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MARGUERITE DURAS AND THE NEW NOVEL

THE NEW NOVEL is here to stay, and as a matter of fact it is not so new any more. Proust, Faulkner, and Joyce have not been mere experimentalists in the techniques of the novel. And the reputation of Marguerite Duras, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Nathalie Sarraute as powerful novelists equipped with formidable intellectual powers is constantly on the increase. Their analysis of human tropisms and their investigation of the stream of consciousness have a definite place in modern literature, for they afford the reader an excellent opportunity of understanding heretofore unexplored areas of conflict and divergence of opinion. For this purpose, blanks (obviously no character can be a complete blank, and it can readily be admitted that "in life there is no man without qualities, for the lack of quality is itself a quality"¹) are more useful than petty, *true-to-life* personages, because they are more like us as we really are, as our subconsciousness "knows" we are, devoured by the boredom of waiting, both afraid of and anxious for the unknown, striving constantly to escape the gravitational chains of prejudice, society, and habit. We all wish to live in a way superior to life as we know it, with its routines, patterns, and commonplaces. We wish to escape mediocrity, and for that reason we look up to movie stars, artists, heroes. More often than not we are simply content with that, we take solace in escapism rather than in escape. The characters of Marguerite Duras are often more bold (not necessarily more successful) and they appeal to us because they have come to grips, consciously, with problems and issues that we carefully store into our subconsciousness.

Marguerite Duras is a writer's writer in the best tradition of Proust and Joyce, unafraid of tackling human blanks, that is to say characters with few or no qualities, personages more dead than alive, more elusive than palpable, hence more disturbing and engaging than those *reasonable* but fake characterizations of many a more popular novelist.

Marguerite Duras is little read in the U.S.A., certainly less than Sagan for example, and while *Bonjour Tristesse*, *A Certain Smile*, and *Do You Love Brahms?* have been financially successful films, fewer here have seen or

talked about *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) or *Une aussi longue absence* (1961). She was born in Indochina in 1914, adopted Paris at the age of eighteen, obtained a *licence* in law and political science from the Sorbonne, and began her writing career inconspicuously enough with *Les Impudents* (1943). She kept on writing, vigorously—eight other novels, a book of short stories, and four plays in less than twenty years. But in spite of such a voluminous repertory, in spite of the undisputable literary quality of novels like *La Vie tranquille* (1944), *Le Square* (1955), and *Moderato cantabile* (1958), few of her works have been translated in this country, and little attention has been paid to her in learned journals or university quarterlies.² Critics who have discussed Marguerite Duras' literary production have divided it into two periods: that of stories in the manner of Hemingway, corresponding to the immense popularity in post-war France of the American novel and, from *Les Petits chevaux de Tarquinia* (1953) on, that of participation, albeit moderate, in the movement of the New Novel.³

La Vie tranquille is a touching story written in the first person, told with a great sobriety of means, and, because of frequent understatements which help to emphasize the platitudes of life, rich in the never-ending search, conscious or unconscious, ardent or passive, for an elusive absolute, a role, a pose, a mask—a reason.

Francou, a twenty-five-year-old girl, inscribes in her notebook the behaviour of friends and relatives in her provincial town, also her feelings, her fears, her nothingness which strives to exist. But Francou is not alone. The mediocrity of life weighs on the others with the same intensity, causing humans to vegetate, the living to become dead or dormant, the inanimate to become overpowering and crushing.⁴ Nothing ever happens. Francou's mother is "neither happy, nor unhappy". She gives the impression that "she is not with us, that she is with passing time, traveling with it . . ." The shepherd, Clément, "prefers nothing to no one, no one to nothing. He is careful about having any opinion, they say he is old, they say he is dumb, he doesn't do anyone any harm, nor any good. . . ." Later Francou comments: "I do not think he is leading a human life; his thoughts begin with daylight and end at dusk." About herself she admits: "I was a nobody, I had no name, no face . . . I was nothing. My steps made no noise, no one heard me, I was disturbing no one." Elsewhere she adds: "I thought of my age, I thought of all those who were asleep in this house, and I heard time eat away at us like an army of rats." When Tiène, a friend of Nicholas, her brother, visits the family in order to make the acquaintance of Francou, the girl remarks: "I warned

him that it would be a silly idea; here, it would be as if no one is ever around."

