

Through a Textual Glass, Darkly: The Masochistic in the Feminine Self and Marguerite Duras' *Emily L.*

Raylene Ramsay
Simmons College

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the inversions operated by proliferating specular images in Duras, seeking the meanings of Emily L.'s masochistic sacrifice of her poetry to her love for the "Captain." The Durassian subject takes form in the movement between looking and being looked at. Emily L., in her indecency and closeness to death, embodies the disturbing strangeness of the perverse desire of the watching narrator, Duras. The telescoping of the dichotomies of the fearful states at the origins of writing (self-loss in, or separation from, the other) also involves a movement between a "masculine" position of desire that seeks to kill and a "feminine" position excited by self-dispossession, a position problematically valorized in *Emily L.*

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine les inversions opérées dans les images spéculaires qui prolifèrent chez Duras, à la recherche des sens du sacrifice masochiste que fait Emily L. de ses talents de poète à son amour pour le «Capitaine». Le sujet durassien prend forme dans le va-et-vient entre le regard qu'il pose et qui est posé sur lui. Emily L., dans son indécence et sa proximité à la mort, personnifie la troublante étrangeté du désir pervers du narrateur (Duras) qui la regarde. Le mouvement qui téléscopie les dichotomies des états de peur à l'origine de l'écriture (la perte de soi dans l'autre ou la séparation d'avec l'autre) implique aussi un mouvement entre une position «masculine» de désir ou l'on cherche à tuer et une position «féminine» où l'on cherche la dépossession, position valorisée de façon problématique dans *Emily L.*

TRADITIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY, AS ELAINE Marks succinctly recapitulates in her discussion of the significant origins of the genre,¹ arises in the narcissistic project of the search for love (self-love, love for the other, the reader's love). In the recent "new autobiographies" of the French nouveaux romanciers—works pursuing the (im)possibility of the return of the self in an age of suspicion and of the primacy of language—such narcissistic and libidinal mirrors multiply self-consciously within the texts to serve a number of arguably (gender) specific purposes.²

At the very beginning of *L'Amant*, Duras, addressed as "vous," chooses, somewhat disconcertingly, to see herself through the gaze of another—a male admirer (the brother of Prevert). Her face, however, is no longer the transparent beauty of a youthful photograph, but is ravaged ("dévasté") by the individualized irreducible suffering of age and living, what Julia Kristeva sees, in a crucial article on Duras, as "The Pain of Sorrow in the Modern World." This, her interlocutor tells Duras, is the face that he prefers. Product of intersubjectivity or of the gaze of the Other, transfigured by collective

suffering, the subject also sees/reads herself in the mirror as monstrous and a fond object of time's "brutality." ("j'ai vu s'opérer ce vieillissement de mon visage avec l'intérêt que j'aurais pris par exemple du déroulement d'une lecture" \ "I saw this aging of my face take place with the interest I would have taken, for example, in the unfolding of a reading" [10].)

These specular and textual images, Durassian inversions, and juxtaposition of opposites frustrate conventional readings. It is a general feminist tenet that the woman who refuses to be the objectified "Other" of the dominant masculine gaze postulated by Simone de Beauvoir or Laura Mulvey must assert her subjectivity by looking (at) herself in the mirror. Yet being seen/seeing with the gaze of the outside other/lover (or indeed reader) has always been central to Duras' scheme of things. Being looked at and looking, being read and reading or writing the other, imply vital constant movements of repeated mirroring and of oscillation (between, for example, active exhibitionism and passive voyeurism) that replace any static photographic dichotomy (seeing/being seen, self/[m]other or self/[br]other) in her work.

In *L'Amant*, which has been portrayed as a work generated from old photographs,³ the narrator comments that the posed family scenes that the mother has taken regularly as a record of her children being seen are not a laying bare of a truth, but rather a dressing up and a fixing. Likewise, the retouched photo her mother has prepared for her grave in the Vietnamese tradition observes photographic conventions that make everyone look similar and conceals rather than reveals individual identity.

Existence, like identity, must take form in response to, or in seeing/reading others, as Marianne Hirsch claims in her interpretation of the mediations of the Durassian text. It therefore holds much of the indirectness of fiction. For Hirsch, Duras' *Modérato Cantabile* is an enacting of such a literary process of reading—an empathetic imitation. In this novel, Anne Desbaresdes, wife of a factory manager in a French seaside town, and

Chauvin, her factory worker interlocutor, meet in a bar of the Northern port to reconstruct the story of the *crime passionnel* to which they have been witness from the probing of the other's inner life and desires. The setting, the character set, and the central movement of *Emily L.* that telescopes the individual and the collective, mirroring self in the Other in intersubjectivity and working against the high textual self-consciousness through the proliferation of doubles, are already present here. So, too, is the oscillation between a sadistic "masculine" position of desire that actively seeks to dominate or hierarchize, to kill—Chauvin—and a "feminine" position excited by social/sexual degradation—Anne's desire for/of the unknown men from the factory passing in the street—that seeks humiliation and self-loss in alcohol, submission to the desire of the dominating other, self-dissolution and death. It could also be argued that what is already at stake in the text is the superordination of the writing and the violent doubling (suppression) of life by language. As in Duras' later texts, the subordinate is valorized.

Emily L. (1987) projects a sense at once of the play of familiar forms duplicated or multiplied, ghosts trying out new shapes in the mirror, and of the fierce re-turning of subordinate and repressed desire in the ever more present face of death. The writer as solitary, masterful subject creating and controlling her characters continues to systematically choose self-dissolution over self-consciousness through the splitting or multiplying of feminine narrative positions (the "je"/"elle"/la petite prostituée in *L'Amant*, the "je"—Duras/"elle"—Emily L./"La femme du capitaine" in *Emily L.*) while suggesting the difficulties with and unreliability of male narrators (Jacques Hold and Peter Morgan in *Le Ravissement de Lol V Stein*). It is only through the other observed and the observing of self by the other lover-reader ("regardez-moi" says Marguerite in *L'Amant*), that is, through a circulation of desire that I—the writer can come to speak.

