire too revolts against the mass of aimless rituals which had made up her life, and of which Marie-Thérèse was the cause. There is however a vital difference. Claire suggests that "la propreté prenait la place du temps" (p.144); in other words, it was because Marie-Thérèse kept house so well that they stagnated and nothing changed. In effect Claire has become the ally of time, or more precisely its destructive side. Duras has remarked: "En la supprimant [ Marie-Thérèse ], Claire Lannes a fait éclater la demeure Lannes: elle l'a rendue à un destin sauvage." (5) Their house is now slowly decaying, and time can have its own way.

One can leave many of Duras's works with a sense of waste and pointlessness. Though time can be favourable to man, on balance Duras emphasises its menacing side. Yet Duras has remarked that the inevitable unhappiness and physical decay which time brings, worries her less than the transformations in our emotional state: "Ce qui me paraît effroyable, intolérable, c'est le temps qui passe dans l'amour. Le temps qui passe

dans la vie est beaucoup plus supportable." (6) Love is our most deeply personal experience, therefore the feeling that it is dis-integrating affects us most acutely. Besides, for a woman who believes so fervently that it is love that gives quality to life, its loss is bound to be devastating.

NOTES

- (1) J.-L. Seylaz, p.7.

M. Seylaz discusses the majority of Duras's novels as far as M. Andemas, and selects Les Chantiers as the key to the theme. His treatment of Dix heures et demie and Moderato Cantabile is particularly suggestive.

- (2) cf. J.-L. Seylaz, p.14.

- (3) In Des Journées entières dans les arbres, Paris, Gallimard, 1954.

The title refers to a graveyard in the process of being widened. This graveyard is an important element in the work. Death or violence linger behind several works - for example, the hideous death of the soldier on the mountainside in Tarquinia - and their effect, as here, is one of contrast with passion. The graveyard represents mortality, the end of life (and is therefore a symbol of the negative side of time), whereas the man and girl are embarking on an amorous relationship, the most positive experience life offers.

- (4) J.-L. Seylaz, p.23.

- (5) "Bref," "Je cherche qui est cette femme," Avant-scène, no.422, (15 mars 1969), p.6.

- (6) Maurice Tillier, "Chaise longue pour Dumayet," Figaro Littéraire, 8-14 janvier 1968, p.34.

Chapter 6.

MEMORY

In Hiroshima mon amour Marguerite Duras wrote a profound and moving study of the processes of memory, and its influence on the development of a personality. The film marks the beginning of an interest in memory which was to continue through the next scenario, Une Aussi Longue Absence, and two novels. Conversely, the problem of how individuals can escape from memory, which contains the sum total of their knowledge, is central to her most recent works and the question of political change.

The actual workings of memory had previously been of merely marginal interest to the novelist, insofar as memory forms the link between man and his own past. In man's vision of the universe, time appears as three separate entities - present, past and future - and his apprehension of the second consists exclusively of what he retains through the act of remembering. A writer so fascinated by the force of time would naturally be drawn to describing the actual manner in which one looks back upon change, fulfilment and disintegration, and in a number of works Duras uses reminiscences to convey what time has taken away. Most often memories are terse and allusive, and interject themselves into the characters' thoughts at unexpected moments. They represent past happiness and irretrievable loss, they bring to mind pleasurable sensations or capital moments in their lives, and because of the very suddenness with which they force themselves on an individual's consciousness, they provoke heart-rending contrasts with his present bleak situation. The technique is sparingly exploited, and briefly it adds an extra dimension to the work. The circular conversation of the maid and salesman (Le Square) returns over and over to certain brief details of a brighter past. Both recall the times in childhood when

they stole cherries in the company of friends, blissfully unaware of the loneliness awaiting them. And the man cannot forget that evening in the zoological garden when happiness suddenly flooded into his wasted life and he knew an almost mystical communion with men and nature. The episode is one golden ray in the darkness of his existence.

Small fragments of memory suffice to suggest whole areas of previous experience. The intense passion that once drew together Pierre and Maria (Dix heures et demie) is sharply evoked by the memories they share, though only a few sparse sentences are articulated. They recollect another night earlier in their lives, in Verona, when they had also been obliged to sleep in the corridor of a crowded hotel. For Maria the memory is only one more turn of the screw and emphasises the gulf that now yawns between them. Again, at the very moment when she is driving off to rescue Paestra, the stillness of another occasion penetrates her thoughts:

Une fois, l'eau d'un lac avait le calme de cette nuit-là. Le temps était ensoleillé. Maria se souvient de l'ensoleillement des eaux du lac et, tout à coup, dans la barque, à travers le calme de ces eaux, les profondeurs du lac s'ensoleillèrent à leur tour. L'eau était pure. Des formes apparurent. Habituelles, certes, mais voilées par le soleil.

Pierre était dans la barque en compagnie de Maria. (p.87)

The passage is inserted without comment or elaboration, and creates a powerful impression. The brilliant daylight, the splendour and purity of that moment are an ironic contrast to the clammy and tempestuous night through which she is nervously driving. Most of all the recollection is associated with what is really on her mind - the one man in her life.

Duras uses particular memories, therefore, to testify to the changes in life. In Les Viaducs a piece of music (one remembers the Vinteuil sonata in Proust) provides the key to the storehouse of Claire's memory. In the first act the strains of Verdi's overture to La Traviata come drifting across the evening air, filling her with unexplained happiness.

The same tune has recurred in her dreams and moves her virtually to tears every time she hears it. It is associated in her mind with other occasions in her life, particularly with her birthday, five years before, when she had discovered that she was on the threshold of old age and could see no purpose in her existence: "Je ne trouvais rien, à part, justement, cette recherche, chaque mois de mai, de l'impossible. Rien ... Quand, tout à coup, j'ai entendu de la musique ... par là (geste) ... C'était ça. J'ai été déchirée de bonheur" (p.56). Then also the music was her beloved Verdi, which reminded her of precious moments of happiness, moments that the writer leaves undefined. The music opens up a relay of recollections, evoking several areas of the past. At the same time Claire's memory brings home to her the decrepitude into which she and her husband have sunk.

Memory plays a vital rôle in underlining the collapse of the marriage in La Musica, in which the conversation of the divorcees is centred almost uniquely upon the experiences they shared. We never gain a full picture of the course of their marriage; rather fragments of memory allow us to glimpse why, after the first excitement of love had faded, they were gradually drawn to infidelity. Once more, their reminiscences are allusive, sometimes imprecise like all recollections, but they are strong enough to cause the former couple real distress:

LUI: Ah! ... c'est extraordinaire que l'on puisse parler (il les montre, lui et elle) comme ça ... Les derniers mois, vous vous souvenez?

(Ils éclatent (enfin) de rire.)

ELLE: L'enfer.

LUI: L'enfer, oui.

(Elle ferme les yeux, balaie l'image d'un geste de la main. Ils cessent progressivement de rire.)

ELLE: À ce point-là ça ne doit arriver qu'une fois par existence, vous ne croyez pas? (pp.151-2)

Their laughter is an instinctive reaction to the pain they feel beneath. They are forcibly reminded of the disintegration of their relationship whilst, paradoxically, their first love is being rekindled.

In all these cases fragments of memory, inserted into narrative or conversation, are merely one contribution to the total effect. In Hiroshima mon amour memory becomes a dominant theme. It marks the beginning of Duras's interest in the influence of memory upon being, and the extent to which individuals are prey to memory of decisive events.

Hiroshima is the story of a woman secretly trapped in an unhappy past, who unexpectedly comes to relive in memory the events that have determined her present emotional state. It is a study of the resurgence of memory to the point of hysteria and hallucination. The film is the result of a highly successful collaboration between Duras and the director, Alain Resnais, with whom she shares an interest in time and memory. In a series of films Resnais has explored the workings of time and its effect upon the consciousness; in Muriel, for example, the middle-aged heroine meets a former lover from twenty years previously, reflects on their affair and is gradually faced with the fact that she has deceived herself by living on false memories of him. As in Hiroshima there is a continual interplay between past love and the present situation.

Hiroshima is about both memory and the loss of memory, as seen in two radically opposed contexts. Duras differentiates between two types of memory, between the universal and the individual. Human beings cannot retain accurate recollections of world-shaking disasters in which they were not caught up as individuals, nor can they respond emotionally to such horrors when they have faded into the past. Their impressions inevitably become effaced by what the Japanese calls "l'horreur de l'oubli." The opening sequences which depict the aftermath of the atomic-bomb admirably underline this common if saddening situation. No matter how terrible the tragedy, there comes a time when men are simply unable to summon up an adequate response or even to recall the barbarity

in any detail. The Japanese tells the woman that she has really seen nothing of Hiroshima, and she does indeed admit that no sooner was the city reduced to ashes and the war at an end than in France (and presumably elsewhere) "la peur de l'indifférence" began (p.37). Visitors to the city can take pity on its inhabitants, but they can never imagine their pain.

On many occasions, however, such oblivion is essential if we are not to be driven crazy by our knowledge of suffering. The Frenchwoman is aware of this: "Il faut éviter de penser à ces difficultés que présente le monde, quelquefois. Sans ça, il deviendrait tout à fait irrespirable" (p.85). Her response to personal tragedy has also been to shut it out of her consciousness; but it is one thing to grow indifferent to the anguish of others, it is quite another to eradicate the memory of some unhappy event which has inflicted suffering upon oneself alone, and casts a shadow over one's subsequent mental life. This is one of the themes of the film.

On the surface nothing suggests the tragedy buried in the Frenchwoman's past, or the significance of her elusive remarks about her home town. Just as Hiroshima in 1945 had meant no more to her than "la fin de la guerre ... la stupeur," so the Japanese has no conception of her private mental world: "C'est un joli mot français, Nevers," he tells her (p.37), and there is no meaning behind the simple word for him. For some reason Nevers lingers hauntingly at the back of her mind: "Nevers, tu vois, c'est la ville du monde, et même c'est la chose du monde à laquelle, la nuit, je rêve le plus. En même temps que c'est la chose du monde à laquelle je pense le moins" (p.43). The importance of dreams as a guide to impulses that have been shut out of the conscious mind in the waking state, is of course crucial for psychologists. In psychological terms, her ego has dammed or "repressed" some experience

she cannot contemplate. During sleep, when the ego is far less active, the unconscious impulses can show through. (1)

The first suggestion that she is in fact the victim of some ghastly memory comes early in the film: she glimpses the Japanese' furred hand while he sleeps, and a memory flashes through her brain. The body changes - for an instant - to a young man in agony, apparently dying. It is the first clue to the woman's subconscious state, though as yet we learn nothing more. The sight of the Japanese' hand is one of those unexpected sensations - like the taste of the "petite madeleine" in Proust - which throw open the doors of the past.

The association awoken by that moment is the hair-line crack on the smooth surface of the woman's mind. Some such impression, perhaps a feeling of performing some action for the second time, or of "déjà vu", can frequently set off a whole train of associations. Her split-second recollection is the climax of the second part, or musical movement as Resnais and Duras might call it. In the third movement, under the impulse of the Japanese' questions, fragments of memory begin to filter through to her consciousness:

LUI: - Il était Français, l'homme que tu as aimé pendant la guerre?

(À Nevers. Un Allemand traverse une place, au crépuscule.)

ELLE: - Non ... il n'était pas Français.

(À Hiroshima. Elle est étalée sur le lit comblée de fatigue et d'amour. Le jour a encore baissé sur leurs corps.)

ELLE: - Oui, c'était à Nevers.

(À Nevers. Images d'un amour à Nevers. Courses à bicyclette. La forêt. Les ruines, etc.) (p.62)

Brief shots of their secret trysts and of Nevers flash on the screen like the momentary images passing through her mind. We might call this the intermediate stage in the revival of memory, since her experiences are as yet something she looks back upon as part of her past.

The fourth movement shows them whiling away the empty hours of the night in a café, again much later; it is at this point that the French-woman's reminiscences take complete possession of her, "Un miracle s'est produit. Lequel? Justement, la résurgence de Nevers" (p.69). The city literally rises like a spectre before her, and she is in a state of hallucination. She relates her horrifying experiences in the present tense, since she is reliving the memory. Increasingly drunk, her nerves frayed, she confuses past and present; the Japanese encourages her to transpose the identity of her dead German lover onto himself.

Painful memories crowd in on her from all sides - she imagines the deafening sound of the Marseillaise which to her drove home the victory of those who killed her lover; she hears the peal of church bells which marked her return to sanity. Her memories form in associated groups, as they link emotionally rather than chronologically. The order of consciousness replaces the order of clock-time. She talks of the day she became aware once more of the world outside her prison:

ELLE: - À six heures du soir, la cathédrale Saint-Étienne sonne, été comme hiver. Un jour, il est vrai, je l'entends. Je me souviens l'avoir entendue avant - avant - pendant que nous nous aimions, pendant notre bonheur. (p.78)

Other recollections intervene before her realisation of why exactly the bells struck such a deep chord in her memory. Months before they had tolled the death-knell of her lover:

ELLE: - Je suis restée près de son corps toute la journée et puis toute la nuit suivante. Le lendemain matin on est venu le ramasser et on l'a mis dans un camion. C'est dans cette nuit-là que Nevers a été libérée. Les cloches de l'église Saint-Étienne sonnaient ... sonnaient ... (p.79)

Her eventual rediscovery of the present is like a reawakening, and the horrific events have been relegated to the past: "Quatorze ans ont passé" (p.81). In effect her ability to recount the events for the first time liberates her from the trauma in which she has been trapped since adolescence. Duras comments: "Le récit qu'elle fait de cette chance

perdue [to die herself in Nevers] la transporte littéralement hors d'elle-même et la porte vers cet homme nouveau" (p.140). She has undergone the same processes familiar to psychologists in the treatment of neurotics, whose symptoms frequently stem from the suppression of memories they cannot face. (2) The recapture of these memories is followed by the disappearance of the symptom. In this case the symptom was the woman's secret terror of love, seen in her stubborn refusal to become emotionally involved with the Japanese and face up to the problem of another passionate love when the last had shattered her.

Now, after the memories have been revived and the spirits of the past dispelled, she has the chance of enjoying a new love in the present. Yet no sooner has this possibility presented itself than she denies it; for in the fifth and final movement her dilemma of whether to stay with her lover or return to her husband in France, resolves itself in favour of forgetfulness.

Memories continue to flow back as she wanders the streets during the hours before her departure, but the past has lost its power over her. She even desires to see Nevers again, a thing she could not have contemplated at the beginning. She can now talk of the girl she was as if about a different person. In the same way she anticipates the gradual oblivion that will shroud her present love:

Petite fille de rien.  
Morte d'amour à Nevers.  
Petite tondu de Nevers je te donne à l'oubli ce soir.  
Histoire de quatre sous.  
Comme pour lui, l'oubli commencera par tes yeux.  
Pareil.  
Puis, comme pour lui, l'oubli gagnera ta voix.  
Pareil.  
Puis, comme pour lui, il triomphera de toi, tout entier,  
peu à peu.  
Tu deviendras une chanson. (p.97)

Her emotional involvement with him will fade until he becomes a mere song in her memory (Duras continually uses references to music to represent

past experience).

In the end, oblivion, the absence of memory, will serve the same purpose as in her previous impossible affair. It is a safety-valve against the flood of emotion. Determined to overcome the force of her passion for the Japanese, she seeks protection in the only manner possible - by relegating him to the past. Already, she feels, she is on the verge of forgetting him. In the celebrated last moment, they call each other the names of the two places that shaped their destiny; to each other, from now on, their only vestige is these words. One thing is certain; as with the couple in La Musica, the very impossibility of love ensures its permanence. Buried in the depths of oblivion, it is "sauvegardé par l'oubli même" (p.8).

Memory and the overcoming of memory had brought them together; the film's irony is that, being free at last to embark upon a passionate relationship she prefers to obliterate her new affair from her memory. The conclusion is not entirely satisfactory, since it establishes a dichotomy between the film's general statement - that emotional crises fade from the conscious mind with time but leave a residue of memory in the subconscious - and the woman's belief that all memory of her present affair can be effaced. The film remains, all the same, an absorbing study of the processes of forgetfulness and the caprices of memory, related in a cinematic style that is both emotive and convincingly accurate. (4)

The following scenario, (Une Aussi Longue Absence) written in collaboration with Gérard Jarlot, continues the themes of oblivion and resurrected memory, and explores additionally the consequences of the total obliteration of memory. Both the Frenchwoman and the tramp are victims of the brutality of war, both are ensnared by the tricks of memory which a horrific past has inflicted upon them, yet whereas she

can resurrect and perhaps come to terms with what had been lodged in her subconscious, the tramp is doomed to remain a pathetic amnesiac. This wretched creature is taken by Thérèse, the café-owner, to be her long-lost husband, who was deported to Germany in 1944 never to be seen again. Whatever the truth, his only recollection is a queer, fragmented picture of the day he perhaps awoke after receiving the injury that destroyed his mind:

LE CLOCHARD: Ah, oui ... Oui, c'était dans un champ. Il y avait là un buisson (geste) rond, et immobile. C'était bien tranquille. Il n'y avait personne. Je m'en souviens bien. C'était dans la journée. Il y a longtemps. (p.88)

The passage, typical of Duras's technique, is particularly suitable here. The hazy and incomplete recollection is virtually the only fact he can relate from his past, apart from the name he was given - Robert Landais - tantalisingly similar to the name of Thérèse's husband, Albert Langlois.

The tramp exemplifies the devastating effect such complete mental absence has upon the personality structure. He is not a fully developed adult, or rather he is an adult no longer and possesses the touching simplicity of a child. Duras and Jarlot finely outline his timid confusion, his naïveté, as well as his childlike fear of the authorities who seem a sinister reminder of his past suffering.

Most of all - and this is what finally separates Thérèse from him - loss of memory means loss of the past, of any identity and communication with loved ones. The moment of realisation comes for Thérèse when to her horror she sees the scar on his head reflected in the mirror. The script comments: "Il est un homme qui a la tête trouée. Pareil à une maison bombardée, debout, mais détruite irrémédiablement" (p.96). His mental limitations leave him no room for any interests other than his bundles of newspapers which he ties, unties and sorts with an obsessive precision and delight which weary the spectator. Any other activity leaves him "dans le vague et le désintérêt, dans 'l'absence'" (p.59).

Hence the title suggests not only the gap of sixteen years during which (if he is Albert Langlois) he has roamed Europe before drifting as if by instinct back to Thérèse, but also solitude, alienation from one's own past experience and genuine contact with others. The tramp is walled completely within himself.

The film is equally the story of Thérèse and her rediscovery of the memories which quickly take possession of her. The tramp passes in and out of Thérèse's life for days, constantly humming some operatic aria that is his sole legacy of the past. One of the customers, ignorant of the poor tramp's situation, asks him about the songs he hums, and insists:

FERNAND: L'opéra, ça reste toute la vie.

LE CLOCHARD: Toute la vie. Peut-être. (p.38)

Yet when Thérèse tries to revive his memories by having him listen to the arias she has painstakingly installed in her juke-box, her hopes are inevitably frustrated.

The moment she overhears him talking of his amnesia, she faints with emotion and her reawakening marks the revival of her forgotten past. She is revitalised by a love that had faded from her conscious mind. So strongly does this love assert itself that it transports her back across the years to the time when her husband was the one man in her life.

The trouble is that she now enters a highly dangerous state of mind in which she is severed from present reality. Mentally she too is "absent." No amount of rational argument can persuade Thérèse to recognise the inconsistencies between her husband and the man before her. She desires at all costs to acquire a physical object upon which to pour out her remembered love. It is the memory of an emotion that possesses her. Had it been memory of the man himself, she might have viewed the situation more objectively. As it is, her obsession makes her distort the truth.

Her exhilarating discovery of dormant emotion convinces her that

"Albert" also is finding his memory once more. She argues passionately with her sceptical relatives, and makes a startling admission: "Je le sais comme je respire, parce que moi aussi je l'avais oublié" (p.73). Her love, like the Frenchwoman's, had been preserved intact, "sauvegardé par l'oubli."

She is so desperate to begin once more where her conjugal life was curtailed that she almost implores the tramp to confess his identity. Her pleas ricochet off a blank wall. Or is a spark lit in his memory when, at the very end, he takes his leave of her for the last time? Thérèse and her inquisitive neighbours shout "Albert Langlois" after him across the square. At first he is indifferent, then raises his hands as if before a firing-squad. The story concludes on a note of deliberate uncertainty.

Both the tramp and Thérèse, in their separate ways, are victims of the tricks of memory. Much of her life since the war had drifted contentedly by until a forgotten emotion suddenly aroused her and threw her off balance. Only oblivion offers the chance of tolerating our situation and continuing a normal life. Thérèse and the heroine of Hiroshima (however unsatisfactorily) had managed to escape from past misery through forgetfulness. It is because no such possibility lay open to the ill-fated Lol V. Stein or Claire Lannes, that their minds have been permanently distorted by tragic events whose memory obsesses them. Recollections, or one particular recollection, may be so vivid or intense that they dominate the whole consciousness and prevent an individual from adapting adequately to the world.

Such an individual is the schizophrenic Lol, who has been trapped by a traumatic memory. Duras maintains that because the centre of her life, her lost love, lies in the past Lol can enjoy greater freedom than the average human being, whose "centre de gravité" lies in the

future. (3) This is not strictly accurate. Lol is caught in a psychological trap, enmeshed in the memory of her emotional deprivation. She is living in a kind of suspended animation; her ten years of marriage are of no relevance to her, since her sparse mental life revolves around the night of the ball at T. Beach.

Her story compares closely with the Frenchwoman's, in that Lol too finds the chance to relive her interrupted affair with a substitute for the lost lover. Jacques Hold senses on the way to T. Beach, where their passion will be consummated, that her nagging memories will collapse like a pack of cards after she has re-enacted her past:

Voici venue l'heure de mon accès à la mémoire de Lol V. Stein.

Le bal sera au bout du voyage, il tombera comme château de cartes comme en ce moment le voyage lui-même. Elle revoit sa mémoire-ci pour la dernière fois de sa vie, elle l'enterre. Dans l'avenir ce sera de cette vision aujourd'hui, de cette compagnie-ci à ses côtés qu'elle se souviendra. Il en sera comme pour S. Tahla maintenant sous ses pas du présent. (pp.202-3)

After their night of love, Lol experiences a release of tremendous emotional energy before she attains an ordered calm that suggests she has at last dispelled the emotional associations of the painful moment. The ball is no longer the "seule épave d'un océan maintenant tranquille" (p.51), the sole remnant of the past which she can consciously recall, for the store of her memory has been unlocked and she can talk of whole areas of her adolescence. She can now relate her first affair with apparent ease, and on their return from T. Beach she seems cured of all the anguish her thoughts had caused her:

Elle me parle de Michael Richardson sur ma demande. Elle dit combien il aimait le tennis, qu'il écrivait des poèmes qu'elle trouvait beaux. J'insiste pour qu'elle en parle. Peut-elle me dire plus encore? Elle peut. [...]

La douleur disparaît. Je le lui dis. Elle se tait.

C'est fini, vraiment. Elle peut tout me dire sur Michael Richardson, sur tout ce qu'elle veut. (p.220)

The final outcome, however, is far less happy than for Lol's counterpart in the earlier film, who could give herself to her new lover if she

desired. Lol's particular experience may no longer inflict mental torment but its consequences cannot be lived down. Her only desire is to indulge her unpleasant perversion: she will continue to spy on the other couple, Hold and Tatiana.

Yet if Lol will always remain emotionally handicapped she does at least find release from a dominant memory. Claire Lannes, in L'Amante anglaise on the other hand, will be possessed by her secret memories until the day she dies. In her private world Claire has spent over twenty-five years reflecting on the chain of tragic circumstances surrounding the loss of her one great love, her policeman from Cahors. Alongside this, affection for her husband has been minimal. Claire has kept her feelings bottled up inside all these years, revealing little of her suffering and regret, so that Pierre has concluded that, with time, all recollection of the policeman had disintegrated.

During her testimony Claire's mind turns constantly to the smallest details of her life with her policeman (whom, strangely enough, she never mentions by name). Whilst some memories cause her suffering, others offer a kind of consolation, a means of savouring past happiness over and over again. In the following passage the idea of happiness leads naturally in her mind into an image of the man who bestowed that happiness:

-- ... Je n'ai jamais été séparée du bonheur de Cahors, il a débordé sur toute ma vie. Ce n'était pas un bonheur de quelques années, ne le croyez pas, c'était un bonheur fait pour durer toujours. Quand je dors il dure encore, je le vois me sourire par-derrière la haie quand il revient du travail. (p.159)

Claire has never been able to come out of the past and accept the valuable and immediate in her marital life, that is, the genuine love displayed by her husband.

Memory threatens to swamp the personality, especially if it retains

the emotional impact of a particular experience. It can cut individuals off from their environment and thwart any appreciation of what is real and valuable in the present. In order to live and act, the writer is saying, one needs to forget.

This need for oblivion takes on more radical significance in Duras's latest works. If memory gives individuals their definition, by linking them with their past and situating them within the context of their own experiences, then those deprived of memory are divested of personality. Without memory men can regress to a fundamental state of being, and are offered the possibility of complete self-renewal. The idea is crucial to the writer's most recent and esoteric works: for Duras the abolition of memory and knowledge leads to an exhilarating kind of madness.

NOTES

- (1) Cf. Sigmund Freud, Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, in Two Short Accounts of Psycho-Analysis, London, Pelican Books, 1964, pp.62-3.
- (2) Ibid., p.40:  
"Not only do neurotics remember painful experiences of the remote past, but they still cling to them emotionally; they cannot get free of the past and for its sake they neglect what is real and immediate."
- (3) J. Piatier.
- (4) The conception of the film inevitably invites comparison with Proust. It demonstrates how the past can be preserved in the storehouse of memory until an unexpected occurrence - like the sight of the Japanese' hand - unlocks the door. The final moments suggest Proust's vision of oblivion, that is, that the memory of loved ones must inevitably fade with time. (cf. also J.S. Bratton, pp.342-3).

However Duras was not consciously working according to the Proustian model. When asked whether she could see in the film any resemblances to Joyce, Proust or Faulkner, she replied: "Joyce, not at all. Proust, well ... perhaps. The theme of memory and forgetfulness and so on, I suppose there is something Proustian about it." (Richard Roud, "Conversation with Marguerite Duras," Sight and Sound, vol. 29, no. 1, (1960), p.17.)  
The most one can say is that Duras, like any other novelist since Proust who concerns himself with the themes of time and memory, cannot escape some degree of debt to Proust.

Chapter 7.

MADNESS

Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein marks a decisive stage in the artistic development of Marguerite Duras. Since 1964 all her fiction and several theatrical works revolve around the idea of madness. Duras considers them the most important part of her output. Why madness should hold such a peculiar fascination for her, was partially clarified at the time of the publication of L'Amante anglaise. When questioned as to what she was looking for in madness, she replied:

Je ne sais pas. [La folie] exerce sur moi une séduction. C'est, à l'heure actuelle, le seul véritable élargissement de la personne. Dans le monde de la folie, il n'y a plus rien, ni bêtise ni intelligence. C'est la fin du manichéisme, de la responsabilité, de la culpabilité. (1)

By this she does not mean simply that lunatics can live outside all laws of morality, but that such laws become irrelevant, and that moreover all restrictions placed on the freedom of the personality are meaningless to the insane mind. Through madness men can be liberated from the harsh realities of the "everyday world" and the claims imposed by it, and from the limits of individual identity. In Duras's words, madness guarantees a

détachement de soi. Au degré d'avarice, d'égoïsme où en sont encore le monde, la société - à long terme je ne suis pas pessimiste - cette dissolution des limites de la personne apparaît comme une névrose. (2)

Under the general term "la folie" Duras is really talking about two quite distinct things. She is interested in clinically certifiable forms of mental abnormality, exploring in the personages of Lol V. Stein, Jean-Marc de H., and Claire Lannes manifestations of acute neurosis; indeed the latter two, who display a tendency to absurd acts of violence, might qualify as psychotics. On the other hand, Duras holds views on the nature of insanity that differ enormously from those of orthodox

medical opinion. According to her interpretation, madness offers expansion of the personality, or perhaps one should say of the "self," since madness for Duras is frequently synonymous with abandonment of the individual personality. The self is free to expand into the identity of others, to transcend the boundaries of the individual. Besides this, madness also means that the imagination has free rein. As the writer asserts above, people will appear to be insane when their behaviour bears no relation to the accepted norms of contemporary civilisation. Some of her creations could be termed mad because of their manic and crazy behaviour (one thinks of the bizarre characters in Les Eaux et forêts) or simply because they are divorced from the world we regard as real, having rid themselves of all knowledge of it. In fact Duras equates insanity with oblivion, with the unlearning of all the accumulated knowledge that has shaped an individual's identity. To the extent that they have rejected the logic and truth of rational men, the protagonists of her most recent works are "not sane." They have regressed in consequence to a state of primitive innocence. (3)

Duras studies mental unbalance from two separate standpoints in Lol V. Stein and the succeeding novels, Le Vice-consul and L'Amante anglaise. Although all three illustrate to varying degrees what Duras sees as the possibilities opened by insanity, they contain first and foremost coherent studies of neurosis. Before establishing their position in the pattern of her recent works, it will be useful to examine the novels individually for the light that the mental state of the central character sheds upon the meaning of the whole work. Much that is puzzling and ambiguous can be explained in terms of the protagonists' neuroses.

Lol is one of Duras's most fascinating heroines - ice-cold, suddenly gay, always elusive and inscrutable. Certainly the most satisfactory solution to her baffling conduct is that/<sup>it</sup>is symptomatic of mental unbalance. Basically, she appears to have no inner life, and her physical being has been an empty shell. Tatiana provides the clue to her state of mind:

Au collège, dit-elle, et elle n'était pas la seule à le penser, il manquait déjà quelque chose à Lol pour être - elle dit: là. Elle donnait l'impression d'endurer dans un ennui tranquille une personne qu'elle se devait de paraître mais dont elle perdait la mémoire à la moindre occasion. (Lol V. Stein, p.11)

From an early age Lol has in fact exhibited the classic symptoms of schizophrenia - a split between her physical presence (the "persona") and her mental self. Even as a child there was little relation between what she appeared - "une personne" - and the sterile self within. She had merely been acting out the role of a human being. In addition she had no rapport with her environment: "Lol était drôle, moqueuse impénitente et très fine bien qu'une part d'elle-même eût été toujours en allée loin de vous et de l'instant" (p.11). Hence for years Lol had been disposed to mental unbalance, and rather like the physically weak person who carries on steadily until he succumbs to the first disease, she had only to be confronted with some critical event which demanded too much from her limited powers of resistance, for the worst to happen. Her experience on the night of the ball drove her over the brink.

It was a combination of her mental state and her weak resistance that created Lol's nervous crisis. Lacking any veritable inner life or emotion, she had found in her fiancé a loving companion who could surround her with the feelings she did not possess, only to have him whisked away from her. She experiences in an acute form sexual deprivation which, according to Freud, provides one of the principal explanations for emotional illness. (4)

Lol suffers a nervous breakdown from which she gradually recovers - or so it appears on the surface. Her husband is more accurate than he realises when he compares her to a sleep-walker. In reality she is permanently scarred, and sets up a compensatory neurotic pattern in the form of a compulsive need for order in her household: she observes strict perfection in the conduct of her house, in her neat and sombre dress, in the very arrangement of her furniture. Like all such neurotic patterns, her orderliness is a defence mechanism, a way of coping with life and avoiding confrontation with past unhappiness and present reality. It is a continuation of her pretence, described by Tatiana, of being "une personne."

Lol is irrevocably split between her public and private lives and is mentally absent from the real world, as her actions and remarks suddenly reveal. Often thoughts do not receive full expression; Lol leaves words in suspense as her mind jumps from one idea to another or simply goes blank. These are the sole indications of Lol's state of absence. Duras never allows us to enter fully into her private world.

The insanity that possesses Jean-Marc and Claire Lannes is of rather a different order, and considerably more dangerous. Jean-Marc's particular kind of madness is less clearly defined than in the case of either of the heroines, but one detects in his erratic and violent behaviour symptoms of an extreme personality disorder. He exhibits rapid changes of mood, oscillating between rage, anxiety, and fearful panic, and on the other hand taciturnity, withdrawal, even a smiling, equivocal affability. He can be aggressive and choleric. On one occasion at the end of the embassy soirée his frenzied outburst causes a public scandal, as a result of which relations are severed with the other diplomats in whom he strikes fear. Even during his adolescence signs could be detected of increasingly aggressive tendencies: he had

tried to "destroy" his boarding-school with ever more menacing tricks, he had broken objects in his home. Everything led towards the decisive act of violence beside the Shalimar gardens. His state of mind, as we saw earlier, was a result of some inexplicable anguish, yet perhaps as in Lol's case the seeds of madness had been planted in childhood.

In Claire Lannes traits of both the previous protagonists have coalesced. She suffers like Lol from a split in her personality and shares Jean-Marc's propensity to violence. The reasons for Claire's awful crime, are not, though, easy to define; according to her husband, Pierre, the crime was perpetrated by a lunatic, and certainly his account of her behaviour tends to confirm Claire's madness. Question-marks remain, however. No madman, suggests the policeman who arrests Claire, would have disposed of the body like clockwork, but only a madman would hold onto the head that is never discovered. This is the fundamental ambiguity in the character of a woman who is deranged yet at times lucid and sensitive. Claire may be dangerous, but she can also be touching, and she escapes any simple label.

Duras gives a penetrating study of the psychotic mind. Claire was a woman, her husband relates, prone to fits of violence - she would break crockery, tear up sheets, she threw their transistor down a well; she would sit alone "half-dead" in the garden one day and be off to Paris the next. All this suggests a dangerous split in her personality, a form of schizophrenia in which contradictory impulses vied for possession of her, and where violence could erupt at any moment, as it did when she butchered Marie-Thérèse. Claire is made to reveal her derangement in the words of her testimony: she is alternatively calm and intensely emotional, and her conversation flies off at moments into a mass of aimless babble. Frequent non-sequiturs suggest how her mind keeps going off at a tangent. Claire also shows to a frightening degree

a common trait of schizophrenics - the inability to separate imagination from reality - and it is in this that her madness coincides with that of Duras's most grotesque characters, as we shall see presently.

Claire's pathological state has left her insecure, so that "les autres" hold a kind of menace. In a moment of striking lucidity she discloses one of her motives for the murder: she had no particular dislike of Marie-Thérèse, but experienced a kind of neurotic anxiety in the presence of others:

-- [ ... Marie-Thérèse ] était trop grosse et les pièces sont petites. Je trouvais qu'elle était trop grosse pour la maison. [ ... ] Mais ce n'était pas elle seulement. Mon mari est comme un échalias et lui, moi, je le trouvais trop grand, trop haut pour la maison ... (p.150)

With such an unstable temperament an explosion was bound to come; yet is Claire totally mad or merely - as the narrator prefers to say - "quelqu'un qui ne s'est jamais accommodé de la vie" (p.99)? Her inability to adapt to life is in fact a predicament shared by others, but without the average human being's stability she breaks out into violence.

In this novel madness takes on universal significance: it stands as an illustration at the absolute level of hidden impulses that are common to humanity. Claire acts out in reality desires that, according to Duras, are universal: "Elle a envie de tuer, comme nous tous," the writer has remarked. (5) Claire reveals that having so many times dreamt of killing all the people she had ever lived with, she was bound actually to commit a crime at some time. Pierre had admitted to her that he too had imagined murdering someone - Marie-Thérèse, or a person he could not identify. He had felt the same need to extricate himself from others. Duras is suggesting that below the surface of human lives common feelings - of distrust, antipathy - sow the seeds of violence. She does not merely point out that by scratching away the thin veneer of civilisation the brute will appear beneath (a hypothesis developed in other contemporary novels, notably Golding's Lord of the Flies). Duras insists that

it is human beings' inability to adapt to life and suffering that can unbalance the mind and produce dangerous psychoses.