Like the heroes of the New Novel of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the personages of this story have become dehumanized (if they had ever been human), that is to say divested of incarnation. They are deprived of that time which can be divided into past, present, and future. They are like time, passing, intemporal. They are shapeless, absent, unaware of the possibility of choosing, of becoming re-incarnated. Life for them is so meaningless and static that inactivity becomes, if not an ideal worthy of pursuit like that of the contemplative Buddhists, a means of hibernation void of happiness, but also of desire. That is not to say that these personages do not experience rare and excessive feelings, or that they are not capable of committing monstrous acts. Nicholas, for example, kills his uncle, Jérôme. The murder is a trivial, senseless action, but it will awaken the others, it will force them to choose. Not all, however, for the parents and the shepherd are already too old, too intemporal, and although they keep on breathing, their apparent existence is only a tropism, an uncontrolled response to uncomprehended stimuli.⁵ But the rest of the family is immediately prompted to act. Clémence, Nicolas' wife and mistress of the murdered uncle, flees. She is replaced by Luce, who had always been in love with Nicolas, but who could not interlope so long as the wife was still present. She represents the intrusion in a dehumanized household of a passionate, exuberant, and humane influence. Her entrance marks the end of a tranquil life of indifference and absence. It is the beginning of the individualization of the others. When Luce seems to forget her first love and become enamoured of Tiène, Nicolas commits suicide and Francou is obliged to take a stand, to "con" Tiène into marrying her, into becoming "a being of fortune and misfortune, one who must choose her among all girls, one who must choose, among all empires, that which is lost in advance, that which can never be found, the empire called happiness."

Tranquil life, then, is nothing but a way of non-existing. One can grow old that way and die without having lived, without having experienced suffering or joy, dragged by and with time, absurdly, unaware of even the closest calamities. But the younger ones have a chance at incarnation, at life, sometimes derisively (murder, suicide), sometimes in a reasonable fashion (falling in love, marrying). But no matter, for in either case incarnation is utopian: suicide is a negative solution and involves only a momentary acceptance of life because of the appeal of its opposite, death; and love and marriage without the hope of happiness constitute a mere adoption of common practices which,

in time, will only result in a return of the process of dehumanization ephemerally interrupted. For the mediocrity of life is a redoubtable foe: one can avoid the battle and die slowly, as did Francou's parents; or seek solution through murder and suicide, as in the case of Nicolas; or, like Francou, give oneself the illusion of passionate feelings while still possessing that lucidity which makes one aware of the futility of it all.

In *Le Marin de Gibraltar* (1952), the theme of utopian incarnation reappears. A nameless hero (anonymous in order to emphasize his absence, his lack of identity) leads with Jacqueline an indifferent, passive existence, a void where no human passions or interests occupy a place. Unexpectedly he will find one day the courage to abandon her and to elope with Anne. She seeks, on all the oceans of the world, a Gibraltar sailor who perhaps does not even exist. The two travel, search; their aims are vague, their illusions unexpressed and almost impossible to formulate, but in their trip they catch a glimpse, once in a while, of certain reflections, certain instants of possible, though unattainable happiness. They have been incarnated, it is true, but for the most part they have not escaped the mediocrity of life which still pursues them no matter where they go, no matter how rapid the trajectory.

With *Les Petits chevaux de Tarquinia*, however, Mme. Duras adopts a different view of incarnation. Mediocrity abounds in the existence of Sara who, with her husband, Jacques, and her son, leads a tranquil absence of life. Sometimes she goes on vacation, and then she lies for hours on a deserted shore where the unreality of life coincides with the acute lack of events. For there are no revolutions, no adventures, and what happens is only illusory and derisive. Frustration, then, becomes a way of existing, and she will not even run away with her lover, Jean, with whom she has a passing, senseless and loveless affair. Incarnation here will not simply be a flight into the unknown, a break with the past, an illusory transcendence of time, as in Marguerite Duras' previous novels. For the first time it will mean perseverance, not in revolt or in refusal but rather in one's lot, in one's routine, mediocre as it might be. Leaving is not different from staying, and Sara, who persists instead of breaking away, makes acceptable and consoling the very sort of life filled with voids and defeats which she had previously found unbearable. For even this type of incarnation requires a terrible struggle: conquering one's unattainable desires, managing to ignore one's ambitions and to suppress one's vitality, accepting in other words the essential mediocrity of terrestrial existence, means exercising fully one's will and, in a way, living. Sara lives now, for with her husband she will agree to go see the horses of Tarquinia,

an indisputably interesting sight. Resignation, then, has something to offer.