The story of *Emily L.*⁴ takes shape in the responses of a narrator, recognizable as Duras, and her interlocutor, himself identifiable as the younger, homosexual (and thus non-superordinate) male

companion of recent years, Yann Andréa, to a second couple they observe daily in the port bar while on vacation close to where the Seine flows to the sea at Quilleboeuf. The narrator attributes her fascination to the woman's abjection, the "indecent" and the humility of her continuing existence so very close to death. "Little lizard" ("Petite iguane"): this fictional double somewhat resembles the description Duras gave in a recent interview for *The New York Times* with Alan Riding of her own diminished state after her treatment for alcoholism and recent illness. The physically ravaged other, an aging alcoholic isolated on her bar stool alongside her younger "husband," hair with graying roots dyed and redyed, a "bundle of rags" with broken nails and teeth, laughing and moaning in inarticulate madness, comes to embody the "disturbing strangeness" (the *Unheimliche*) of the narrator's own desire.

Desire in *Emily L.*'s narrator is, most immediately, the sudden fierce tenderness of the need to hold the bird-like skinniness of the dying Emily L. against herself. However, Duras' version of *Love-Story* is less simple than that popular sentimental film, even if it, too, requires the suffering and imminent death of the heroine to bring about the spectator's transfiguring identification. Indeed, the mirror figures of desire in *Emily L.* could be seen as closer to the sado-masochistic images in the feminist anti-pornography video *Not a Love Story*, which not only displays the social and sexual power imbalance between the sexes but also, inadvertently, their erotic power—their self-conscious staging of abuse and their self-dissolving libidinal use.

Freud has argued that, in a positive Oedipal scenario, the woman will identify narcissistically with the (m)other woman, her rival for the preferred love-object, the father's phallus, object of desire that the daughter must renounce. In this "normal" Freudian scenario, the "feminine" position is close to a disturbing lack and abjection. Emily L., for her part, is described as "the bar woman" and "the captain's woman." This childlike "She" (L/elle) recalls the self-dispossession or social destitution of all the phantasmatical, recurring figures of loss who traverse Duras' texts and weave together her writing and her life.⁵

As in Irigaray's theory of feminine speech, there is no unity of the subject or possibility of clear subjectivity or objectivity in this looking (reading/writing).

pas un sujet qui pose devant lui en objet. Il n'y a pas cette double polarité sujet/objet, énonciation/énoncé. Il y a une sorte de va-et-vient continu, du corps de l'autre à son corps. \ not a subject which poses in front of itself as object. There are not those dual poles of subject-object, enunciation-enunciated. There is a kind of continual movement back and forth from the body of the other to one's own. (*Le Corps-à-corps avec la mère*, 136).

Self-revelation may come from this self-effacement or displacement, "the mystery of seeing oneself as other" (249) as Sanford Ames describes in Lol V. Stein's *désaisissement* in the rye field as she watches the window of the hotel where Jacques Hold (the narrator who watches her) and Tatiana are making love. These slippages or oscillations from one position to another, from narcissistic identification (displacement/self-effacement) to libidinal identification (love), from mother to daughter, daughter to father (or brother substitute), feminized minority lover to machistic hunter brother, go beyond the settling down at fixed masochistic "maternal" or sadistic "paternal" poles that characterize Freudian models.

Discussing the reversal or complementarity of the roles of Alissa, Max Thor and Stein in *Détruire, dit-elle*, Agnes Beaudry recalls that, although it is Max Thor (and the reader with him) who observes Elizabeth with fascination, in a final scene, Thor challenges Elizabeth with the statement that it is she who, for ten days, has been looking at him. Astonishingly, Elizabeth accepts this statement and leaves the hotel followed by her husband. For Beaudry, this puzzling interchangeability reminds us that Elizabeth (who, like Emily L., is looked at and does not see) is also a consciousness. In Duras' films, too, the camera moves without motivation from assuming the look of a character to apparent objectivity. Scenes beginning as the glance of a certain character slip to become a glance at the character.

The anonymity and ambiguity of pronouns, that from *Modérato Cantabile* on marks the slip-page between selves and others, the self seeing and being seen, recur in *Emily L.* The narrator, however, now explicitly equates loving with seeing the other. ("Aimer, c'est voir. C'est vous voir" \ "Loving is seeing. It is seeing you" [139].) This seeing/loving seems necessarily sado-masochistic. *L'Amant*, for example, eddies around the vortex of an "absent" photo in which cohere both traces of Duras' own past and her present process of remembering, writing from the desiring body. This photo is the perverse one of the "little prostitute," in "masculine" assertive hat and "feminine" seductive gold lame high-heeled shoes, beside the "superior" black limousine of her "inferior" Chinese lover-to-be, on a frail ferry crossing the Mekong river as it sweeps powerfully to the sea.

In a study of masochism and male subjectivity, Kaja Silverman argues that the subversion of established hierarchies operated by perversion ("women governing men, slaves governing freemen," foreplay displacing hetero-sexual penetration, or deferral outranking end-pleasure) can only operate within the structuring moment of the Oedipus complex and the premium this places on genital sexuality: "perversion always contains the trace of Oedipus within it ... always represents some kind of response to what it repudiates, and is always organized to some degree by what it subverts" (32). It can thus be both a capitulation—and Foucault, for example, sees perversion as simply extending "the surface upon which power is exercised" (32)—and a revolt against hierarchy, genital sexuality, the symbolic (Father, Truth, Right) disrupting gender, functionality (biological and social), and binarism (pleasure/pain).