The message of L'Amante anglaise is that we must understand the causes of the pathetic woman's crime, for we are all potential murderers. Were it not for our sanity we should all be capable of the crime of Claire Lannes.

Duras believes that insanity radically alters an individual's relationship with the world outside himself, and that in effect the frontiers of the individual personality are dissolved. This is what she means by the "dissolution des limites de la personne." The distinction between the self and others vanishes, and men are capable of transcending into other beings, or at least of imagining that they are doing so.

Lol is the first of Duras's personages whose being - one cannot say "personality," since this is precisely what she lacks - is liberated from the shackles of everyday living. In this context one of the novel's paradoxes becomes evident. Duras maintains that the very absence of Lol's love, her inability to feel after the critical night mean that she can achieve personal liberation. The writer compares Lol to Claire Lannes in her lack of attachment to the world:

Toutes les deux ont, derrière elles, ce qui a donné de l'importance à leur vie: leur amour. Leur centre de gravité s'est déplacé. Il est d'habitude en avant de nous, dans l'avenir. Chez elles, il est dans le passé. Alors, c'est merveilleux. On a beaucoup plus de liberté. On gagne à ses yeux une inimportance libératrice. (6)

It is true that the present holds no meaning, but Lol is trapped and veritably obsessed by her past trauma. One detects an unfortunate disparity between Duras's remark and the impression the novel gives.

It is true that the very fact that Lol is absent from life in the

present, allows her to drift off into her imagination or other identities. Her nocturnal perambulations around S. Tahla make her aware of this:

Elle devait toujours se rassurer davantage après ses promenades: si elle le voulait on la voyait très peu, à peine. Elle se croit coulée dans une identité de nature indéfinie qui pourrait se nommer de noms indéfiniment différents, et dont la visibilité dépend d'elle. (p.46)

Lol is free to escape mentally from her physical presence and hence Jacques Hold regards her as elusive, "inconnaisable." In psychological terms her self is divorced from her false self, that is her body and visible action. (7) She is free to move between identities through having no one single identity, though we are never allowed more than fleeting glimpses of these mental processes. After making love with "l'amant de Tatiana Karl" Lol goes through an emotional crisis, an orgy of excitement and anguish in which she imagines herself as, and indeed resembles, her former school-friend:

[...] il n'y plus eu de différence entre elle et Tatiana Karl sauf dans ses yeux exempts de remords et dans la désignation qu'elle faisait d'elle-même - Tatiana ne se nomme pas, elle - et dans les deux noms qu'elle se donnait: Tatiana Karl et Lol V. Stein. (p.219)

Yet in the case of Lol transcendence offers her little joy, largely because it is a one-sided attempt. Without any reciprocation on the part of Tatiana, Lol enters her identity only in imagination. Only when two or more consciousnesses coincide can there be any fruitful interplay.

There is a scene at the end of Le Vice-consul which depicts the breakdown of the barriers between one consciousness and another. Jean-Marc and his confidant, the director of the European circle in Calcutta, come to share a kind of communal madness. They confuse each others' memories and adopt for themselves the other's past. "Quel embrouillamini," they both remark, and the implication is that their imagination has completely free play. During his crucial conversation with Anne-Marie,

Jean-Marc tries to lure her into sharing his madness - a temptation from which she shies away in fear; she too might have been transformed so that, in her lover Michael Richard's words, there would be "un grand danger de [...] ne plus reconnaître Anne-Marie Stretter" (p.193). Such insanity does indeed appear a danger to the diplomatic community, who instinctively steer clear of Jean-Marc. The mental derangement he represents involves a kind of self-destruction.

The strange protagonists of Détruire dit-elle come nearest to merging their separate beings in a collective consciousness. Duras remarks in the prologue to the film that they would be considered mad - by the standards of today - precisely because they have transcended their individuality. The prologue (during which the screen remains blank) is a kind of interrogation; a woman puts a series of questions to the director herself, and Duras's replies go some way towards clarifying the opaque narrative. In particular she explains: "Un fou est un être dont le préjugé essentiel est détruit: les limites du moi." (8)

As was stated in the first chapter, Détruire dit-elle describes the annihilation of the individual personality through the power of love, and the development of a universal love which knows no sex-barriers. In fact communal love and communal madness are seen to be essentially the same experience - the intermingling of several consciousnesses. Our difficulty in finding any sort of rapport with the central characters stems from their strangeness, their divorce from everyday reality, and their close resemblance to each other. They are living in fact in a complete void. Yet this very void allows their consciousness to be liberated and "les limites du moi" are abolished. Mentally Stein and Max Thor are the same person, and Alissa attempts to liken herself to Elisabeth. Taken to its logical conclusion, this willed destruction of the self opens up entirely new possibilities of communication. In the

second chapter we saw that, walled in their own minds, people could never enter into adequate or permanent communication. Duras posits a solution in this book, though knowing that it is an unrealisable ideal. She sees madness as the antidote to solitude. Because the process is reciprocal between the two men and Alissa, they can counteract the loneliness that haunts so many of Duras's heroes. They are far luckier than either Lol or Claire Lannes, who are condemned to isolation.

Even if insanity cannot always guarantee that the barriers between individuals will collapse, Duras sees it equally as a means of liberating the mind. Madness abolishes the boundaries between the real and the unreal, thus giving free rein to the imagination. Logic and reality have little place in the mind of the madman. The writer looks to madness as the key to an exhilarating expansion of the mind.

Claire Lannes is typical of Duras's recent characters in that she has regressed to a state of innocence - and ignorance - by throwing off her accumulated knowledge. When asked why she chose the title L'Amante anglaise she explained:

Il s'agit de la menthe, de la plante, ou, si vous préférez, de la chimie de la folie: [ Claire ] écrit ça avec un 'l' apostrophe ... elle a tout désappris, y compris l'orthographe. (9)

Duras mentions two important and complementary aspects of what she regards as madness; according to her madness involves "unlearning," "forgetting" all the knowledge one has built up over a lifetime and which has moulded the personality and vision of an individual. Take away the knowledge and the individual disappears as well. Secondly, Claire can enjoy "la chimie de la folie," changing facts, truth and logic as she pleases, like some chemist forming strange new compounds

from the elements he possesses. In one way knowledge is restrictive, since it defines the boundaries dividing truth and fiction, the objectively real and the imagined. Without knowledge fantasy and reality melt into one another, as they do in the mind of a child (indeed, Duras's deranged characters are frequently compared in the text to children). (10)

Claire is completely unable to separate the imagined from the objectively true. In her mind fiction and fact are quite indistinguishable. As Pierre relates: "Les choses de l'imagination elle ne les comprenait pas. Une histoire inventée, une pièce à la radio par exemple, on n'arrivait pas à lui faire admettre qu'elle n'avait jamais existé. C'était une enfant par certains côtés" (p.86). Claire not only has day-dreams and hallucinations, but she invents whole incidents in which she thoroughly believes, or complete conversations with strangers. (Yet here again she escapes any easy categorising: she later claims that she knew she was inventing stories, that she feigned madness to escape her husband and cousin.) (11)

A very similar theme can be found in Le Vice-consul. Jean-Marc too is unlearning his past experience, since this allows him to forget the suffering around him and his own wretched past. Madness is therefore a manner of coping with the tragedies of life. Again the drama of the beggar-girl which opens the novel, forms a prelude to the central situation. As she wanders across Indo-China she is attempting to forget her whole unfortunate past and the family that has disowned her. The opening passage of the novel is crucial:

Elle marche, écrit Peter Morgan.  
Comment ne pas revenir? Il faut se perdre. Je ne sais pas.  
Tu apprendras. Je voudrais une indication pour me perdre. Il faut être sans arrière-pensée, se disposer à ne plus reconnaître rien de ce qu'on connaît... (p.9)

And during the following years of abject poverty she gradually loses almost all she knew and is left with only her "mémoire abolie" (p.70). The raving creature who haunts the protagonists is undoubtedly crazy, her sole contact

with the past being the Battambang-song she shrieks in the night. During a discussion on Peter Morgan's projected novel, a member of Anne-Marie's clique points out that the woman has gone mad in order to find oblivion and shut out a world of pain; she is liberated from her feelings and her very identity.

Similarly, Jean-Marc has glimpsed the possibility of stripping himself of all knowledge; it came to him during his fit of madness in Lahore, and he describes the moment to Anne-Marie in terms of "nothingness," of complete divorce from thought, explaining that "il ne peut rien dire sur Lahore, rien, et que vous devez le comprendre" (p.126). If only for a moment Anne-Marie manages to "apercevoir Lahore," that is, experience intuitively the complete absence of personality and thought. He encourages her:

- Aidez-vous de l'idée qu'on est un clown qui se réveille.
- Elle s'écarte de nouveau un peu de lui mais elle ne regarde pas, elle cherche.
- C'est-à-dire, dit-elle, je ne pense rien.
- C'est ça. (p.127)

The word "rien" will assume enormous importance in later novels and plays, suggesting oblivion, the void, the absence of thought.

Moreover, blotting out reality does not merely guarantee forgetfulness of a painful past, but can give the imagination freedom to roam at leisure. The curious trio in the farce, Les Eaux et forêts, demonstrate how by forgetting even temporarily about their actual lives, people can indulge in the most outrageous fantasies. Normally in their everyday lives the three people who meet by accident on a road-crossing would be sane, upstanding citizens, but for a few moments they are no longer faces in the crowd as they find exhilaration in communal madness. They are carried away by their compulsive and frenzied conversation; on the one hand they talk about their real lives, on the other they allow their imaginations to run riot. If the man's efforts to invent a whole romantic past for himself and one of the women, are sharply rebuffed by her, the other woman is only too eager

to let him bolster her mundane present with dreams of a fairy-tale youth. Once infected by insanity, there is simply no holding him back. He imagines his encounter with one woman:

HOMME: [ ... ] C'était moi l'année des Settons. Vous aviez vingt ans. J'avais vingt ans et je dansais à la perfection les tangos argentins. Je vous aimais tant que j'en mourais. Tous les soirs on me ranimait au sortir de vos bras...

FEMME 1: On n'a jamais ranimé personne au sortir de mes bras! Ah, j'étais pas Miss France, moi, à vingt ans!

FEMME 2: Et moi, où c'était donc?

HOMME: A Granvillou! Vous, ah, vous! Quelle ivresse! Je dansais le one-step comme le tango argentin. Et tous les soirs, tes yeux dans mes yeux, et allez, on dansait! On dansait! On dansait! (p.31)

All logic and reality are thrown to the wind. Their identities are multiplied as easily as their names, for in such circumstances they are capable of incessant change, ready for the new experience a chance conversation can hold. This is their way of escaping from the misery of their empty lives. The man in particular has his own philosophy:

HOMME: [ ... ] On vous dit: "La vie est triste? hélas! il faut vivre quand même." On vous dit: "Toujours-prête-à-servir-la-France?" Pouah! Vulgarité et imbécillité! (Doux) Non, non, non ... faut pas écouter, Missis Thompson; rien, écouter rien du tout ... il faut être comme moi, des Eaux et Forêts, sans arrière-pensée aucune, pas la moindre trace d'une arrière-pensée, être à la fois des eaux, des forêts... de tout ... de rien ... de rien du tout ... (p.24)

It is best to forget the real world; the imagination is far preferable.

The later piece Le Shaga is a reductio ad absurdum of the same basic situation. (12) Again three people - even more bizarre than the hot-heads of Les Eaux et forêts - meet by chance and indulge in a series of crazy exchanges. The circumstances certainly are very different, for these weird people appear to be inmates of an asylum - a suspicion confirmed by their clowning, their illogical chatter, and their constantly changing poses which can only be put down to insanity. At the opening of the play, a woman is discovered speaking "Shaga," a completely new language. A man and woman, passing by, try to converse with her, and at the same time they talk about themselves. Their "conversation" establishes hardly any common ground between them. Indeed the incomprehensible babble of the woman speaking

Shaga is scarcely more obscure than the rambling talk of the other two. All are completely mad, and jabber excitedly about whatever enters their head; they demand attention for an absurd anecdote, they burst into the refrain of a pop-song or an aria from Carmen, or they recount details of their past (real or imagined), like the talking bird which the man (H) claims to have kept. Like the trio in Les Eaux et forêts, they love the feel of words on their tongues, and even more than they these excitable creatures need "du calme" (cf. Les Eaux et forêts, p.25).

They exemplify the primacy of the imagination achieved by madness. At the centre stands the woman (B) who stubbornly refuses to speak anything but her "Shaga." In effect she has rejected all the laws of logic and normal communication to express herself in an entirely original manner. She has achieved that "élargissement de la personnalité" which by everyday standards we should call madness. B is completely happy in her state, which leaves her free to become whoever or whatever she pleases: "Elle a été bien-des-choses-bien-des-gens," gabbles her friend, A. Speaking Shaga is one more form of mental liberation:

B, (enfin, s'explique en trois mots): Sudrina yumi natagan... [ ... ]

A, (indignée): Vous savez ce qu'elle dit??

H: Non?

A, (d'une traite toujours): Que toutes les raisons qu'elle avait de ne pas être contente en français sont devenues des raisons d'être contente en shaga, et que du moment que ce n'est pas obligatoire qu'une chose qui n'existait pas avant ne se mette pas à exister un jour, il y a pas de raison que ça cesse. (pp.217-8)

"Terminé" is the only word she remembers from her previous language, and her past - husband, relations, values, background - has been obliterated from her mind. There are suggestions too that she has been incarcerated in this establishment for a psychopathic murder (unless that fact is one more product of an over-fertile imagination).

A and the man, H, live just as fully in the world of their hallucinations - she had imagined seeing a lion, he taught phrases of conversation to a bird visible only to himself. Together they embroider on each other's

fantasies, and the slightest details become a pretext for scenes of fun or shameless melodrama.

The important point is that madness brings them back to a childlike state and opens up a world of fantasy where all is possible. At the end it suddenly occurs to the women that they might enjoy themselves by playing lions, and they come dangerously close to tearing each other apart. But it is only a game, and they change their minds just as quickly.

Their situation, all the same, is not without its paradox: there is no permanent refuge from existence even in madness, and they end, exhausted, in a state of apprehension. All are waiting for something that never comes, with only their laughter and insanity as bolsters against a world that has no value for them.

Nevertheless the play rarely leaves the level of farce. Détruire dit-elle is quite a different matter. Though in several scenes the mood is one of absurd or dark comedy, the intentions of the work are far more serious. Again one sees men and women ridding their minds of all knowledge and memory, but here the process is far more radical. Gradually they reach what Duras in the "film-annonce" calls "ignorance.":

-- Je suis pour qu'on ferme les écoles et les facultés. Pour l'ignorance. Pour qu'on s'aligne sur le dernier coolie, et qu'on recommence.

-- Pour qu'on s'aligne sur la folie?

-- Peut-être. Un fou est un être dont le préjugé essentiel est détruit: les limites du moi. (13)

We shall leave aside the obviously social and political implications of these remarks, which are discussed in the following chapter. The important point is that Duras believes men should throw off the whole weight of knowledge, and especially the knowledge disseminated by educational institutions which restricts, specialises and (in her eyes) perverts the individual. Only by throwing this off can the individual attain complete freedom:

je parle d'un passage par le vide de l'homme: c'est qu'il oublie

tout. Pour pouvoir recommencer. Qu'il renaisse de lui, si vous voulez. On pourrait alors, avec une extrême prudence, revenir à la connaissance. Bien sûr. Mais qu'elle ne devienne jamais une scholastique. (14)

Hence the protagonists might appear mad because they have ceased to possess the thing that defines normal individuals. Alissa and more particularly Stein and Max Thor are conscious only that they know nothing: "Je ne comprends pas" and "rien," which recur in their clipped conversations, have therefore a special significance. There are various examples, such as Max Thor's remark to Elisabeth: "Nous n'avons rien à nous dire" (p.95).

In the film, all the characters speak in flat, unemotional tones, their faces remaining often expressionless. Their complete lack of knowledge gives them an air of innocence or even of non-existence. Yet it is a state divinely to be wished, according to Duras, who has said that the world of the future will belong to children and madmen. (15) At the nerve-racking yet delightfully comic luncheon with Bernard Alione, the barrage of incomprehensible remarks hurled by the trio, leads up to:

Stein et Alissa se tiennent les mains. Max Thor les désigne.  
-- Eux, dit-il, regardez-les, eux, ce sont déjà des enfants. (p.124)

They have regressed to a state of childlike innocence. What is so amusing about the lunch-scene is that Bernard Alione is struck dumb with incomprehension at the sight of these strange creatures who do not fit in with his narrow, conformist view of existence. The audience, however, has by this point so completely accepted the protagonists' behaviour that Alione's normality is a drastic shock; his surprise registers what their own reaction might have been, had this been their first acquaintance with the three people.

As with Claire Lannes and others, the boundaries between reality and fantasy have broken down, allowing free play to their imaginations. On occasions an idea passes through one person's head and is elaborated by the others - in the card-game where they probe Elisabeth with questions, and especially during the luncheon conversation, where their imaginings become

simply absurd (cf. p.123).

The characters will only appear/<sup>peculiar</sup>to those who cannot penetrate their state of mind and who, like Alione, will take them for "des malades." Their behaviour, their "madness," is, according to Duras, the only sanity of the future. Once men have rid themselves of their prejudices and the restraints placed upon their thinking, they may indeed "revenir à la connaissance," but never in a way that destroys their freedom by warping their minds.

Madness purifies the consciousness, which can then be born anew. This is the position at which the writer has arrived in Détruire dit-elle. Her view has widened considerably over the past few years, from the time of Lol V. Stein when she was only dimly aware of the possibilities of madness. It can offer genuine transcendence when two or more consciousnesses merge together and are mutually beneficial. A serious objection can be raised to what is a highly personal position with no factual basis. There is no guarantee that madness will bring men closer together on the level of consciousness. Furthermore, if they are divested of all knowledge they have no means of communication and their isolation would be complete. Duras admits, however, that in any case her ideals are unrealisable and she is "en pleine utopie." (16)

The madness of recent works is of quite a different order from the psychoses of Lol, Jean-Marc and Claire Lannes. In fact it would only be considered such in the light of present-day suppositions about the individual and society; hence its personal and political connotations go hand in hand. For Duras, madness implies a radically new way of looking at the world, from a resumed state of innocence and purity, and thus holds enormous

importance as the key to what the writer sees as true Communism; the prologue to Détruire dit-elle contains the following remark:

-- Est-ce qu'ils sont fous?

-- Dans la vieillerie de la classification actuelle, on peut le penser. L'homme communiste de l'an 2069, qui disposera complètement de sa... de sa liberté, de sa générosité, serait actuellement considéré comme un fou. (17)

The madness that Duras first regarded as a means of liberating the mind, has now come to offer the liberation of mankind.

NOTES

- (1) J. Piatier
- (2) Ibid.
- (3) Duras's view of madness bears striking similarities with that of the Surrealists; although they had no direct influence on the development of her ideas, she acknowledges that she has come to share some of their preoccupations, particularly madness: "Le surréalisme, je ne suis pas allée à lui, mais maintenant il vient à moi, et j'en suis très heureuse. C'est depuis Lol V. Stein." (J. Piatier)

From the 'twenties onwards, the Surrealists have been concerned with the possibilities of an unrestricted imagination, and have attempted to explore the unconscious. Like self-willed hallucinations and automatic writing, the Surrealists regarded madness as a form of mental liberation, as well as a source of artistic genius. (In L'Immaculée Conception Eluard and Breton wrote a series of texts under the stimulus of simulated mental disorders).

For the Surrealists too madness is associated with expansion of the self and with freedom. Duras stands particularly close to André Breton who also exalts insanity because of his disgust with civilised thought; madness is the antithesis of the logicity and order imposed by society. Like Duras, Breton does not condemn madness as deviance from a social norm: both maintain that the mad exist in their self-sufficient universe of the imagination, and find a positive joy in hallucinations. "Les confidences des fous, je passerais ma vie à les provoquer. Ce sont gens d'une honnêteté scrupuleuse, et dont l'innocence n'a d'égale que la mienne." (André Breton, Manifeste du surréalisme (1924), Manifestes du surréalisme, Paris, Collection "Idées," Gallimard, 1961, p.14). Madness represents a return to innocence, to a simple purity.

Where Duras parts company from the Surrealists is in her view of the potentialities of madness. For Duras it is a state of non-identity and inactivity (she admires the hippies also for their inactivity, which she sees as a rejection of social norms). The Surrealists, on the other hand, turn to madness as one means of unlocking the subconscious and discovering the essential and authentic in each individual which becomes a source of creativity and genius. "L'hystérie n'est pas un phénomène pathologique et peut, à tous égards, être considérée comme un moyen suprême d'expression." (Louis Aragon/André Breton, "Le Cinquantenaire de l'hystérie," in Révolution surréaliste, no.11, quoted in Maurice Nadeau, Histoire du surréalisme, Seuil, Paris, 1964, p.285.)

One should note also that neither Breton nor Duras has lived by their exhortations, and induced a permanent state of insanity. Breton indeed warned his fellow-artists of the dangers of allowing their imagination free rein.

- (4) S. Freud, p.80.
- (5) J. Piatier.
- (6) Ibid.

- (7) I am borrowing the terms "self" and "false self" from Dr. R.D. Laing, since they well describe Lol's mental state. Dr. Laing points out than an individual may experience himself as split between mind and body, and feel identified with the "unembodied" part of him (Laing's term). Hence the body becomes the centre of a false self. A false system develops: the individual comes to act out a role betraying nothing of the "true," inner self.

See R.D. Laing, The Divided Self (1959), London, Pelican, 1965, pp. 65ff.

- (8) J. Rivette/J. Narboni, p.51.
- (9) C. Sarraute, "L'Amante anglaise ou la chimie de la folie," Le Monde, 20 décembre, 1968, p.12.

Duras's remark does not state the whole case. Claire has not unlearned the most important circumstances in her life - her affair with the Cahors policeman - and her memory has therefore not completely vanished.

- (10) The Surrealists drew a parallel between madness and the childlike state, considering children as culturally innocent. To this they added the third element of "primitivism" (the mentality of "uncivilised" people). The Surrealists advocated regaining the childlike state, as being the most authentic. (cf. André Breton, Manifestes du surréalisme, Paris, Collection "Idées," Gallimard, 1961, pp.54-5).

- (11) Claire has much in common with Breton's Nadja, who calls herself "l'Âme errante." Nadja is mentally unbalanced and lives completely in a world of her own imaginings. She gives a credible account of other places and epochs in which she exists mentally. In her private universe there is no demarcation between dream and objective truth.

cf. André Breton, Nadja, Paris, Gallimard, 1928.

- (12) Performed with Yes, peut-être in Paris, 1968.  
Published in Théâtre II.

- (13) J. Rivette/J. Narboni, p.51.

- (14) Ibid., p.51.

Duras is calling for a process remarkably similar to the "déculturation" advocated by Jean Dubuffet, who has connections with Surrealism. His Compagnie de l'Art brut collects non-cultural art, especially the art of the insane. Dubuffet launches a scathing attack on the way men have been corrupted by the culture of the West and its accompanying values, in Asphyxiante culture (Paris, Pauvert, 1968). He recommends the setting up of institutes for "déconditionnement," where individuals would be systematically cleansed of their cultural perversion through a process of "oubli." (cf. p.152)

- (15) This remark was quoted during an introduction to a performance of the film which I attended in Paris, in June, 1970.

(16) J. Rivette/J. Narboni, p.52.

(17) Ibid., p.51.

Chapter 8.

POLITICS

The events of May, 1968, had a profound effect upon the consciousness and political outlook of many French writers. The near-revolution that brought first Paris then all of France to a standstill stemmed in part from an intellectual questioning (a "contestation" to use the current jargon) of the values and traditional assumptions of an outwardly stable society, and a desire for radical reform of its structure; these aims were matched by a conviction that the whole edifice of education and factory-produced knowledge in particular must be torn down, and that a revolution in the individual consciousness was essential. All this was very close to the heart of Marguerite Duras, who shared the ideals of the student revolutionaries. She has seen in the 1968 crisis an expression of doubts about the course society was taking, and despite the right-wing backlash that followed, despite the disillusion, and the inadequacy of the reforms, she sees the period as something of a success: "Mai était une chose réussie. C'est un échec infiniment plus réussi que n'importe quelle réussite au niveau de l'opération politique, n'est-ce pas?" (1)

It would be unjust, and incorrect, to conclude that in her recent writing Duras has simply "jumped on the band-wagon." I mention 1968 to show the extent to which ideas she had already formulated to some degree, coincide with the preoccupations of her time. As much as two years earlier she was at work on plays that suggest a need for reform of the consciousness, and the ideals of May confirmed her own beliefs, which resulted from her personal interpretation of the nature of madness.

In recent years her works have contained an increasingly political outlook, culminating in Abahn Sabana David, the first fictional work in which she has abandoned all her traditional interests to concentrate solely on a political vision. That vision is decisively influenced by

Marxist Communism. Even after her expulsion from the Party in 1957, Duras has remained a fervent Communist, convinced that this offers the only answer to the problems of humanity. It is a view that has dominated her whole life:

There is no political substitute for it: there is no party to replace it, because being a Communist is not politics, it is the end of politics. It is an ideological position, a philosophical position if you like. Politics is temporisation, and if you are a Communist you are, by virtue of principle, deeper in than that. (2)

Before examining what Communism signifies to Duras personally, as seen in her political works, it is worth noting the political undercurrents detectable earlier in her career. Her latest writing marks something of a "volte-face," insofar as she had kept literature and politics apart, believing that a political stance should never dictate creative writing. (3) Several stories, nevertheless, reveal what could be described as left-wing sympathies. In general terms, Duras has always been on the side of the exploited, and repeatedly one finds a critique of oppression, epitomised in the colonialist ethos and in the barbarity of war.

A woman who spent the formative years of childhood and adolescence in French Indo-China would naturally retain vivid memories of the squalor, disease and poverty she witnessed. Duras's experiences had a profound effect upon her, and she hated colonialism intensely, launching a bitter attack in the largely autobiographical Un Barrage. Colonialism is synonymous with callousness, brutality and corruption, as the fate of the Indo-Chinese peasants demonstrates. Duras arraigns the whole ethos which can permit one nation to be the ruthless exploiter of less powerful peoples. The rulers of the French colony are seen as an omnipotent elite,

grabbing the fruits of the land and bestowing nothing in return; the natives must slave their lives away to fill the coffers of the whites. In Duras's eyes colonialism is the most blatant and cruel kind of racialism, by which one section of humanity holds others in subjection:

Les quartiers blancs de toutes les villes coloniales du monde étaient toujours, dans ces années-là, d'une impeccable propreté. Il n'y avait pas que les villes. Les blancs aussi étaient très propres. (p.143)

The rulers wear their cleanliness like they wear their white uniforms - as a mark of racial superiority. The contrast could not be more shattering between the hundreds of wealthy, effete landowners in the tree-lined suburbs and the naked children dying of starvation and disease in their first years. The lives of the natives come very cheaply, even more cheaply than those of the poor foreigners gullible enough to lose their savings on their sterile concessions. Under colonial domination the aboriginals' fate is one of misery and helplessness.

Again, Des Journées entières contains an implied criticism of colonialist exploitation, though expressed in purely symbolic terms. Duras has little sympathy for people like the mother who adorn themselves with gold and luxuries extorted from the French colonies. The mother's psychological make-up is used to symbolise colonialism: not only does she dwell luridly on the vast sums she has raked in from her factory (now, it turns out, nationalised by the independent territory) but her insatiable appetite for sauerkraut, her vampiric love for her son, indeed her whole devouring nature stand for the manner in which she and her compatriots sapped away the life-force of their conquered lands. In her youth, the mother "avait eu des appétits de pouvoir et de puissance jamais satisfaits et qu'il lui restait cette démesure-là, ce grand appétit vengeur de toute nourriture." (story, p.28). Europe's shameful treatment of the Third World is further exposed in the more recent Le Vice-consul. The approach is different from that of Un Barrage: here

the writer describes the misery of India not through external commentary and long sociological descriptions but in short, vivid scenes and brief allusions. The Europeans are shown not so much as the exploiters, rather as people indifferent to the suffering around them, though it is significant that the drama is set in the period of colonial rule. Calcutta offers brutal contrasts between the hyper-civilised diplomats and the starving millions outside their compound. On the whole the diplomats show a horrifying callousness: "Mais des lépreux ou des chiens, est-ce tuer que de tuer des lépreux ou des chiens?" (p.94).

Oppression and domination, the lack of equality among men and peoples seem to obsess Duras. She regards inequality as one of the causes of strife and suffering, and particularly war. Hiroshima mon amour, with its emphasis on universal suffering, comes closer to the literature of commitment than any work since Un Barrage; yet Duras approaches the tragedy not as a Marxist but as a humanitarian, concerned with love and peace. The barbarity inflicted upon the people of Hiroshima was a crime against humanity, whatever the political colour of those responsible. However, at one point in the Frenchwoman's description, comes a remark suggesting that Duras sees the fundamental cause of such misery in the existing political structures of civilisation; hatred and turmoil result from inequality, national and racial, and from a hierarchical class-system. The woman is describing demonstrations against war:

La colère des villes entières qu'elles le veuillent ou non, contre l'inégalité posée en principe par certains peuples contre d'autres peuples, contre l'inégalité posée en principe par certaines races contre d'autres races, contre l'inégalité posée en principe par certaines classes contre d'autres classes. (pp.23-4)

A similar connection between war and oppression is evoked in the opening sequences of Une Aussi Longue Absence. During the parade on 14 July the massed armies, the tanks squelching on the roads, and the paratroopers suggest domination of a people by hostile forces. (The Nazi

occupation is evoked .) The recent play, Yes, peut-être (4), contains a bitter commentary on the oppression practised by the United States - Duras's particular "bête noire." She calls the piece a "rêve éveillé sur la fin de l'impérialisme américain." (5) The whole country has been reduced to rubble after a nuclear war - a kind of poetic justice for their own repressive wars, as they are described by one of two deranged women: "Allaient. Revenaient. S'installaient. Brûlaient. Tuaiement. Escaladaient. Allaient dans l'Asiaticos où c'est qu'on les avait jamais vus, disaient ils défendaient la mère patrie" (p.173). The reference is obviously to the Vietnam war - the invasion of Asia, the burning napalm-bombs, the escalating campaigns. Duras views them from the Communist standpoint, as imperialists and aggressors. Though they are ostensibly fighting to preserve their own country's freedom, the war (according to the playwright and the woman) is an attempt to forestall political change and the spread of Communism. It is an affront to human freedom.

Is there, then, any way of ending oppression and rescuing the Third World from disaster? Duras believes the only hope lies with Communism, achieved through a revolution that would transform both society and the very consciousness of each individual. She admits that such a situation demands a kind of suicide, and is quite impossible. (6) Yet in the works with which we are concerned here, she does provide a blue-print for her hopelessly idealistic revolution. It is important to note that in these works the writer is talking of political change, but nowhere does she mention the economic revolution or the seizure of the forces of production that must inevitably accompany it. All this she takes for granted, concentrating instead on revolution at the level of the individual.

What she understands by Communism she does not define, and even from a detailed study of her writing one does not gain a complete picture. The reason is not hard to find: she has only the vaguest idea herself. Duras points the way (as she envisages it) towards Communism, but the actual future situation is a mystery to her:

qu'est-ce que c'est que le communisme? Je ne sais pas. Personne ne le sait. On sait qu'il n'y a pas - enfin, personnellement, je sais qu'il n'y a pas d'autre voie que le communisme. Mais je ne sais pas où cette voie nous mène. (7)

Genuine Communism, as we shall see, includes the concepts of a "human community," "communal living and communal identity." Before discussing her own blue-print for what she would regard as true Communism, mention must be made of a play which reveals her attitude to Communism's failures and false courses in the past. For Duras Communism is not, or should not be, the kind of authoritarian and repressive régime that has become associated with Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Indeed her first political play takes as its theme the past course of Soviet Communism, which has obviously caused the writer deep personal anxiety. Un Homme est venu me voir (8) is about the aftermath of the Moscow treason-trials in the 1930's, which are here used to represent one of the basic conflicts of any committed Communist - between his individual needs and the progress of the revolution (as seen by the leaders). Duras had personally experienced expulsion for refusing to "toe the party line." Moreover the play was being completed at the time when French intellectual circles were shocked by the trial of Siniavsky and Daniel, who had been sentenced to labour-camps for publishing works judged to be critical of the Soviet Union.

Un Homme est venu me voir seems an attempt to settle the score with Communism, to show that it can be set on a new course, once the mistakes of the past have been freely admitted and rectified. It must be said that this is Duras's most difficult and at moments baffling play, because of its polemical form, the rambling discussions and the obscure allusions, and

because it is not easy to discover with whom the writer sides.

The drama is one long intellectual discussion between two men who have not seen each other for eighteen years. One of them is Steiner, who is visited by an unnamed individual who judged and condemned him at one of the Stalinist treason-trials, where false evidence was trumped up in order to denounce and purge "dangerous elements" from the Party. Since then Steiner has been living in exile (apparently in France). The visitor's purpose is only gradually clarified, though he seems to be probing and testing out Steiner with his questions.

Together they recall, indeed re-enact in the actual words they used, their previous rôles as if attempting to understand their experiences. Apparently the facts of the period are going to be revised, with Steiner's assistance: Steiner must confirm the visitor's lost identity. He finally turns out to be a man named Marker, a disgraced party-member presumed dead; this is only revealed when Steiner's wife (who for some reason never appears on-stage) invites them to dine together "pour une fois que vous n'êtes pas mort, ni vous ni lui" (p.285).

The two men stand for all those, in Russia and elsewhere, who were dragged along by a political situation which had gone out of control, and their subsequent fates are ironic: Steiner had fled from the prison-camps and for the past fifteen years has been living a comfortable and affluent "bourgeois" existence, though despite his two cars he still votes for the Party. (The word "Communist" is never used). The visitor, on the other hand, underwent his own denunciation later, in the continuing process of purging; though he is a nonentity he still sees the only viable future within the party. He insists that Steiner too has his role to play after years of apathy.

Both of them are depicted as tools in the process of history, sacrificed in the struggle for Communism. The visitor claims that he was merely a cog

in a vast bureaucratic machine, and can hold no personal view of the trials. He seeks excuses in the jargon of Communism, and in the way it had couched political manoeuvring in ideological terms; according to him, Steiner fell victim to "une fonction provisoire dont la nécessité n'est pas mise en question du moment que cette fonction a existé et que quelqu'un l'a assumée" (p.264). "Provisoire" refers to the necessity of "temporary" restraints on individual liberty, and the sacrifice of certain individuals, in order to further the revolution in the long-term. Steiner just happened to be the victim of an intermediary stage in the process of Communism.

The play is constructed around an attempt to reassess and correct such evils, and the crimes committed against the revolutionary spirit, or as the visitor puts it, "le tort fait à l'idée révolutionnaire" (p.277). He is there to talk over the way "History" is to be rewritten, reinstating the condemned as heroes. He describes the Party's aims: "embarquer ces années-là dans l'Histoire" (p.279), that is, make them fit into the historical process. (The reference is to "Historical Materialism"; the events are to be seen as part of the progress of mankind towards the rule of the proletariat).