Marguerite Duras' next publication, *Des Journées entières dans les arbres* (1954), a collection of four almost plotless stories, pursues the vein of the New Novel, scant in incidental detail and complex in psychological investigations of characters and situations. The work is perhaps preparatory, for it is followed by *Le Square*, a good example of the New Novel. Here, a travelling salesman of shoelaces and razorblades meets, in a park, a young servant with whom he begins to talk. We do not know the names of these persons, nor their age (the girl says at one point that she is twenty-one, at another that she is twenty-two, and she might be either or perhaps she has no idea how old she is), not exactly what they look like, what they hope, or why they are attracted to each other. But we do know that there is a bond between the two, for they continue to converse from early afternoon until dark. The man resembles the characters of *La Vie tranquille* before the murder of Jérôme: he has not chosen yet, he has not been incarnated. Struck by the platitudes and trivia of daily living, he awaits, he does not know what, perhaps for something to happen, something terrible and catastrophic that will provide his elusive *cause d'être*. His waiting is marked neither by happiness, nor by resignation. Only once in his life had he felt like dying, that is only once had he been fully aware of his existence. The woman shares, for different reasons, her interlocutor's predicament. She is a simple, naïve domestic constantly abused by her masters who overwork her because they sense that she is not capable of resistance. There are no short cuts for her; she refuses to make her labours easier even when the opportunity presents itself, for to do that would be to become reconciled to her situation. And it is here that lies the difference between the two characters in the book: the woman envisions a future, different from the present, a home, a family, a husband. Her imagination and bourgeois taste make her less intemporal than the man she speaks to. Her hope has of course no basis in fact, for she is too shy and indeed too secretly resigned to make true efforts towards the realization of the dream. But the vision is sufficient; she will exist until she will be able to live, fully aware that "nothing has yet begun for her," but that something will. And the two characters are mysteriously drawn to each other, so much so that at the end we foresee the possibility of a reunion, a faint possibility, more in the mind of the woman than in the will of the man. We wonder if he is the domestic's future husband, if she is the bridge which will take him across from hibernation to life. We do not know the answers to these questions, nor are we left with a feeling of frustration when we turn the last page of the

book. For the story is complete such as it is, not merely the chance meeting of two lonely hearts, as it might have degenerated into in the hands of a less skilled writer, but a revealing dialogue replete with psychological undertones and engaging interest. And then, too, we well remember the lesson of *La Vie tranquille*: marriage constitutes a utopian incarnation, for the mediocrity of life will sooner or later grip the couple and unleash the dehumanization process temporarily stopped. And so, it is just as well that the heroine holds only a faint hope of meeting once more her interlocutor of an afternoon. For who knows if *it is better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all?* As for the hero, his acquisition of an identity at any cost, not through heroic and significant acts but through a gesture, a formula such as is involved in a marriage ceremony, constitutes an end perhaps not worthy of the lonely torpor in which he now finds himself.

Incarnation for the purpose of avoiding the dullness of one's existence is also utopian in *Moderato cantabile*. Here the author manages to create a tense drama in the opening scenes when she recounts the banal encounter between a stubborn child, a bored mother, Anne Desbaresdes, and a stern piano teacher whom the pupil cannot or will not obey. Largely through dialogue, Marguerite Duras succeeds in evoking a powerful inner struggle. There is nothing between the three personages in the room but an indirect contact, a bond of chance. Miles separate the characters: the child goes through the motions of playing the piano, automatically and badly; the teacher insists on technicalities which are meaningless in terms of the pupil's early development of method, and the mother seems to despise her unbearable and indocile offspring. As the conversation unfolds, a murder takes place in a café across the street, and the cry of the victim, of the gathering crowd, of the police sirens insinuates itself into the room, into the inner fibres of the three personages, like a terrible and inescapable obsession. Anne is most afflicted, for while others live and die *outside*, she awaits and is bored and has no hope of participating in real human dramas.