I would argue that the oscillations operating in Duras' imagined ideal image, in which transgressive "masculine" affirmation of self through sexual desire takes place against a background of the opposite "feminine" pull towards self-loss in the matrix sea/mother/death (mer/mère/mort), constitute a staging of the possibility of the taking up of both positions—active and sadistic, passive and masochistic, feminine and masculine, subordinate and superordinate—that goes beyond a definitive Oedi-

pal choice of subject position to become subversive. There is, nonetheless, a surprisingly clear favouring in Duras' work of masochism, bias that does not at first sight appear particularly subversive. As Silverman points out, quoting Reik and supported by the work of Krafft-Ebbing, masochism is a requisite element of normal female sexuality. While it may stretch the woman's subjective limits, it does not have the shattering qualities it has for the male who abandons his "self" and passes over into the "enemy terrain" of femininity. The Freudian categories of "erotogenic" masochism (seeking pleasure in bodily pain/being [beaten] in a passive feminine sexual relation to the father), "feminine" masochism (being castrated or copulated with, or giving birth to a baby, in which the suffering position is almost necessarily male and there is no necessary connection between "woman" and "femininity"), and moral masochism (pleasure in ego pain where the ego is beaten by the superego), as outlined in the essays "The Economic Problem of Masochism" and "A Child is Being Beaten," are subtly reoriented and redefined by intersubjectivity and the subverting of fixed subject positions in Duras. The woman writer's emphasis on masochism and its threat to the stability of the ego is, moreover, in opposition to Freud's focus on sadism, where sadism's desire to subjugate and its combination of cruelty and sexuality is described as "a serviceable fusion,"⁶ and where sadism is seen as simply an exaggerated aggressive component of the normal sexual instinct.

Like Duras' adolescent self, the aging Emily L./elle/female represents both rejection of parental authority and social caste and affirmation of pleasure principle, and regressive impulse to fusion and maternal self-dissolution, death instinct. The text speaks of "sa lenteur noyée à se défaire" \ "the drowned slowness of her dissolution," linking Emily of the English I(s)-land, like Anne-Marie Stretter before her in the estranging Colonies, or the migrant mother/Emilia of Ivry in the 1990 novel *La Pluie d'été*, strangers in a foreign land/language, to the phantasmatic figures of death/bliss by drowning that recur through the work. Like the young man lost overboard in the immensity of the sea on the ship returning to Europe in *L'Amant*, with whom the young girl identifies, the "feminine" figures which conflate love and death are both male and female.

After sounding the I(s)lands ("îles de la Sonde") in the Malaysian Seas/troubled maternal waters ("Mers Malaises"/mères malaises) of her youth with the Captain, Emily L. spends the space-time of the story in the self-dissolution of drinking in the Bar de la Marine, looking at nothing, and weeping for the ancient loss of a child and the recent disappearance of the yacht's old dog, Brownie. She is the willing scapegoat of pain and death in the world and the ego/victim offering itself to the superego's punishing oversight. This older and diagetically disappointing Emily, in France, is not so distant from Anne-Marie, in India, and her impoverished story of abandon "to the rising tide of the delta and to the oblivion to which it relegates individual lives" (Brée, 275).

For Marcelle Marini, Duras' work is the recognition by a woman of her "sexual identity" and the inscription of feminine "difference" in the "stifling universe" of the masculine "same" (269). Marianne Hirsch, as we noted, identifies in Duras that female sense of connection and receptivity and self-imagination in which the ego boundaries between self and other/(mother) are exceptionally fluid and undefined, which constitutes the basis for a distinctive female form of reading. If they are indeed "feminine territories," these spaces are problematically or provocatively marked by masochism.

Indeed, from Duras' very earliest stories ("The Boa" is a striking example), there is a recurrent *mise en scène* of the powerful erotic attraction of the dominating devouring lover/brother/other. Freud explains the fantasy of being beaten (the fantasy of the incestuous relation with the father repressed to become both punishment and a substitute for the forbidden relation) as appearing only in "unwomanly girls" identifying with the father, and in "unmanly boys" identifying with the mother, that is resulting from a (dangerous) negative Oedipal complex. Silverman, on the other hand, analyzes the self-display by the male masochist as the exaggerated acting out of the conditions of cultural subjectivity that are normally disavowed and the radiation of "a negativity inimical to the social order." The male masochist:

loudly proclaims that his meaning comes to him from the Other, prostrates himself before the Gaze even as he solicits it, exhibits his castration for all to see, and revels in the sacrificial basis of the social contract. [He] magnifies the losses and divisions upon which cultural identity is based, refusing to be sutured or recompensed. (51)

Deleuze's recent study, *Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty*, as Silverman points out, goes beyond this again to radically reconfigure masochism as a utopian affair between a severe maternal mother and her son, a pact to disavow the father's phallus and the mother's lack and to write the father out of his dominant position in both culture and masochism.

Analyzing Freud's explanation of the beating fantasy (boys being beaten by a male authority figure in the fantasy of the girl, who wants to be a boy, while the figure doing the beating is a woman for the "feminine" and "masochist" boy) from the point of view of accounts of masochistic fantasies and performances since Freud, Parveen Adams also concludes that "Something about masochism eludes Freud" (24). For Adams, the masochist of either sex might, in fact, occupy any of the three positions (the beaten, the beater, and the observer).

The final form of the fantasy is not fixed, either in the sense that there is one form found in women and another in men, or in the sense that the subject occupies only one position in fantasy or in deed. (24)

Adams questions whether the terms "passive" and "feminine" are indeed crucial to an account of masochism, denies that it is the figure of the father who stands behind the figure of the beater, and redefines masochism as the participation in a ritual scenario that signifies the abolition of the father in the symbolic and thus also indicates a subversive relation (travesty) to the Law.