Furthermore the exercise must provoke as little emotional response as possible; there must be no hatred, remorse, nor pity, and no seeking of revenge. The events are simply to be relegated to their place in the past so that men can forget them. One sees how closely this ties up with the latest novels - men must forget in order to start afresh; their sights must be directed towards the future and the progress towards Communism. "L'idée" - the revolutionary ideal - has thankfully survived all the battering it suffered in men's hands (particularly in cases like the sacrifice of individuals in their thousands under Stalin):

VISITEUR: [ ... ] Ayant traversé toutes ces épreuves, l'idée est cependant là, toujours, intacte. (Exaltation théâtrale). Ni plus ni moins elle-même que si nous n'étions pas nés. Au-dessus de toutes les mêlées qu'elle provoque, vierge, elle se propose comme au premier jour de son existence. (p.267)

Steiner himself has never doubted that Marxism was the only way of achieving ideals: "Il n'existe pas d'autre chemin que celui-là. Même si nous ne savons pas où il mène" (p.272). One is reminded of Duras's words above (note 7). Hence the play does not define or discuss what exactly "l'idée" is. The play ends with the situation unresolved - nothing suggests that Steiner is prepared to commit himself once more, and in the last moments the pair seem indifferent to the encouraging words of Steiner's wife that they should sit together at dinner, reconciled.

The two men's lives have been wrecked and their hopes dashed by a barbaric process that in the end brought no benefits. (This is the only pathetic element in a cold and philosophical piece). Yet Duras insists that bitterness and vengeance are pointless; men must look to the future, and take for granted that Communism has gone tragically wrong in the past.

Duras's two most recent novels are metaphors of her ideal revolution that will open the way to true Communism. It is possible to read Détruire dit-elle (9) without having the slightest inkling that it is a political novel; indeed without the aid of the prologue to the film few people would be aware that Duras has distilled political ideas into pure symbol. The questions and answers preceding the film provide the clue; Duras gives the replies:

- C'est un film politique?
- Profondément, oui.
- C'est un film où il n'est jamais question de politique?
- Jamais. Non. ....
  
- Qu'est-ce que vous entendez par destruction capitale?
- La destruction de l'être personnel.
- Par opposition à quoi?
- À l'inconnu. Que sera le monde communiste. De demain. (10)

The mysterious, ritualised drama is, at its deepest level, an allegory of the

future as Duras foresees it. "Destruction" is the prelude to transcendence, not only in a personal but in a Marxist context: the destruction of the individual must precede the destruction of capitalist society. What Duras is implying in fact is that capitalist society is so thoroughly corrupting, distorting the very consciousness of the individual, that he too must be torn apart. She regards men as determined from birth by the conditions, values and assumptions of present industrial society; they are too far corrupted to be capable of gradual change, and so must be purified.

One sees how Duras's view of madness eventually offered a solution to the problem of liberating not only the individual, but the whole of mankind. Men must forget, and become "mad." Revolution can only occur when they eradicate the beliefs with which they have been indoctrinated, and hence their very identity. Duras is envisaging nothing less than the complete rebirth of man, stripped of the ties of capitalist civilisation and of all inheritance from the past. This is the stage which both Stein and Max Thor are attaining; words like "rien" have therefore a special significance for them:

[Max] -- Ma femme doit venir me chercher dans quelques jours. Nous partons en vacances. [...]  
-- Tiens, je n'imaginai pas cela.  
-- Quoi d'autre imaginiez-vous?  
-- Rien. Vous comprenez? Je n'imaginai rien. (p.18)

By the end they are reaching the level of non-thought and "ignorance," unburdening themselves of all past knowledge. One of the most important phrases in the film had not occurred to the writer at the time of the novel. Max Thor, talking to Elisabeth of the novel she never opens, advises her: "Il faut jeter les livres." It is a surprising attitude for a distinguished member of the literary world, and one which only recently became part of her political creed. Yet she sees ignorance of everything, literature included, as the sole means of bringing people truly together. As the relationships in Détruire dit-elle progress, the differences between Stein and Max Thor

become less marked, until they speak identically, as we have seen earlier.

The gigantic force, in the form of thunderous musical chords (the effect was achieved in the film by slamming down the lid of a grand piano) that approaches at the end, represents revolution. How near that revolution may be, is a very debatable point, and Duras herself admits that she is "en pleine utopie." (11) The absolute scepticism she advocates has of course led successfully in the past to a complete restructuring of human knowledge, and arguably Duras is calling for a questioning of knowledge similar to that of Descartes. The Cartesian rejection of all unverifiable knowledge, of whatever has distorted and confused the mind, is as ruthless as the self-willed ignorance Duras posits. Yet not only did he accept the political status quo, but his purpose was diametrically opposed. Descartes aimed to wipe out the superstructure of knowledge in order to discover elementary objective truths on which to rebuild knowledge. Duras insists that men must annihilate knowledge completely. Furthermore, the "natural light of reason" is precisely what the writer wishes to abandon in favour of insanity.

Duras dramatised this state of complete ignorance-cum-insanity in the curious one-acter, Yes, peut-être, the only work specifically set in the distant future when her dreams might be realisable. It is set in a vast no-man's land, "uniformément beige" where two women meet and hold an aimless conversation. Confused and utterly lonely, they are among the survivors of a war that has devastated a continent perhaps a hundred years from now. The desert around them was once New York. One of them drags behind her a strange "object" - an inert soldier surviving from the last great battle. Inscribed on his tattered uniform are the words "Honneur" on his chest and "Patrie" across the behind, as well as "God," the Stars and Stripes, and the Légion d'Honneur; he represents the collapse of all such established values, the final downfall of war, patriotism, and capitalism. The women, A and B, have an innocence and gaiety that are matched by their complete lack

of intelligence and memory. They are the last rejects of a society that has torn itself apart.

If Un Homme est venu me voir settles Duras's score with Moscow, in Yes, peut-être she states her views on the future of America and its relations with the rest of the world:

La pièce se passe sur une terre délivrée. Si je devais la dédier, ce serait aux populations civiles américaines. Les États-Unis sont le pays le plus provincial du monde. Un pays coupé de tout [...] Le plus grand pays du monde mais provincial. De ce point de vue, Cuba est vraiment le plus grand pays du monde. On va vers une Internationale. Tous les pays tendent vers une sorte d'Internationale. Sauf les États-Unis. (12)

Presumably she means by this that the United States are cut off from the movements towards international socialism. Elsewhere the revolutionary struggle towards Communism is growing, and nations are progressing towards proletarian rule. (A somewhat simplistic view when one thinks of the repressive right-wing régimes in countries like Greece or Portugal). The important point is that the piece again demonstrates the need for a revolution in both society and the individual consciousness. "Destruction" must precede the International.

Mentally the two women have been destroyed; they have become "mad." Their weird, clipped sentences echo the void within themselves and in their universe. Communication has slipped back to a more primitive level: "Yes" is the most frequent word in their conversation, their language is on the whole simple and naive. Like Claire Lannes they have unlearned virtually everything, and make unconscious puns as their minds confuse expressions from the previous civilisation: "Of au plat" (p.161); "Ils sont vingt coeurs de désert" (p.165). They also mix up facts and events from the past ("Dans les fusées y a des paroles," p.171) and "avant" is the only word they know for the hazy circumstances before the nuclear holocaust.

Without identity they are free to become whoever they like. The

boundaries between people have been eradicated, as their language testifies - "je" and "vous" no longer exist in their vocabulary; A recites the new conjugations of verbs, containing "on," "tu," "nous." In such a situation men have a unique opportunity to begin again from square one:

B, (affirme en doutant): On apprend quand même par ici quand même.

A: Commence, yes.

B: Ici c'est toujours nothing alors ici?

A, (doute): Peut-être, yes.

(Elles regardent le désert et en parlent en lieu et place d'elles-mêmes. Leur existence leur apparaît certes mais comme une notion intimidante, presque inconvenante, vague. (p.172)

They are free to regain knowledge untainted by prejudices and start rebuilding (Duras would maintain) a truly Communist society. B learns the new "materialist Bible" that will transmit the rediscovered knowledge to posterity and point the way "pour les enfants plus tard" (p.182). In this play at least there is the suggestion that men will not remain forever in total ignorance.

Yes, peut-être is on reflection an unconvincing play, not only because of Duras's questionable hypothesis as regards the purifying power of amnesia, but also because the future she foresees is not a thrilling prospect. Even if human beings have a chance to unite on a fundamental level after being liberated from their intellectual prejudices and the strait-jacket of a capitalist system, is the cost not too great? Millions have been killed in the process of destruction before the play opens. There is no sign that for generations to come any kind of civilisation can be reconstructed; the existence of A and B will be almost totally sterile. It is more comforting to regard the piece as a metaphor, a physical representation of what destruction implies, or as a timely warning of what awaits the world inevitably - unless Capitalist Man (and particularly the United States species) can reform himself from within.

The fullest exposé to date of Duras's political outlook is to be found in Abahn Sabana David (13), in which she expresses her views on the present nature of Communism and attempts moreover to dramatise a pre-revolutionary situation. This one short volume is so crammed with allusions that only a very detailed analysis can do justice to Duras's thought. One recognises the same rarefied atmosphere, the opaqueness, the uneventful narrative that distinguished Détruire dit-elle.

The setting is an empty house, outside the town of Stadt in an unnamed state. Around it stretch the icy "plaine des morts" and a dark, sinister park and forest. It is dusk as David and Sabana come to the house to guard its occupant, a Jew named Abahn; at dawn the leader of the "Party" will arrive to kill him. Everyone - both Gringo and "les marchands" who apparently control the town - is afraid of Jews.

Into the house comes another Jew, also named Abahn, who declares himself the enemy of Gringo, among others. He will dominate the situation, probing the others with questions, making them aware of their positions and potentialities as individuals. The ensuing narrative is almost completely taken up by their discussion of the fate of the world and the suffering around them. Both Sabana and David are overcome at times by intense emotion, which explodes in cries of anguish. Sabana, Abahn (the second is always designated by name) and the Jew shift nervously about, taking up new positions relative to each other, while David sleeps, a prey to dreams.

Outside, the Jew's dogs howl in the gloomy park. Voices and cries, the reports of guns shatter the silence and fill the night with terror. Desiring to own the dogs, David had allowed himself to become Gringo's tool, collecting evidence on the Jew. Much of the night David remains asleep, indifferent to the Jew's pleas to awaken and listen to his advice. Apparently the Jew had sown the seeds of revolt in Soviet concen-

tration camps. (This is the nearest that events come to a clear explanation in contemporary terms).

Eventually David does awaken, as if to take control of his life. With the arrival of Gringo, he is forced to act. The Jew urges him to escape: "par tous les moyens essaye de vivre" (p.136). David openly defies Gringo, and as Gringo's totalitarian jargon is met by David and Abahn's joyful laughter, he is forced to depart.

Sabana (David's mistress/wife) will stay with the Jews. Jeanne (David's other wife) briefly comes to the door, saying she is now tied to Gringo. The story ends as the Jew imagines Jeanne walking off: will he now turn his attention to her?

Because the narrative is deliberately oblique and the dialogue frequently elusive, words like "Communisme," "souffrance," "rien" must suffice to suggest what is unstated. In itself, the "récit" is arguably not a self-sufficient work of art, since one is obliged to seek supplementary explanations outside the text. Interpretations must hinge on the identity of the protagonists and their value as symbols. In the first pages one might take the narrative as an allegory of Nazi Germany - the name "Staadt," the references to anti-Semitism and gas-chambers. This is not what is intended (it was other Jews who went to the gas-chambers, Abahn remarks). As Sabana realises, all those not aligned with the authorities are "Jews": "On appelle juifs les autres, ici?" (p.20). "Jew" is a connotative word, representing here not that particular ethnic group, but a vast number across the globe known simply as "les autres." It turns out that the entire surface of the earth is one series of "Judaeas." All the world, in other words, is like Jewry - persecuted, oppressed, trapped in the clutches of the powerful "Gringos" and "marchands." The important point is that the word Jew, for Duras, symbolises a group of people stretching right across mankind. The prologue to the film of Détruire dit-elle highlights the

word's true significance; the characters are, as here, of German-Jewish extraction:

-- Pourquoi juif allemand?

-- Il faut entendre: nous sommes tous des juifs allemands, nous sommes tous des étrangers. C'est un mot d'ordre de Mai. Nous sommes tous des étrangers à votre État, à votre société, à vos combines. (14)

"Jew" stands for all those who have opted out of society, who have discarded its values and are attempting to subvert it. Such is the shadowy figure whom Sabana and David have come to guard; such also is the other Abahn who can comment fully on the Jew's position because he shares it.

Wandering the lands to preach to the masses, the Jew is a cross between the Saviour and Karl Marx, weeping at the fate of others, talking of freedom and the future. In him the specifically political significance is crystallised: like Marx, he has studied in various capitals and has been a leader in the class-struggle, having collected dossiers on the abominable working-conditions of the men of Stadt as well as the injustice of the wage-structures imposed by "la Société Immobilière" (a heterogeneous industrial consortium involving French, German and American capitalism - again, Duras has universalised the situation).

In short, the Jew is a subversive revolutionary, though of a highly unusual type. His radicalism goes far deeper than what passes for Communism. Gringo, leader of "le Parti" - and the Communist Party is suggested - not only persecutes and kills all subversives and those who do not follow the party-line, but has deliberately compromised with "les marchands," the capitalist factory-owners, Big Business. He has come to terms with the status quo. Gringo and his party are representative, for Duras, of the debased and compromised state of Communism in much of the world. He is as repressive as some leaders in the Soviet bloc, but more important is his resemblance to the Parties of the West, not least of

Duras's own country. The French Communist Party no longer aims at seizing control through revolution, but within the democratic system.

Against this watered-down form of Communism Duras sets, in the figure of the Jew, the values and political stance that are her own.

The Jew is what Duras might term a true Communist:

- Avant, le juif était très sûr, reprend Abahn.
- De quoi?
- Il était du Parti de Gringo.
- Communiste.
- Non, du Parti de Gringo.
- [ Sabana ] fait le même effort qu'Abahn.
- Et maintenant, il est quoi?
- S'il est quelque chose, communiste. (p.85)

It is no longer the Party-leader who is feared by the industrialists. Their common enemies are the extreme left-wingers who hold firm to the principle of total revolution and refuse to compromise. In France these are the student revolutionaries and factions such as the Maoists. Like the Jews in this story, they are a permanent danger both to right-wingers and to moderate Communists, since they aim at the complete overthrow of society. It is important to note that the Jew sees man's future not as one of toil, but hopefully of leisure; his conception of life revolves around the rejection of work: "Il avait envie de vivre sans travailler au milieu de la banlieue ouvrière de Stadt" (p.92).

Yet the Jew is prey to despair and uncertainty, for the revolution is long in coming. "Mille ans," he makes David repeat in his sleep (p.53), and the reference may be to that millenium which according to Communist thinking, might have to pass before the attainment of true Communism. The Jew has lost all hope that Communism will ever be attained through patience: "C'est un communiste qui croit que le communisme est impossible - [ Abahn ] ajoute - Gringo croit que oui? [ ... ] Nous avons cru à l'attente rationnelle, interminable. Maintenant nous croyons qu'elle est inutile" (pp.94-5). Passive acceptance is useless.

It is in the methods of achieving Communism that the two Jews (and

Duras) part company with conventional Marxists: once again, the writer pins her hopes on the transformation not only of society but of the individual through self-immolation and a form of madness. Certainly the Jews are revolutionaries in the sense that they are determined to undermine society; they are part of a great number arriving from all corners of the globe, who seek to rouse the population, create turmoil and urge others to overthrow civilisation. Yet the Jews are not merely nihilists or catalysts of social revolution. Their aim is to attack the very consciousness of each individual:

- Vous venez pour briser l'unité? demande David. [...]
- Oui.
- Diviser? Semer le trouble dans l'unité?
- Oui, dit le juif.
- Semer le doute dans les esprits?
- Oui.
- Pour arriver où?
- Personne ne sait, dit le juif. (p.104)

The Jew is an agent of destruction, desiring even to kill David - out of love; and his advice to David at the end of the novel is to go out into the world and do likewise: "Parle à tous. Sans méfiance. Regarde bien autour de toi: détruis" (p.136). This destruction, this murdering is of course at the level of knowledge and experience, not physical death. The Jew had urged others to discard knowledge, to believe nothing, not even what the Jews tell them. He shares the writer's suspicion of the dangers of knowledge, its capacity to pervert and indoctrinate the mind, particularly as it is disseminated by contemporary society.

The Jew is one more of Duras's heroes to be losing all memory, becoming blind and deaf. He and Abahn are already virtually identical, moreover (this is why they are given the same name). Sabana too has no knowledge of her background. All are approaching a void, the complete absence of knowledge and personality that opens the way to communal identity. They can come close to each other in an entirely new fashion. This is the crux of the message, and it is indicated in the title of the

book. True Communism means community. Men need to create a lasting inter-personal relationship, that is, one in which they can share themselves with others.

Suggesting that Sabana comes from "Auschstaadt", the Jew attempts to involve both her and David in a mass-identity. Auschstaadt embraces the whole universe; it is

-- Partout, dit Abahn, comme Gringo. Comme le juif. Comme David.  
[...] Nous sommes tous de la ville d'Auschstaadt. (p.102)

Everything, in their eyes, is amalgamated into one vast totality. Such a vision of the world - in which there are no distinctions between individuals or objects - sets apart those who share it in a form of madness, as we have already seen. Sabana, in conjunction with the two Abahns, lets her imagination run riot when talking of the "forest": they see it as something all-embracing, within and outside them. It is an example of the way in which their type of madness expands the mind and dissolves the boundaries between illusion and reality; everything is fused, opposites cohere.

Madness is expressed finally in joyous laughter. Once David has decided to follow the Jew, he is convulsed with liberating mirth, which spreads to Abahn. Gringo, at the door, tries to lure David back into the Party fold:

-- Je vais parler au nom de notre grand Parti. Je ferai mon devoir.  
Le rire repart, fou, il est irrépressible, enfantin, il se mêle aux hurlements des chiens, il frappe le discours, l'ordre, le sens, de sa lumière. Il est un rire de joie. (p.144)

The words are carefully chosen - their laughter is hysteria, madness, and also childlike (one remembers Duras's remarks about the future belonging to children); it breaks down "l'ordre," everyday normality, and "le sens," the antithesis of madness.

Gringo's formulae of totalitarian socialism, a barrage of disjointed clichés, are of no avail. He uses the ploys - propaganda, character-

destruction, and blind ideology - which have come to be the familiar tools of more than one Communist régime, only to be driven off by their gusts of laughter.

Under the two Jews' influence both Sabana and David have achieved a new awareness of their possibilities; at first they exemplified individuals living under Communism and totalitarianism, acquiescent and deformed by their world. Sabana will transfer her love from David onto the Jew, and continue living with him. David had been corrupted by the materialistic values of the state, betraying the Jew in order to possess his dogs. "Ni juif ni chien," he had been brutalised into carrying on a meaningless job; his hands are encrusted with cement, and he has no idea why he works at all. He is Apathetic Man, dulled and indifferent to advice. With Gringo's arrival he is forced to a decision, and revolts. In the future, as he eagerly agrees with the Jew, "nous essayerons."

The question remains as to what form their new society will take, and no answer is forthcoming. Hopefully they will achieve Communism, but no more than the authoress can they predict what that means. One thing is essential: "Il faudra quand même essayer de ne pas le construire" (p.103). There must be constant flux, society must be capable of change and must not stratify into accepted patterns, that is it must not be governed by dogma or formulae. Such dangers have devastating consequences - witness the unbridled cruelty and cynicism of the Gringos. The Jews' ideal "liberté" can be preserved only if it never becomes rigid. The position is similar to total anarchy - in its purest sense of absence of laws and government.

The "récit" appears to end on a note of hope: men can be roused to follow the Jews' example. Yet the story is merely a parable, and perhaps only in such form could such an idealistic vision be represented.

Such is Duras's present political stance. In fact she has moved far away from the political philosophers she most admires. She has remarked that conventional Marxism takes no account of the individual personality; nor does it advocate a revolution of the mind: "Le marxisme a une très grosse lacune. Il s'arrête à la vie intérieure. C'est un arrêt radical, affreux." (15) In other words, Duras is beginning where Marxism leaves off. She is convinced that mass movements which are not paralleled by a reform of each human being, cannot achieve permanent change. Her outlook is also fundamentally at odds with the thought of the current Communist cult-hero and (ironically) a man whom Duras warmly admires - Mao-Tse-Tung. Although the Chinese leader also talks of "destruction" as the essence of revolution, this involves, according to him, the very thing Duras rejects: reason. By "destruction" he means an intellectual critique of the status quo; reasoned argument, as in the recent cultural revolution, must prevail. (16)

Leaving aside her departure from orthodox Communist ideology, one is forced to conclude that Duras's vision is absurdly Utopian. She admits so herself. In the first place, even if men could abandon knowledge and return to a kind of void, will they not simply stagnate and remain unproductive non-entities? And is there not a danger that, in the process, they will lose all political impetus? Secondly, it is quite inconceivable that men will achieve even that state of non-being; identity and knowledge are not so easily rejected. In the final analysis Duras is not optimistic: "Quel autre moyen avez-vous de rejoindre le reste de l'humanité? Le point zéro, quel autre moyen avez-vous de le rejoindre?" (17)

If this is the only way to bring men closer together, then her ideal revolution and true Communism are a very long way off. Yet perhaps the questioning of values, the radicalism of May 1968 which so excited Duras, might still provide a feasible example of the way men can learn to look

at their world in an entirely new fashion.

NOTES

- (1) J. Rivette/J. Narboni, p.51.
- (2) L. Langley.
- (3) Cf. Introduction.
- (4) In Théâtre II.
- (5) Claude Cézan, "Marguerite Duras se met en scène," Les Nouvelles Littéraires, 45e année, no.2104 (28 déc., 1967), p.18.
- (6) J.-M. Fossey, p.20.
- (7) J. Rivette/J. Narboni, p.51.
- (8) In Théâtre II.
- (9) Mme Duras wrote in a letter to me that Détruire dit-elle is her most important book. This is certainly because it provides the blue-print, however unrealisable, for her ideal revolution.
- (10) J. Rivette/J. Narboni, p.51.

Duras's views echo those of Dada and the Surrealists. Dada was also a rebellion against intelligence, language and society, and sought the complete disintegration of the mind, in the hope of uncovering the authentic resources in mankind untarnished by social organisation. In the Manifeste Dada 1918, Tristan Tzara proclaims the liberation of men through anarchical destruction:

Je détruis les tiroirs du cerveau et ceux de l'organisation sociale: démoraliser partout et jeter la main du ciel en enfer, les yeux de l'enfer au ciel, rétablir la roue féconde d'un cirque universel dans les puissances réelles et la fantaisie de chaque individu. (Lampisteries, précédées des sept manifestes dada, Pauvert, Paris, 1968, p.27)

Yet whereas Dada is advocating the rediscovery of what is individual and unique in each person, Duras advocates non-identity.

- (11) J. Rivette/J. Narboni, p.51.
- (12) Émile Copfermann, "Avant-première: 2 pièces de Marguerite Duras au Théâtre Gramont," Les Lettres françaises, no.1215, 3 janvier 1968, p.22.
- (13) Gallimard, Paris, 1970. Filmed as Jaune le soleil, 1971.
- (14) J. Rivette/J. Narboni, p.51.

Similar rallying-slogans are commonly shouted in contemporary demonstrations. cf. "Nous sommes un groupuscule," chanted by thousands of students on 7 May 1968, as they stormed to the Arc de Triomphe. Duras is referring to that shouted when Daniel Cohn-Bendit (a German Jew) was deported from France after his activities during "les événements."

Abahn, Sabana, and David are all Jewish names (as opposed to Gringo and Jeanne) and the idea of Jewish persecution is reinforced by Abahn's remark: "Nous sommes tous de la ville d'Auschstaadt" (p.102), undoubtedly suggestive of Auschwitz.

(15) J. Piatier.

The idea that Marxism has to be complemented by a revolution in the consciousness is put forward by the Surrealists, who in the 'thirties came to regard their group as a cultural movement allied to revolution. Breton sums up their outlook in his slogan: "'Transformer le monde,' a dit Marx; 'changer la vie,' a dit Rimbaud: ces deux mots d'ordre pour nous n'en font qu'un." (Discours d'André Breton au Congrès des écrivains pour la défense de la culture (1935)), in Maurice Nadeau, Histoire du surréalisme, Seuil, Paris, 1964, p.422.

(16) "Pas de construction sans destruction. La destruction, c'est la critique, c'est la révolution. Pour la destruction, il faut le raisonnement, et celui-ci signifie la construction."

Mao-Tsé-Toung, Oeuvres (Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 1960) t.IV, p.394.

(17) J. Rivette/J. Narboni, p.51.

Chapter 9.

OTHER THEMES

a. PARENT AND CHILD

A study of Duras's outlook would be incomplete without some discussion of two themes which, though minor, recur consistently in her earlier work. The first is the central theme in Des Journées entières dans les arbres and M. Andesmas, and forms a kind of leitmotif in several other stories: the warm love, the close but intangible bond uniting a mother and her child (only in the case of M. Andesmas is a father involved).

In those tales of transient passion - Tarquinia, Moderato Cantabile, and Dix heures et demie - a child plays a vital rôle. Sara, Anne Desbaresdes and Maria are each irrevocably attached to the son or daughter who lingers on the sidelines of the emotional drama. The strength of the heroines' affection is revealed succinctly in a chance remark, or a sudden embrace:

[Anne Desbaresdes] le prit par les épaules, le retint comme il essayait de se dégager pour courir en avant.

-- Tu grandis, toi, ah, comme tu grandis, comme c'est bien.  
(Moderato Cantabile, p.66)

Descriptions of children playing contentedly in the sunshine, or poignant moments when a few words pass between mother and child, are woven into the narrative like a leitmotif.

The child is always close at hand, yet quite unaware of the emotional crisis. In these three novels the children represent as it were the absolute of normality, of the every-day, as opposed to the absolute passion to which their sensual mothers are drawn. With their innocence and gaiety they are totally at home in the world, and hence provide the link between that world with its bourgeois conformity and the world of romance. If Sara quickly renounces her amatory adventure

for her previous banal existence, it is not only because she can rescue something of her marriage, but because she cherishes the creature she has brought into the world: "depuis la minute où il est né je vis dans la folie" (Tarquinia, p.34). He helps to draw her back to reality, just as Anne Desbaresdes's son acts as a magnet in attracting her back to her rambling, empty home. Until the final chapters of Moderato Cantabile, he is never absent from the narrative, playing by the harbour in front of the café or interrupting the urgent conversations of Anne and Chauvin. The power of her love - seen in her wonderment over his refusal to learn his piano-lessons, - urges her back into the fold of marriage.

More important, children offer permanence and continuity when all else is in flux. Always maternal love is seen as strong, unchangeable, the antithesis of the unpredictable emotions that draw men and women together, and women can be certain that their children will return their affections in kind. In her solitary existence with a man she may never have loved, Anne Desbaresdes's son is her sole reason for living. Similarly, Sara's love for her child has a warmth and permanence that are lacking in her relations with her husband. And when the life of Maria (Dix heures et demie) has fallen apart she is dependent on Judith for survival. She calls her daughter, "Ma vie" (p.44), and indeed her daughter is her only link with the world. When marital love has grown stale and adulterous passion is futile, the affection between Maria and Judith is simple, pure, and above all unshakeable.

Repeatedly maternal love provides an anchor in existence for the lonely and depressed, for those who would otherwise be consumed with despair on account of their condition in life. It can thus become the very "raison d'être" of an individual. The obsessional neurosis of the colossal mother in Un Barrage is a direct result of her ardent love for her offspring. Her mind is fixated on one futile plan after another and

to achieve her ends she seems to trample ruthlessly on her children's feelings. At times Suzanne appears no more than a piece of property to be traded for the wealth of the gawky and apathetic M. Jo, whom she finds merely repulsive; she also bears the brunt of the mother's frustrated rage. Yet at bottom her mother's epic struggles have been as much aimed at securing a brighter future for her children as for herself. However inappropriate and ill-judged her actions, she acts in the belief that she is ensuring their happiness. What seems to be near-madness is in fact the manifestation of her total devotion. In her children's favour she has sacrificed all other happiness with a man of her own. In a final letter to her enemies, the authorities, she writes:

Je vous ai tout donné ce matin-là, tout, comme si je vous apportais mon propre corps en sacrifice, comme si de mon corps sacrifié il allait fleurir tout un avenir de bonheur pour mes enfants. (pp.250-51)

In retrospect one realises that she has laid down her life for her children, and her all-consuming love assumes both pathos and dignity.

Parental love is not always so selfless; in fact Duras regards it as an ambiguous emotion, demonstrating not only how such devotion can completely dominate the personality but the amount of egocentricity, of self-love, which may be contained in it. Individuals may need to keep a hold on existence by controlling another human being as if he were their personal possession. Duras describes such obsessive and potentially dangerous affection in her first novel. Mme Grand-Taneran (Les Impudents) carries maternal love far beyond the bounds of rationality. She displays a strange and dangerous affection towards the one member of the family who least merits her attentions. At forty, her son Jacques is a cross between an over-grown schoolboy and a lascivious waster; despite his cruelty towards the rest of the family, his mother included, she pours out on him an unceasing love, while she treats the innocent Maud with contempt. Although her love is illogical, she can do nothing to quell it and must go to any

lengths to ensure that it is reciprocated. There is more than a touch of selfishness in Mme Grand-Taneran's conduct, and she can be coldly calculating. She has indulged her spoilt and lazy son, as he grew deeper in debt, for the sole purpose of keeping him within her clutches: "Elle ne lui donnait jamais trop d'argent d'un coup pour qu'il n'eût pas l'impression de la mener à sa guise, mais toujours assez cependant, pour qu'il pût tenir quant à l'essentiel, et pour qu'il revînt" (p.10).

However, her over-indulgence has backfired, and at bottom she is the exploited one. She has reached the stage where she cannot resist indulging her misplaced love. In truth she is a tool in her son's hands, and the agony she undergoes stems directly from her unwillingness to call a halt to the spendthrift's excesses. She will hear nothing of the sheer rottenness of Jacques's nature, since she would be denied any reason to keep him by her for her own satisfaction: "C'est parce qu'elle croyait en son fils qu'elle vivait dans un songe inaccessible à aucun démenti de la réalité" (pp.218-9). It is open to question how far she really is blind, and how far she is forcing herself to pervert reality, to live in a dream-state, rather than admit what is glaringly obvious to others. Such devotion could be forgiven if it did not harm the bystanders. Love to that point is folly - and a menace.

Mme Grand-Taneran's love has the force and illogicality of an irresistible passion, and in this she foreshadows the old lady in Des Journées entières dans les arbres (1), a story whose central theme is the strength and perpetuity of maternal love. The plot is simple: an elderly woman has returned to Paris from the other side of the world, to visit the only one of her children she has ever truly loved. On the threshold of middle-age, Jacques is an idle mediocrity, a gigolo, but is literally worshipped by his mother. Her doting fondness, combined with her neurotic mannerisms and senility, quickly drive Jacques from her. An embarrassing

scene in a night-club where he works is the culmination of a day of torment, and realising he cannot stand her presence she decides to leave, though not before she has parted with considerable sums of money.

The mother towers over the narrative. Like all such larger-than-life creatures she is at once fascinating and repulsive, arousing our compassion and exasperation. From the obsessive, meddlesome woman of the story, Duras enlarges her on stage into a neurotic monster. Here the mother is a compulsive chatterbox, liable to burst into a rambling, incoherent monologue about whatever enters her head but particularly about her material possessions - her son included. She is fixated on the man whom she has indulged all his life to the point of madness. Her reasons are not above reproach: she has made him her personal possession, and is desperate to convince him that he is still in her clutches, emphasising her dominance in her fawning terms of affection - "fils," "mon petit." Although she tries to lure him back to the colonies with her to make his fortune, at heart she wants to be reassured that he has never changed from the indolent, useless child she made him through lack of discipline. His very idleness ensures that he is dependent upon her for financial support and the good things in life, and most of all that he will forever be her creation.

The mother is not an attractive woman - grasping, self-centred - but there are attenuating reasons for her possessiveness: she acts out of instinct, out of a need to cling to an anchor in life. Again, a child provides an individual's "raison d'être," and very identity: "Mon nom même, personne ne le prononce plus ... Je n'ai que toi" (play, p.124). The mother is a creature of passion, with a physical lust for life. Hence her need for the security of money and material luxuries like the seventeen pieces of jewellery weighing down her arms and hands. Although we can laugh at such a Molièresque detail, her greed has its sinister side and

is motivated by the same needs as her love for her son: "De l'or de ses cheveux, je suis passée a celui-ci" (play, p.89). Wealth, like the possession of her son, reassures her that she is holding on to life. Her insatiable appetite is yet another manifestation of her lusts. She is not so much a doting mother as a vampire sucking away her child's life.

For most of the play there is little to suggest that she is motivated by anything finer than calculating selfishness, or a need to keep her plaything in her hands. Duras underlines the irony of such a situation, for her selfishness is ultimately destructive. Not only has her attitude destroyed Jacques's moral fibre, but his lack of will-power has twice been the cause of her own ruin. Though Jacques occasionally displays a genuine tenderness towards his mother, he cannot resist exploiting her for every penny she is worth. As with Mme Grand-Taneran, her egocentricity backfires. Yet the mother is a considerably more tragic figure than her predecessor in Les Impudents, since she is perfectly aware of her son's callousness and must bear the responsibility for it.

What gives both story and play their extraordinary subtlety is the manner in which the hitherto grotesque creature is finally revealed in a true and more flattering light. The squalid shell is peeled away and a warm-hearted woman emerges. Duras reserves for the last moments of the play two capital speeches which suddenly reveal the depth and sincerity of a love that has survived years of sorrow and disappointment. The mother proclaims that even now, far from being a nonentity, her gambling, amoral son is of a far nobler stature than those ensconced in bourgeois conformity. Her words are those of any mother who cannot stop loving a wayward son and would defend him to the death; the tragedy is that she is unable to communicate the intensity of her feelings:

LA MÈRE: [ ... ] Je ne souffre que d'une seule chose, un détail, ce n'est rien, ne vous inquiétez pas... C'est que cette fierté que j'ai de lui, je suis seule au monde a l'éprouver, que je ne peux la partager avec personne, même pas avec vous, et que je vais mourir,

et que personne, après moi, ne l'éprouvera plus... C'est la seule chose au monde qui me fasse un peu mal à penser, c'est tout... (play, p.150)

The final impression is one of pathos and calm regret. The mother stands declaiming her faith, no longer a noisy neurotic but a solitary and frail old woman, unable to talk of the love that will disappear along with her. For her "fierté" is nothing else than the great love that has dominated her life, and she knows that with the loss of the son she adores, her existence has effectively drawn to an end.

M. Andesmas is also the study of parental love that has reached the level of an obsession. The old man has allowed his daughter to become the sole reason for his existence; without her he is nothing. Duras makes the narrative form delineate his state of mind without external commentary. The brief story is largely comprised of his private thoughts during the hours he is left alone, and Valérie is constantly on his mind: he imagines her light-heartedness and youthful charm, the times she would dance around the house, her moments of innocence. Once again, love is virtually indistinguishable from self-love. M. Andesmas finds gratification in recalling how he has always given into her every whim, as if in doing so he had bound her ever closer to him. Everything else is coloured by his obsession, and only interests him insofar as he can relate it to his daughter. Michel Arc's child attracts him because of her likeness to Valérie, and as she whistles a popular song that drifts up from the village dance, his imagination is already at work:

Elle sifflait, avec une application forcée, mal. La forêt en est transpercée, et le coeur de l'auditeur, mais l'enfant ne s'entend pas. Valérie siffle dans les couloirs, en dehors des heures de sieste de son père, d'admirable façon. Où as-tu appris, ma petite Valérie, à siffler si bien? Elle ne sait pas le dire. (p.30)

The totality of his love has narrowed his outlook.