Across the street the killer has been arrested, the crowds have dispersed. No one knows exactly why the murder took place. Rumour has it that the couple was too much in love. When the police arrived, the assassin stood over the body of his victim, his lips grotesquely chained to hers, her blood spotting the collar of his shirt. Anne goes into the café and meets Chauvin, one of the workers of her husband's shipyards. He had witnessed the murder, and now attempts to satisfy Anne's curiosity about the details. As they speak they are mysteriously attracted to each other, and they will meet, day after day,

in order to drink together and talk about the crime that had taken place. There is, of course, no real excuse for their clandestine meetings. The explanation which they share at first, and which becomes more and more difficult to accept as time goes on, is that Anne must know the reasons behind the murder and that Chauvin hopes to dig into these reasons and relate them to her. When it becomes apparent that the couple is identifying itself with the *others*, that Chauvin is supposed to become the killer and Anne the victim, they agree not to meet any more. This is a blow to Anne's quest for incarnation. She now misses the psychological adultery in which she had engaged with Chauvin. Despair follows, the agreement is broken, and the two will continue to meet and to mimic the terrible game of unbearable passion the *others* must have gone through, until there is nothing left to do but for Chauvin to become an assassin and Anne a voluntary gull. When Chauvin raises his hand and utters: "I wish you were dead," Anne simply answers: "I already am." His gesture is useless, for the woman has already been incarnated. And so, as in the case of Nicolas, death is once more construed as an alternative superior to an existence of futile expectation and boredom.

Moderato cantabile is perhaps the best novel of Marguerite Duras. The author deliberately fails to portray her characters in full. They remain flimsy, anonymous, sketchy. All we know about the hero is that he loves Anne; all we know about the heroine is that she loves or perhaps simply uses Chauvin. But the platitudes they speak to each other, while not revealing in the accepted sense of the word, point admirably to the futility of Anne's quest. For becoming someone else, finding identification with another, are not simple operations like that of forging a passport. In spite of her continuous efforts Anne has remained herself, for it is she who dies, the bored, lifeless Anne and not the other who was indeed murdered because she had been alive, really alive, and because she had kindled in her husband, or lover, or whatever he was, a passion, or a hatred, or a madness that is only possible with the living. Chauvin on the other hand simply went through the motions of killing, because he had to, because it was too late, fully aware, even before Anne's last words, that he was only strangling a lifeless body.

Thus in all instances Marguerite Duras evokes a psychological atmosphere, suggests a human situation, seizes and seals the authentic impasses of heroes and heroines dissatisfied with their condition: sometimes the fruits of lucidity remain in the efforts made, as in the case of Francou, of the anonymous hero of *Le Marin de Gibraltar*, of Sara; at other times incarnation may

be illusory but still beneficial, like that of the young servant of *Le Square*, or negative and destructive, as in the case of Nicolas and Anne Desbaresdes.

Marguerite Duras' next undertaking was the writing of the scenario for *Hiroshima mon amour*. The film narrates the story of a love affair between an impressionable French actress and a married Japanese architect. Hailed in France as "a thousand pictures in one, an atomic horror movie, a pacifist tract, a Proustian exercise in recollection, a radioactive *Romeo and Juliet*," the author's efforts have been largely missed in the U.S.A. where the production was judged more from the point of view of its cinematographic technicalities. On the occasion of its première the *New York Herald Tribune* was alone in mentioning Mme. Duras' insight "into some of the major dilemmas that confront modern man," and the manner in which she "prods at guilts in men's minds and sends them wriggling to the surface."

But perhaps nowhere more than in her latest novel, *L'Après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas* (1962), did the author manage to emphasize so perfectly such prodding and to fuse or cause to clash the mediocrity of life with the individual ambition of superiority. *L'Après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas* hardly contains a story. Practically nothing happens in the afternoon described. An obese old man simply sits on the balcony of his mountain cottage and, from time to time, casts a glance on the village below. His solitude is absolute, painful, and poignant, and the gay musical fragments which sporadically reach his ears from down below emphasize his spiritual and physical loneliness. But Monsieur Andesmas does not suffer nearly so much as the reader who identifies himself with the hero. His interest for *others*, for the noise and masks of the world, has considerably diminished through the years, and his old-man reveries are tinged by passion only when he thinks of his daughter. He had bought the cottage for her, had had it furnished according to her wishes, and it is because of her that he is now waiting for an architect to submit remodelling plans.