Masochism in Duras is perhaps less immediately a disavowal or suspending of belief in the phallus, or a questioning of the production of mas-

culinity and femininity as one particular relation to the phallus, than a "negativity" similar to that attributed by Silverman to male masochism, and indeed an inversion of the negative quality — its validating.

In Emily's love story, "she" is the Captain's victim. His passion is fed by her frailty. His violent jealousy of her possible exclusion of him by her writing or her otherness is placated by her submission. She is infantilized, rendered speechless, possessed, appropriated by the Captain's words ("Darling ... My poor little girl" [98], "She's just like a child" [69], "She's my wife... But she doesn't know what she wants..." [102-3]), so the Captain, claims the narrator, must speak in her place ("Il faut bien, chaque soir, un peu, pour elle, à sa place, parler" [71]).

Writing, on the contrary, would bring about his dependency much as the young "gardien" falls hopelessly in love with the work of Emily, the poetess. This muse-lover of the poetess is not jealous of her vocation, or her strange instinctive knowledge and power like the old authoritarian "gardien," the "Capitaine." Emily L. has taken on the fatal attraction of Anne-Marie Stretter and the young keeper has inherited the position of hopeless passion of Michael Richardson or, indeed, of "Jacques Hold ravished by Lol," even "as he reinvents her ravishment" (Suleiman, 112). His is now the waiting, passivity, voyeurism, and self-abnegation in thrall to the beloved. As the narrator (Duras) herself tells Yann Andréa: "When I write, I do not love you. It is you who love me. You do not know it." Emily's sacrifice of her writing is interpreted by the narrator as a choice, a renunciation of this strength and the other's dependency in order to remain "là où elle voulait se tenir, ces régions pauvres de son amour pour le Capitaine" \ "there where she wanted to take a stand, these poor regions of her love for the Captain" (121).

The mirrors here do not re-present, at least not clearly. Duras, the celebrated writer, who is indeed herself writing the story of the narrator (Duras) and of Emily L., does not stand directly facing the woman who, in a lateral mirror, as it were, re-

nounces even her poetry for an ever-receding love. She is able to envisage the possibility of a new future with the young warden ("gardien") or the homosexual Yann Andréa. Her looking at Emily L., however, reflects something of the unintegrated states, the circulation of (masculine and feminine) desire which is at the origins of her writing.

The framing story in *Emily L.* is illuminated by a short 1986 autofictional text in the Yann Andréa series, *La Pute de la côte normande*. This fragment evokes the terrors of the writing of a book in an apartment overlooking the sea, in Normandy. Required to participate in the book's invention, called to see/to love, Yann Andréa, Duras' male interlocutor, slips between resistance to this love story, denial and separateness, and complicity. (He can be read, more generally, as a Durassian reader/lover in the text.) At one moment, ranting against Duras' impossible project, obscurely and obstructively jealous of her excessive work, Yann insults and denigrates the writer. "Vous êtes folle, vous êtes la pute de la côte normande, une connarde, vous embarrassez" \ "You are mad. You are the whore of the Norman coast, a cunt, you're embarrassing" (16). This is the shameful name/title that Duras chooses to retain for her self/her text. Yann's anger against the book, his desire to kill "ça" (the Id/writing/desire) prevent the writer from continuing although she says nothing; ("Je ne lui disais pas que j'étais empêchée d'écrire à cause de ses cris, et à cause de ce que je croyais être son injustice à mon égard" \ "I didn't tell him that I was prevented from writing because of his shouting, and because of what I believed to be his unfairness to me" (14). The completion of the writing becomes a race against the lover. (The latter does, however, type the manuscript for the writer and expresses concern least Duras, fragile after her treatment for alcoholism, should die or abandon her work.)

In *Emily L.*, the questions of the battle of the sexes, of simultaneous love for and destruction of the other, and of the centrality and the jealous exclusivity of the love story for the woman poet that makes her writing project impossible, self-forbidden (and yet, at least in part, defiantly or secretly realized), twine through the stories of both couples.

Emily L.'s intense physical fidelity unto death to the lover comes to her from her Durassian women predecessors, now generalized. ("C'étaient des femmes qui ne se séparaient jamais du corps de leurs amants" \ "They were women who would never separate themselves from the bodies of their lovers" [75].) However, the suffering and violence of which the "feminine" is the victim is personalized. As the narrator (Duras) says to her interlocutor (Yann Andréa):

Vous ne m'aimiez déjà plus à cette époque-là.... Et moi j'étais déjà en allée dans ce projet dont je vous avais parlé ce jour-là, d'écrire cette histoire, retenue encore d'y être tout à fait présente à cause de l'amour que je vous portais encore... Et vous qui saviez tout de ce sentiment, jamais vous ne m'en parliez \ You already no longer loved me at that time.... And I was already embarked on this project I had spoken about to you that day, to write this story, held back still from being completely present to it because of the love I still bore you... And you who knew everything about that feeling, never spoke to me of it. (144)

For his part, the male interlocutor denies the very existence of any story to tell ("Il n'y avait rien entre nous").

"Ça avait commencé par la peur" \ "It began with fear" begins *Emily L.*; a "fear" that like the "pain" of Duras' earlier pseudo-diary, *La Douleur*, associated with childbirth as with war, or the fear of the assassin brother in *L'Amant* that woke the heroine in the night at age 18 and set her face aging in a particular direction, becomes invasive and multiform. This negative, passive image/indefinite pronoun ("ça") seems also to speak of the emergence of the writing vocation. The final line insists again on the importance of origins: "laisser tout dans l'état de l'apparition" \ "leave everything in the state it appeared." A journey back into remote primitive regions materially imaged by Emily L.'s voyages to the jagged I(s)lands, fragmented, thrown up before time in ever threatening volcanic eruptions and profound chasms in the ocean floor, *Emily L.* appears to seek a final facing of the

conscious and unconscious origins of Duras' sexual/textual body through its re-turning masochistic ghosts in the textual mirror.