M. Andesmas's affection has decidedly sexual and incestuous overtones; it began as a kind of transference of the intense love he bore his wife

before her death. One can see the element of perversion quite clearly when he tries to transfer his feelings, for the last time in his life, onto a new person - in this case, Michel Arc's daughter:

Il désira ce jour-là, une dernière fois, changer ses sentiments en faveur de cette enfant qui allait à l'étang avec une force aussi brutale, aussi impérieuse, dit-il, que celle qu'il avait mise, jadis, à désirer - de passion mortelle - une certaine femme. (p.36)

There can be little doubt that that woman was his wife.

The sheer passion of M. Andesmas's love blinds him to reality. As the circumstances of his past life are pieced together, Valérie does not emerge as a totally sympathetic person. There are suggestions that she does not return anything like the powerful affection he bestows upon her, and she has a streak of callousness, displayed in her desire to live on her own at precisely the time when her feeble father needs close attention. Yet the old man's infatuation prevents him seeing that his daughter is an inconsiderate and spoilt young woman.

On this particular afternoon M. Andesmas makes a startling new discovery, which he calls "l'intelligence de l'amour de son enfant" (p.41). He realises he is quite incapable of quelling his love, and at the same time that he will suffer the loss of the one person to whom he is irrevocably attached. The discovery is painful, and it makes of M. Andesmas a pathetic figure. This afternoon is therefore the moment of truth. The arrival of Valérie and her suitor, Michel Arc, will mark the end of the intimate and exclusive relationship between father and daughter. M. Andesmas's response to the crisis remains ambiguous. The reader never learns whether he can adjust to the radical change in his life, though there are signs that he may be coming to terms with it. In the final moments he is unable to remove a broad smile when Mme Arc has described an incident from Valérie's past. While Mme Arc grows increasingly nervous at the sound of the approaching couple, "M. Andesmas, occupé seulement à essayer de s'enlever ce sourire paralysant de la figure, ne s'effraye

plus. [...] M. Andesmas croit être sorti d'une sieste énorme, de plusieurs années" (p.126). Perhaps he has recognised the inevitability of change, and will content himself with the happiness of his memories. Duras has left his emotional situation unresolved.

Like the old mother in Des Journées entières M. Andesmas has experienced a love that is both intensely passionate and resilient, and his words could hold good for her: "Je suis bien stupéfait, croyez-moi, devant une telle possibilité de la vie. L'amour de cette enfant qui survit à mon âge, à ma vieillesse, ah!" (p.95). Both will go on loving until they die. Parental love has a durability seldom found in the love between men and women. Although M. Andesmas and the formidable old lady exemplify its egocentric and sinister side, Duras shows enormous compassion towards them, for if they sin it is by excess of love.

M. Andesmas was Duras's final statement on parental love; indeed children no longer figure in her novels. She did return momentarily to a similar theme in the film La Voleuse, which revolves around a woman's attempts to regain the son she entrusted to another couple just after birth. The story draws its strength from the contrast between the genuine love of the foster-parents who have cherished the child for several years, and the largely selfish motives of the natural mother who appears concerned mainly with salving her conscience. (2)

Duras created some very touching scenes between parents and their children, and what lingers in the memory is the way she accurately conveys lived experience. One remembers those intimate moments when the warmth of love suddenly shows through - Sara fondly inhaling the aroma of her son's hair, Anne Desbaresdes laughing at her child's stubbornness,

M. Andemas's smile. With the sparsest details Duras evokes the beauty and tenderness of feelings that are almost beyond the reach of words.

#### b. SEXUALITY AND PERSONALITY

Duras's earliest novels focus on the figure of an adolescent girl or young woman, eager for life yet trapped in a banal routine. None of them has any awareness of herself as a complete human being, that is, she has no sense of being one whole, body and soul, because nothing has occurred that would make her aware that she is physically alive, a creature of flesh and blood. The girl has hitherto seen reality as two separate entities - her psyche or self, and the "other," namely her body and all that is exterior to her self. For this reason the girl also feels an outsider, unrelated to the world around her.

During the course of the story the heroine comes to experience herself as a harmonious whole for the first time, after the giving of her body to a man. Sexual experience is the decisive moment in her life, the point when body and psyche are united into one personality. (3) The question of love does not arise; it is the loss of virginity that forms the heroine's initiation into the world.

Maud, for example, feels she has no real existence as a human being until, after she succumbs to Georges, her corporeal and mental life can both be seen as parts of her personality: "Elle sentait entre les draps son corps nu dont elle n'avait plus honte, qui devenait comme son visage une forme vivante. [...] Or, ce matin-là, son corps demeurait en harmonie profonde avec son esprit, inerte" (Les Impudents, p.133).

Sexual experience reassures a woman not only of her own carnal being, but additionally gives her a sense of relatedness to others, of "belonging" to a world from which she had seemed excluded. Suzanne (Un Barrage) quite casually gives herself to the first attractive young man who happens to

come along, and has no particular feelings towards him. She believes her seduction is inevitable, and might as well be sooner than later. Instinctively Suzanne feels that it is an obligatory introduction into the world outside, and into adulthood. Françoise (La Vie tranquille) has experienced a kind of inner void, since her life lacks any apparent meaning or cohesion and is quite unjustified. Only her relationship with Tiène, and particularly their physical intimacy, convince her of her completeness and give her life significance. Through Tiène she has discovered both that her body is part of her, and that, belonging also to her lover, it relates her to the world:

On ne voit rien du gouffre qui est là, entre mes jambes. [...] c'est l'idée de Tiène qui m'a fait découvrir qu'il m'appartient, qu'il peut appartenir, à moi, à Tiène. Avant de le connaître, je le sentais vaguement au fond de moi comme quelque chose de vide ou si on veut, de plein, plein d'une ignorance totale. (La Vie tranquille, p.129)

The maid in Le Square, similarly, feels that she has remained a nonentity, at the lowest level of existence, and cannot experience herself as a fully-developed human being. Her colourless environment has never allowed her any positive identity. Hence a man, any man, who will make her his wife, will give her reality and self-awareness, and give her a sense of belonging to the world:

JEUNE FILLE: [...] Non, il faut qu'on me choisisse une fois [...] je n'ai jamais été choisie par personne, sauf en raison de mes capacités les plus impersonnelles, et afin d'être aussi inexistante que possible... (p.89)

The giving of one's body to a member of the opposite sex is therefore one way of coming truly alive. Duras enlarges on the theme in Le Boa. (4) In this curious short story, with its mixture of impishness and black humour, a woman reminisces on her experiences as a thirteen-year-old in a boarding-school. (The period coincides with Duras's own childhood.) Two experiences stand out most clearly: her regular Sunday visit to the zoo where she would watch a boa swallowing up a chicken; and the inevitable

spectacle, later in the day, of her septuagenarian schoolmistress appearing in her favourite underclothes, which exhude an odour of staleness and decay like the woman's wasted existence. These seemingly trivial events are the girl's only glimpses of life, and they shape her whole outlook. On the threshold of puberty, she is at an impressionable age. To her the boa, free, sensual, lives at the opposite pole from "la Barbet" who is consumed with regret at her sterile existence. The young girl is faced with the choice between la Barbet's respectability and the life of the senses, which she confuses with the law of the jungle. She is

la spectatrice d'abord d'une dévoration violente, aux stades et aux contours éblouissants de précision, ensuite d'une autre dévoration, celle-là lente, informe, noire. [ ... ] Le boa dévorait et digérait le poulet, le regret dévorait et digérait de même la Barbet (p.108)

The snake epitomises vitality and health, whilst her school-teacher has as much vitality as a rotten vegetable.

What she has witnessed are the two extremes of existence, not the norm, and the comedy arises from the naive and outrageous conclusions she draws from her observations. The world appears to her as a kind of vast sensual jungle, a place of continual orgies with all creatures divided into the devouring and the devoured. She has the over-fertile imagination of girls of her age, and her impressions coincide with her sexual awakening and a growing interest in the opposite sex. She quickly adopts an absurd sense of values, in which evil and immorality are equated with authentic living. She can think of no more exciting prospect than becoming a prostitute, to be deflowered in some dark brothel:

Je me le représentais [the brothel] comme une sorte de temple de la défloration où, en toute pureté (je n'appris que bien plus tard le côté commercial de la prostitution), les filles jeunes, de mon état, auxquelles le mariage n'était pas réservé, allaient se faire découvrir le corps par des inconnus, des hommes de même espèce qu'elles. (p.112)

Yet at bottom the girl has a positive outlook. Mlle Barbet might have been saved from decay if her morality had been less restrictive and she

had tried harder to find a man. The girl has only one aim: "se faire nettoyer de sa virginité, s'enlever sa solitude du corps" (p.113). Her words would hold good for any of Duras's young heroines. Virginity is not a thing to be prized; it has to be cleansed from the body as one cleanses the soul. Sexual experience ends "la solitude du corps," for it involves sharing the body with another. The gift of her virginity will be the girl's initiation into the world. However narrow that viewpoint, chances are that it will open a happier future than that of her lonely schoolmistress.

Concord between mind and body, a sense of inter-relation with others, these result from the loss of maidenhood and purity. The fact that the idea recurs so frequently in the writer's early work, when she was herself a young woman, seems to indicate that it was a firmly-held belief.

NOTES

- (1) The original short story is contained in Des Journées entières dans les arbres.

The play adapted from the story was first performed in 1965, and is published in Théâtre II.

When references are applicable to one work only, this is specified. Quotations are followed by the words "story" or "play."

- (2) La Voleuse, 1966. Directed by Jean Chapot, from an original idea. Adaptation and dialogue by M. Duras.
- (3) J.S. Bratton's chapter on "Identity" is partly devoted to this point. He remarks that both Maud and Suzanne have been only half-conscious of the life around them and of their own bodies. With their first sexual encounter their bodily desires are integrated into the pattern of their lives. J.S. Bratton, pp.208ff.
- (4) In Des Journées entières dans les arbres.

PART TWO:

TECHNIQUE AND STYLE.

Chapter 10.

TECHNIQUE IN THE NOVELS

In the works of the most accomplished novelists the mode of expression - the techniques and style - has as much importance as the meaning; indeed form and meaning are inseparable. Novel-technique signifies the group of procedures which give expression to the narrative. They are dictated by the writer's particular vision and are the ideal method of representing that vision in words. A different technique would convey a different view of reality. Duras has experimented widely in narrative techniques, seeking new forms as her vision matured and altered. The following discussion attempts to trace the development of several of her techniques, while pointing out what is unique and particular in individual works.

It is Duras's manner of telling a story, as much as her outlook, that has brought her renown. In fact she would wish to be considered above all an experimentalist, attempting to expand the potentialities of the novel-form like the writers she admires - Blanchot, Bataille, Queneau, des Forêts, Leiris. Indeed Duras regards the French literary scene as the most important in the world at present. The French novel, she believes, is

le seul roman d'avant-garde du monde. Je ne suis pas du tout nationaliste, je ne suis pas du tout chauvine [ ... ] mais je suis obligée de remarquer lorsque je lis des romans anglais ou américains que s'il y a une avant-garde romanesque, oui je peux dire qu'elle est en France. C'est nous seulement qui avons brisé avec la tradition du 19me, la tradition balzacienne... (1)

Unlike her contemporaries among the "nouveaux romanciers," Duras has never published a manifesto setting out a series of aims for the novel, and so her attitude to her material and her reasons for adopting

particular narrative techniques must largely be deduced from the novels themselves. One clue lies in her reference to "la tradition balzacienne," Balzac being the "bête noire" of several modern writers, most notably Robbe-Grillet. Duras departs from a major novel-tradition headed by Balzac, in that she does not attempt to play God. She joins Robbe-Grillet and a whole series of their contemporaries in rejecting authorial omniscience, the writer's assumption of supremacy over his material. (2) The narrative techniques in Duras's fiction have been dictated almost from the beginning by what might be termed scepticism: she has been constantly aware of the strict limitations of any one individual's knowledge.

Such an outlook inevitably leads to a kind of novel different from the novel "à la Balzac." One would look in vain for an all-knowing narrator who is capable of transcribing the external world down to its smallest details, of encompassing all reality. Duras refuses to create the impression of a whole social framework existing within the pages of her book. Secondly, her standpoint has important consequences for the concept of fictional "character." She avoids placing in her novels individuals who are totally within her control, nor does she make any pretence at leading her characters along the tracks of a plot predestined by the nature she has given them. Such an attitude, I feel, has a certain artificiality. Taken to its logical conclusion, the writer would be able to talk solely about himself and his own experience. Writers - Duras and her contemporaries included - do create worlds outside of their own experience, and their characters are their own invention. An artist seems to me no less justified in communicating a whole vision of the world, and in penetrating the psyche of any number of his protagonists.

a. Angle of Vision.

Given that Duras refuses to seize reality in its entirety, one of her principal problems in her fiction has remained that of the narrator's angle of vision. She must allow the narrative sufficient scope for the dramatisation

of theme while limiting the field of vision to what can be experienced by one individual. In the majority of her fictional works therefore all the light is cast from one angle, that is Duras allows the reader to perceive events from the position of one individual. There are of course innumerable precedents for such a technique. (3) Yet the restrictions Duras places on her narrative are particularly rigorous: rarely does she allow interpretation and analysis, and very often her novels are largely descriptions of what can be perceived by the central figure.

In two of Duras's earliest novels one is in fact conscious that the unseen narrator is both omniscient and capable of manoeuvring events from the outside. Les Impudents is a conventional third-person narrative in which Duras seems as yet unconcerned about the angle of vision and has not discovered her technical gifts. The work is of little interest in the present discussion, and it is unfruitful to criticise the writer for a lugubrious novel she has herself disowned. Duras does manage to create an atmosphere of fear and impending tragedy by the suggestion of violent death - the presumed suicide of Jacques's wife, the discovery of Jean's drowned mistress - yet the mood is offset by the writer's direct commentary on events and her occasional tendency to make remarks of singular naïveté: [Mme Pecresse] avait envie d'agir et d'entraîner son fils Jean dans l'aventure. Qu'y a-t-il en effet de plus merveilleux que de s'unir dans une action commune avec l'être qui vous est cher?" (pp.48-9).

As in other respects, Un Barrage with its broader perspective stands apart from the mainstream of Duras's writing. Because of the epic proportions of the story which convincingly portrays the life of a whole country, from its white mandarin rulers to the most wretched peasants, and because it is more a sociological document than a study in human relationships, an all-seeing eye is essential. Furthermore the novel is untypical because of its autobiographical nature; the writer's intense emotional

involvement with the events which had shaped her childhood, shows through. The narrator cannot remain in the wings when she is describing colonial corruption or the misery of the natives. Rather than allow events to speak for themselves, she constantly intervenes:

le dieu des enfants c'était le car de Ram, la mécanique roulante, les klaxons électriques des chasseurs, la ferraille en marche, et ensuite les racs bouillonnants, et ensuite les mangues mortelles. Aucun autre dieu ne présidait aux destinées des enfants de la plaine. Aucun autre. Ceux qui disent le contraire mentent. (p.284)

La Vie tranquille is Duras's first attempt to place the task of relating the narrative upon one character directly involved in the action. Françoise is never off-stage and relates events exactly as she herself has experienced them. La Vie tranquille is very much a novel of its time: many writers of the 'forties were decisively influenced by the American experimental novelists, and Duras is no exception. The narrative structure reveals a conscious attempt to juxtapose diverse techniques in order to create a homogeneous whole. (One sees marked similarities with Faulkner's influential The Sound and the Fury, similarly divided into juxtaposed sections - stream-of-consciousness, first-person and third-person narration). The novel is in three parts. In the first Françoise relates the tragic events of recent weeks and the gradual disintegration of the family. The narration is terse, plain, and suited to the outlook of a lucid but unsophisticated young woman. In the second part Françoise waxes lyrical and even philosophical, as her mind wanders between her impressions of the seaside, and her reflections on her situation. The third part attempts simultaneous narration or stream-of-consciousness, before ending in the simpler style of the first section. The stream-of-consciousness technique is employed with some skill: it situates the reader inside the heroine's tortured mind as she returns home, and flows smoothly along on a train of mental associations. The technique evokes effectively both the mass of contradictions that are tearing her apart, and by repetition underlines her

obsessions. The first-person narration as a whole both lends realism and serves to bring alive the central character.

The action is again related by a character within the novel in Le Marin de Gibraltar, a fact which contributes largely to the mystery and fascination of the story. The reader knows as much and no more than the narrator himself about the inscrutable heroine and her past, so that her tales, and the very identity, of her sailor never lose their ambiguity. The novel is also interesting in that Duras experiments with a kaleidoscopic effect, by changing the angle of vision, a technique she will not exploit again until Le Vice-consul: the radical difference between the two works is that here the inserted narratives of other characters constitute reminiscences of what is past, and not commentaries on the present situation.

Apart from the short stories Madame Dodin and Le Boa, and part of Lol V. Stein, Duras was never again to write in the first person. She sought forms in which the angle of vision would be restricted, yet which would preserve enough flexibility and freedom for the development of her descriptive and stylistic talents. In the novels from Tarquinta onwards Duras tried to reconcile these two aims by means of a restricted third-person narrative. (A considerable advantage was the gradual limitation of the scope and content of her novels; with Tarquinta Duras began to concentrate on one emotional crisis, rather than create a wide panorama of events, stretching over weeks or months. Subsequent works, compressed in time and space, are the very antithesis of the large-scale "baroque" adventures of Le Marin. All light could thus be thrown from the direction of one protagonist involved in the critical situation.)

In Tarquinta Duras first exploited a personal technique that could be described as a form of "recording consciousness." Although the novel appears to be written by an outside observer, or unseen narrator, we are

not allowed omniscience over events. Sara is never off the scene, and in effect we view only what she herself sees. It would be more accurate to speak of a recording consciousness, a disembodied presence registering events from Sara's standpoint as well as describing her mental state. The downward trend of her marriage, the growing sexual attraction between herself and the stranger, and all the petty quarrels are viewed solely from her angle. Her hopes and apprehensions, her memories of happier summers, are described, as well as her private reactions to events. When it appears that Ludi and Gina are going through another period of marital strife, for example, Sara's own train of thought is immediately set off:

Gina n'avait pas répondu très vivement au cri de Ludi. Diana avait raison, ils avaient dû se disputer. Ludi et Gina, comme eux, se disputaient beaucoup. [...] Elles allèrent se déshabiller derrière les rochers. Oui, des querelles de quatre sous, mais qui empoisonnaient la vie. N'empêche que Jacques était content qu'elle fût venue. Eux, il y avait sept ans qu'ils s'aimaient. [...] Diana attendait Sara. Elles descendirent ensemble des rochers.  
(p.30)

Here the consciousness is oscillating continuously, depicting the simultaneity of impressions received from outside and of Sara's own thoughts. This interplay is a distinctive feature of the novel.

Les Chantiers employs a very similar narrative method. The short story demonstrates clearly why Duras prefers the third-person narrative. More than in Tarquinta she uses a rhythmic, cadenced style which would seem absurd and unnatural in a story told in the first-person. The same holds true for Dix heures et demie and M. Andesmas. The repetitive and poetic language that sets the ritualistic tone and underlines the themes, would be simply incongruous in the mouths of the protagonists. (4) In Les Chantiers the style is both elaborate and repetitive, giving events a ritualistic character.

It is fitting that the story describing the forces of time should be told from the viewpoint of a man acutely aware of its processes. All the events have in fact been refracted through his eyes, and the reader gains

important insights into his emotional state from the way he distorts reality. To him the girl is a fascinating creature: love seems to have blinded him to her true nature, for she is a fairly undistinguished person of whom the other holidaymakers take not the slightest notice. For the man the sight of her dirtied collar, or her dishevelled hair, are new sources of excitement, additional reasons to adore her, whilst to the more lucid reader they suggest a slovenly young woman. On the other hand the girl's affective state remains a mystery, and the reader's only knowledge of her comes from the man's interpretations.

All the light in Moderato Cantabile is thrown from one direction, namely that of the heroine. The crime of passion, the decisive event in the tale, takes place off-stage, its only manifestation being the scream that interrupts the music-lesson. Chauvin has no existence outside the time Anne spends with him. Only once does the story stray outside her field of vision: the hallucinatory seventh chapter is composed of a series of rapid camera-shots that alternate between Anne's ordeal at the formal dinner and the figure wandering like an animal along the shore, though even at this point there is an affective connection between Anne and the man who is preying on her thoughts. Yet because of its concision the tale offers only the most cursory insights into Anne's reactions at any given moment, and her dark desire is implied solely through what she says.

Dix heures et demie shows a skilful use of the recording consciousness whose possibilities are here more fully exploited. Firstly the limited angle of vision greatly increases the sense of realism. We see no more than Maria would herself, and perceive reality simultaneously with her.

Secondly the recording consciousness probes deeply into Maria's psychic state. Action is not recorded as it occurs, but as Maria perceives it to occur. Consider, for example, the moment when Paestra jumps into Maria's

waiting car: the police are arriving at any second; she is anxious, confused, and only concerned with their escape:

Une fenêtre s'est allumée. On a crié.

Des coups de sifflets fusent dans toute la ville, se relayent sans arrêt. Maria va arriver sur la place principale. Lorsqu'il est tombé du toit la gouttière a cédé sous son poids et elle a fait un bruit de catastrophe, un vacarme obscène. Une fenêtre s'est allumée? Oui. Deux, trois fenêtres s'allument. Les choses crient, les portes de nuit. (p.96)

In her tense state, she notices only the lighted window and the police whistles, and it is not until she has a moment to reflect that she realises what has caused them. The falling gutter and the din only register in her conscious mind after their effects are felt. Strict chronology has been replaced by mental chronology.

Duras employs the recording consciousness technique to delineate Maria's tortured mind without recourse to direct commentary or psychological analysis. The word "jealousy" is never used, rather we experience Maria's neurotic state through her deranged imagination. What the reader sees is jealousy running riot. Several of the scenes between Pierre and Claire have no reality except in Maria's imagination (cf. pp.169-172). The great merit of the recording consciousness is its ability to treat the actual and the imaginary as if they possessed the same degree of authenticity, which, naturally, they do within the protagonist's mind. No change of mood or variation in style marks the transition from reality.

One thinks immediately of Robbe-Grillet's fictional techniques; Le Voyeur, for example, is constructed entirely on the subjective reality of one mind in which truth and fantasy are indistinguishable. Indeed the similarities with her contemporaries become even clearer with M. Andesmas. The recording consciousness is especially suited to this stripped narrative, where it fuses reality and imagination, reality and memory. Duras makes greater use here of memory and anticipation, and effectively explodes "real" time, since the story stretches much further backwards and forwards

than the four hours during which events take place. Present, past and future merge together in a stream-of-consciousness. The technique is familiar to a number of distinguished modern writers: in a range of novels from Joyce's Ulysses to Butor's La Modification a restricted length of actual time forms the framework for an exploration of time as experienced by the consciousness, which wanders freely between a series of temporal levels. This is not to suggest that Duras's work is imitative, but that she shares other writers' preoccupations.

In the following passage, M. Andesmas's impressions of the world around him, and his reminiscences, are recorded as they reach his conscious mind:

Elle avait chantonné dans la chaleur du chemin:

Quand le lilas fleurira mon amour

Il était maintenant assis dans ce fauteuil d'osier bancal qu'il avait trouvé dans une pièce de la maison. Dans la chaleur, vivement, comme si rien n'en était de la chaleur, elle avait chantonné:

Quand le lilas

Il avait péniblement atteint la plate-forme, en marchant comme elle le lui avait conseillé, prudemment, d'un pas égal. Elle eût chanté pareillement dans la fraîcheur d'un soir ou d'une nuit, dans d'autres régions, ailleurs. Où n'aurait-elle pas chanté?

fleurira pour toujours (pp.17-18)

Several strands of thought have been dovetailed into one complex sequence, so that M. Andesmas's mind wanders to the moment when his daughter's voice rang out, becomes aware of his present situation, then wanders back again. He quickly moves to a later point in the afternoon when she has deserted him, and then his imagination takes over. Finally the sound of her voice recurs, and the split refrain emphasises the split in his thoughts, as one memory precludes another.

The angle of vision is of capital importance in Lol V. Stein and

Le Vice-consul where it bestows upon the novels their distinctive quality: mystery. In these two works Duras's scepticism is at its zenith. She appears to be suggesting the impossibility of ever achieving a coherent picture of the world, of coming to terms with objective truth, or of penetrating personality. In the confusing and unfathomable Lol V. Stein Duras has deliberately placed an opaque screen between reader and narrative. Whole areas of truth which would help to clarify Lol's situation, are left in shadow; tantalising details are never explained - such as the rumour of Lol's pregnancy before her marriage, or the nature of her ambivalent relationship with Tatiana. The fragmentation of the story, the haziness of events stem from the fact that much of the essential action unfolds outside the field of vision of the narrator, Jacques Hold. He can no more than scratch the surface of Lol's unhappy past, and repeatedly he insists on the unreliability of his present knowledge: "On pouvait, me parut-il, en savoir moins, de moins en moins sur Lol V. Stein" (p.94). He throws into doubt Tatiana's account of her friend's early life, and is constantly obliged to supplement his own knowledge with possible truth. (One is reminded of the teacher in Butor's Degrés, who likewise stipulates that his story is situated on several levels of reality, possibility and imagination.) The boundaries between truth, probability and mere appearance have effectively been effaced, though Jacques Hold insists that there is at least a grain of truth in his assumptions: "c'est toujours à partir d'hypothèses non gratuites et qui ont déjà, à mon avis, reçu un début de confirmation..." (p.41). It is this belief that gives him leave to imagine Lol's psychic state and hysterical crises.

Jacques Hold's position in the novel merely exacerbates the confusion, since he only reveals himself at the moment of his meeting with Lol, and his identity comes as a shock. The reader is quite unaware until then that he has been describing himself from the outside, and indeed he reverts to

this viewpoint after revealing his identity; moving with singular ease between the third and first persons, he turns the novel into a "jeu de miroirs." The reversal of situation leads us to question all our assumptions so far.

Obscurity and ambiguity also pervade the succeeding novel, Le Vice-consul. The reader is confronted with images, incomplete actions, and snatches of conversation that appear to lead nowhere except into a labyrinth of misunderstanding. Once again much that is essential to our comprehension of the work is firmly withheld: the reason for the beggar-woman's fascination with the white community, the nature of Anne-Marie's secret despair. The two central figures, Anne-Marie and Jean-Marc, have a shadowy vagueness, and hide behind enigmatic exteriors.

However the narrative approach is different from that of Lol V. Stein and is indeed without precedent in Duras's fiction (except, as has been noted, in Le Marin). Far from restricting the angle of vision to that of one individual, Duras constantly switches vantage-points, though none of them adequately throws light on the mysteries. Some of the novel is written by an external narrator who describes the action and protagonists with cold objectivity (pp.74ff., for example). As a mere spectator he is frequently unsure of his facts and adopts an interrogative style: this is why Le Vice-consul contains more questions and hypotheses, largely unanswered, than virtually any novel of comparable length:

Le vice-consul vient de dire quelque chose à Anne-Marie Stretter, une chose qui la fait reculer. Il l'attire vers lui. Elle se dégage. Jusqu'où ira-t-il? L'ambassadeur aussi le surveille. Il ne recommence plus. Mais elle veut fuir, on dirait. Elle est désemparée, et peut-être a-t-elle peur? (p.143)

Secondly, by making one of the central characters, Peter Morgan, a writer himself, Duras creates the effect of a novel-within-a-novel. The first episodes of the novel, relating the Indo-Chinese girl's trek across Asia, appear to be written by Peter Morgan from fact, though only

gradually does it become apparent that she may exist nowhere except in the pages of his projected novel, and that the raving beggar-woman in Calcutta may have no connection with her.

Thirdly, Duras makes use of the third-person/recording consciousness which moves from one individual to another in different sections. In one section (pp.31ff.) the consciousness is situated in Jean-Marc's position, registering his thoughts and particularly his memories of his Parisian home; this is one of the very few glimpses of the inscrutable creature's inner life. The consciousness also adopts the standpoint of other members of the diplomatic community, recording their interpretation of events.

Duras diversifies the angles of vision even further, for much of the action is refracted through the eyes of unseen spectators. The sections describing the embassy soirée are crammed with furtive questions and hurried whispers:

On pense à lui en termes d'interrogatoire: Cette bicyclette de femme, celle de Mme Stretter, comment se présente-t-elle à vos yeux?

On entend la réponse: Je n'ai rien à dire sur les raisons...

On songe: Et quand il a été confirmé dans ce qu'il croyait qu'était Lahore avant de la voir il a appelé la mort sur Lahore.  
(pp.137-8)

These disembodied voices increase the feeling of confusion.

The cumulative effect of this complex technical structure is kaleidoscopic: the story is a series of shifting patterns. The irony is that the central characters defy definition nevertheless, since they are either viewed from a distance or filtered through the consciousness of others.

The uninvolved external narrator in Le Vice-consul looks forward to Duras's most recent fictional works, Détruire dit-elle and Abahn Sabana David, where the writer stands resolutely outside the drama, content to allow the situation to develop seemingly of its own accord. The stories

are related with cold detachment and no attempt to impose an interpretation on the apparently random series of events, hence the feeling that one is watching an inexplicable ritual. Moreover the narrative form is strikingly cinematic or filmic. The narrator is so detached that the economy and flatness of the writing give the works the appearance of film-scripts:

La nuit augmente, le froid.  
Quelqu'un est entré, un homme grand et maigre, aux tempes grises.  
Sabana le regarde entrer. L'homme sourit à Sabana. Elle ne lui sourit pas. Il dit:  
-- Je passais. (Abahn, p.18)

The narrator is acting as camera-eye, recording without comment. The books are constructed like scenarios, for the overall effect is of a series of brief scenes juxtaposed in "montage." The authoress does not link one sequence to the next - which would necessitate intervention and manipulation - but prefers the continuity of the cinema, that is a series of shots: each passage is a self-contained unit and the effect comes from the inter-relation that the reader is required to make between these units or shots. The most remarkable example of "montage" occurs in Détruire dit-elle (pp.53ff.), where the narrator/camera alternates in a series of rapid shots between Alissa and Elisabeth, and the two men who have hidden to spy upon them.

It comes as no surprise that Duras quickly transferred both stories to the screen, since she does not regard them as belonging to any one genre such as the novel but as works that can transcend accepted genres. Her attitude developed at the time of writing Détruire dit-elle:

Il n'y avait pas d'idée de film, mais il y avait l'idée d'un livre, comment dire ça - d'un livre qui pouvait être à la fois soit lu, soit joué, soit filmé, et j'ajoute toujours: soit jeté. (5)

Duras is advocating something very similar to Butor's breakdown of genre-forms, (6) that is she does not see her latest works as possessing an absolute, definitive form but rather as having a further potential existence

as plays or films. In addition she aims at creating works that the individual reader can approach from any number of directions: 'Il y a dix façons de lire Détruire, c'est ce que je voulais. Et de le voir aussi peut-être.' (7) Such a viewpoint inevitably leads to a fictional work where the narrator is as far removed as possible from his creation, and leaves only the raw materials on which the reader is to work. At least for the moment Duras gives the reader an essential role in the act of creation.

#### b. Psychology

Since Duras makes no claim to omniscience, she does not pretend to have an intimate knowledge of the men and women who people her novels. She has been reluctant to create fully-rounded fictional characters and in particular she has renounced the traditional methods of literary psychology.

Duras has long since ceased to people her works with the instantly recognisable individuals, with a complete personal and social identity, such as were found in nineteenth-century realist fiction. If Duras's characters are defined at all, it is by their anonymity. In the first place Duras avoids physical description of her personages; she would maintain that to give an individual a fixed physical form is to enclose him, to reduce his stature because the writer appears to have supremacy over him. Physical characteristics are only noted as and when they throw light on the emotional situation: Anne Desbaresdes's neurotic state is revealed by her pallor and her trembling hands; Claire's blue eyes are described at the moment they are noticed by the insanely jealous Maria (Dix heures et demie). Similarly there is little indication of characters' background or position in the social strata except when it is relevant to their predicament: the maid and salesman harp continually on the

mediocrity of their jobs because it is the source of their despair (Le Square), but one learns virtually nothing of the social status of the holidaymakers in Tarquinius and Dix heures et demie. Many of the characters have only one name, and some are never designated by name at all. Frequently their past is left in complete obscurity, and it is perhaps this fact above all that differentiates them from the majority of fictional characters: they have considerably more freedom, since they appear to have been in no way conditioned by their past experiences. Notable exceptions are Lol V. Stein and the heroine of Hiroshima. Duras refuses to bedeck her personages with superficial trappings that seem to define them and in effect place them in her control by conveying the impression that they are her "creations." (The fact that Duras has created them is beside the point; she no more pretends to know their every secret than is possible in reality.)

More important, Duras has departed from one of the principal traditions of the fictional form, at least in the French language: psychological analysis. Over several decades novelists have in fact increasingly tended to move away from the tradition of the "roman d'analyse" as it has developed since the late seventeenth century. In this type of novel authors describe what is happening within the mind of some - or all - of their characters, analysing motives and explaining reactions. For Duras nothing could be more presumptuous or artificial; the novelist is arrogating to himself the power to penetrate behind an individual's exterior and by implication to control his behaviour, since the psychological make-up a character has been given, will determine his future conduct.

Duras therefore refuses to pass on to the reader a predigested interpretation of her characters' behaviour. Her personages (apart from the central character) never lose their impenetrability. Where a considerable

number of novelists analyse from within, Duras observes from without, recording behaviour, gesture - and, above all, conversations. Her methods are reminiscent of the "behaviourist" techniques in American novels such as those of Hemingway.

Duras does not portray character as a fixed entity, a group of permanent personality-traits, but as something in continual flux. Just as we may find difficulty in grasping the essential nature of an acquaintance, so the authoress's personages defy definition because each successive moment reveals something different about them. Anna is at moments gay, attractive, apprehensive, gentle (Le Marin); Mme Arc is distant, polite, yet soon reveals her nervousness and fear of solitude (M. Andesmas); Lol is described as a "gloire de douceur mais aussi d'indifférence" (Lol V. Stein, p.11) and manifests to an extreme degree the mystery and unpredictability of human nature. In short, Duras confines herself to describing the observable and the momentary.

In Les Impudents and Un Barrage Duras uses fairly traditional methods of psychological analysis, and even the minor characters are treated with a certain penetration. In the first novel motives are carefully analysed at important points, and there is a particularly successful passage in which Maud goes through a nervous crisis (pp.141-2). Unfortunately the analysis of Maud and Georges is embarrassingly incoherent; one cannot believe in the continual fluctuations in their emotional state and, as was pointed out in the first chapter, one has the impression that they are being manipulated like marionettes. The members of the family in Un Barrage all come across as individuals, and the writer gives a credible account of their aspirations and fears. The mother above all - half-crazy, strong-willed - is an unforgettable creation. Duras also shows a flair for comic

caricature in the characters of M. Jo and Carmen, "the tart with a heart of gold."

Yet already in La Vie tranquille one notices a change in the writer's attitude towards her characters. Since the angle of vision is limited to Françoise, she alone is seen from the inside. The other characters conceal most of what is going on in their minds. With Tarquinta the view of character becomes even more rigorously one-sided. We know Sara's husband and friends only at the surface level, by their gestures and words, as she herself would know them. Psychological analysis is non-existent. At the capital moment, for example, when Sara leaves the little clique to go off with the stranger, there is no delineation of her husband's reaction, which would have been carefully explored in the "roman d'analyse":

L'homme se leva. Sara se leva après lui et alla vers Jacques.  
L'homme resta debout près du banc.

-- On va faire un tour au bal, dit Sara à Jacques. Et puis je rentrerai.

Jacques vit l'homme debout près du banc. Diana aussi. Jacques et l'homme se sourirent. L'homme, d'un air de vague excuse. Jacques, de celui qui comprend bien les choses.