And Monsieur Andesmas waits, as he has always done, periodically falling asleep on his chaise lounge. In the village, the laughter and the music mingle into an ironic twist. A dog appears and disappears. Then nothing; just the sky and the mountain and the static air. Lifeless surroundings hardly animated by the remoteness of the life below. A little girl, the architect's daughter, comes to inform the old man that her father is being detained in the village because of the festivities; he will be late. Monsieur Andesmas attempts to begin a conversation, but his efforts are useless. He finds nothing to say, and he watches, already without regret, the disappearance of the young girl who

hurries away. A little later, another visit. This time it is the wife of the architect who comes to announce that her husband will be very late because he is too busy down below, dancing with Monsieur Andesmas' daughter. Dialogue between the two is now possible, for each pursues a conversation in monologue. Clichés reveal their solitude, their resignation. The reader guesses that the architect will run away with the old man's daughter. The novel then ends, abruptly, when the merry voices of the couple now climbing up the mountain are heard, and the semblance of conversation hardly begun must end.

There is no action in all this, not even an interior struggle. The situation is motionless from beginning to end. Father and daughter are strangers to each other, to themselves, perhaps even to the most attentive reader. And one suspects that the climax of the novel realizes what Monsieur Andesmas had always thought would happen. His solitude will become irremediable now and, as in the case of Francou's mother, neither can he nor will he do anything about it. The architect's wife will likewise refuse to prevent her husband from leaving her. She will accept suffering because she knows that she will one day forget. And resignation will perhaps be followed by another man, or another marriage. Life is thus construed to be neither absurd, nor unjust, but simply terribly mediocre. Sometimes one falls in love, one marries, one has children or a clandestine affair. Impossible passions and calamitous dramas occur, incarnation and superiority seem within reach, only to fade quickly and plunge the victims into the antechamber of hell where neither hope can animate nor desire can stop the onrush of permanent acquiescence.

The lesson of *L'Après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas* crystallizes Mme. Duras' previously exposed views on the mediocrity of life. In her twenty-year-old career as playwright, film writer, and above all novelist, she has succeeded in synthesizing the qualities of what is generally called the "American Novel" with the engaging aspects of the New Novel now raging throughout Europe. She has managed to become neither so famous as Hemingway, for example, nor so notorious as Alain Robbe-Grillet. But her ability to combine the forces of the old with the lucidity of the new seems to assure her place in modern French literature. Her middle-of-the-road position represents, perhaps, the writer's own tacit assent to the inferiority of existence. Marguerite Duras, then, already widely known and appreciated by war-torn European readers who, more than others, have cause to question our "best of possible worlds,"⁶ deserves a greater reception among the American intelligentsia, indeed among all *aficionados* of better writing.

NOTES

1. J. Mitchell Morse, "Coreography Of the New Novel," *The Hudson Review* (Fall, 1963), p. 408.
2. An important article has been published abroad, however: Gaétan Picon's "Les Romans de Marguerite Duras" in *Mercure de France* (June, 1958); Maurice Blanchot's *Le Livre à venir* (Paris, 1959), also contains invaluable commentary on the author. American critics have devoted little attention to Marguerite Duras, although *Yale French Studies*, No. 27, contains an excellent article by Jacques Guicharnaud, "Woman's Fate: Marguerite Duras," pp. 106-113, and another by John W. Kneller, "Elective Empathies and Musical Affinities," pp. 114-120, which deals only with the author's *Moderato cantabile*.
3. See for example Germaine Brée's "The Contemporary French Novel Since 1960" in *French Culture Today* (New York: Cultural Services of the French Embassy, Spring, 1962), pp. 3-4.
4. For an analysis of the dominance of the lifeless on life in modern literature, see my article "The Validity of Ionesco's Contempt" in the *University of Texas Quarterly* (Winter, 1963-64).
5. The analysis of tropisms is, of course, the domain of the New Novelists: Nathalie Sarraute's *Tropismes* (Paris, 1957) is an example; in this connection see my article "Nathalie Sarraute: Resuscitator of the Novel" in *Renascence* (Summer, 1964).
6. This oft-quoted phrase summarizing Liebnitz's optimism has been under constant attack in French letters ever since Voltaire's *Candide* (1759).