Madeleine Borgomano suggests that fear in Duras may be traced to the intense formative early experience of the mother's purchase of a child. The beggar-woman's self-dispossession in the act of abandonment of her child and her replacement by another "mother," accompanied by the desire for the "velvet annihilation" of death, is, precisely, for Borgomano, the "transparently opaque" generative cell of Duras' writing. There are, however, a number of possible readings of such an abandonment that Duras herself describes as "monstrous" and "adorable." In "My Monster/Myself," Barbara Johnson reads Mary Shelley's Frankenstein's monster as a figure for the self-portrait. Jane Gallop argues in "The Monster in the Mirror" that, in alluding to Nancy Friday's *My Mother/My Self*, Johnson implies that the monster is both self and mother or, rather, the difficulty of separating the two. Gallop reads the mother's refusal to mirror the daughter in "good mothering," and her desperate attempt at disentanglement from the ties of motherhood and from the constitutive connections and permeability of self boundaries that for Chodorow and Irigaray exemplify the mother-daughter bond, as a positive assertion of self.

Other such generative experiential cells can be found in Duras' work. These might include the daughter's sense of humiliation and defilement at the onset of the menstrual flow and murderous rejection of her mother at the beginning of puberty, evoked in *L'Amant*. In a perceptive study entitled "The Beast in the Jungle," which seeks to identify the contours of the monster that roams in *Emily L.*, Carol Murphy recalls that, in *Les Parleuses*, Duras conflates the twelve-year-old girl's entrance into "ça" (menstruation) as entry into both the feminine and writing. Again, there is a potentially primal scene, present in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* and recurring somewhat altered in *L'Amant*, in which the body of the adolescent is stripped, smelled, and beaten by her enraged mother who

suspects her sexual commerce. The libidinal effects of such scenes are intense if contradictory—revolt, humiliation, a certain pleasure/pain in shame and in the differentiation of herself from the mother through the experience of improper sexual pleasure.

The relation with the mother is hardly clarified by this scene. Is this the scenario of the dutiful pure mother chastising the impure daughter—whore who asserts her lack of dutifulness or her social rebellion through sexual pleasure? Or is narcissistic identification with the mother in fact the corollary of Oedipal desire for the father—brother as primary love object as Freud would suggest? Or, the mother a cold cruel phallic mother and stand-in for the Father's Law? Is she a rival for the love of the professedly "hated" older brother/father substitute, or is the relation with the mother primary (archaic or symbolic) and the young girl's jealous fascination with the preferred brother and fascination with the scene of punishment an attempt to be closer to her? I would argue for Freudian unorthodoxy and oscillation between the contradictory positions of love and identification, now one, now the other (as between the soft-skinned virile penis of the feminized lover and the powerful beautiful thrust of Helene Lagonelle's breasts in *L'Amant*).

The fictional daughter's resistance to her rich family in *Emily L.*, in her liaison with her father's proletarian warden, and the autobiographical young girl's defiance and transgressive affirmation of her own sexual desires or pleasure in being desired in *L'Amant*, in her liaison with an older Chinese man, her subversive shamelessness, are inevitably doubled by figures of self-chosen degradation and pleasure in shame. The self "prostitution" and marginalization of the adolescent (the girls at school were forbidden to speak to her), like Emily L.'s sacrifice of her social position and her poetic gifts to the Captain's exclusive passion and her subsequent self-dissolution in alcoholism, seem to have an origin in the validating of this feminine lack and shame.

Duras writes "organically" close to a collective lost "wild country" of darkness, silence, the unknown (Husserl—Kapit).⁷ Also sensed intensely in

her linguistically artful text, however, is the writer's diffuse, desiring, active, present self marked by the threat of an underlying eruptive violence. This self-affirmation is not so much the Hegelian (or De Beauvoirian) desire to destroy the consciousness that opposes it but an impulse clearly related to both the sexual and writing, a sado-masochistic desire to enter a fullness of possession/ravishment that takes the intra- and inter-personal form of killing and being killed.

Fear can be located in *Emily L.* both as the fascination of the sado-masochistic relationship between ego and alter at the level of the psyche (between ego and superego, ego and id) and in the relation with the potentially violent other or interlocutor ("C'est de vous que j'ai peur" [50]). The gaze of the male lover that the narrative "I" once followed everywhere, "wherever you went," attentive to his needs (forcing herself even now to communicate because she knows her silence makes him anxious), is predominantly violent and annihilating.

Yet when this observer declares that there is "nothing" between them the female narrator can only concur. Death alone, she knows, would give their story reality, making it "fabulous" and "evident." Whose death? In *Modérato Cantabile*, Anne symbolically plays out with Chauvin the death of the woman beaten, degraded, abject before her lover, willing victim of his "*crime passionnel*" as the troubling female protagonist of *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* plays out the masochistic role physically in a sado-erotic scenario. The self-sacrificial mother in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* or *Journées entières dans les arbres*, willing victim of her profligate son, the *mater dolorosa* of the murdered German soldier in *Hiroshima*, would lay down their life for the son. Although the fascination with the fixing and magnifying of the power and powerlessness of love by death is not limited to the female victim (one thinks of the death of the little brother in *L'Amant*) and, as Kristeva points out, all Duras' work is morbidly necrophilic, it is predominantly the "feminine" protagonists who act out scenarios of self-immolation opposite their immolating "masculine" lovers. (Claire Lannes who cuts up her lover's body and scatters the pieces on trains

throughout France in *L'Amante Anglaise* would presumably be "masculine.")