-- C'est une bonne idée, dit Jacques.

-- Puisque nous ne jouons pas aux boules, dit Sara.

-- Vous avez raison, dit Jacques. Pourquoi rester là à regarder?  
(p.118)

On the surface, Jacques's remarks could hardly be more casual or innocuous. The only clue to his state of mind is his facial expression - a meaningful smile, interpreted by Sara as a sign that he is aware of what is about to take place. We are left to guess his thoughts.

The episode illustrates the basis of Duras's psychological technique in her major works. Her characters uncover their nature by their behaviour "in situation" - in particular circumstances at a given point in time (and even then we are offered the merest hints of their emotional depths). Duras's method is dramatic rather than expository. Hence "character" is a series of largely behavioural responses to events. We are not told in advance that Anne Desbaresdes or Maria are prey to dark sexual longings,

rather their impulses come to light when a significant situation arises.

Moreover, characters other than central figures are observed from the outside; Duras will go no further than providing a sketchy outline of them. This is why the writer attaches to physical gestures an importance far beyond their usual value in everyday life; they represent the point when inner tensions break surface, or when words fail and only gesture can communicate feeling. It is precisely because M. Andemas is a static and uneventful story that its final moments have a climactic effect. Mme Arc, hitherto calm and unruffled, suddenly becomes agitated with the approach of her husband and Valérie, and grabs the old man's hand urgently. Such a gesture would have scarcely any importance in normal circumstances, but because it is so unprepared it creates a surprise: it marks the moment when Mme Arc's composure finally shatters, and points to her inner turmoil. Very rarely does the narrator penetrate inside the mind of the heroine of Moderato Cantabile, but much is suggested by her physical reactions. In the closed world of this novel, virtually all external action has been suppressed, so that the slightest movement takes on added significance. A flicker of the eyes, a slight start betray a wealth of emotion below Anne Desbaresdes's surface appearance. At her first meeting with the stranger, when she is trying to discover details that might explain the crime of passion, his remark strikes a deep chord within her:

-- Ils s'aimaient, dit-il.  
Elle sursauta, mais à peine. (p.36)

Her fear may be expressed in her closed eyes, in her trembling hands that can hardly hold the glass of wine, or in her pallor at the erotic undertones of the other couple's relationship:

Elle baissa les yeux, se souvint et pâlit.  
-- Du sang sur sa bouche, dit-elle, et il l'embrassait,  
l'embrassait. (pp.43-4)

And through a single gesture - when Chauvin places his hand against hers -

their liaison becomes overtly sexual.

Facial expressions, glances, and particularly smiles are pregnant with meaning. At one of the crucial moments in Les Chantiers, when the man realises the strength of his feelings for the first time, not a word of explanation passes between him and the girl: "Elle essayait de se souvenir avec précision de lui comme lui se souvenait d'elle. L'homme la regardait et souriait. Elle sourit aussi et commença à le regarder, à regarder et regarder l'homme qui se souvenait" (p.223). Pierre and Claire are as remote and shadowy at the close of Dix heures et demie as when they appear; they have no personality, save a certain kindness expressed in the smiles they exchange with Maria, and Duras suggests their emotional state only by outward behaviour. In the claustrophobic situation, where they are watched almost every moment, any hint of sexual desire must be suppressed, yet for a split second their feelings can be read in their looks. A sudden pallor crosses Claire's face, revealing her tortured fear of being discovered (p.21); and one hurried glance betrays her:

Claire, la voilà. [...] C'est Pierre qu'elle regarde d'abord tandis qu'elle entre. Le désir qu'elle a de Pierre, dès qu'elle entre, se voit, la prolonge comme son ombre. On eût dit qu'elle criait. Mais c'est à Maria qu'elle parle. (p.120)

At the time of Lol's meeting with Jacques Hold, a furtive exchange of glances suffices to explain that she is perfectly aware of his relationship with Tatiana, and that she is not the shy innocent she appears:

l'homme que Lol cherche se trouve tout à coup dans le plein feu de son regard. Lol, la tête sur l'épaule de Tatiana, le voit: il a légèrement chancelé, il a détourné les yeux. Elle ne s'est pas trompée. (p.84)

In all these cases the controlled and static narrative permits Duras to achieve the maximum effect with the minimum of effort; movements

gain an intensity far greater than in everyday experience.

c. Conversation.

Much of Marguerite Duras's renown rests on her use of conversation. It is an extremely important element in her novels since, as we have seen, it provides a means of viewing character from an external standpoint.

The importance of the spoken word first becomes apparent in Un Barrage. Once again Duras finds her inspiration in Hemingway; like the American writer Duras pares the conversation down to brief and deceptively simple exchanges which typify those speaking. Hemingway's dialogues crystallise the mannerisms of a particular individual, but in a condensed form rarely found in everyday existence. (8) In Un Barrage Duras similarly makes a character speak in laconic phrases that capture the fundamentals in his or her personality. Tics and mannerisms crop up repeatedly in a highly artificial fashion, yet the effect is one of veracity. The mother's obsessions come alive through her interminable harping on the same themes - her sea-walls, M. Jo's ring; her need for obedience and supremacy over her children is conveyed through the rapid reiteration of identical commands ("donne-moi," p.93; "dis-le-moi," pp.117-8). The frequent repetition, that by accretion characterises the mother, goes considerably beyond what one would find in reality. Joseph's choler and disgust are expressed in his crass vulgarity (quickly imitated by his sister): "je fous le camp," "merde," "emmerder," "j'en ai marre" are the stuff of his conversation, together reinforcing the picture of an angry and despairing adolescent.

Also reminiscent of Hemingway is the extreme banality of the dialogue (which has a natural ring in the mouths of the uneducated children and local peasants): understatement creates a sense of unease, a feeling that more lies behind the words than the ear can pick up. (9) Slang expressions

and casual remarks point to the unarticulated boredom and unhappiness, as when Joseph asks his sister:

- T'en as marre, toi?
- C'est pas ça...
- De quoi t'as marre?
- De tout, dit Suzanne, comme toi. Je ne sais pas. (p.124)

Dialogue forms the largest element in Le Marin. The novel is full of interminable, rambling conversations in which the characters indulge to while away the idle days. Their language is colloquial and idiomatic, which contributes to the realistic tone of the exchanges. More important, the subjects of conversation rarely rise above the commonplace: indeed, with their mixture of trivia and light-hearted banter, the conversations look forward to those of Tarquinta. They bring the characters alive as attractive people, but disclose precious little of their private thoughts and passions. In the second part of the novel Duras sacrifices realism when she uses the conversational form for digressions of considerable length. A character takes charge of the narrative to recount at first hand some past experience. Here Duras is consciously working in the tradition of the epic or the picaresque novel, among whose basic conventions was the story-within-a-story, some tale or autobiographical yarn interrupting the narrative proper. Such digressions are of course beyond the bounds of credibility, unless one credits the characters with total recall. The snappy exchange of remarks gives way to copious monologues; in fact the form could only be described as "conversational" at all because Duras carefully intersperses a few brief fragments of dialogue. Anna's account of her adventures with her sailor forms a narrative in itself (pp.115ff), and the oddity of the device is only attenuated by Anna's style of delivery: her language has the same colloquial directness as in the narrative proper. The effect of Anna's story is to define her in a manner impossible for the narrator, to evoke her warm and passionate nature, the yearning for excitement that her great romance had aroused. The monologues of the weird

and pedantic African teacher, Louis (pp.241ff) which constitute a second major digression, could hardly be more different in tone. The outrageous and overblown oratory with which he describes the man he takes for the sailor and his chauvinistic obsession with Dahomey's glorious past, turn his story into a richly comic interlude.

Ultimately the effect of the conversational form is one of irony. The lengthy realistic dialogues, the banter and cheerful repartee, the tales of high adventure form a verbal screen, indicating nothing of the fundamental psychological drama or the secret emotions of hero and heroine. The important things are rarely said. The narrator can never bring himself to talk at length about himself, and his conversation with his mistress never strays from a superficial level, so that the rare occasions when emotions manage to break surface come as a surprise. At the critical point when Anna becomes aware of their germinating love, she asks him:

-- Alors, tu vas rester là, à te taire, à te taire? [ ... ]

-- Je ne peux déjà plus me taire, dis-je.

Ce fut un instant comme si nous avions parlé. Mais cela passa et cela ne fut bientôt plus suffisant. Elle mit son visage sur le mien et elle resta ainsi, immobile, un long moment.

-- Dis-moi quelque chose, n'importe quoi.

-- Anna.

La montre sur la table marqua deux heures. Nous n'avions pas sommeil.

-- Encore quelque chose, dit-elle.

-- Je me plais sur ce bateau.

Elle se coucha et ne demanda plus rien. (p.216)

He seems on the point of making an important confession, but despite her pleas he possesses neither the courage nor the words to express his feelings, and his conversation regresses into commonplaces.

The main achievement of the conversation in Le Marin is to suggest that the vital truths remain unarticulated, that emotions are beyond the reach of words. This discovery explains the use Duras makes of conversation in subsequent novels. Her aim is to imply the concealed emotional dramas through the form of the dialogue, and not by allowing characters to open their hearts, since words themselves cannot adequately convey psychological

states.

In Tarquinia Duras moulds the conversation to underline the futility of words. The reader does not proceed far through the novel without the uneasy feeling that the dialogue lacks the slightest depth; what Duras began in the trivial exchanges of Le Marin, she here elaborates. Constantly the holidaymakers harp on the most superficial subjects - the heat, the chances of rain, where to eat the next meal, and when, and with whom - and in one way their aimless chatter reflects the boredom of their holiday. However, the triteness of their words has deeper implications. The little clique fill the hours with small-talk because they have nothing of importance to say to each other. More tragically, husbands and wives, like Jacques and Sara, cannot easily achieve intimacy. In this context the recording consciousness technique is particularly useful for drawing a contrast between Sara's unarticulated thoughts and the colourless words she employs with Jacques. While privately she is tortured by the crisis in her marital relationship, Jacques perceives little of her mental state (cf. pp.65-6).

In short, words are only there to emphasise their vacuity. Superficial chatter is a pointer to what remains unspoken, what the authoress would call the "silence venu du fond des âges, dans lequel baigne l'immense majorité des hommes." (10) Duras increases the reader's awareness of this silence through a device she will make her own: fragmentation of the dialogue, which bestows on the gaps and hesitations between speeches a resonance of their own. Duras's conversations are adroitly constructed on a delicate interplay between words and silences, since silences are signals of the life within.

This is most forcefully exemplified in the relationship, or rather encounter, between Sara and the unknown boatsman; no contact is ever established between them, save on a sexual level. Duras fashions the

dialogue to convey the impression that they "parlent pour ne rien dire."

On the night he will seduce her, they are walking back to her house:

-- C'est drôle comme vous me plaisez, dit-il.

La nuit était si chaude que là où leurs bras se touchaient une moiteur se formait aussitôt. Ils ne se dirent plus rien, jusqu'au moment où ils arrivèrent devant la villa. Sara s'arrêta.

-- Nous sommes arrivés, dit-elle.

Il l'embrassa. Puis il s'éloigna d'elle d'un pas. Elle ne bougea pas. Ils se regardèrent. Sara vit dans ses yeux le fleuve qui brillait.

-- Je ne veux pas partir, dit-il.

Sara ne bougea pas. Il l'embrassa de nouveau.

-- Je ne partirai pas, répéta-t-il.

Il l'embrassa une nouvelle fois. Ils entrèrent dans la villa.

(p.128)

The triteness and fragmentation of the dialogue accentuate the rift between carnal desire and psychological contact. The words themselves are flat and commonplace, offering only the barest suggestion of the couple's unarticulated thoughts, and Duras creates the impression of silence between their words by inserting the elliptical, reiterated references to their actions. In fact Sara is sexually attracted (this is expressed in the way she notices the shining reflection in his eyes) but she says nothing.

The insipidity of the conversation has an additional dramatic effect. The dialogue flows along in such a low key that at the rare moments when emotions do reach articulation, a sudden remark creates an explosion. Sara and the man are bathing together, when Sara says, out of the blue:

-- J'aime bien cette idée, dit Sara, d'avoir couché avec toi.

Il se pencha vers elle.

-- J'ai envie de toi. Je voudrais là, tout de suite.

Elle lui sourit, mais pas lui.

-- Je voudrais bien une cigarette, dit-elle.

-- Peut-être que je suis amoureux de toi. (p.159)

Such moments, when characters reveal their inner tensions, are conspicuous by their rarity.

Similar aims govern the use of dialogue in Dix heures et demie. The atmosphere of the story is overheated and sexual; Maria, Pierre and Claire struggle hard to contain their erotic feelings. Yet their conversation never betrays the violence of their passion; quite the contrary, for their

remarks are superficial if not insipid. Like their counterparts in Tarquinoa they discuss little except the weather, the next meal, or the local sights; only once or twice do they express their affection for each other in anything more than a kind compliment.

Duras draws brutal contrasts between the seemingly unruffled surface of their lives, which their words suggest, and the chaos beneath. Just after discovering them embracing on the balcony above, Maria meets up with Claire and Pierre, and they mask their secret emotions with trivial remarks:

Ils n'ont pas eu beaucoup de temps entre leur départ du balcon et leur arrivée auprès de Maria. Ils sourient. L'espoir était donc insensé. L'amour ne s'est pas fait ce soir dans cet hôtel. Il faut attendre encore. Tout le restant de la nuit.

-- Tu as dit que tu revenais, Maria, dit encore Pierre.

-- C'est-à-dire. J'étais fatiguée. (p.52)

Both are trying their best to retain their casualness and to reveal nothing of their torment.

It is through Maria's imagination that we are made aware of the mental agony of Pierre and Claire. Maria's eyes light on the erotic details of Claire's dress and body, on significant glances, which are far more indicative of the psychological drama than their words.

The dialogues in Moderato Cantabile have a somewhat different status from those in Tarquinoa and Dix heures et demie. Conversation in Moderato Cantabile forms the principal action of the work, and indeed the consummation of the couple's love takes place at the verbal level. Anne Desbaresdes and Chauvin do talk about what is preying on their minds - the relationship between the couple involved in the crime of passion. They do not, however, until the climax talk about their own sexual drives, and it is in suggesting their hidden emotions that silence once again plays a vital role.

The interplay of dialogue and silence is central to the conception of this novel; it is here taken to the level of a fine art, and contributes

much to the delicacy and mystery of the tale. The complex dialogue which Anne Desbaresdes and Chauvin prolong over successive evenings is compressed and split into succinct, precise moments, interspersed with silent intervals. Duras hardly ever employs the word "silence," or draws attention to the fact that the couple have stopped speaking; with much greater cunning she inserts a brief annotation of gesture, or descriptions of the world outside the couple's magic circle - Anne's child playing by the harbour, the siren announcing the end of work in the nearby factories, and the arrival of the workers in the café. This punctuation bestows on the dialogue a rhythm and tempo that bring it close to ritual; but more particularly it serves to imply the emotions surging below the surface. At one point Anne is obsessed with the idea that the woman they are discussing, died in ecstasy at her lover's hands:

-- Peut-être, dit-il, que nous nous trompons, peut-être a-t-il eu envie de la tuer très vite, dès les premières fois qu'il l'a vue. Parlez-moi.

Elle n'y arriva pas. Ses mains recommencèrent à trembler, mais pour d'autre raison que la peur et que l'émoi dans lequel la jetait toute allusion à son existence. Alors, il parla à sa place, d'une voix redevenue tranquille. X

-- C'est vrai que lorsque le vent cesse dans cette ville, c'est tellement rare qu'on en est comme étouffé. Je l'ai déjà remarqué.

Anne Desbaresdes n'écoutait pas.

-- Morte, dit-elle, elle en souriait encore de joie.

Des cris et des rires d'enfants éclataient dehors, qui saluaient le soir comme une aurore. (pp.80-1)

Anne's silence reveals that something is preying on her mind. In fact she is shut in her own private world and is oblivious of Chauvin. She is alone with a vivid erotic memory and we are left to imagine her sensual excitement.

Throughout the novel, this technique of fragmentation suggests the couple's hesitations, fear, uncertainty, and above all those moments when the emotional life cannot be verbalised. Chauvin too is sexually aroused by his secret liaison with Anne, though he never avows his passion:

-- Devant une certaine fenêtre du premier étage, dit-il, il y a un hêtre qui est parmi les plus beaux arbres du parc.

-- Ma chambre. C'est une grande chambre.

Sa bouche à lui fut humide d'avoir bu et elle eut à son tour, dans la douce lumière, une implacable précision.

-- Une chambre calme, dit-on, la meilleure. (pp.73-4)

The pregnant silence following the mention of her bedroom indicates that Chauvin is hanging on her words. The sight of his wet lips suffices to hint at the erotic connotations he places on her revelation, and at his toughness.

The tale's dependence upon pauses and hiatuses, looks forward to the later dramas, where the interplay of words and silence will be of central importance. Musical analogies with Duras's technique immediately spring to mind. The musical pause fulfils a role very similar to that of silence; the pause both throws into relief the contours of the music itself, and has a value equal to the notes. The permutation of music and silence, which react mutually upon each other, is central, for example, to the work of Stockhausen.

I have left until this point the discussion of two novels - Le Square and L'Amante anglaise - which are the high-water marks of Duras's interest in the potentialities of the conversational narrative. In Le Square, (11) whose experimental nature and apparent objectivity were largely responsible for the writer's inclusion among the "nouveaux romanciers," Duras seems to have been eager to prove that dialogue could bear the whole weight of the novel. The narrator is very much a passive spectator to the meeting between the maid and the salesman, and the reader is placed in direct contact with the characters as if he were sitting close by and eaves-dropped on their conversation. The man and woman are not introduced or described, they are simply "present" and reveal themselves. Were it not for a few allusions to the child and to the changes in the weather, the

novel could pass for a tape-recording like the study of Claire Lannes.]

The most striking aspect of the dialogue in Le Square is its extreme artificiality; Duras has moulded it into a highly stylised form. The long tirades, the density of the sentences, the abstract vocabulary are far removed from the language one would expect from a working-class man and woman. The form is however admirably suited to the elaborate and detailed discussion of concepts beyond the couple's limited education; after all, it is not every day that they have the chance to philosophise, and the dialogue form removes the encounter from the level of a commonplace discussion.

On the surface the conversation seems shapeless and desultory, as the two individuals let their thoughts wander at random to their past and future, their hopes, daydreams, and disappointments. The conversation is not schematic, does not progress systematically from one subject to the next, but is full of non-sequiturs as thoughts go off at a tangent. Yet Duras's skill lies in fact in the creation of this apparent diffuseness, since by a process of free association, the characters return constantly to the same topics and thereby uncover the sorrow and fear that are nagging their minds most urgently. Thus the aimlessness and circularity of the dialogue have a definite artistic purpose.

Above all Duras's art is one of suggestion and not revelation. The narrative draws its strength as much from what is left unsaid as from the actual words; Duras makes us aware of the couple's inner life through the incompleteness of their descriptions of themselves. In the first place their memories are impressionistic and allusive; the girl's reminiscences of cherry-picking and the man's account of the golden evening in the zoological garden gain their effect through restraint and omission. The very fragmentation of their memories points to what is unarticulated and private, and allows the merest glimpses into the past happiness that

is their personal possession.

Duras manipulates the form of the couple's remarks to hint succinctly at more than what they intend to give away. The very coolness of their words gives them a bitter poignancy, for the depth of their feelings shows through. Each attempts to understate his own pathetic circumstances, and deny the very emotions that are creeping through. Words have effects diametrically opposed to their intention, in that they give away precisely what they are supposed to conceal. In this context Duras makes subtle use of attenuating phrases, with which characters introduce or qualify their remarks. The girl attempts to underrate her sorrow: "Évidemment il y a des moments où je pleure, c'est vrai, mais c'est seulement d'impatience, d'irritation si vous voulez. Non, l'occasion de m'attrister enfin sérieusement sur moi-même, je l'attends encore" (pp.84-5) [my underlining]. The whole elaborate denial comes crashing down precisely because she brings in too many qualifications, too many half-truths. It is something more crushing than impatience that drives her to tears. The salesman tries to nullify his emotion and denigrate his wretched state: "Lorsqu'on sait que sa mort ne fera souffrir personne, pas même un petit chien, je trouve qu'elle s'allège de beaucoup de son poids" (p.31). This is one of the most devastating images of solitude in the whole work. He tries to counteract (for his own peace of mind) and hide (from his companion) what must be a terrible sense of alienation by pretending that dying alone alleviates the pain of death, since no-one will be troubled by his passing.

The reader must pay the closest attention to detect the reality behind the evasions, the half-truths, the imperceptible hesitations. All are clues to the couple's inner suffering and sense of futility, and to their hidden life that is only vaguely defined and would perhaps be distorted by words. Indeed there are hints that vital events are happening at the

sub-vocal level, that more is going on within them than they are prepared to admit, or of which they may even be conscious. On the verbal level the man and girl are trying to define their outlooks relative to each other, and express their interpretation of happiness; mentally they may be drawing closer through understanding and sympathy for each other's situation. At only one or two junctures does Duras suggest that the lonely creatures may be experiencing a growing awareness of each other, an awareness that breaks surface in an unprompted remark. The man pays a sudden compliment, or appears over-anxious to reassure the girl about her future; such are the only signs that emotions are germinating. One such moment occurs when the girl is expatiating on her right to happiness:

-- [ ... ] Peu m'importe, d'ailleurs, au fond, le bonheur ou alors autre chose, peu m'importe, mais quelque chose à me mettre sous la dent. [ ... ] Je ne peux pas imaginer mourir un jour sans avoir eu mon comptant, quitte, le soir, à le regarder à mon tour avec l'air de Madame lorsqu'elle vient me voir.

-- On vous imagine <sup>mal</sup> / des yeux lassés, Mademoiselle. Vous l'ignorez peut-être, mais vous avez de bien beaux yeux.

-- Ils seront beaux, Monsieur, à leur temps. (pp.98-9)

The man's brusque interruption shows that during her tirade he has been following a quite different train of thought, and regarding the girl in a new light. In their final words, behind the modesty and politeness, one finds a trace of cautious optimism:

-- J'ai comme l'impression que vous le connaissez [ le plaisir ] moins que vous pouvez le penser, je m'excuse, Monsieur. Je parle du plaisir de danser.

-- Oui, de danser avec vous, Mademoiselle."

L'enfant se mit à geindre de nouveau.

"On s'en va, lui dit la jeune fille et, - à l'adresse de l'homme - je vous dis au revoir, Monsieur, peut-être donc à ce samedi qui vient.

-- Peut-être, oui, Mademoiselle, au revoir!" (pp.155-6)

The novel's fundamental ambiguity lies in the contrast between their unspoken proximity and the separateness maintained by their excessive formality of speech: although they have achieved a mutual understanding, can they have formed a durable personal relationship when they have preserved to the end their stiffness of manner? On this the narrator offers no

reassurance.

The stylised conversation of M. Andemas has much in common with Le Square. The old man and Mme Arc speak an elaborate language whose effect is to preserve the politeness and distance between them. The average individual would be unlikely to express himself in formalised terms like the following:

-- Quand je me réveille, Madame Arc, à mon âge, de ces siestes de vieillard dont vous parlez, d'un sommeil épais comme de la poix, avec mes souvenirs je sais que c'est une plaisanterie très commune de croire qu'il sert à quelque chose d'avoir eu une vie si longue. (pp.116-7)

The rambling diffuseness of the conversation is also reminiscent of Le Square; here too by a process of free association the characters return to what is preying on their minds. Madame Arc's hesitant, uncertain manner, her deep interest in Valérie are only clarified slowly, as her words, in ever-decreasing circles, enclose around her hidden fear of the future. Little by little she gives herself away:

-- L'auto de Valérie n'est plus sur la place, annonce-t-elle.  
-- Ah! vous voyez, s'écrie M. Andemas.  
Le chant s'éleva une nouvelle fois, saccagé par la distance.  
On baissa le pick-up plus vite que la fois précédente.  
-- Alors je crois qu'ils ne vont pas tarder à venir, dit-elle.  
Ils sont tous les deux très honnêtes et charmants. (p.99)

There is more behind her words than the ear can at first appreciate. They are meant as a warning: she deliberately describes Valérie and Michel Arc in conjunction with each other. One also detects a note of jealousy in the word "charmants." Madame Arc's words are tentative, insinuating, rather than direct.

L'Amante anglaise is entirely constructed on dialogue, but there any similarity with Le Square ends. The neutrality of the conversations places it at the opposite pole: the complex sentences, the stylised language are completely absent, and fortunately so, since Duras sets out to provide an unadorned and unbiased picture of the three individuals concerned. Robert Lamy and Pierre Lannes are the most ordinary and undistinguished

provincials, and speak the informal, natural language of "le Français moyen." Claire's words too are mostly direct and simple.

The men's testimonies unfold almost exclusively in a minor key - Lamy's words are calm and detached, Pierre tries to remain cool - and because of this controlled tone the slightest increase in tension creates a crescendo, as at the moments when bitterness and regret overcome Pierre:

-- [ ... ] Peut-être que je n'ai jamais rencontré de femme que j'aime assez pour la quitter, elle [ Claire ]. J'ai cru le contraire une ou deux fois mais maintenant, avec l'éloignement, je sais que je n'ai encore aimé aucune femme comme je l'ai aimée elle. Elle ne le sait pas. (pp.97-8)

The book gains its rhythm from the flow of the language - slow and unruffled in Lamy's testimony, more modulated in the case of Pierre, until finally with Claire's confession the tempo is extremely varied, since her conversation is a concatenation of staccato phrases, worried questions, lyrical reminiscences and long, confused tirades.

The form is particularly suited to the theme, since the writer/interrogator is seeking above all to uncover the characters' own opinions on the crime and its motives. Hence what they say is of prime importance. Since the writer is conducting an investigation, the tape-recorder offers the most reliable means of preserving authenticity and "impersonality." The work resembles a skeleton for a novel ("Un livre sur le crime de Viorne commence à se faire," the interrogator explains, p.9) or a work of non-fiction upon which the writer refuses to pin any flesh. Duras's aim was to stay in the wings: "J'entendais pourtant parler mes personnages. Alors j'ai pris des notes. Et le livre est sorti sous la forme qu'il a, antérieure à toute élaboration." (12)

As we have seen, the interrogations do not go the whole way towards uncovering Claire's motives, and illustrate the impossibility of gaining objective truth. There is a gap between what characters say and what they remember, between what they see of others and what others feel at heart,

between illusion and truth. As Lamy asks:

-- La différence entre ce que je sais et ce que je dirai, qu'en faites-vous?

(-- Elle représente la part du livre à faire par le lecteur. Elle existe toujours.) (pp.9-10)

Much of the book depends on our own deductions. We feel our opinions shifting, modifying, as new levels of truth undermine previous impressions. We discover, for example, a mental world in Claire of which her husband is quite oblivious.

Duras's work has striking affinities with Truman Capote's celebrated In Cold Blood, where the writer also recorded interviews with two murderers. The radical difference is that Capote then elaborated the basic material describing a real series of events into a full-scale work which contained much of himself. Duras's approach is quite the opposite - she starts from an artistic inspiration then endows the work with a spurious objectivity by pretending to remain detached. She refuses to embroider or comment on the protagonists' statements, though these proceed directly from her own imagination. It is this strange paradox that gives the work an unsatisfactory artificiality.

Conversation has lost its previous function as a guide to the inner life in Duras's recent fiction. The dialogues in Lol V. Stein, in ironic contrast with Jacques Hold's overblown narrative style, are a series of neutral, clipped exchanges. They add little definition to the shadowy characters. Certainly Lol's words - the way she unexpectedly changes subject, the occasional disruptions in mid-sentence - point to her disordered mentality. At times Duras shows a tendency to over-dramatisation, to bestow upon the dialogue an ominous quality:

J'ai encore envie de fuir.

-- Mais qu'est-ce que vous voulez?

[ Lol ] ne le sait pas.

-- Je veux, dit-elle.

Elle se tait, regarde ma bouche. Et puis voici, nous avons les yeux dans les yeux. Despotique, irrésistiblement, elle veut.

-- Pourquoi?

Elle fait signe: non, dit mon nom.  
-- Jacques Hold. (p.130)

At such moments the characters talk as if in an hallucination. The effect is a rather absurd theatricality. In Le Vice-consul Duras has fashioned the dialogue to increase the atmosphere of strangeness and mystery. The many conversations about Jean-Marc, for example, turn round in circles without ever penetrating his exterior. As we noted earlier, the embassy party seems to ring with the voices of unseen spectators, whose hypotheses on the vice-consul's personal life merely exacerbate the confusion.

The purpose of conversation in the political novels (Détruire dit-elle and Abahn Sabana David) is totally different. In the first place conversation does not demonstrate "personality," since this is precisely what is missing from the shadowy protagonists who are progressing into a state of non-identity. They exist as metaphors, as the embodiment of the political vision, and in their mouths Duras places all references to the central themes.

The two works therefore lean very heavily on conversation, though it is of a highly unusual nature. Duras uses a brief, oblique narrative form and condenses a whole political outlook into a very short space. Ideas have been distilled into their essence, and are transmitted through a laconic dialogue consisting of terse allusions rather than expanded statements. Because of its closeness of texture the conversation demands the most careful attention, for words that may seem irrelevant non-sequiturs are essential to our understanding. No detail is gratuitous, though it may be mentioned once and no more. In Détruire dit-elle elliptical remarks are crammed with meaning; in the following sentences characters allude to their spiritual unrest, to anguish, and to the uncertainty of the future:

-- Je dors mal. Je redoute d'aller dans ma chambre. Je tourne en proie à des pensées exténuantes. (p.16)

- Comment vivre? demande Alissa dans un souffle.  
-- Qu'allons-nous devenir? demande Stein. (p.107)

And Alissa reveals herself as the agent of destruction in a single word, "Détruire" (p.34). Such momentary suggestions depend for their effect upon the associations awoken in the reader's mind. This is particularly true of Abahn, where the entire narrative is constructed on oblique questions and answers and clipped exchanges:

- Qu'est-ce qu'il [le juif] disait?  
-- Il disait: Plus rien, dit Abahn, autre chose, autrement, ailleurs. (p.91)

Political problems especially are evoked in a fleeting reference. The following remark obviously alludes to the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968; David represents those who became the tools of hard-line Communism:

- Celui-là, ils l'ont envoyé à Prague, dit-elle. [...]  
Elle désigne David. (p.49)

Thus the function of conversation has changed radically, and it remains to be seen whether Duras has permanently abandoned the delicate and suggestive use of dialogue for which she became famous.

#### d. Setting and Meaning

Much of the charm of Duras's novels lies in her use of description; she has a rare talent for capturing the moods of nature, which one senses as a living presence. Moreover, the description is never merely decorative, never gratuitous, rather it serves to underline theme, and its meaning varies with Duras's central concerns.

The descriptive passages of the two early novels paint the setting in which the emotional drama unfolds. The changing aspect of the lush countryside, the revolving seasons represent the ordered pattern of time that contrasts with the chaos of human lives. Already the writer shows

a gift for the precise evocation of moments of lyrical beauty:

La pluie tombait drue comme de la grêle, autour de la métairie. Sur l'étang d'un vert sombre dont elle criblait la surface, les deux meules qui tiraient déjà sur leur fin projetaient leur ombre. La pluie accusait encore la nonchalance de l'été, exprimait son opulence dans ces feuillages gonflés, cette chaleur opaque et dense, ces fruits tombés qui jonchaient les allées de leurs fraîches pourritures. (Les Impudents, p.84)

The passage is typical of Duras's early work: it is graphic, expansive, contains a rich variety of detail. Gradually she will move away from such exactness to a careful choice of a few visual images that bring alive a landscape by working on the reader's imagination. In her major works Duras's word-paintings are impressionistic as opposed to realistic. Changes in the atmosphere, effects of light and shadow, glimpses of the sea or rustling trees, often reiterated at different points in the story, create poetic effects and conjure up a mood. One need only look at M. Andesmas to see how far Duras has progressed. Time and again the old man's gaze falls on the same vivid details - the stirring breezes, the shifting angle of light on the hillside, the movement of the sun that mark the orderly passing of the hours:

L'ombre du hêtre se dirigeait vers elle [Mme Arc]. Et alors qu'ils se taisaient tous deux et qu'elle était toujours dans la scrutation rigide et fascinée de la place du village, M. Andesmas, lui, voyait que cette ombre du hêtre allait vers elle, dans une appréhension grandissante. (p.79)

The shadows lengthen, just as the shadow of age creeps across the lives of M. Andesmas and the lonely woman.

Setting in the novels from Le Marin onwards serves two distinct purposes. In the first place description is one of the principal methods of punctuating the narrative to create the interplay of dialogue and silence. The external world stands as the antithesis of the internal life, yet Duras's skill lies in employing one to hint at the other.

Secondly, setting creates the moral climate of the novel, and is emblematic of the themes. The natural world especially is a palpable

presence and contributes in a number of works to the claustrophobia that throws individuals off-balance. What lingers hauntingly in the mind is the choking oppressiveness, the powerful combination of outer pressures that reinforce inner tensions. The elements that weigh down upon the characters are the physical expression of their psychic states.

Heat above all is a hostile force; it nearly drives the foreigners in Calcutta insane (Le Vice-consul). In Le Marin the stifling heat of Pisa and Florence, dulling the senses and preying on the mind, underlines the malaise and frustration in human life. A powerful passage describes the dog-days as some heaven-sent pestilence:

Angoissée autant que par les pestes et les guerres, la population, pendant quatre jours, n'eut pas d'autre souci que de durer. Non seulement ce n'était pas une température pour les hommes, mais pour les bêtes non plus ce n'en était pas une. Au zoo, un chimpanzé en mourut. Et des poissons eux-mêmes en moururent, asphyxiés. Ils empuantissaient l'Arno, on parla d'eux dans les journaux. Le macadam des rues était gluant. (p.25)

Life ceases; love, reason, human personality no longer have any credibility in the stifling aridity.

The setting reflects in microcosm the world of the protagonists in Tarquinia. The dullness of the resort, and the scorching, heavy, languorous atmosphere are suggestive of all existence. Diana asks Sara why she is on edge:

-- C'est cet endroit? toujours cet endroit?  
-- Il n'y a jamais que les endroits, dit Sara en souriant. (p.28)

Sara is allowed no escape from her marital problems - books fall apart in her hands - and she and her husband walk about like somnambulists, too dazed to act. Only their child sleeps well, ignorant of the adults' passions and irritability, and oblivious of the hostile elements. Again in Dix heures et demie it is the freak storms, bursting and subsiding with disturbing regularity, that create the claustrophobia and exacerbate the tense nerves. Forced into the overcrowded hotel, Maria, Pierre and Claire are shut in with their emotions: "Il n'y a pas de place, durant cette

nuit, dans cette ville, pour l'amour. Maria baisse les yeux devant cette évidence: ils resteront sur leur soif entière" (p.49).

(It is significant, also, that the protagonists are on holiday in three of these novels (and Anne Desbaresdes is a woman of considerable means who has too much time on her hands). The setting is specifically chosen to allow the characters the freedom to live out their destinies. On holiday they are outside routine; no ritual tasks can distract them, and they are placed in direct confrontation with their problems. Moreover, men and women are stripped of their façade:

Mais l'été, la véritable nature des gens apparaissait bien mieux. Les conduites des hommes étaient bien plus significatives l'été que l'hiver. Enfin, on pouvait le croire. Sous le soleil, les caractères s'ouvraient et se faisaient voir. (Tarquinia, p.244)

Characters are for once "being themselves.")

Perhaps Duras has never surpassed her achievement in Moderato Cantabile, where the picturesque detail is rich in resonance and meaning: the boats leaving harbour, with their temptation to escape; the boulevard stretching along the shore and separating the worlds of passion and conformity; the factory-sirens and the workers, reminders of Anne's husband, the industrialist. Even more memorable is the way in which the setting intensifies the drama. Each conversation takes place at the onset of evening, dusk and lengthening shadows. Scarlet skies glow over the sea, and the last rays of the sun aureole the couple. The atmosphere of sensuality is increased by the dominance of red and black: "Le mur du fond de la salle s'illumina du soleil couchant. En son milieu, le trou noir de leurs ombres conjuguées se dessina" (p.59).

It is the interweaving of description and dialogue that gives the work its tempo and justifies the title. "Modéré et chantant," the music-teacher explains, and the moderation is felt in the economy and control of the conversation, whilst the choice of colourful detail gives the narrative that lyrical, "chantant," almost operatic quality.

The background of India, bathed in its "lumière crépusculaire," bestows on Le Vice-consul both its beauty and its atmosphere of menace. One remembers the splendour of the tropical landscapes, the vegetation, the rivers and swamps, but the most powerful impression is of filth and disease, of mass-starvation; human degradation lingers behind the drama, and forms a horrifying contrast with the opulence of the diplomatic community. Moreover India is taken as the most extreme example of the tragedy of the human condition, against which the vice-consul's action is aimed.

Setting contributes much to the opacity and weirdness of Lol V. Stein. From the start we are plunged into a dream-world, at once fascinating and mysterious, where towns cannot be placed in any one country or time: S. Tahla, T. Beach. The urban landscapes have the vagueness of Kafka's; S. Tahla is faceless, a meandering nowhere of suburban bungalows and gardens, and Lol and her future lover pursue each other through the town along endless boulevards:

Le centre de S. Tahla est étendu, moderne, à rues perpendiculaires. Le quartier résidentiel est à l'ouest de ce centre, large, il prend ses aises, plein de méandres, d'impasses imprévues. Il y a une forêt et des champs, des routes, après ce quartier. (p.44)

The strangeness stems from the absence of colour, the stark descriptions of a geometrical world. The setting increases the sense of uncertainty that pervades the novel, the feeling that there is more behind words and actions than is ever adequately revealed.

In her two most recent books Duras uses physical description mainly for symbolic purposes. The entire action of Détruire dit-elle unfolds in a place purporting to be a hotel, but which may equally well be a sanatorium or an asylum, especially considering that some of the guests are mad. The setting is removed from everyday existence, and all references to the outside world are deliberately restricted. The "hotel" symbolises a world divorced from time and normality, a world as unlike the one we

know as possible, since its inhabitants have thrown off their ties with previous existence. The nearby forest, too, has an emblematic value: it is the place of destruction, where the "psychological murder" must be perpetrated before an individual can know the new insanity. The atmosphere of Abahn Sabana David is perhaps the most bleak and chilling in all of Duras's fiction. Again the setting is symbolic: the town and country are ill-defined because, as we saw in an earlier chapter, they are universalised. The icy landscape, the howling dogs, the screams suggest the anguish and cruelty of existence, whilst the frequent bursts of gunfire come from the oppressors who trample upon mankind.

Thus setting is used to illustrate and enhance theme. Since her earliest work Duras has dispensed with descriptions of a particular social setting (of the kind common in the traditional novel) that sketch a character's background and throw light on his identity. Duras's novels are not social commentaries.

NOTES

- (1) J.-M. Fossey, p.21.
- (2) cf. Alain Robbe-Grillet, Pour un nouveau roman, Paris, Collection Idées," Gallimard, 1967, p.149.
- (3) The questions of "point of view" and authorial omniscience have of course preoccupied novelists for generations, and some of the solutions adopted foreshadow Duras's techniques. What I have here called the "recording consciousness" bears similarities with techniques in some novels of Henry James (e.g., The Ambassadors). James insisted that, rather than appear an all-knowing intermediary between narrative and reader, the novelist should attempt to reveal events through the eyes of protagonists involved. He often uses a third-person/restricted angle of vision technique. There are distinguished examples among the works of other writers: Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, where action is refracted through the consciousness of the hero, and Virginia Woolf's The Waves, a third-person narration composed entirely of the mental events of six people.

Most of all Duras is the successor of Sartre in rejecting the standpoint of the Almighty:

De plus, en renonçant à la fiction du narrateur tout-connaissant, nous avons assumé l'obligation de supprimer les intermédiaires entre le lecteur et les subjectivités-point-de-vue de nos personnages; il s'agit de le faire entrer dans les consciences comme dans un moulin, il faut même qu'il coïncide successivement avec chacune d'entre elles.

Jean-Paul Sartre, Situations II, Paris, Gallimard, 1948, p.327.

Sartre employs the third-person/limited viewpoint shifting between a number of characters, in Les Chemins de la Liberté.

A fuller study of Duras's use of narrative viewpoint, particularly the single viewpoint in Tarquinia and Dix heures et demie, is given by J.S. Bratton, pp.264ff.

- (4) See chapter on "Style."
- (5) J. Rivette/J. Narboni, p.45.
- (6) cf. Michel Butor's Réseau aérien (pièce radiophonique), 1962, which can either be heard as a radio-play or read as a book with a complex technical structure.
- (7) J. Rivette/J. Narboni, p.45.
- (8) cf. for example Brett Ashley's repeated "What a bore!" in Fiesta.
- (9) cf. Hemingway's frequent use of "good," "fine," "swell," whose flatness suggests that the real sentiment is hidden beneath. An outstanding example of understated terror concludes The Killers (in Men Without Women).

(10) C. Damiens.

(11) Quotations in this chapter are taken from the novel  
(1955).

(12) J. Piatier.

Chapter 11.

TECHNIQUE IN THE PLAYS:

The Use of Dialogue.

Duras has always had a special interest in the theatre, though not until it was suggested she should create a stage-version of Le Square, did she decide to embark on a career as a dramatist. However, she has never dedicated herself completely to play-writing; she is aware that because she is chiefly interested in experimentation, her works are unlikely to appeal to the boulevard public or to be a resounding commercial success. (1) All the same, two at least have enjoyed considerable popularity on both sides of the Channel - Des Journées entières dans les arbres and L'Amante anglaise. (2)

On first acquaintance Duras's plays may cause some surprise. The majority have the impressionistic and laconic qualities of much of her fiction; they are cameo-pieces rather than full-scale dramas and provide only the briefest evening's theatre. Duras pays little attention to plot and hardly more to characterization: the salesman and maid, Claire Lannes, and the terrifying mother in Des Journées entières have considerable complexity and indeed are powerful creations, but the rest are sketchily drawn. Duras's plays could not be termed naturalistic; rather she aims, in the majority, at which might be called heightened reality. She is careful to situate most of them in credible settings - a hotel-lounge (La Musica) or a deserted Saint-Tropez villa (Suzanna Andler); in Des Journées entières Jacques's flat, "désolé, meublé, dirait-on, de vieux meubles d'hôtel" reflects his restless and basically barren existence; Les Viaducs unfolds in a living-room and a typical provincial bistrot, and conversations are interrupted by the rattle of trains passing under the viaduct. The point is that Duras inserts into this realistic context a dialogue of extreme artificiality which abstracts the drama from normality.

Dialogue, indeed, is the most important element in Duras's plays. She is attracted to the theatre by the potentialities of the spoken language, and it is the sonority and variety of the language she employs that give her theatrical works their shape and their rhythm. The importance she attaches to the flow of the dialogue can be judged from her attitude towards the plays she directed herself - Yes, peut-être and Le Shaga. The text was considerably altered during rehearsals when she heard the words spoken by the players; she spent three months changing and adding to the pieces, experimenting constantly with the actors to find the best verbal effects. (3)

Before examining the various uses Duras makes of dialogue, it is important to consider the architecture of the plays; they are in fact distinguished by the looseness of their structure. Although they are extremely economical, revolving around a single capital moment or a short period of moral crisis, and their time-span rarely exceeds a few hours, they can be strangely disconcerting, for in contrast to this tight outer structure there appears to be no inner architecture. Like a large number of contemporary dramatists, Duras has left the tradition of the "well-made play" far behind. In performance her plays seem shapeless and desultory, without any dramatic progression or in many cases traceable plot; instead they rely for their effect on a succession of moods created by a contrasting series of dialogues.

It is true that in certain of her pieces there is a kind of hidden structure in the emotional development taking place during the play. Le Square and La Musica are on the surface brief and random dialogues between two people, and Suzanna Andler is made up of a group of loosely-

connected scenes in which characters meet, and talk about themselves, about love and life. In each case there is until the end no visible change in situation or progression, but underneath an emotional rapport has been gradually established between a man and woman. The conversations form a verbal framework, concealing the essential unspoken drama; feelings have grown but remain largely unarticulated and even unapprehended. The plays only work when an audience is made to sense intuitively this linear development at the heart of the drama.

These plays are, however, the exceptions. In Les Viaducs - essentially a public confession of murder - Duras was interested in revealing the frightening depths of human motives and not in writing a fast-moving drama, hence one sees little dramatic progression and no attempt to increase tension until the climactic scene in which the aged couple enter a kind of liberating trance and confess their crime. Again, Des Journées entières, closely adapted from the short story, lacks the earlier work's links between scenes and seems jerky and fragmented. Duras sets out only to define the central situation - the mother-son relationship - and the plot is minimal.

Yet, although these plays seem aimless and diffuse, there is at least some progression in that the initial situation is resolved at the end. The same cannot be said for Duras's farces (Les Eaux et forêts, Yes, peut-être and Le Shaga) in which Duras has dispensed with any structure whatsoever. These plays are nothing more than confrontations between three grotesques who gather by accident in one place; they appear to lead nowhere and in theory could continue indefinitely. The maniacs of Le Shaga could go on playing games and jabbering away merrily for hours.

Duras prefers to rely entirely on dialogue to bestow on her plays their

inner architecture. Her most important consideration is not a strong central plot but what she calls "l'aménagement du tempo," (4) the creation of rhythm and variety of mood through the manipulation of language. Thus the dramatic movement, increase in tension, and climaxes come entirely from the dialogue. It is fashioned in two distinct ways: Duras aims at a contrapuntal effect of words and silence similar to that which characterises a number of her novels, or (in the majority of her plays) creates shifting patterns of language, an oscillation of verbal styles. The following discussion attempts to trace the continuing use of these techniques through several works, while indicating the particular functions of dialogue in individual plays.

The first of the two devices described above - the interplay of dialogue and silence - can be seen in the stage-version of Le Square. The book required virtually no changes in order to be translated onto the stage (though the original version was considerably abridged) because of its inherent theatricality. All the same, Duras made one important adjustment which demonstrates that, even at this early stage, she was well versed in the demands of drama: "le travail a été de décongestionner le texte pour qu'il trouve la respiration propre à l'interprétation théâtrale." (5) By "respiration" she means the natural tempo, which is here created by silences. The essential difference between novel and play is the skilful insertion of those intervals and gaps that occur constantly in human intercourse. They represent those moments when the man and girl are alone with their thoughts, or communication has momentarily ceased, and they give the play its almost musical movement.

The musical analogies are immediately apparent in the title of La Musica, in which the conversation is punctuated with frequent pauses and silences. The hesitations and reticence betray what the estranged couple are too nervous to avow openly. For both of them mention of their lives

together is still distressing, and their words keep leading them into tight corners. Uncertain how far to reveal themselves, anxious not to hurt by harking back to the past with excessive brutality, they stop abruptly in mid-sentence. Duras's art lies in letting Anne-Marie and Michel say just enough for the audience to glimpse their hidden emotions. Michel cannot resist asking her if she has returned to their former home:

LUI: Vous êtes retournée ... à La Boissière?

ELLE (regard surpris): Oui, ma foi. Je n'étais jamais revenue depuis... (Sourire.) Vous en venez vous aussi, non?

LUI, (confus, surpris): Comment savez-vous?

ELLE: Il m'a semblé vous apercevoir en haut de la côte quand j'arrivais... mais je n'étais pas sûre...

LUI, (regarde ailleurs): Oui, je suis passé devant la maison.

(Un temps, gêne.) Dites-moi, ce n'était pas à des gens aussi jeunes qu'elle avait été vendue il me semble?

ELLE: Non... elle a dû changer de main entre-temps... ces deux personnes qui dînaient, je ne les connaissais pas...

LUI, (sourire): Oui... c'est une drôle d'impression... la salle à manger est là où... elle était... même la télévision... (pp.147-8)

At the back of their minds is the memory of their own time together, and in the new couple, though they will not admit it, they see a reflection of themselves. Their words give away more than they intend.

Thanks to the use of evocative silences, elliptical phrases can have more resonance than a whole tirade. At capital moments knowledge passes between the couple at an unspoken level, as when she describes her new lover:

ELLE, (distracte): Lui, c'est quelqu'un que vous ne connaissez pas... vous ne l'avez jamais rencontré...

LUI: Et...

ELLE, (a compris qu'il lui demandait si elle aime cet homme nouveau): Oui. (Un temps.) C'est bien. C'est bien comme ça... (p.156)

The slight hesitation in her voice indicates both that her thoughts are elsewhere with the other man, and that she is anything but certain of her love for him. The repeated "C'est bien" suggests that she is seeking reassurance for herself.

The vocabulary throughout is simple and direct, but through the movement of the dialogue, through the intervals in speech, it is invested

with an emotional significance greater than in everyday experience.

In technique Suzanna Andler is the successor of La Musica. Few playwrights can have used the interplay of dialogue and silence as extensively as Duras in this study of an adulterous woman's torment: "temps" and "silence" are the most common stage-directions, giving the play its slow, measured movement. The silences indicate mental events and unarticulated affective states, or those moments when characters have a verbal blockage and are encased in their own preoccupations. One of the most poignant passages occurs during Suzanna's telephone conversation with her husband. Unknown to her, Jean is only seeking confirmation of her infidelity, of which he is already aware:

JEAN, (temps): Suzanna?

SUZANNA, (temps): Oui.

JEAN, (doux): Je voulais te demander quelque chose. Je peux?

SUZANNA, (retard): Oui.

JEAN, (retard): Tu n'es pas seule à Saint-Tropez?

SUZANNA, (tout à coup très nette): Non.

(Silence. Dialogue très lent.)

SUZANNA: On te l'a dit?

JEAN, (temps): Même si on me l'avait dit... Je ne crois que toi.

(Silence, le plus lourd)

JEAN: Je suis heureux pour toi.

SUZANNA, (temps): C'est vrai?

JEAN, (sourire dans la voix): C'est-à-dire... (temps) ... un jour nous parlerons de nous... (p.54)

The intervals in their dialogue suggest a whole series of mental events. At the start both are fearful of the truth, and scared to make an admission. Suzanna is anxious not to hurt him. After her curt "Non," Jean is speechless and one can only guess at his unhappiness, though he tries his best to appear unmoved. His final remark conceals a note of resignation and bitterness at what they have lost.

The dialogue is also crammed with urgent questions. The protagonists try to probe each other, to learn more about each other's feelings, and live in a state of continual uncertainty about the future. In this way Duras suggests that much of their private world is hidden from others, and words cannot communicate all that the characters would wish.

The rhythm of the dialogue is for the most part slow and controlled, and because of this continual low key Duras can achieve the maximum effect with little effort; dramatic crescendoes are created through sudden revelations, a cruel or penetrating remark, or an unexpected upsurge in emotion:

MICHEL: Je viendrai ici avec tous mes bagages. Je veux la chambre là-haut. Je prendrai mon petit déjeuner avec toi sur la terrasse. Un été avec toi. Dans le mensonge et la vérité.

SUZANNA: Oui.

(Silence)

MICHEL: Je t'aime Suzanna.

(Elle reste interdite. Silence)

MICHEL: J'ai envie de nager. (p.70)

Michel's first speech begins in a straightforward manner, and ends on a more poetic note that preludes his confession. After it, Duras maintains silence for a second before breaking the mood and bringing the couple back to earth.

The stage-version of L'Amante anglaise is of course entirely dependent on the spoken word. (6) The novel has been substantially reduced and, in particular, sentences have been pared down to a more clipped form that slightly increases the speed. The importance of the silences (represented simply by gaps in the text of both novel and play) is immediately apparent in performance. They underline the moments when characters' thoughts are elsewhere. In Pierre's case they reveal his subterfuge, his attempts to cover up the truth about his own life with Claire and particularly about his attitude towards her:

L'INTERROGATEUR: Vous aviez peur qu'elle [ Claire ] se supprime ou bien vous l'espérez?

PIERRE: Je ne sais plus. (play, p.9)

His long hesitation suggests that he would rather not admit the truth, even to himself, and when finally obliged to say something, his reply is quite obviously a lie, for he could not possibly have forgotten.

The pre-eminence of dialogue has dictated the austerity and almost

classical simplicity of the form: the play is simply two interrogations on stage. As in the classical theatre all trappings are stripped away to concentrate attention on the dialogue: "L'Amante anglaise devrait être représentée sur un podium avancé, devant le rideau de fer baissé, dans une salle restreinte, sans décors ni costumes" (play, p.8). The spectator is confronted with two living, recognisable individuals abstracted from their social context. Pierre and Claire do not act out roles in a dramatic real-life situation, but are defined solely by their own confessions.

Whether such a static piece can be regarded as "theatre" is open to question. (7) There are no stage-directions in the text, and in both the French and English productions, the two people interrogated scarcely moved. (8) (In the distinguished original production Madeleine Renaud gave a touching performance as Claire; she remained serene and hardly moved a muscle. Peggy Ashcroft showed more external manifestations of instability: she fidgeted and fumbled, suddenly changed her expression by pouting her lips, and jerked her head frequently). Yet despite the complete absence of external action the piece is remarkably gripping; the suspense is maintained by the flow of the dialogue, by the succinct and increasingly intimate questions that tear away one veil after another. L'Amante anglaise is a very difficult play to produce, for if the sombre lines are to be injected with emotional warmth, the direction and performances must be immaculate and convey all the suggestions behind the words and silences.

Many of Duras's plays have a structure similar to musical composition, in that their pattern is in effect a modulation of verbal styles. The dialogue oscillates between direct, colloquial discourse, lyricism, hesitant phrases, expansive tirades, and at times grotesque comedy. The

result is constantly varying tempo and mood.

Les Viaducs is the first play to rely in this manner on the changing contours of the language. The most striking quality of the dialogue is the continual smooth alternation between quick, natural exchanges and long tirades. By a kind of counterpoint each verbal style throws the other into relief, separating successive mental moments when the couple gain, or regain, insights into their interior life:

MARCEL, (il revient au sujet): De quoi tu te souviens exactement?

CLAIRE: Du temps.

MARCEL, (découragé): Quelle facilité!

CLAIRE: De l'hiver. Des hivers. Des chambres qui s'assombrissaient très tôt, l'hiver. Le jardin, c'était un peu plus tard. (Effrayée) Des fleurs qui, lentement, dans le crépuscule, se décoloraient, se décoloraient, jusqu'à l'uniformité... à n'y pas croire! (pp.37-8)

The alternation is equally one of mood, as the couple wax nostalgic, are consumed with regret, or fearfully discover clues to their motives for violence. Or the conversation will unexpectedly strike a note of gruesome humour:

CLAIRE: Qu'est-ce que tu veux... L'idée de ce viaduc me plaisait, elle correspondait assez bien à l'idée que je m'étais faite de la mort. Une jambe gauche à Bordeaux. Une main droite à Brest. Ils peuvent toujours y aller ensuite pour la sépulture, ah ah... Ça les fera rigoler, ces monsieurs... (p.51)

The tone will also become more poetic and evocative, particularly at the shocking moment of confession, when Claire and Marcel will themselves into a somnambulistic state. Their impetuous revelation arouses in them an exhilaration that is close to ecstasy; yet their imprecise and haunting words give the barest suggestion of their private dream-world (pp.113ff).

The trouble with Les Viaducs is that the dialogue fails to bring alive the central characters, who remain as flat as cardboard. Their words rarely suggest an unseen personality behind the façade (unlike Le Square) and while this is of little importance in the majority of Duras's plays, it is essential that one should be able to accept the complexity of the two people's personalities in order to believe that violent impulses are buried in their psyche. Besides, the words placed in their mouths sound

unconvincing. It was perhaps this crucial flaw that led the writer to call Les Viaducs "antipathiques et faux" (9) and to rethink the situation completely in L'Amante anglaise, which provides a far more penetrating study of the psychotic mind.

In Des Journées entières, rhythm is again created by an oscillating dialogue, which swings between simple conversation, lyrical and touching moments when mother and son share a distant memory, and the mother's seemingly interminable monologues. The central purpose of the dialogue is to delineate the manic old woman; it is shaped by her cantankerous and volatile moods, and its climaxes occur when she is carried away by her own ravings.

Through the dialogue we gain the impression of an obsessive and self-centred woman. Her incessant babble, as if she dared not be silent for a moment, is a mass of contradictions, and is punctuated by snappy interjections that are the hallmark of the compulsive talker: "te l'ai-je dit?", "nom d'un chien." The mother's enervating manner of reiterating *ad nauseam* takes the conversation into the realm of fantasy:

LA MÈRE, (grandiloquente comme elle le sera souvent): C'est que je suis habituée aux grands espaces, aux grandes maisons, trop grandes, avec des jardins autour..., des hectares..., toujours trop grandes..., où j'ai peur la nuit quand j'entends un chien... laissez-moi parler mon petit ... comme mes idées..., mes enfants... comme mes projets... (p.87)

Among the memorable moments is the first scene of Act Two (a new invention not found in the story): the odd trio wander from shop to shop as the mother gives full rein to her chaotic chatter. The scene has great visual and aural impact.

One of the dialogue's distinctive features is the way in which - unexpectedly, and only for a second - it will illuminate the characters' private emotions. A few phrases suddenly hint at their secret life, like a momentary glimpse into an abyss. The spectator is left to imagine the wealth of associations behind their unamplified remarks:

LA MÈRE, (comme s'excusant): Ah! mon petit, tu ne peux pas savoir la sorte de faim que c'est... [ ... ]  
LE FILS, (riant): Moi aussi, j'ai toujours faim.  
LA MÈRE, (tendre): Comme à vingt ans, petit?  
LE FILS: Oui. Quand je mange, c'est la chance.  
LA MÈRE, (tendre et fière): Quel fils j'ai là! Quel fils! (p.91)

All action in Un Homme est venu me voir is concentrated in the verbal tournament between the two disgraced Russians. The rhythm is at times ponderous as they propound an ideology in extensive formal speeches, whilst at other moments it accelerates into passages of stichomythia; the mood is intermittently calm, aggressive, bitter. The most startling sequence of dialogue occurs when they recite verbatim the words they employed at the treason-trial some eighteen years earlier (pp.268ff). The technique shifts the piece onto another plane of time and the men literally relive their roles of judge and accused. This episode, in which questions and answers are darted back and forth, provides virtually the only theatrical excitement.

The heaviness and gloom of this play could hardly be further removed from the vigorous tempo and drolleries of the comedies. The three weird creatures in Les Eaux et forêts touch upon potentially tragic subjects, but thanks to the tone and rhythm of the dialogue the piece retains its gaiety and buoyancy. In their excited chatter we learn much of the individuals' sordid background, but the humour and eccentricity prevent the situation slipping over into tragedy:

FEMME 2: [ ... ] Ces sales voisins, ils copient vos façons, vos meubles, vos menus - je n'ai qu'à faire une chiwawa, le lendemain, allez, tout le monde fait une chiwawa. [ ... ] hier j'étais en train de peser mes nouilles pour le dîner, je me retourne et qu'est-ce que je vois? Un voisin, deux voisins, dix voisins qui me lorgnent... (pp.38-9)

The mention of her bizarre culinary delicacies robs us of any sadness we might feel at the woman's claustrophobic existence.

Moreover, the dialogue races along merrily; the impetuous movement, the gabbled phrases allow Duras to skim at top speed over distressing

subjects like solitude and death. The man is questioning one woman about her private life:

HOMME: On compte. La nuit? Le jour? Combien ça fait de personnes? Combien ça fait en plus de la cousine germaine? En plus de Toto? (Un temps.) À votre enterrement, combien de personnes? [ ... ]  
FEMME 1, (elle rit): La nuit? Mon enterrement? Combien la nuit? A l'enterrement combien? Toto seul? Tout Paris? Il me faut un papier. De tête je ne sais pas. (p.19)

Only the quick-fire questions, the peculiarly clipped phrases (together with the woman's mirth) save the situation. If the pace had been slower, if the half-crazy characters had dwelt longer on their suffering and acute loneliness, the mood would have been one of despair.

In Yes, peut-être Duras places in the mouths of the two women who are part of the new society, a childlike dialogue in which whole sections of sentences have been lopped off. In consequence the piece has a jerky, staccato quality that ultimately creates a feeling of unease. Very rarely does the rhythm alter: the women's conversation is interrupted by the ravings of the half-dead soldier, who sings the few words he recalls of his "hymmilitaire" (its inappropriate and unexpected occurrence is meant to deflate military values). Sometimes the dialogue gains pace, rising to a climax when the women remember their ghastly past. At one point they make a mechanical address directly to the audience as if urging them to take hold of their lives; the incisive repetition of their words creates a strong effect (pp.174-5). And in a crescendo of anger the women describe all those who were deceived by the jingoism of war:

B: Sont fous de guerre quoi?  
A: Ouerre.  
B: En sont pleins!  
A: Ouerre!  
B: En sont recouverts!  
A: Ouerre!  
B: Puent la guerre!  
A: Ouerre!  
B: Pissent la guerre! Chient la guerre!  
A: Ouerre ouerre!  
B: Sont complètement faits en matière de guerre!  
A: Ouerre! (Temps, calme revenu.) Restaient des mots (elle cherche lesquels) god... guerre...  
B: ... ah yes, vieux mots... (pp.162-3)

Like some liturgy, the words echo and respond to each other ('A' shouts a combination of "oui" and "guerre.") At the same time the increase in ferocity and speed leads to an explosion of disgust after which the women fall back into despair and the momentum is lost. (Such devices suggest that Duras has learnt much from recent propagandist theatre, which attempts to bully the audience into reacting, and which is exemplified by plays like Peter Brook's US.)

The mood of Le Shaga is one of continual frenzy and uproar. The dialogue progresses in fits and starts, a hotch-potch of eccentric chatter, wistful reminiscence, recitation or snatches from a pop-song. Duras has called it "une pièce sur la fascination du langage. Crises à partir des mots. Crises d'interprétation. On traduit le shaga en français, le français en shaga, puis, le délire gagnant, le français en français." (10) Much of the conversation consists of a quick-fire relay between French and Shaga, as A translates, however erroneously, B's excited gibberish (cf. pp.218-9).

These two plays show the disadvantages of relying heavily on a rhythmic dialogue for a theatrical experience; both plays leave a feeling of dissatisfaction, for they are little more than over-inflated nonsense, a display of verbal fireworks that barely conceal the hollow shell. Their insubstantiality largely explains why they have achieved only a modicum of success.

Duras's theatrical works do not lend themselves easily to critical assessment because she has deliberately dispensed with so many dramatic conventions; one must therefore examine how far they work on their own terms. We noted earlier that they were loosely constructed and desultory, and depended for dramatic impetus, shape and coherence on the tempo of the

dialogue. In this respect, it seems to me that Duras takes a gamble that does not always pay off. Les Viaducs suffers from frequent longueurs, because of its aimlessness and painfully slow movement. Paradoxically L'Amante anglaise, while treating much of the same material in an even more static form, holds the attention because the dialogue is so skilfully manipulated; the cut-and-thrust of questions and answers, the hesitations and half-truths are far more dramatic. On the other hand, Un Homme est venu me voir, also a verbal confrontation, appears a dreary and inconclusive polemic. One feels too that Yes, peut-être and Le Shaga, not only lack depth but any direction or form; they demand too much of an audience and show the dangers of open-ended theatre. Dialogue alone does not always provide enough dramatic impetus, and in these two plays, as well as in Un Homme est venu and Les Viaducs, Duras has failed.

Against this structural weakness in certain pieces must be set the attractions of Duras's theatre. From an aesthetic viewpoint, one can admire and enjoy the rhythmic qualities of the language, and the subtle interweaving of dialogue and silence, or a mixture of verbal styles. But perhaps their chief attraction lies in their penetration. Duras's achievement resides in the fact that she chooses one limited situation, which she explores in detail and at whose centre we discover a surprising degree of emotional content. It is her manner of suggesting the store of happiness, disappointment and pain in individuals' existence, as well as pointing to their intense inner life, that makes Le Square, Des Journées entières and L'Amante anglaise (in my opinion her most accomplished plays) so moving and so convincing.

NOTES

- (1) cf. Paul-Louis Mignon, "Miracle en Alabama," Avant-scène, no.279, (1er janvier 1963), p.9.
- (2) In both plays the success was partly due to the distinguished performances of Madeleine Renaud and Peggy Ashcroft in the leading roles, in the French and English productions respectively:  
  
Des Journées entières dans les arbres:  
Théâtre de France, at the Odéon, 1965.  
Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre, 1966. (Days in the Trees).  
  
L'Amante anglaise:  
Théâtre National Populaire, 1968.  
Royal Court Theatre, 1971. (The Lovers of Viorne).
- (3) cf. E. Copfermann.
- (4) C. Cézan.
- (5) P.-L. Mignon, p.8.
- (6) Published in Avant-scène, no.422 (15 mars 1969), pp.8-24.
- (7) Few other modern plays have been so rigorously austere; cf. Beckett's Play and Pinter's Silence.
- (8) In the French production the interrogator was positioned during Pierre's testimony among the spectators, and came gradually closer to Claire during the second testimony. The two principals never moved from their seats, where they were discovered when the stage-lights came on. In the London production the interrogator hardly moved until he left. One did, however, see the two people arriving.
- (9) Claude Sarraute, "L'Amante anglaise ou la chimie de la folie," Le Monde, 20 décembre 1968, p.12.
- (10) C. Cézan.

Chapter 12.

TECHNIQUE IN THE FILMS

Marguerite Duras came to film-making as an amateur, but quickly revealed considerable understanding of the medium. Her scenarios for Hiroshima mon amour and Une Aussi Longue Absence (on which she collaborated with Gérard Jarlot) largely dictated the shape of the film, and the directors adhered on the whole to the techniques laid down there. In recent years Duras has emerged as a director of some skill, even if the austerity of her works means that they will inevitably appeal to a limited public. If she prefers to translate her works to the screen and to direct them herself, it is because of bitter experience. Duras was horrified by the screen-adaptations of Un Barrage, Le Marin, and Dix heures et demie which she felt had been distorted beyond recognition, and she will no longer permit her novels to become vehicles for films that betray the original conception. (1)

Duras is attracted to film-directing because it offers an aesthetic challenge quite different from literature. In connection with La Musica she has said: "What interested me was the physical aspect of it - le côté manuel, of the cinema: it really is the antidote to literature... much simpler." (2) In other words she is interested in the possibilities of the camera, and in each of her films one is aware that she is using it with great precision. This chapter attempts to show, through Duras's published scenarios and the films La Musica and Détruire dit-elle, how she has exploited the cinema's resources. (3) Although thematically and technically there are important differences between the four films, they have one thing in common: in each a close correlation has been established between image, sound, and meaning.

Hiroshima mon amour.

Hiroshima mon amour is arguably as famous for the cinematic techniques it popularised, and their formative influence on the French "nouvelle vague" cinema, as for its powerful emotional impact and thematic complexity. Naturally this is Resnais's film more than Duras's, and occupies a significant position in his development. Although it is his first feature-film, it elaborates upon his previous interest, already manifest in the short films, in the workings of time and its effect upon the human mind. (Nuit et Brouillard, like Hiroshima, contrasts the horrors of Auschwitz during the war with the reality today, and shows how with time men lose the ability to feel.) Duras's role in the creation of Hiroshima is however sometimes underestimated. Resnais was responsible for the actual images shot, for the imposition of musical themes that are a vital factor in the final conception, and above all for the disciplined "montage" or editing by which he aimed to give the work a rigorously musical structure. (4) Indeed it was because he considered himself a kind of composer in celluloid that he followed Duras's script with absolute fidelity. As the writer explains: "His idea was to film my scenario just as a composer would set a play to music - as Debussy did with Maeterlinck's Pelléas et Mélisande." (5)

To communicate its themes, the film depends heavily on montage. It makes constant use of visual imagery and is constructed on an interplay between two distinct sets of images, achieved through split-second cutting. The technique is a development of the "flash-back" familiarly employed in the cinema to represent events anterior to the moment in time at which the action takes place. The flash-backs are here mental images, and they provide a far clearer picture of the woman's psychic life than her words alone would allow. The counterpointing of visual imagery is used for two distinct effects - to elaborate the Frenchwoman's impressions of the Hiroshima

tragedy, and in the majority of the film to record the resurgent memories of her traumatic past.

We have seen in the first chapter how Duras wishes to maintain a dialectic between present love and past suffering; she achieves this through alternation of imagery. As the woman describes what she has seen of the burned victims of the Atomic bomb, the views of the couple's bodies are interrupted by shots of maimed people, museum models and particularly news-reels - all of which constitute her mental picture of the horrors. Image and commentary link up. However, in order to suggest that she can only see the anguish from the outside and never experience it imaginatively, Duras uses sound and image at moments to arouse contradictory feelings: while the eye is assaulted by the succession of horrific sights, the harrowing commentary is negated by the Japanese, who in a cool, authoritative tone tells her she has really seen nothing:

ELLE (bas). -- Écoute...

Je sais...

Je sais tout.

Ça a continué.

LUI. - Rien. Tu ne sais rien.

(Nuage atomique.

Atomium qui tourne.

Des gens dans des rues marchent sous la pluie...) (pp.22-3)

Resnais has called this first section of the film "the opera," because of its orchestration of incantatory language, views of the embracing couple, rapid shots of the horrors and subtle musical score. (6)

The cinema has an immediacy that makes it an ideal medium for exploring the processes of memory; a director can represent with a single shot a memory flashing for a second in the consciousness. Early in the film occurs the celebrated moment when the woman, glancing at the hand of the sleeping Japanese, is reminded of her German lover. The mental event is expressed in one shot, without any elucidation, which creates a shock for the spectator and lingers in his mind. (Resnais attached great importance to this first memory, and tried various shots - a glimpse of the garden

from which the gun was fired, a shot of the girl bent over the corpse - before opting for Duras's original suggestion.) During the course of the film the Frenchwoman's mental images become increasingly frequent. Duras and Resnais, with consummate skill, let mental chronology rather than "clock-time" dictate their growth:

ELLE. - Et puis, il est mort.

(À Nevers. Images de Nevers. Des rivières. Des quais.  
Des peupliers dans du vent, etc.  
Le quai désert.  
Le jardin.  
À Hiroshima, maintenant. Et on les retrouve [presque dans  
la pénombre.] )

ELLE. - Moi dix-huit ans et lui vingt-trois ans.

(À Nevers. Dans une cabane, la nuit, le "mariage" de  
Nevers. ...) (pp.62-3)

The devastating event - his death - arouses mental pictures of the places associated with his murder. Then - completely at variance with chronology - she recalls the occasion they consummated their love. Each memory is given its psychological duration; the first recollections have the instantaneous quality of snap-shots, but gradually whole scenes unfold before us - the tortured months in the cellar, the girl's humiliation and madness. Significantly, we catch only fleeting glimpses of her German lover whose facial features have faded from her mind. In fact, we experience as much of the Frenchwoman's past as she herself - and gain a far clearer picture than the Japanese, whose only acquaintance with her past is at the verbal level.

Hiroshima became a landmark in the cinema. Its counterpoint of imagery gave it the appearance of a musical composition. It showed also that the flash-back could serve as a penetrating vehicle for exploring the stream-of-consciousness in the manner of the modern novel. One only regrets that its techniques have been imitated so exhaustively that they have nowadays lost much of their impact.