Death, for you, is "nothing" ("Mais pour vous ce n'est rien" [61]) the interlocutor (Yann Andréa) tells the narrator lost in the "despair" of her "frightening love" ("je vous aimais d'un amour effrayant" [137]) that he continues to deny. It is, of course, the case that, like the slippage between opposites, "rien," within the web of the Durassian text, operates inversions, produces new meanings. There is a *parti pris* of being "nothing," of speaking for "nothing" ("Je crois que je parle pour rien dire" [137]), without authority, much as Emily L.'s poem rushes towards the "unintelligibility of the truth." Fear and pain, like the erotic with which they exist in metonymical and metaphorical relation along with death (both violence and self-transcendence) are similarly transformed, inverted, to absorb the fluid multiplicity of the unknown and the unnamed. In the *mise en scène* of "feminine" masochism, a characteristic Durassian inversion of values and a recuperation of an apparently "negative" feminine quality is operated—perhaps not dissimilar to the writer's surprising use of the black Morris Leon Bollee, the luxury liner, the private yacht, and the French Embassy ball, to suggest certain human aspirations and oppose them to the limited, the mass produced, or the mean spirited.

The independent poet's acceptance of her assassination by her lover might of course be seen to represent the writer's fear of independence. Her shame at having to die, her assuming of the shame for the dog who is dead, however, recall not only the couple's former guard dog, Brownie, but also the dogs tortured on the Kampot plain; the taking upon oneself of the crown of thorns, the fear and pain of the world. Emily L.'s poetry is implicated in the experience of a mystical pain-pleasure in self-wounding that is just such a communion with the beggar-woman of Calcutta and the sorrow of the world. Indeed, as in Bernini's statue of Saint-Theresa d'Avila, representations of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, or Bataille's work (on which Duras has written), such a wounding is conflated with ecstatic physical love.⁸ The rays of the sun through the church windows on Winter Afternoons,

described in Emily L.'s lost poem, "wound" like "celestial swords"; "pierce" the heart. Pain, violent self-overthrow and boundary-crossing (that Reik finds particularly in male masochism) are similarly equated with intensity and pleasure in the description of Emily L.'s experience of writing: "cette douleur terrassante ... cette lumière rougie de sang, dans le lieu de laquelle elle entrait seule, dans l'innocence et le mal" (99).

In a study of women's "auto-bio-graphy," Suzanne Wilson argues that, while "man" remembers his past through words, "woman" remembers her past through her body, citing Duras looking at her own lined face, at the beginning of *L'Amant*, to support this claim. But, however seductive the theory of a woman's writing close to the biological and the lived, the use of narcissistic mirrors in Duras' work to argue for a splitting of writing dialectically into masculine words and feminine body is questionable. Duras must "read" her face to know it in a circulation between body and text. The adolescent girl, like the poetess, is a projection of the writer but at a distance from herself, controlled by a circulation of pronouns ("you," "I," "she"). Indeed, the Durassian heroine has been described as floating, abstract and absent, shrouded in mystery to herself, the very opposite of a body. She is a face, a look, a fragile voice of nostalgia, empty waiting (Gosselin). Or like Lol. V. Stein, "ravished/enraptured," condemned to live in the desire of a triangulation, outside herself, watching in a total identification the passion and the pain of lost love in the love of others, she is disincarnate, necessarily recounted by a masculine other.

The individuality of Duras' "erotal" new autobiographical text does not, then, reside in an exclusive "feminine" bodiliness, although the inscription of the feminine is clearly intensely libidinal or, as Christiane Makward has called it, a "régession hystérique." It is also a self-conscious attempt to capture the unconscious wellsprings of fear and love. Desire is a textual (re)construction in a sado-masochistic relation with the words in power (a war between words forced to become new personal symbols and stories and a submerging by the ready-made words of the other). The final passages

of *Emily L.* conclude that formal written language must be dispossessed and humiliated, "thrown" on the page, "mistreated" almost ("jeter l'écriture au dehors, la maltraiter presque, oui, la maltraiter..." [154])⁹ in order to glimpse the secret country from which it arises/which it hides, and know what we do not know.

In *Emily L.*, the regression through the metaphorical spaces of Duras' text and mind to an "ideal image" that for Madeleine Hage marks all of Duras' work¹⁰ is both fearful and exhilarating. The originary scene is evoked here in linguistic terms; it is the scar left on the poet by the lost minimal difference, "une différence interne au cœur des significations" \ "internal difference, Where the Meanings are" (114). The problematic recurring figures of negativity (Anne-Marie Stretter's fatal attraction and her suicide, the beggar-woman's abjection, the absent photo of the self-affirmation of the adolescent through a kind of prostitution, the missing lines of Emily L.'s stolen poem, (le seul poème ... celui qui a disparu [117]) double such an originary space. In a postmodern world where meanings arise in the play of self-similarity and difference and in the circulation of signs, outside the body, in the web of (inter)textual relations, and in recursivity, the text can appear at the worst self-reflecting and circular, at best a clouded and partial re-presentation or false mirror-mask in which the real presence of self and the world appears to be endlessly deferred. In an autobiographical genre which is encompassed by the "impossibility of closure and totalization ... of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions" (De Man, 922), and which "veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause" (De Man, 930), such a lost, primal "minimal difference" would constitute the truth of self. The fearful/ fierce compulsion to write and the losing/finding of self in writing that the poet Emily L. experiences, her attraction to the "empty" space at the centre of the writing quest as "origin" is the writer's *mise en scène* of the stakes of her literary life—the lost, absolute text/meaning behind the face that is both goal and absence in her work.

In Barthes' writing, interestingly, the "defacement" that is an aesthetic or intellectual category

for De Man has sado-masochistic implications. *Le Plaisir du texte* presents the writer as "he who plays with the body of his mother," and "jouissance" as the "disfiguration" (60-61) of traditional language/ nature. This does not prevent the textual "I" as de-facement, the name as name of the other, or the writing that Duras herself describes as a "replacing" and an "effacing" in *Emily L.* from projecting (and thus ultimately moving towards some knowledge of) the writer's own bodily fear, desire, revolt, and pain. Moreover, the disintegration of plot, linear time, first and third person narrative and of clear character psychology, in favour of moving point of view, anonymous pronouns, dialogic drama, non-sequential verb tenses and the all-importance of rhythm and symbolic repetitions, is itself both a de-facement and, potentially, a subversive opening up of traditional fiction.

What organizes the various levels of functioning of difference within *Emily L.*, in its movement around the lost/last minimal difference, is the re-writing of distinctions between the traditional logical opposites of violent de-facement and fear of de-facement, body and text, "feminine" and "masculine," individual identity and indifferentiation. The poles themselves are still organized by gender. In the imagining of the differences between Emily L. and the Captain, the narrator hypothesizes that in her drinking, wandering and affinity with death, "she" may be hiding from "a belief of fear," "he" from a "murder." Linked to Duras' own childhood memories of cruelty in Indochina—bands of Asian youths taking child-like pleasure in running over undernourished dogs on the Kampot plain—fear lies closer to an abstract vision of originary "masculine" violence. The narrator's confession of her idiotic personal fears of the unknown or the unclassified in *Emily L.*, or of leaving the house (in an interview with Riding), are universalized to become fears of holocaust ("les massacres auxquels je m'attendais" [14]). This death of the world would, the narrator claims, shockingly, be "Japanese"; extermination would come from "Korea."

Beyond the political incorrectness of such provocative stances, the experience of fear evoked and examined in the mirrors of aging, love and death in

Emily L. seeks knowledge of itself through representations in the text of its own irrational origins—individuated, tribal, and universal. To a consciousness marked by the war as by colonial occupation, says the narrator, the provoking of fear (or fear of God, the night, the dead, government) is indeed "original sin." The danger from the Kampot plain, however, is that the "Asians" kill dogs as children would, laughing, without awareness (of "sin"). Such a fear of the unselfknowing other (he who does not understand his/the others' hidden cruelty) that arises in historical experience, from the outside, is inevitably lodged deeply, darkly, in the inside, in the naked semi-aware cruelty of the self towards the self:

C'est là. Sans langage pour se dire. Au plus près, c'est une cruauté nue, muette, de moi à moi, logée dans ma tête, dans le cachot mental \ It's there. Without language to speak itself. At its closest, it is a naked cruelty, dumb, from myself to myself, lodged in my head, in the mental dungeon. (51)

References to the historical marks left by the Colonies and the War, confession of her own irrational or alcohol-induced fears and prejudices, and intimation of the sado-masochistic relations of ego and alter within the psyche, "The Koreans," as the interlocutor guesses, is also an embryonic book ("*Les Coréens*, c'est un titre de livre" [50].) In spite of the "imbecility" of her fear and even of the project itself, this writing of fear may protect from "a certain fear" (55). At a more abstract level, the play of fear of difference (the slant-eyed, crew-cut group of Koreans "of the night" with their "cruel" enigmatic smiles sitting in the French bar) with the fear of sameness (the indefinite multiplication of the self-similar Asians advancing imperceptibly from the forest towards the empty square) might create a space beyond simple fear in a meaning-creating circulation of love and hate, sameness and difference, self-assertion and self-effacement.

The apparent eroticization of the self-deprecation that constitutes a characterization of the "feminine" writer by her apparently timeless masochism and her identification with the world in its fear and pain is problematical. Will, indeed, she who lays

down her life gain it, purified by suffering or, at the least, the pleasure of anticipated future reward, as New Testament teachings and mystical religions profess?

The pragmatic feminist literary critic might ask—aghast—whether Duras' work, at age 73, on the problem of the sacrifice of *Emily L.*'s writing to the fierce absorption of her relation with the "Captain," is really subversive. Is this the final wisdom of the life and career of a woman whose writing projects are considered inspirational? Perhaps *Emily L.* is simply a passive product of Colonial Indochina, Asiatic fatalism, childhood humiliation or cruelty, indigency, otherness and subordination to the male, and Duras a victim of the pain of the War (the conquering older brother) and daughter of a time which inculcated masochism in its females. Or, taken in/by the hand of her creator, does *Emily L.* become revolutionary in its courageous assuming and re-writing of a complex which is intimately part of women's lives; in an active seeking of a more self-aware but finely wrought approach to the human psyche that prefers the feminine position and more fluid, mobile ways of mistreating and thus disturbing the old words and old worlds?

It is evident that the gap between Anglo-American pragmatic feminist theory concerned with reclaiming for women the strength, visibility and authority that men have enjoyed, and the French writings attempting to deconstruct that difference¹¹ or revalorize feminine positions, has not narrowed with this autofiction. As Lacan said of Lol and might have said of *Emily L.* or indeed of Duras, "Etre comprise ne convient pas à Lol, qu'on ne sauve pas du ravissement" (Lacan, 135, qtd by Suleiman, 13). However, as Susan Suleiman says, in the context of a critique of the project of psychoanalytic mastery confounded from within by problems of transference, this Achilles heel is a good thing:

Insofar as ... to be vulnerable, to be open to the risk of pain and death is the sign of being human. For a long time and in very specific ways, it has been the additional sign, in our culture, of being a woman. (116)

Although it is difficult and perhaps dangerous to translate Duras' intense, intangible, poetic universe of fragmented states ("états successifs sans liens" [56]) to the prose of everyday practice and politics,¹² I would argue that the complex re-writing of the feminine masochistic relations with the masculine sadistic Other in interchangeability and intersubjectivity, revealed in a textual glass, and thus necessarily darkly, telescoped¹³ with the "seeing" (loving) of the pain of the world, is presented in *Emily L.* as the best hope for the survival of the poetess without either her self-accepting assassination or the loss of the origin and well-springs of her passion.