Une Aussi Longue Absence

The interest in Une Aussi Longue Absence lies in the manner in which Duras and Jarlot have exploited the resources of vision and sound not only to create mood and tempo but to throw light on situation and motive.

In one respect the film is the successor of Hiroshima, using the montage- and jump-cutting-techniques of the earlier work. Not surprisingly, since Henri Colpi (directing for the first time) and his co-director, Jasmine Chasney, had both worked under Resnais on the editing of Hiroshima, and Jarlot had been "Conseiller littéraire". The script-writers and directors appear to have worked very closely together.

The early part of the film especially scores its effects through expert montage. The first minutes, during the credits, are a daring collage of imagery with no apparent logic but which build up an impression through an association of ideas. The first shot is of the tramp, and is totally symbolic - he appears as a huge, mysterious figure, whose back fills the entire screen; only later will it become clear that he is the embodiment of Thérèse's past memories. (When subsequently he strides past Thérèse, Duras remarks: "Nous le voyons démesuré, géant. Le souvenir en marche dont aucune réalité n'est à la hauteur" (p.22)). The second image is a surprising contrast, and equally suggestive: the man seems a tiny detail in the landscape, just as he has faded from the mind of others, and lost any identity. Now a roar of jets leads into the spectacle of the parade on July the fourteenth, and a series of images are meant to suggest war, cruelty and oppression (the audience will soon discover that the last war was responsible for the tramp's state). These shots are followed by views of Puteaux, a backwater suburb of Paris where the drama will be played out. Thus in a short space of time, visual impressions have related the tramp, a violent past and a calm, orderly present.

Editing is responsible for the whole rhythm of the film. The story begins at a brisk tempo, as the days follow swiftly upon one another and the French national holidays approach. Duras and Jarlot compress time by means of the technique, then highly fashionable, of jump-cutting: liaisons are effected between scenes by carrying over the conversations, so that one person makes a remark at one moment in time, and another replies at some future point, perhaps days later (cf. pp.17ff). Gradually the film decelerates, as the scenes lengthen; the early scenes consist of merely a few snatches of dialogue, but slowly they gain in detail and dramatic interest, and lead up to the climactic scene, by far the longest, of the dinner where Thérèse makes her last desperate attempt to unlock the tramp's mind.

Important moments of the story are related in largely visual terms. One remembers the distressing moment when Thérèse catches sight of the scar on the tramp's head in the mirror; nothing is said, but it is clear she knows the situation is hopeless (p.96). One of the most original and haunting sequences occurs when Thérèse searches for the tramp for hours on end. The authors playfully call it "les scènes de 'poursuite.'" Elles devraient être aussi animées qu'un western" (p.42). Thérèse wanders alone for miles along the banks of the Seine as it passes through faceless suburbs. Not a word is spoken. The pictures of urban landscapes have two capital psychological effects. The constantly changing setting, as Thérèse rushes through much of Western Paris, underlines her bewilderment and frenzied obsession. Secondly, the shots create a sense of her alienation from her environment, for her present life has now ceased to have any value, and she has effectively left the present for the past. Particularly powerful are the shots in which she is a tiny, scarcely noticeable figure in the landscape.

Sound also plays a dramatic role. Music (by Rossini) forms a leitmotif

throughout the tale, representing memory. The tramp's arrival is precluded by the aria he whistles, his only connection with the past, and on their final evening together Thérèse and the tramp listen enthralled to the music she has installed on her juke-box, and through which she seeks to arouse his memory. At the moment of recognition, when Thérèse first suspects the man's identity, there is absolute silence, as if the sound-track had stopped functioning (p.23). The device underlines Thérèse's psychic state, for she is cut off from the present. And at the somewhat melodramatic climax, the apparent accident is heard from her position, as an ear-splitting screech of brakes.

From this discussion Une Aussi Longue Absence might seem little more than a collection of cinematic tricks. They are in fact woven into the fabric of the film and are not over-exploited. The film's success is of course largely due to the performances: Alida Valli and Georges Wilson bring to their roles sensitivity and deep tenderness, and bestow credibility on the story.

### La Musica.

In an interview at the time La Musica was released, Duras was asked why she had chosen this particular work for her début as a director. She explained:

Parce que ce n'était rien d'autre qu'un dialogue, et qu'autour de ce dialogue tout était à faire.

Je ne crois pas qu'un film puisse jamais remplacer le rapport solitaire du lecteur au livre. On fera toujours moins bien que le livre. Par exemple, mon "cinéma" de Madame Bovary est incomparable. (7)

Mindful of the extent to which her own works have been distorted in transference to the screen, Duras feels that the majority of novels do not lend themselves to adaptation, since the demands of the cinema are quite different. Duras chose therefore a skeletal work on which flesh would be

pinned by the actual production.

La Musica is a psychological film, a conversation piece with little external action, and stands or falls by the success of the dialogue in hinting at the most private recesses of the characters' minds. Duras and Paul Seban (her co-director) thus placed great emphasis on the quality of the performances, since the actors were responsible for bringing out the nuances and implications of the spoken words, and engaged in an unusual number of rehearsals before shooting began. The film won critical acclaim because of the intelligent playing of Robert Hossein and Delphine Seyrig, who make us sense beneath their poise and sophistication the residue of regret, pain, and confusion.

The film-techniques are secondary in the conception of La Musica, since they serve to enhance the film's verbal and psychological core. The structure of the work is significant: the field of vision gradually narrows, and one has the impression that the characters act within an ever-shrinking circle. The first half is an entirely new invention not found in the play. On the day of his divorce, in a café in Evreux, the man unburdens himself upon a young American girl (Julie Dassin) about his hopes and anxieties. We begin by viewing the emotional drama from the outside, from the viewpoint of a young person largely ignorant of the troubles of love. For a while we can only imagine what the woman involved is truly like. When she arrives on the scene the real drama begins, and the focus switches onto her and the man she has just divorced. They are trapped in a new emotional dilemma. In a parallel movement, the film's spatial reference is reduced. The backgrounds of modern Evreux (associated with the couple's former life together) give way to the claustrophobia of a quiet hotel where the crucial confrontation takes place.

Duras has specified what she considers to be the cinematic aspect of La Musica:

C'est le visage, le mouvement; c'est le mouvement du visage et, l'événement, c'est la parole. Il n'y a pas de "flashes-back" sur la vie du couple: ce qui compte, c'est la vision qu'ils ont l'un et l'autre de leur passé et ce qu'ils en font maintenant. (8)

Duras uses cinematic technique to delineate affective states, but there is a fundamental difference from her approach in Hiroshima: she renounces any use of mental images or flash-backs to situate the spectators inside the characters' minds. Both works revolve around memories of past love, but in the case of La Musica what is said and felt now is of prime importance.

The cinema and television (for which the play was originally written) possess an intimacy lacking in the theatre and situate the audience in closer proximity to the players. In La Musica the camera, like the microphone, is employed as a psychological instrument that captures the slightest visible reactions, most frequently through close-ups that pick out a flicker on a face, a change of expression. At times a take starts as a long shot, then the camera pans in to concentrate on one face at an intense moment, or to underline the fact that characters are becoming aware of an inner transformation. The effect of the close-ups is to isolate what is significant, to cut out of the frame all that is non-essential.

One remembers La Musica because of its portrayal of three attractive human beings, and also because of the coolness and simplicity of its cinematic style, a style which foreshadows Détruire dit-elle.

### Détruire dit-elle.

The first film Duras directed alone came as a considerable shock. From the technical viewpoint, Détruire dit-elle could hardly be more different from Hiroshima. The swift succession of images, the jump-cutting and interruptions of time-sequence - all are missing here. Nothing disturbs the slow, ritualistic movement. Indeed the film at first gives the impression of

never having passed through an editor's hands at all. It is composed largely of long-held shots, sometimes of as much as five minutes' duration. In all there are eighty shots, an astonishingly small number for a full-length film. Whole scenes are viewed from one position (in the card-game sequence, for example, only Elisabeth Alione is seen, in close-up, while the others are heard attacking her from all sides). When the camera does change angle or distance, the tracking-movement is scarcely perceptible. The camera will depict a conversation between characters from some distance, then very slowly pan in to study one of them at close-range, but without cutting to another shot. (Occasionally Duras varies the tempo by inserting a group of quicker shots which catch characters' reactions in close-up).

The composition of the film serves a specific artistic purpose, for any display of technical wizardry would clash with the film's unemphatic tone and lack of visible action. John Russell Taylor has compared Duras's use of the static-shot technique with that of other contemporary directors, notably Jean-Marie Straub:

M. Straub says that if you watch an apparently unchanging scene for long enough you begin to see the leaves move on the trees, and in the same way it is only by watching in detail the processes of music-making in The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach that you begin to have a feeling for the physical effect of the smallest movement. (9)

As Mr. Taylor himself insists, it does not matter whether Duras has seen any of Straub's films or not. It seems to me that the long-held shots in Détruire dit-elle do give the spectator the chance to take in the slightest details - in any sequence - visual details like the faces of Max Thor and Stein, calm, contemplative: the face of Alissa, at times expressing anxiety or sadness; above all one hangs on the spoken words, which are of prime importance. In recent years numerous directors have consciously employed the technique to underline a particular point. Jean-Luc Godard uses it excessively, for example to register the trite remarks of a silly French teenager (Masculin Féminin); Andy Warhol stands his camera in front of a

sleeping male prostitute to catch every detail of his face (Flesh); and in Eric Rohmer's Ma Nuit chez Maud the camera moves very little because the verbal element is all-important: the conversations between the characters provide the central interest. Duras's film runs the same risk as all these: it can be disconcerting and achingly dull to those who are not aware of what she is attempting.

The recently completed Jaune le soleil (the film-version of Abahn Sabana David) continues this austerity and restriction of camera-movement. There are few close-ups, and the film is again composed of long-held shots, one of nine minutes. In a reference to the film Duras has said: "Je fais un cinéma contre l'image." (10) Her camera is not used to create an artistic piece of cinema, nor to allow her to display technical virtuosity; it is an instrument for recording events as unobtrusively as possible.

One final comment should be made on Duras's present attitude to film-making. The simplicity of her two latest films is an economic as well as an aesthetic consideration, though they are essentially part of the same thing. Duras refuses to make expensive films: "Money ruins everything," she says. "Joseph Losey wanted the <sup>[of Détruire]</sup> rights. I refused. He would have made the film with too much money." (11) Détruire dit-elle cost £20,000 and Jaune le soleil had a budget of £17,000. Duras fervently believes that money would be used to elaborate and adorn what she wishes to remain simple.

NOTES

- (1) cf. J.-M. Fossey, p.20.
- (2) L. Langley.
- (3) The study is necessarily incomplete, since it deals only with those works generally available - the two published film-scripts and the two films directed and written by Duras which have so far been released. The bibliography contains a complete list of films in which the writer has been involved.
- (4) cf. Henri Colpi, "Editing Hiroshima mon amour," in Sight and Sound, vol. 29, no.1 (1960), pp.14-16.

Montage itself dates from as far back as the silent cinema. It signifies the juxtaposing of shots of events separated in time and space, often to summon up associations, parallelisms, or sharp contrasts. Hiroshima showed the potentialities of montage, through which a highly stylised work of art could be created, hence its recent popularity.

- (5) Richard Roud, "Conversation with Marguerite Duras," in Sight and Sound, vol. 29, no.1, (1960), p.16.

The original script was very skeletal. Resnais enlarged on it at the time of editing in France, to include some documentary material on the Hiroshima tragedy that he had brought back from Japan; he also filled out some of the Nevers sequences.

- (6) Ibid., p.16.
- (7) Yvonne Baby, "L'amour est un devenir constant comme la révolution," Le Monde, (7 mars 1967), p.24.
- (8) Ibid.
- (9) John Russell Taylor, "A long, hard look," in The Times, 6th December 1969, p.13.
- (10) Duras said this at the French Institute, London, on 4th June, 1971, after a performance of the film.
- (11) D. Rowe.

Chapter 13.

STYLE

Duras has always worked relentlessly at perfecting her literary techniques and style; she has spent as much as two years rewriting one novel. The preceding chapters dealt with the development of the authoress's techniques, that is the devices which give the novels, plays and films their overall shape and help communicate her vision. The present discussion is an examination of form in microcosm, from the point of view of style; in other words, it covers the creative use of language - the choice of syntactical constructions, rhythmical patterns of words, imagery, and the particular vocabulary in which the vision is expressed.

A stylistic study involves, in Professor Ullmann's words, "two basic assumptions: (1) that there is such a thing as 'individual style', a set of linguistic habits peculiar to a given writer; and (2) that this individual style is closely bound up with the writer's mind and experience and bears the stamp of his personality." (1) Style betrays an author's psychological make-up - Duras, for example, has an intuitive feel for the musicality of word-patterns - and his attitude towards his material. Moreover, ideally style is no mere adornment, but is inseparable from the vision, which it embodies in words: in Flaubert's celebrated formula, "la forme d'une pensée est sa chair même." In the works of accomplished writers language is not merely referential, rather style becomes a fundamental part of the experience. This is how Duras uses style.

It would be possible to treat each of Duras's works in chronological order, examining them as self-sufficient works of art employing a number of stylistic devices, or alternatively to outline the general principles of her style. Neither method is entirely satisfactory. The chronological method inhibits the tracing of significant trends, since a continuity of style does not always exist between one work and the next. The second

approach may also create a false impression. Duras's works make stylistic analysis difficult because of their complexity, their combination of very different styles; flat, objective writing, repetitive word-patterns and unexpected striking metaphors are interwoven within the pages of the same novel, and one must constantly bear in mind, when these factors are treated separately, that the total effect is achieved by their coexistence. I have opted for the second method, which has the advantage of allowing the discussion to range across the whole spectrum of Duras's works. Although this study is primarily concerned with style in the novel-form (since, as we have seen, technique and style in the plays are virtually indistinguishable - the tempo of the dialogue is created by style), it attempts to show the manner in which, by cross-fertilisation, a stylistic device may be transferred from one genre to another.

#### a. Simplicity

It is with her fourth novel, Le Marin, that Duras begins to come into her own as a stylist and experiment with the style that she is to develop in subsequent works, a style based on simple syntax and for the most part limited but carefully chosen vocabulary.

Certainly one detects, in the early sections of La Vie tranquille, an attempt to maintain a plain and limpid style characteristic of Françoise, yet Duras cannot resist embellishing the narrative with occasional poetic images that destroy our belief in the reality of the narrator. Françoise recalls her lover: "Le vent qui sortait de ses narines était mouillé de l'embrun qui embue les départs" (p.135). In particular Françoise would be incapable of the philosophical reflections and abstract language of the second part. The two other early novels also reveal a self-conscious striving after

effect: "Le drame éclatait ce soir, brutal, inespéré. Sans doute allait-il dénouer un imbroglio devenu inextricable et en faciliter singulièrement la liquidation" - a somewhat exaggerated description of a sordid family quarrel (Les Impudents, p.10). Un Barrage is a considerably more successful novel; the style varies to convey a number of moods, from evocative descriptions of tropical nature to an almost theatrical narration of lively scenes, yet Duras tries too hard at moments to adapt the style to the intellectual level of the protagonists: "Au troisième [disque], fox-trott, le planteur du Nord se leva pour inviter Suzanne. Debout il était nettement mal foutu" (p.35).

Le Marin marks a decisive departure. Simplicity and clarity are maintained throughout the story proper. The narrator speaks in a straightforward, natural French uncluttered by the poetic images that mar La Vie tranquille; his vocabulary is that of an intelligent man but he rarely speaks in abstractions; his sentences are short and precise:

Notre table fut prise. On se tenait debout avec d'autres, près du pick-up. On joua la fameuse samba. Aimait-elle cet air? Elle l'aimait. Il était à la mode, cette année, dans toute l'Italie du Nord et tout le monde le chantait. Elle me plaisait cette fille. Je lui demandai son nom.

-- Candida, me dit-elle, comme si c'était un nom pour moi. Elle rit. (p.62)

Yet Duras has chosen the style not only in order to impart conversational realism but because of her attitude to her material. The style offers a non-interpretative view of reality. The man records objectively what he observes, describing events in their chronological order, without making connections between them, and without comment, never interpreting others' motives. The simple sentences, rarely exceeding three clauses, fall after one another in sequence, as separate units registering separate impressions. They are distinguished by an almost complete absence of all but the most neutral conjunctions - "et," "puis" - and apart from "alors" there are no

causal links. Thus each action, each experience is isolated as it were within its sentence, and no general pattern is imposed upon reality, save that of chronology.

Le Marin shows clearly the influence of Hemingway (who is mentioned by name more than once in the text). Duras has stated that "le roman américain a exercé sur moi une grande influence, qui se retrouve dans la première partie de mon oeuvre," (2) and in this novel the stylistic similarities with Hemingway are certainly striking. (3) Hemingway is perhaps the most frequently imitated author in the twentieth century. A whole series of writers in the 'thirties and 'forties, particularly those of the "tough" detective-story, copied his journalistic prose. His influence in France produced at least one novel of the first rank - Camus's L'Étranger. (4) Hemingway's style seems deceptively easy: the technique involves stripping vocabulary down to strong but neutral and commonplace words, and writing in crisp, terse sentences. His prose, like Duras's in this novel, is made up of sentences with few subordinate clauses and presents a clear and unvarnished picture of external reality. The simplicity hides the fact that he was scrupulously careful in his choice of words, striving for conciseness and precision. (In this respect Duras is still working in the Hemingway manner, relying on a few selected words to convey an impression vividly yet succinctly). Duras writes in a similar vein not out of any desire to follow literary fashion, but because the style is suited to her aesthetic, inasmuch as it allows no amplification upon a simple observation of reality.

Duras went on to develop this plain style "à la Hemingway" into a form that provides an admirable complement to the recording consciousness technique as employed in Tarquinta and Dix heures et demie. In the first novel the action is described as it strikes Sara's consciousness: each event or action appears to Sara as a separate "perceived object," and is therefore contained within its own sentence, which frequently consists of a single

clause. Moreover, the style echoes the writer's scepticism since the events are related without commentary on behaviour, in a language that is largely flat and unembellished. Again, there are hardly any causal conjunctions, which would suggest interpretation; those that exist are reflections of Sara's mental state ("Car Sara ne désirait plus les maisons à elle," p.65), or they serve to state obvious truths ("Il y avait pas mal de circulation de ce côté-là du fleuve parce que plusieurs routes le desservaient," p.76).

The only liaison between events is one of chronological sequence:

Les autres arrivaient en effet de l'hôtel. Ils crièrent qu'ils étaient prêts et se précipitèrent dans les bateaux. Jacques préféra ne pas monter dans celui de l'homme. Diana et Sara y montèrent, suivis de Ludi et de Gina. (p.150)

Yet whilst the syntax never becomes more complex, the sobriety of the language will suddenly be broken by a piece of colourful description. Just as in the closed, immobile world of Duras's novels the slightest gestures take on an intense significance, so she can achieve startling effects by introducing a note of poetry into the neutral prose. One sequence of the novel is unforgettable in this respect: the journey to Pointa Bianca. It is related in a richer vocabulary, with frequent recourse to metaphor, and the descriptions (of natural scenery) have a sensuous loveliness (cf. pp.152-3).

In Dix heures et demie a modulated effect is achieved between two quite different types of sentence-structure. For reasons described later, passages of brief, staccato sentences alternate with others composed in rhythmic and repetitive language. However, even in the latter case the grammar is rigorously simple, with clauses juxtaposed rather than related by conjunctions. Once again the style records reality as a series of disconnected perceptions. In the actual structure of the clauses Duras practises an austerity rare even in Hemingway's work:

Personne ne s'est réveillé dans la ville. Rien ne se produit. La forme est restée drapée dans son imbécillité. Dans l'hôtel rien n'a bougé. Mais une fenêtre s'est éclairée dans la maison qui touche l'hôtel. Maria se recule légèrement. Il faut attendre. La fenêtre s'éteint. Il ne faut plus crier. Le cri venait de l'hôtel, d'un

touriste. Donc, les gens se rendorment. Un calme mortel recommence. (p.75)

Where Duras differs from Hemingway in this novel is partly in the use of vivid metaphors - "drapée dans son imbécillité," "un calme mortel" - which raises the emotional temperature and creates a surprise effect by being inserted into passages where vocabulary is for the most part undistinguished.

The two "novels of mystery," Lol V. Stein and Le Vice-consul, have great stylistic variety, but frequently the writing is simple and spare. Jacques Hold employs brief sentences at those times when he refrains from hypotheses on Lol's character and tries to preserve objectivity (cf. Lol V. Stein, pp.103ff). In Le Vice-consul the beggar-girl's story is related in clipped language because it reflects her insane state; she has lost all rationality, and the style, as one of the characters puts it in a discussion on Peter Morgan's narration, underlines the "disparition ... du lien entre la cause et l'effet" (p.182). In those passages of the story proper ostensibly told by an external narrator, the prose is stripped and devoid of explanatory detail that would remove some of the opaqueness from the story. Each scene is set, and characters are placed within it after the fashion of a film-script (cf. p.74).

This simple prose, therefore, offers a non-interpretative view of reality; it is used for specific artistic reasons. In Duras's recent fiction, where it is at its most austere, it fulfils paradoxically an anti-aesthetic function. With her present distaste for literature, Duras has rejected the concept of style, and indeed the clipped phrases and laconic quality of Détruire dit-elle and Abahn Sabana David represent an attempt to escape from literary style. The bleak writing might qualify as "non-style" or, to employ Roland Barthes's term, "le degré zéro de l'écriture":

le livre Détruire est un livre cassé du point de vue romanesque. Je crois qu'il n'y a plus de phrases. Et, par ailleurs, il y a des indications scéniques [ ... ] je voudrais qu'il y ait la matière à lire le plus décanté [ sic ] possible du style: je ne peux plus du tout lire de romans. A cause des phrases. (5)

Duras does not mean that she has an aversion to all words, but that she now rejects any attempt by a writer to compose sentences that place a gloss upon naked language. The two books are therefore written in the plainest manner possible; they resemble scripts, with their flat description of setting and action:

Le silence arrache un cri à la poitrine de David. Le visage de Sabana exprime la douleur. Elle dit:

-- On dirait qu'il souffre.

-- Qui? demande le juif.

Elle bouge. Elle se lève, elle va à la fenêtre, elle passe à côté du juif, elle ne le regarde pas, elle est à la fenêtre, face au chemin vide, reste là. (Abahn Sabana David, p.52)

Of course, as the above passage demonstrates, this blank "reportage" is in its own way as fabricated as any style. Duras may have avoided rhetoric, but she is deceiving herself if she believes it is possible to write without any style whatsoever. In the present case, the neutrality is contrived, and the "non-style" is in fact a style in itself.

#### b. Rhythm and Repetition.

Je mets la musique au-dessus de tout au point de vue de la création. Elle est à mes yeux indépassable, c'est la création pure et elle se pose là comme un modèle inégalable dans chacun de mes livres. (6)

Duras is talking about the leitmotif of classical music in her books, but her words provide the key to one aspect of her prose style. Duras regards music as an absolute, as the purest aesthetic form; language can never attain to such purity since it is always referential - "un mot [ ... ] fait élever l'image, il n'est pas pur." (7) Nevertheless, Duras attempts in a number of works to give the style a rhythmic texture that is reminiscent of poetry and even more of musical composition. She achieves this rhythmic prose not through stylistic complexity (such as Proust employed to create his sinuous periods) but by an accumulation of simple sentences or clauses. In her use of repetition the musical analogy is even more pronounced: Duras uses words, individually or in groups, as a composer uses a musical motif,

reiterating and elaborating for dramatic effect. (8)

In Dix heures et demie, Lol V. Stein and Le Vice-consul, Duras gives the prose its tempo by gathering together into clusters the clipped sentences or short clauses (which are strung in one sequence). Duras varies the cadence by varying the weight and length of these clauses, as can be seen in the following example from Le Vice-consul, which describes the beggar-girl's trek across Asia. The staccato rhythm of the narrative results from the accumulation of clipped phrases:

Battambang. Elle n'ajoute rien. En route pour la carrière, elle met les dents dans le poisson, le sel croque avec la poussière. La nuit venue, elle sort de la carrière, longuement elle lave, lentement elle mange. La salive monte, jaillit dans la bouche, c'est salé, elle pleure, elle bave, elle n'a plus eu de sel depuis longtemps, c'est trop, c'est beaucoup trop, elle tombe et, tombée, elle continue à manger la nourriture. (pp.21-2)

And in Lol V. Stein the rhythm will suddenly become jerky and uneven, as the brief sentences give way to paragraphs of complex structure, in which clauses are juxtaposed rather than related; the style becomes tortuous, the rhythm confused, as thoughts and impressions jostle uncomfortably against one another (cf. p.184). Duras pays particular attention to the rhythm of the dialogue in L'Amante anglaise, where the actual flow of the language contributes much to the understanding of character; slow and ordered in the first two interrogations, the rhythm becomes erratic during Claire's testimony, reflecting her chaotic thinking. Her words come out in fits and starts at times, as her mind moves quickly from one idea to another:

-- [ ... ] Ils devraient me décapiter moi aussi pour ce que j'ai fait. Oeil pour oeil. A leur place je le ferais. Le jardin me manque. Dans la cour de la prison il n'y a pas d'herbe. Pour nous punir. C'est bien trouvé. Rien ne remplacera mon jardin.

Mon mari aurait dû faire attention. Je me sens folle quelquefois.

C'était ridicule cette vie. (p.184)

Duras has frequently had recourse to the musical convention of re-iteration. The origins of this style can be traced back as far as La Vie tranquille, where repetition is used for poetic effect in the more lyrical second and third sections, emphasising the heroine's personal predicament and anguish:

Chaque jour je pourrais mourir mais jamais je ne meurs. Chaque jour, je crois en savoir davantage qu'hier, juste de quoi mourir. J'oublie qu'hier c'était la même chose. Jamais je ne meurs. (p.170)

The repeated words stand out from the rest of the prose as the essentials, underlining Françoise's obsession with time and her death-wish. Repetition will be a principal method of demonstrating obsession in later works.

Repetition of a different order colours Tarquinius and Moderato Cantabile. Here Duras will take a pattern of words and insert it again at various points throughout the novel. The effect, to continue the musical analogy, is of an initial linguistic theme reintroduced with syntactical variations. Descriptions of Sara awakening or falling asleep recur at the beginning and end of each chapter of Tarquinius, giving the novel its circularity and tight inner structure. The chapters open and close with variations on the same sentences, suggesting the dull similarity of the days:

La chaleur était si grande qu'on aurait pu croire qu'il allait pleuvoir sans tarder, peut-être dans l'après-midi. Elle s'endormit dans cet espoir. (p.62)

La chaleur était si grande qu'on aurait pu croire qu'il allait pleuvoir sans tarder, dans l'après-midi. Elle s'endormit dans cet espoir. (p.198)

Elle espérait que cette nuit-là, la pluie arriverait, et elle s'endormit très tard, dans cet espoir. (p.260)

(cf. also pp.9 and 136; pp.63 and 199)

One remembers the child's cries - "J'ai faim," "J'ai soif," "Je suis fatigué" - that introduce the three movements of Le Square. In Moderato Cantabile Duras embroiders on the device. She makes great use of repeated detail dispersed throughout the novel - the beaches and sea that tempt Anne to freedom; the sunsets, the approach of evening. Such repetitions are

reinforced at the linguistic level, by the reintroduction, with subtle modifications, of phrases already used. The ritual of Anne's daily walks to the café is emphasised by the variations on the phrase: "Une fois le premier môle dépassé" (p.31), on pp. 46, 50, 64, 69. Other variations are played on "le boulevard de la Mer" and "le désordre blond de ses cheveux" through which Anne passes her hand at moments of crisis. The technique recurs in the descriptions of the child at his piano-lesson; the music rises on the air and drifts out towards the world of passion beckoning Anne:

De la musique s'éleva par-dessus la rumeur d'une foule qui commençait à se former au-dessous de la fenêtre, sur le quai. (p.18)

Une deuxième, une troisième gamme s'éleva dans la colère de cette dame. (p.93)

Une, puis deux gammes en sol majeur s'élevèrent dans l'amour de la mère. (p.95)

The cinema was a capital influence on the development of Duras's style, for in Hiroshima she began to experiment more widely with the musical potentialities of language. Duras acknowledges her debt to Resnais in this respect; in several interviews she has stated that it was Resnais who had encouraged her to "write literature." (9) He had said that she should give full rein to her feelings, and so she felt free to write in a much more lyrical vein than in her earlier works.

The script of Hiroshima resembles not so much the speech of ordinary men and women as a poetic duologue. On the film's first appearance, critics found the language irritating and weird. Arguably, however, the film-script finds its justification in the sense of ritual and pathos which it contributes to the film.

The language relies very little for its effect upon richness of vocabulary or imagery; almost always stripped and simplified, with few subordinate clauses, its power is accumulated through repetition. Sentences are echoed and elaborated by those that follow in the way that musical

phrases are amplified, and the language builds up by degrees to dramatic climaxes. In the first part of the film, during the woman's description of Hiroshima, sentences elaborate on those which precede in the way that horror is piled on horror (cf. p.23). More important, the dialogue is frequently reiterative, a series of crescendoes:

LUI. - Peut-être que c'est possible, que tu restes.  
ELLE. - Tu le sais bien. Plus impossible encore que de se quitter.  
LUI. - Huit jours.  
ELLE. - Non.  
LUI. - Trois jours.  
ELLE. - Le temps de quoi? D'en vivre? D'en mourir?  
LUI. - Le temps de le savoir.  
ELLE. - Ça n'existe pas. Ni le temps d'en vivre. Ni le temps d'en mourir. Alors, je m'en fous.  
LUI. - J'aurais préféré que tu sois morte à Nevers.  
ELLE. - Moi aussi. Mais je ne suis pas morte à Nevers. (pp.95-6)

The rapid, echoing exchanges raise the emotional temperature, which suddenly falls on a note of bitterness and resignation - "je m'en fous." The last two lines form a much quicker crescendo, after which there is a sudden silence.

Hiroshima sets the pattern for those works on which Duras next embarked (in 1959 and 1960): Les Viaducs and Dix heures et demie. The film-script revealed the potentialities of heightened, rhythmic dialogue, a dialogue she employs in her first play. In Les Viaducs the pendulum swings between sparse, conversational prose and reiteration which both varies the tempo and emphasises essential themes: the couple's private suffering, their frustration and sense of waste. More especially it creates an atmosphere of ritual at the climactic moments when they plunge briefly into their subconscious (cf. pp.112ff). Marcel, willing himself into a kind of trance with his own ritualistic words, rediscovers his secret motives for murder:

MARCEL: Vous vous gardiez en réserve jusqu'à ce lever du jour! Vous vous étiez oublié! Voici que vous vous souvenez que vous vous étiez oublié. Quel crime! Tout à coup! Vous étiez-vous oublié? Non. Vous vous gardiez en réserve pour la fois où vous vous pourriez servir encore, un certain soir d'automne justement... dans une forêt d'oiseaux endormis. (Après un temps.) Où j'en étais? (p.119)

Once again, language builds up in a series of crescendoes until the

hallucination disintegrates.

In Dix heures et demie and M. Andemas (and less extensively in Lol V. Stein and Le Vice-consul) Duras went on to experiment with a prose constructed on recurrent word-patterns; this stylistic device bestows on the works an insistent rhythm. Duras's method consists of amassing a series of short clauses that recapitulate on significant details. As with musical sequences, the effect is not merely additive, rather the accumulation makes the prose increase in intensity, since the clauses - like musical motifs - increase in value by echoing and reflecting previous sequences.

Repetition is exploited most in Dix heures et demie, and is responsible for the architecture of the work. Duras reintroduces, with slight developments or modifications, a phrase or even a whole sentence. The repetition works at two levels - words repeated within sentences or paragraphs; and sentences recurring throughout the narrative. In each case the effect is to emphasise a particular idea or psychic state, by making it stand out from the body of the passage; three main themes are involved - Rodrigo's passionate nature and imminent death; Maria's jealousy and neurotic state; and the inexorable flow of time:

Sur la forme morte de Rodrigo Paestra, morte de douleur, morte d'amour, la pluie tombe de même que sur les champs. (p.51)

Maria gives way constantly to her imagination and to jealousy, expressed in Maria's obsession with the eyes of Claire, the woman who has stolen her husband:

Est-ce sur ses yeux, derrière l'écran du ciel noir qu'il l'aura d'abord embrassée? On ne peut pas le savoir. Tes yeux avaient la couleur de ta peur de l'après-midi, la couleur de la pluie, en ce moment même, Claire, tes yeux, je ne les vois qu'à peine, comment l'aurais-je déjà remarqué, tes yeux doivent être gris. (pp.47-8)

À la lumière jaune de la lampe à pétrole sont ses yeux. Pierres bleues de tes yeux. Je vais manger tes yeux, lui disait-il, tes yeux. La jeunesse des seins apparaît précise, sous son tricot blanc. Le regard bleu est hagard, paralysé par l'insatisfaction, par l'accomplissement de l'insatisfaction même. (p.53) (cf. pp.36-7, 159)

As in Moderato Cantabile, many details are repeated with slight variations over whole sections of the book, building a complex inner framework: Claire's sensuality, Maria's addiction to drink, and most important the passing of the hours towards the fatal climax. The entire novel is punctuated with references not only to clock-time but to the changing aspects of nature. Much of the early novel gains its atmosphere from an elaborate counterpoint between thunder-storms and moments of calm, paralleled in the language:

L'averse cesse (p.9)	Une autre averse arrive (p.11)
L'averse se termine (p.11)	Voici l'averse (p.14)
L'averse cesse (p.16)	Voici la pluie (p.19)
L'averse a cessé (p.22)	
Les appels cessent. Et une averse recommence (p.33)	
	Voici enfin l'averse (p.46)
	Et voici la pluie (p.50), etc.

The analogy with music needs no underlining; the effect is like a musical motif.

Frequently Duras employs recurrent phraseology to suggest without authorial intervention what is preying on characters' minds. We saw in an earlier chapter how certain details about his daughter constantly crop up in M. Andesmas's thoughts, underlining his obsessive love. This is equally true of Mme Arc; again the obsession is Valérie, the young beauty who will take away her beloved husband. Mme Arc cannot escape mentally from that first afternoon when Valérie arrived:

-- [ ... ] D'où sortait-elle? Nous nous demandions toujours quel homme possédait cette blondeur, et seulement cette blondeur puisque nous n'avions pas encore vu le visage. Tant de blondeur inutile cela ne pouvait pas s'imaginer. (M. Andesmas, p.90)

Duras uses repetitive dialogue in Des journées entières to dramatise the old woman's exaggerated fascination with her son and her property, and in Les Eaux et forêts to demonstrate the characters' obsession with their wretched position in life; here the repetition, which is one source of the play's fun, also underlines their growing excitement with words:

HOMME: [ ... ] Je pense, et je fais. Je varie. (Geste des mains

qui s'inversent.) Quelquefois je pense je pense je pense Quelquefois je fais je fais je fais. (Diction de plus en plus rapide.) Quelquefois je pense à ce que je fais, quelquefois non, je fais ce que je pense, je pense, je fais, je pense, pense, je fais, quelquefois j'en ai marre, j'en ai marre... marre. (p.40)

To sum up, Duras employs rhythmic language to give a musicality and formal beauty to her works. Yet the form is more than an embellishment, it contributes to the central meaning. In works such as Moderato Cantabile, Dix heures et demie and M. Andesmas repetition of phrases - either at different points in the narrative or in the actual structure of the sentences - induces a sense of ritual and mounting tension.

#### c. Tense

In her more recent fiction Duras has placed great emphasis on the choice of tense because like sentence-structure or vocabulary, it dictates the author's attitude towards his material and the position of the reader in relation to events. She has at times experimented with a shifting tense-system and in the past decade has often restricted herself to the narrative present.

The problem of tense is in fact not new to Duras. The choice of tense plays a vital role in the conception of La Vie tranquille. Once again the book appears very much a novel of its time; while her early novels generally employ the preterite, La Vie tranquille is written in the tense popularised two years earlier by Camus in L'Étranger - the perfect or past indefinite. The tense invests Françoise's narrative with an informal, conversational quality, but it also has much more significant overtones. A novel whose central theme is time - the bringer of suffering and happiness, time that seems to trap individuals in its flow - must rely for its effect on making us acutely aware of the painfully slow passage of time. Duras

exploits the past indefinite's temporal possibilities. The tense gives the impression that all events have taken place in a very recent past, and that they are therefore only slowly receding from us. Moreover, as its name suggests, the tense does not create the same feeling of definiteness and finality as the preterite. Whilst the preterite represents completed action, the past indefinite suggests a continuing effect of past upon present. Events are not relegated to the past and shut off, but retain a degree of actuality. One has only to imagine the different emphasis the following passage would possess, if written in the preterite:

La mort de Nicolas est arrivée. Elle est entrée dans la maison avec Luce au retour de l'enterrement de Jérôme. Dès ce soir-là, Nicolas ne nous a plus appartenu, ni à Luce ni à moi. Je ne savais déjà plus les mots pour lui dire de vivre, je ne possédais plus la force pour l'empêcher de mourir. À partir de ce moment-là, je me suis désintéressée de Nicolas. (p.154)

Nicolas's death is not simply a past event; it has a kind of actuality. Its resonance is still being felt by Françoise, and is still influencing her emotional state. One has only the vaguest impression how long ago it took place; in the past indefinite all events have a less obvious place in the time-scale and seem to hover between past and present. The tense therefore engenders a sense of continuity, and of the slowness of time.

The style inevitably invites comparison with L'Étranger, whose tense-structure has been admirably studied by John Cruickshank; he remarks of the perfect tense:

Its peculiar quality lies in the fact that although it describes a past action it also retains, to a considerable degree, its original sense of presentness, of being present tense plus adjective as much as auxiliary plus past participle. The action formulated in the perfect tense, though occurring at a point in time past, is presented as somehow holding good up to the present moment. [ ... ] One might even say that whereas the preterite is the tense of lived experience, the perfect is the tense of living experience. (10)

Where Duras's use of the tense differs from Camus's (at least in Mr. Cruickshank's interpretation) is in the metaphysical overtones:

... the indefiniteness of the perfect tense also emphasizes that gratuitous quality which absurdism finds in experience. This tense,

with its ultimate inconclusiveness, suggests that events might easily assume a different character, that nothing is irrevocably settled. (11)

The theme of La Vie tranquille is that everything is irrevocable, that time brings tragedies like Nicolas's death and all is changed.

In some novels Duras has experimented with unusual tense-structures: she will daringly introduce an unexpected change of tense to sharpen a dramatic moment. The seventh chapter of Moderato Cantabile marks a change in perspective; it is situated in the luxurious, hyper-civilised world that is the antithesis of the world of passion. The chapter is related almost exclusively in the present tense, whilst most of the narrative is told in the preterite; the shift in tense, in this very musical work, might be compared to a change of key. Into this present are inserted occasional preterites that create a kind of modulation:

Elle passe légèrement la main dans le désordre blond de ses cheveux, comme elle le fit tout à l'heure, ailleurs. Ses lèvres sont pâles. Elle oublia ce soir de les farder. (pp.127-8)

Elle découvre, à boire, une confirmation de ce qui fut jusque-là son désir obscur et une indigne consolation à cette découverte. (p.134)

Duras develops the device in M. Andesmas, where she deliberately writes against the rules of grammar, shifting suddenly from one tense to another. Passages in the past historic alternate with others in the narrative present, often on the same page. Duras does not ring the changes according to any set pattern; she uses the device to make us aware of the flow of time, the passing of the minutes. Often the change parallels a change of mood, or situation, particularly when one of his visitors leaves the old man, and he is confronted once more with solitude. In this case, it is the child who deserts him:

[...] trop tard, il cria:

-- Si tu vois Valérie...

Elle répondit quelque chose alors qu'elle avait déjà disparu derrière le tournant du chemin mais elle ne revint pas.

M. Andesmas entend siffler.

Il retombe dans son fauteuil. Il cherche à démêler du silence de la forêt les mots qu'a prononcés l'enfant mais il n'y arrive pas.  
(p.50)

Lol V. Stein contains two tense-schemes quite different from one another: whilst most of the novel is related in a narrative present, the early sections of the novel contain an extraordinary variety of tenses that exacerbate the confusion. In relating his and others' suppositions on Lol's past, Jacques Hold expresses himself in the present, the past indefinite (perfect), the preterite, and frequently the conditional; these changes mark his changes of perspective and the relative verifiability of his suppositions. He shifts between certain knowledge, hearsay, and "what might have happened, but did not" (cf. pp.54-5).

Duras's most significant and lasting innovation has however been the use of the narrative present which, as in Lol V. Stein, engenders a feeling of contemporaneity. This is crucial to the writer's attitude to her material. Two reasons can be deduced for her choice. Firstly, writing in the past tense makes an immediate assumption about the world and about the writer's and reader's relation to the narrative. Events at once appear fixed, irrefutable, complete; the author appears to have the benefit of hindsight on the development of the plot. (This in particular is anathema to Duras who looks upon her writing as a kind of voyage of discovery, in which she uncovers truths unknown to her at the beginning: "je ne suis pas de ces écrivains qui, d'avance, savent ce qu'ils vont faire. Je ne prends jamais de notes et je travaille toujours comme ça: l'acte d'écrire est un voyage

dans l'inconnu." (12)). The present tense, on the contrary, leaves a sense of uncertainty, since the author creates the illusion (at least) that events are happening now, and that their outcome is as yet unknown. Authorial omniscience and control appear to be missing.

Secondly, the narrative present is the tense of consciousness, for whatever enters the conscious mind - memory and imagination included - exists as an experience in the present for the individual concerned. (Hence the widespread popularity of the narrative present among the "nouveaux romanciers." Robbe-Grillet uses it in many novels, to give the impression that we are experiencing reality with the protagonists (Les Gommages, Dans le labyrinthe) or through one consciousness (La Jalousie); the "vous" in Butor's La Modification is followed by the present indicative in those passages describing the actual train journey; and Nathalie Sarraute employs it in Le Portrait d'un inconnu in order to capture what is only momentary, to delineate those secret and fleeting movements of the sub-conscious at the precise moment of birth, before they are expressed in gestures or language.) Because it gives this sense of actuality, Duras resorts to the narrative present in La Vie tranquille in the reflective sections and especially in the stream-of-consciousness passage. Again, in Dix heures et demie the tense increases the impression that one is sharing Maria's experiences as she lives them. In Le Vice-consul, where events are seen from myriad vantage-points and through several consciousnesses, the action is always registered in the present for the same reasons as in previous novels.

Détruire dit-elle and Abahn Sabana David represent a special case. The present complements the scrupulous objectivity and adds to the impression that the action is being recorded by a camera. Additionally, the present is the most common and neutral of tenses, and parallels the "non-style" of these two works.

In short, the present induces a feeling of contemporaneity and thus of uncertainty; it is the most open of tenses in that it defines events the least. And it has become a vehicle for conveying the presentness of all perceptions and mental events in an individual's consciousness.

#### d. Preciosity

Duras alternates between two radically opposed modes of linguistic expression. In much of her work she strives to write in a grammatical style and with a vocabulary that are simple, spare and elliptical; at other times she delights in an elaborate and highly artificial style that might be termed preciosity. In a number of works Duras utilises figures of speech and vocabulary that would not have seemed out of place among the "précieux" of a seventeenth-century salon: ornate phraseology and sentence-structures, a choice of elevated and "noble" words, euphemisms, and especially abstract expressions; in several later novels Duras indulges, as did the "précieux," in surprising and somewhat exaggerated metaphors.

The writer's fondness for such elegance is first displayed in the short stories. Le Boa, Les Chantiers and Madame Dodin owe much of their charm to the mannerism of the style. The sentences are sinuous and flowing; the vocabulary is carefully chosen for its elevated tone, and there are frequent abstract expressions. The elevated, slightly artificial style of Les Chantiers contributes to the tale's rarefied, unreal atmosphere and is a suitable vehicle (as it had been for the "précieux") for delineating delicate shades of feeling and the almost imperceptible changes in the man's heart as love begins to bloom:

Il n'était pas si aveugle qu'il ne se souvint d'avoir déjà éprouvé ce sentiment à l'égard d'autres femmes. Toutefois il fut heureux de se trouver capable de l'éprouver encore, et cette fois

avec une plénitude dont il ne retrouvait, dont il ne cherchait à retrouver aucun équivalent dans sa mémoire. Et il ne lui déplaisait pas d'être encore capable de croire qu'il n'avait jamais connu que de très pâles prémonitions de ce qu'il vivait aujourd'hui. (pp.214-5)

It is in the succeeding work, Le Square, that the style reaches its most polished form. Much has been written about the intricacy and the elaborateness of the language in Le Square. The maid and the salesman may belong to the same social stratum as Madame Dodin or the creatures of Les Eaux et forêts, but the couple's conversation lacks the colloquialisms and sheer vulgarity of those people. Instead the language is mannered and completely unrealistic.

In the first place, the two people never abandon the tone of polite formality in which they first engaged in conversation. Constantly they address each other as "Monsieur," "Mademoiselle," and when they contradict each other's beliefs, they feel obliged to soften the blow, to avoid hurting the other's feelings, and use the cordial phrases of the drawing-room:

Excusez-moi...  
Si j'ose me permettre...  
Je vous en prie...  
Je ne voudrais pas vous contredire...  
Vous êtes aimable, mais, voyez-vous...

Moreover, their dialogue is closer to a philosophical disputation than to a casual chat, and has a peculiar quality of abstraction. This stems from the absence of imagery and all but a few colourful and impressionistic memories, and particularly from the abstract vocabulary they employ. The couple tend to speak in generalities, as when the girl tentatively enquires about the loneliness of a salesman's existence: "Moi je pensais à d'autres qualités, à des qualités d'endurance, de patience plutôt, et aussi de persévérance" (p.56). They use stylisations, and unexpected abstractions:

HOMME: Quand je vois les enfants, une confiance m'emplit soudain, sans que je puisse en dire la raison. Comme un soulagement aussi de je ne sais quel accablement. (p.93)

Occasionally outdated expressions crop up in their conversation, which serve

as euphemisms for more common words or phrases; the man speaks of the girl's employment as "certaines corvées" (p.77), and in describing his one memorable evening in the distant town he says: "Les gens étaient sortis de la précipitation du travail" (p.79). Speaking at once of the enormous woman she tends and the drudgery she must undergo, the maid remarks: "Je préfère que cette horreur grossisse encore" (p.107) and she rejects the man's way of life thus: "[...] sans des affections quelque part dans le monde, qui m'attendraient, je ne pourrais pas le faire [that is, travel]" (p.65). "Affections" is the sort of euphemism for "l'homme que j'aime" that was prized by the members of the salons.

In a few key-passages Duras colours the dialogue by means of another stylistic device that she will exploit in later novels - unusual and striking imagery. When the salesman describes the happiest occasion of his life, the language becomes exquisitely poetic: "La brise s'était donc levée, la lumière est devenue jaune de miel, et les lions eux-mêmes, qui flambaient de tous leurs poils, bâillaient du plaisir d'être là" (p.80).

The syntax of the dialogue is extremely complex: elaborate conjugations of verbs, especially conditionals and subjunctives, involved subordinate clauses and an amount of repetition all contribute to the tone:

HOMME: [...] Mais néanmoins, vous comprenez, du moment que l'on juge utile pour soi, par exemple, de laisser vivre cette femme [the girl's employer] le temps qu'il faudra et que l'on fait tout ce qu'on vous demande afin de ne pouvoir faire autrement que d'en sortir un jour, on pourrait par exemple, en manière de compensation, prendre quelques jours de vacances et aller se promener. (p.111)

Duras maintains the heightened quality for important artistic reasons.

M. Seylaz speaks of "une cérémonie du langage":

cette conversation représente la possibilité merveilleuse de s'ouvrir à autrui, l'occasion d'exercer le privilège humain de la communication. Il n'est donc pas étonnant que l'auteur ait voulu honorer, magnifier ces instants... (13)

This seems to me a valid point; the meeting is an event to be cherished, a unique opportunity of contact to be celebrated by a unique dialogue. Moreover,

one of the girl's remarks holds the clue, I feel, to the sustained use of such elaborate dialogue: "On parle, n'est-ce pas, monsieur, et comme on ne se connaît pas, vous pouvez me dire la vérité" (p.97). The crucial phrase is "on ne se connaît pas." The girl is insisting that they are as yet strangers, and they can communicate precisely because of this; they must maintain their formality in order to have the confidence to converse. Yet through this they do in fact lay bare their deepest aspirations and their personalities. This is the central paradox of the work; the elevated style contrasts sharply with the intimacy of their remarks. The work's verbal level is the antithesis of the psychological. Whether they will at some later stage meet again and perhaps dispense with the formality in order to engage in a fulfilling relationship, is a matter on which the writer imparts no information.

Le Square is one of Duras's major artistic successes. It possesses a charm and grace that are particularly lacking in Un Homme est venu me voir, which employs a very similar abstract, intellectual dialogue. The reason is that Le Square possesses emotional warmth, and presents a credible picture of personal anguish and solitude, whilst the later play is merely a confrontation between two stone-cold figures. The preciousness which in Le Square works as a contribution to the total effect is here no more than an ornament and cannot compensate for the fact that the work lacks an emotional core.

Duras has recourse to the same stylistic devices seen in Le Square - the elaborate phraseology, the abstractions and circumlocutions - in later works. She also employs extravagant metaphors with which to describe people and events in striking terms. The style not only bestows on the narrative an elevated tone, but sharpens moments of suspense or intensifies an affective state.

In Dix heures et demie abstract expressions are frequent, and serve

to create a feeling of portentousness: "avec cette aurore se démasque encore une certitude nouvelle que la nuit gardait cachée" (p.110). Duras also attempts to raise Maria's situation to an almost tragic level by means of abstract, therefore universal terms: "Elle a sur elle, répandu le parfum irremplaçable de son pouvoir sur elle, de son manquement à son amour pour elle, de son bon vouloir d'elle, elle a sur elle, l'odeur de la fin de l'amour" (p.183). (In Les Viaducs, similarly, the precious tone in which Marcel, Claire and the café-owner, Bill, occasionally couch their remarks also represents an attempt by the authoress to imbue the play with a tragic quality). Duras also resorts to another device favoured by the "précieux" - exaggerated metaphors. Mr. Bratton has rightly pointed out that the flamboyant mode of expression is one means of characterizing Maria: "Maria is a woman whose emotions are so pent-up and near the brink of violent expression that she is led to a somewhat theatrical act (saving Paestra) which is an over-expression of her tension. ... Hyperbolic and metaphorical passages occur often when Maria thinks about Claire and Pierre or about Paestra." (14) The other couple are described "dans l'émerveillement de leur foudroyant désir" (p.45); Paestra becomes, in Maria's eyes, "cette animalité de la douleur" (p.74), "ce prodige tangible, cette fleur noire poussée cette nuit dans les désordres de l'amour" (p.103).

Whilst in Dix heures et demie such mannerism is reserved for important moments, it is more common in M. Andemas, where the profusion of abstract phrases gives the novel its poetic and slightly unreal quality. There is a strange beauty in the descriptions, achieved partly through the odd choice of vocabulary; the dog's departure is related thus: "Il avait transpercé de sa coulée colorée l'espace gris à la hauteur du vol des oiseaux" (pp.12-13). Frequently it is people who are described in unexpected and pedantic language; M. Andemas sees on the young girl's face "l'inconvenance immaculée d'un regard déjà vu" (p.44); and "la blondeur

de Valérie" forms a leitmotif across the whole story (pp.89, 90, etc.). Duras departs at times from normal syntax, substituting nouns for verbs: "elle était toujours dans la scrutation rigide et fascinée de la place du village" (p.79), "M. Andesmas [ ... ] contempla [ ... ] ce passage de Valérie" (p.87) [my underlining]. Not only do such devices elevate the tone, but, more important, Duras is universalizing the experience of one old man confronted with the loss of a loved one:

Ah, comme il cherche à rejoindre cette longue attente où depuis longtemps il s'est relégué et qu'il peut si commodément nommer son désespoir! Ah! que la blondeur de Valérie coure le monde, que le monde entier se ternisse, si bon lui semble, devant tant de blondeur, pourquoi cela se penserait-il? (p.39)

This peculiarly abstract style is in addition responsible for the unusual metaphors that occasionally crop up: "La forêt reprit sa pose silencieuse sur la montagne" (p.24); "la cruauté de ce délire d'écoute" (p.101); "Ils écoutent la douceur égorgée de ce chant" (p.101); and there is the old man's saddening confession: "Je crois que je mourrai avec tout le poids, l'immense poids de l'amour de Valérie sur mon coeur" (p.117).

Lol V. Stein continues the tendency towards abstractions and grandiose metaphors; in this novel preciousness reaches its most extreme form. Abstractions render vague and insubstantial whatever they describe, and they are used in Lol V. Stein to engender a feeling of unreality. The flamboyant abstractions attached to the characters in particular tend to dehumanise them, deprive them of concreteness: "À travers la transparence de son être incendié, de sa nature détruite, elle [ Lol ] m'accueille d'un sourire" (p.131); "Tout à coup, voici leurs voix entrelacées, tendres, dans la dilution nocturne, d'une féminité pareillement rejointe en moi" (p.107). One cannot say that the stylistic device is a success; rather the final effect is of clumsiness and even silliness. Although there are some mysterious and poetic metaphors - "la vieille algèbre des peines d'amour" (p.19) - the language is more often over-blown to the

point of absurdity: "La nudité de Tatiana déjà nue grandit dans une surexposition qui la prive toujours davantage du moindre sens possible" (p.135); "la fin sans fin, le commencement sans fin de Lol V. Stein" (p.214) (cf. also pp.36-7). The only reason one can put forward for this affectation is that it is the idiom of the narrator, but it seems highly unlikely that a doctor, however romantically inclined, would indulge in such magniloquence.

Regrettably one feels that in parts of M. Andesmas and considerably more in Lol V. Stein the authoress has overreached herself, and that the stylisation falls over into literary pedantry. In the second book an intriguing study of neurosis is marred by the portentous and melodramatic language. The elaborate style is far more successful when, as in Le Square, it is not over-exploited and when extravagant metaphors and grotesque exaggeration are avoided.

#### e. Humour.

Duras has most frequently been identified as a prophet of unhappy love and solitude, yet several of her lesser-known works possess a rich comedy, achieved largely through style.

The preciosity in her short stories, for example, works in favour of effects that are far from serious. In Le Boa and Madame Dodin style and content are radically opposed. The bizarre spectacles of the two "dévorations" which the girl in Le Boa must witness every Sunday, are described in quite incongruous terms: "le boa s'intégrait ce poulet au cours d'une digestion d'une aisance souveraine" (p.101); and her adolescent baroque fantasies about the generous nature of assassins and prostitutes are couched in convincingly logical language (cf. pp.111ff.). Much of the

fun in Madame Dodin lies in the clash between the bourgeois narrator's elevated style and the crass banality of the details described; the narrator is here talking about the rancour of the concierge, who is inundated with everyone else's rubbish:

[Madame Dodin] voudrait, comprenez-vous, nous faire comprendre. Et, pour ce faire, elle nous obligerait même, si elle le pouvait, à résorber nos propres poubelles, à manger nos restes, à grignoter nos épiluchures [...]

Mais cette solution suffirait-elle? Sans doute, non. [...] Ce ne serait pas encore cette chose nouvelle, différente de ses parties, cette entité que l'on nomme poubelle, qui est à l'origine d'une obligation spéciale échue précisément à Mme Dodin, notre concierge. (p.129)

Duras uses literary mannerism to create the comic irony in the first of her farces, Les Eaux et forêts. Characters speak at times with exaggerated articulacy and preciousness; one woman, for example, wonders about the reasons for her dog's sudden vicious attack on the man:

FEMME 1, (cherche, toujours hypocrite): Ces jours-ci, n'aurais-je rien remarqué? en cherchant bien? Un refus de nourriture? Une conduite inattendue? Un dérèglement de ses bonnes petites habitudes prises par mes soins? (p.12)

Duras will allow a character to become magniloquent, then suddenly make him deflate himself: (HOMME:) "J'essaye de me dominer, de me tenir en respect par autodomination, par autosaturation, mais quelquefois j'en ai marre" (p.25).

In her comedies Duras draws on a number of other sources of verbal humour. She chooses bizarre and ridiculous vocabulary that sounds incongruous in the characters' mouths. In Les Eaux et forêts, some words satirise the pretentiousness of modern urban living: one woman talks of going back to "ma petite casa" (p.20), and the man describes his house as "de l'immobilier de première classe avec tout l'conf' modern', s.d.b., etc.," (p.40). The man is apt to employ particularly silly examples of "franglais" - "le one-step" (p.31), "le rocking-chair" (p.41), "une femme légale et sexy" (p.40). In this case Duras takes her place in a satirical

tradition going back to Rabelais and including Ionesco, who also attacks the absurdities of modern language.

Odd effects are achieved in both Yes, peut-être and Le Shaga by weird combinations of words and by the chaotic mixture of different languages - (French, English and smatterings of Vietnamese in the first piece):

B (à H, souriante): Sudrina Monte-Carlo?

H: Oh non, non. Vous exagérez. Moi j'avais un billet.

J'ai pris le train.

B: Monte-Carlo, nodriden ashamo Monte-Carlo (non, non, vous n'avez pas compris.)

H (à A): Qu'avez-vous compris?

A: Elle demande pourquoi on va à Monte-Carlo plutôt qu'à Monte-Carlo.

H, (ne comprend pas): Ah oui, ah oui... je comprends.

(Le Shaga, p.201)

Several comic devices are characteristic of Ionesco's plays: in Le Shaga, the gabbled recitations and nightmarish anecdotes (cf. pp.200, 201, 209-10), the pitched battles fought with words and syllables (cf. p.204, etc.), and the degeneration into nonsense; in Yes, peut-être the punning which the childlike creatures make in all innocence and the illogicality of their affirmations:

( [B] va regarder l'homme très près, sous le nez.)

B: O lala, a l'oeil fixe comme un of au plat.

(Elle reste bouche ouverte sur "plat.")

A, (intriguée): Of au plat?

(Elle reste de même bouche ouverte sur "plat.")

B: Plat. On mangeait, en americanos avant avant. Ont trouvé d'lof au plat sous le sol, ont fait le musée d'lof au plat ils disent, sous le palace, yes.

A, (admirative): Savez des choses...

B, (fière): Yes. (pp.160-1)

In her comic works Duras communicates her delight in the potentialities of language, which she manipulates to create grotesque and ridiculous verbal confrontations.

Duras's prose is at its most accomplished when she works within very

narrow limits and resists the temptation to indulge in an expansive metaphorical style. Although Le Square is a work of distinction, she does not always have the artistic range or skill to cope throughout a novel with an elevated, mannered style and unfamiliar vocabulary, hence the clumsy, overwritten appearance of much of Lol V. Stein and M. Andemas. The spare and lucid writing of Le Marin, Tarquinia and other novels seems more suitable to Duras's talents, which include a capacity for rigorous selectivity; she chooses a few precise words that suffice to give an impression of mood. Moreover, this very simplicity contributes to the freshness of her prose style. Duras also shows great delicacy in the manipulation of her prose for musical effect. Indeed this musicality, this insistent ceremonial rhythm, contributes much to the atmosphere of urgency and mounting tension and to the lyrical charm of her novels.

No matter how austere his approach to his subject, a talented writer's work will be instantly recognisable by the personal manner of writing. Duras has sought, as we have noted, to limit the writer's omniscience and command over his material. Yet Duras is not "absent" from her work, precisely because she attaches such prime importance to careful craftsmanship. In the majority of her novels, Duras's name is written on every page.

NOTES

- (1) Stephen Ullmann, Style in the French Novel, Cambridge University Press, 1957, pp.25-6.
- (2) Cf. Pierre Hahn, "Les hommes de 1963 ne sont pas assez féminins," Paris-Théâtre, 16e année (1963), p.35.
- (3) A short passage will demonstrate the similarity with Duras:

Finally we went up to Montmartre. Inside Zelli's it was crowded, smoky, and noisy. The music hit you as you went in. Brett and I danced. It was so crowded we could barely move. The nigger drummer waved at Brett. We were caught in the jam, dancing in one place in front of him.

"Hahre you?"

"Great."

"Thaat's good."

He was all teeth and lips.

"He's a great friend of mine," Brett said. "Damn good drummer."

The music stopped and we started toward the table where the count sat. Then the music started again and we danced. I looked at the count. He was sitting at the table smoking a cigar. The music stopped again.

Ernest Hemingway, Fiesta (1927), in The Essential Hemingway, London, Jonathan Cape, 1947, p.52.

- (4) Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre's essay on L'Étranger in Situations I, Paris, Gallimard, 1947, pp.99-121. Sartre points out devices similar to those employed by Duras: the simple, disjunctive sentences; the avoidance of causal liaisons. (cf. pp.113, 118-9)
- (5) J. Rivette/J. Narboni, p.45.
- (6) J.-M. Fossey, p.18.
- (7) Ibid., p.18.
- (8) The present study is confined to general remarks. An exhaustive study of Duras's use of incantatory rhythm and repetition, from Moderato Cantabile onwards, is contained in J.S. Bratton's work, pp.339ff.
- (9) Cf. Richard Roud, "Conversation with Marguerite Duras," Sight and Sound, vol. 29, no.1, (1960), p.16.
- (10) John Cruickshank, "Camus's technique in L'Étranger," French Studies, vol. X, (1956), p.249.
- (11) Ibid., p.250.
- (12) P. Hahn, p.32.
- (13) J.-L. Seylaz, pp.30-31.
- (14) J.S. Bratton, pp.348-9.

CONCLUSION

Marguerite Duras is at an important turning-point in her career. In her creative writing she has come to something of an impasse. Her whole attitude towards literature, which is bound up with her political concerns, has altered, and her present interest lies in the audio-visual media:

I don't read novels any more. A growing number of people violently reject the concept of eternal literature. Now I find audio-visual culture completely adequate. (1)

Duras dislikes "eternal literature" because it is part of the established order; it has been accepted and absorbed by present society. Her words echo Max Thor's remark in the film of Détruire dit-elle: "Il faut jeter les livres." Duras's present attitude explains also her rejection of style in recent works; she considers that style bestows upon art an "eternal" form.

Her recent fiction, as we have seen in the previous chapter, has been the product of this attitude. Duras has been veritably obsessed with creating art cheaply, using as little money as possible:

Je crois qu'il faut faire des choses de plus en plus économiques, de plus en plus rapides à lire, c'est-à-dire faire de plus en plus large la part du lecteur. (2)

Duras is advocating a kind of anti-art, or art at its least aesthetic. The reader, or spectator, is given the skeleton of a work upon which he must let his imagination have free play. The danger is that such works of art are neither very satisfying nor very illuminating; a reader desires not a few fragmentary ideas, but the writer's vision. One can see the principle at work in both Détruire dit-elle and Abahn Sabana David, which, although skeletal in form, are fortunately brimming with ideas.

It is difficult to see (even if Samuel Beckett has proved it is possible) how much further Duras could reduce the actual written material and, significantly, her next film - provisionally entitled Histoire d'un

amour - will not be published first as a book.

It is worthwhile examining Duras's position vis-à-vis the recent literary scene. At one time her name was associated with those of the exponents of the "nouveau roman," a connection she has always denied. (3) All the same, certain similarities can be traced.

The term "nouveau roman" came into fashion in the middle of the 1950's to designate a number of young French novelists who, despite the diversity of their outlooks and literary techniques, were considered to share some similar aims. (4) All have been experimentalists in literary forms. Among them are Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, Nathalie Sarraute and Claude Simon. (5)

It hardly needs repeating here that the idea of a "school" of the "nouveau roman" is largely a myth. The writers concerned have never established a common literary doctrine or manifesto, and they are united only in what they reject. The "nouveau roman" represents in part a reaction against the social novel, and in particular the literature of commitment, exemplified by Sartre, Camus, and Malraux. Robbe-Grillet, for example, maintains:

l'art ne peut être réduit à l'état de moyen au service d'une cause qui le dépasserait, celle-ci fût-elle la plus juste, le plus exaltante; l'artiste ne met rien au-dessus de son travail, et il s'aperçoit vite qu'il ne peut créer que pour rien; [...] quel que soit son attachement au parti ou aux idées généreuses, l'instant de la création ne peut que le ramener aux seuls problèmes de son art. (6)

The words have been echoed by Duras, who will not allow any cause to interfere with creative writing: "The intrusion of political commitment into literary creation is, for me, the beginning of a moral position which is incompatible with literature." (7) In her most recent works art and

politics have coalesced naturally, however. She would not go as far as Robbe-Grillet: she believes art should not be dictated by pressures external to the artist.

The "nouveaux romanciers" have abandoned many fictional conventions, although they are not the first to do so, and have acknowledged precursors in Kafka, Joyce, and others. Frequently there are only the barest traces of plot, and no characters in the sense of fully-rounded individuals. It would seem that the virtual absence of plot in Le Square and Moderato Cantabile, the narration only of what is externally apprehensible, and the reliance upon conversation, led critics to class Duras with the New Novelists. Many of them reject the kind of psychological analysis practised in the past. Nathalie Sarraute has remarked: "Le mot 'psychologie' est un de ceux qu'aucun auteur aujourd'hui ne peut entendre prononcer à son sujet sans baisser les yeux et rougir." (8) Sarraute believes, however unfairly, that the novel has continually produced defined social types whose characteristics can be immediately recognised by the reader. Even characterization in Proust's work, she feels, is superficial. Sarraute attempts to probe into the furthest depths of the mind in order to capture the secret, unacknowledged emotional responses and movements of which characters themselves are only half-aware. The New Novelists in general have been drawn to depict the psychic life, preferring to situate the action inside an individual's consciousness, or a series of consciousnesses, or at least restricting the angle of vision to one personality and recording reality as he perceives it. We have seen that Duras also strives for what Robbe-Grillet has called "la subjectivité totale." (9) In Robbe-Grillet's novels reality is refracted through an insanely jealous mind (La Jalousie) or registered in a third-person narrative from the angle of vision of a single man, with the consequent filtering (Le Voyeur, Dans le labyrinthe). Duras's "recording

consciousness" is very similar. She shares also with Michel Butor an interest in the processes of memory, and interweaves past, present and future as they crowd in on the consciousness (cf. La Modification).

Duras's conception of literature is in one important respect similar to that of her contemporaries; they frequently regard literature as a kind of quest, a means of uncovering new and unsuspected truth, particularly through experimentation with new forms. Duras confesses that "l'acte d'écrire est un voyage dans l'inconnu [ ... ] Je vais à l'aventure quand j'écris un livre." (10) Robbe-Grillet too looks on the novel not as an expression of truth known in advance but as "une recherche qui crée elle-même ses propres significations, au fur et à mesure." (11) And Michel Butor, in an article entitled Le Roman comme recherche, says that the novel must be continually transformed in order to reveal new facets of reality: "des formes nouvelles révéleront dans la réalité des choses nouvelles, des liaisons nouvelles." (12)

Yet the most one can say is that Duras's preoccupations happen to resemble those of her fellow-writers, by one of those coincidences frequent in literature. This is equally true of Duras's work in the theatre. Her comedies are reminiscent of Ionesco's absurdist plays: one thinks of their unreal, dream-like quality, the grotesque situations and characters, and there are echoes of Ionesco in the way circumstances which are at first surprising and comic may in the end have frightening and tragic undertones (cf. La Leçon). The humour has certain similarities - the clowning and buffoonery, the crazy antics in Le Shaga - and more especially, as we have seen, the verbal humour stems from several of the same sources: the word-battles, the punning, the parody of language (cf. La Cantatrice chauve).

It is dangerous to make definitive judgments on the artists of one's own time, and critics can at best select and discuss what seems important, original, or relevant to the epoch and the development of literature. It is therefore impossible to predict Duras's eventual stature in literary history. One can, however, define certain valuable qualities in her works.

In the first place, Duras has an interesting vision and deeply-held convictions. Some of her ideas - like the destructive nature of time - do not contain much originality, others may be unusual to the point of bizarreness, yet they testify to a complex personality. Secondly, she has a rare ability to convey the quality of lived experience: the intensity of passion, or the sense of falling out of love, of waste and emptiness as the bottom drops out of life; the unspoken affection between mother and child; the feelings of an old man left in isolation. Again, her novels are memorable because of their particular mood, mysterious and ominous in Moderato Cantabile and Le Vice-consul, frequently oppressive as the hostile elements crowd in on the protagonists; one remembers the delicacy of the natural description, achieved by a careful choice of a few evocative details, in Tarquinta, Dix heures et demie, and other novels. These are the qualities that have popularised Duras's works. Her principal artistic successes, it seems to me, lie in the impressionistic form of the narratives, the economy of her writing, and in the subtle, allusive dialogues of the novels and plays.

Duras's artistic achievements are considerable. At this critical moment in her career, one can only hope that she will not, as her recent pronouncements suggest, turn her back on literature for very long.

NOTES

- (1) "P.H.S.," "Undistributable," in "The Times Diary," The Times, 7 June 1971, p.14.
- (2) J. Rivette/J. Narboni, p.45.
- (3) Cf. L. Langley.  
J.S. Bratton has written a full account of the affinities between Duras and the New Novel. Particularly suggestive is his comparison of the use of conversation by Duras and Sarraute, (pp.372-84).
- (4) In the 1950's the phenomenon had been variously called "néo-réalisme," "école du regard," "anti-roman." John Sturrock suggests that the special number of Esprit (juillet-août 1958) devoted to these novelists, including Duras, is the first recorded public appearance of the term "nouveau roman." It had probably been in use in some critical circles for a considerable time.  
  
cf. John Sturrock, The French New Novel, London, O.U.P., 1969.
- (5) Texts by Robbe-Grillet, Butor, and Simon were often published by Editions de Minuit, as were Duras's Moderato Cantabile and (more recently) Détruire dit-elle, and Sarraute's Tropismes. This tended to increase the impression of a link between the writers.
- (6) Alain Robbe-Grillet, Pour un nouveau roman, Paris, Collection "Idées," Gallimard, 1967, p.42.
- (7) L. Langley
- (8) Nathalie Sarraute, L'Ère du soupçon, Paris, Gallimard, 1956, p.83.
- (9) A. Robbe-Grillet, p.149.
- (10) P. Hahn, pp.32, 35.
- (11) A. Robbe-Grillet, p.152.
- (12) Michel Butor, "Le Roman comme recherche," in Répertoire I, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1960, p.9.

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(1) Les Viaducs de la Seine-et-Oise. Paris, "Le Manteau d'Arlequin,"  
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- (2) Duras has adapted the following plays, originally in English, for the French stage:

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With Gérard Jarlot: Une Aussi Longue Absence. Paris, Gallimard, 1961. Directed by Henri Colpi, 1961.

Unpublished film-scenarios:

Moderato Cantabile. Directed by Peter Brook, 1960.

La Voleuse. Directed by Jean Chapot, 1966. Original idea by Jean Chapot, who was assisted in writing the scenario and dialogues by Marguerite Duras.

Nuit Noire Calcutta. A short film, made in 1966. It was never released. No information available on director.

(2) Duras has both written and directed the following films:

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