NOTES

1. Elaine Marks' article is a reflection on the search for love as a common aspect of the most significant French autobiographies of the twentieth century. Marks focuses particularly on Gide's *Si le grain ne meurt* (1920), Genet's *Journal du voleur* (1949) and Simone de Beauvoir's *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (1958).
2. In Robbe-Grillet's autobiographical fiction *Le Miroir qui revient* (1984), the "self" that re-turns is a phantasmatical and hybrid figure of the Father: the Comte de Corinthe, war-hero and Nazi collaborator and traitor, in battle with death and dissolution and "the marine monster who devours little girls." In the "returning mirror," Corinthe (or a self-conscious Robbe-Grillet) distances, while simultaneously recalling, the feminine figures object of his sado-erotic sexual phantasies.
3. The very sensitive video presentation of *L'Amant* made by Thames Television for the *South Bank Show*, for example, uses old photographs to accompany readings of the text.
4. This protagonist re-assembles the leitmotif of Duras' earlier work. An absolute passion for her father's warden ("gardien") has led this young English woman living on the Isle of Wight to break with her wealthy parents. Sacrificing her poetry to her lover's jealousy, she follows him on a yacht travelling the world, returning periodically to the security/prison of her estate (the house, the garden) after the death of her parents, waiting/passing time. Emily L.'s rebellion against parental and societal norms in her uncompromising physical passion, the pain of the impossible loss of a child at birth, *ennui*, the search for absolute love, the excesses of madness and of alcoholism that manifest and intensify the fascination with self-loss and death, are common both to Duras' fictional characters and to the narratives of her own life (*L'Amant*, *La Douleur*, Yann Andréa's *M.D.*).
5. The mad beggar-woman of Calcutta of *India Song*, driven from home by the shamed mother, is connected to the barefoot mother from Savannahkat who abandons her child, and to "the little prostitute from Sadek" (also beaten and "sold" into prostitution by the shamed mother), who both re-appear in *L'Amant*.
6. Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*. Trans. Joan Riviere and James Strachney. (New York: Norton, 1962) 31; quoted from Silverman, 34.
7. In her interview with Duras, Husserl-Kapit attempts to read Duras' women characters as "mobile, independent, aware, active, and rebellious" and "all your male characters as immobile, dependent, unaware and passive." Duras protests: "I don't see where you find this activeness of women" (426). Although Duras refuses "authority" or "masculinity" to describe her female characters, she does accept that women have "a power that is almost involuntary ... it isn't directed."
8. The links between mystical experience and masochistic sexuality are touched on in an interview with a former Carmelite nun that Duras published in the collection of essays, *Outside*. Duras asks whether the sisters are aware of the sexual sublimations present in the masochistic rituals of penance by group flagellation in the darkened church, rituals described by her interlocutor, which clearly fascinate Duras.
9. This is perhaps a re-writing of Barthes who in *S/Z* affirms the need to mistreat ("maltraiter") the unified traditional text, to silence it ("lui couper la parole" [15]), although, as Susan Suleiman points out in *Subversive Intent*, Barthes, significantly, reverses the traditional gender coding to see the classical, readable text as replete or pregnant *mer/mère* and feminine and the new decadent, fluid, plural unreadable "fragment" as masculine. Are the aggressions of the female writer against the body of her text the same as for the male? Duras does not so clearly gender code the language to be "maltreated" as Barthes. Does she in fact echo what Suleiman sees as Barthes' "homosexual" preference or does she move into new regions—of, for example, the *entre-deux*?
10. Fear is interwoven with exaltation in the assemblage of intertextual material metaphors to create the places of *Emily*

L.: in the frail ferries and fragile cross-hatched white guard-rails and the great sea-going tankers against the gulf of the ink-blue river Seine flowing strongly to the sea; the gulls free-flying in the lyricism of the wind of the summer evening and the chasm of the channel below; the smooth surfaces of the Seine and its concealed turbulent flow; the brilliant sunlight pouring out from behind storm clouds and the passage from sunlight into the dark sunless spaces that enclose the narrator in the forest near Quilleboeuf.

11. As Susan Suleiman points out, Kristeva's semiotic (maternal) theory (in *Des Chinoises*) posits the virtual impossibility for a woman to give up "paternal legitimation" as creative male writers are able to do without falling into madness or suicide. Kristeva argues that, while the support of the mother can enable the rebellion against the authority of the father for the male, the only possibilities for the female are acceptance of the father's Law or dangerous regression to the archaic mother. It could be argued that Duras does "create" her own subject position in her invention of, and dialogue with, a double close to madness, suicide or death (the "mendiante," Lol, Emily L.), or in the oscillatory movement of regression to and distance from the (archaic

or symbolic) maternal, between feminine and masculine, sadistic and masochistic.

12. Poetically, Duras' text moves beyond the traditional love stories in her quest for love into very powerful women's territories. Politically, the attitudes of Duras' female protagonists have also been seen as strength. Germaine Brée contends that whereas Anne-Marie Stretter lets the human misery, the primal disorder, the death of European history that is India (like the cruelty that is Asia in *Emily L.*) flow through her like the river itself, the Vice-consul's intolerable knowing of the horror leads him to seek a violent double destruction, firing on his own image in the mirror but also on the innocent lepers of Lahore. As in Sarraute's recent *Tu ne t'aimes pas*, the "weakness" of guilt for the ignored outstretched arms of the poor and suffering in the world and the recognition of the need of the other's love seem, in the final instance, to be less damaging than the "power" of knowledge and self-love.
13. I discuss the "telescoping" of history and personal story and the consequent redefining of genre in "Autobiographical Fictions: Duras, Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet and Simon Rewriting History, Story, Self," a forthcoming paper in *The International Fiction Review*.

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