ROMANCE STUDIES:
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present

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The Lover: Marguerite Duras Returns to the Threshold

Marguerite Duras's *The Lover* (*L'Amant*, 1984) takes us to pre-war colonial Southeast Asia, where Duras was born (as Marguerite Donnadieu) in what was then French Indochina and is now Vietnam. The story she tells is heavily autobiographical, but it is also a story that she told at least three times, with significant differences in each case, and so is equally heavily fictionalized. It is the tale of a young schoolgirl's affair with an older man, a tale that might easily be assumed to be an account of predation and abuse, but Duras tells it in such a way that it is not clear who is taking advantage of whom. Duras challenges our assumptions about intersecting hierarchies of gender, race, and class. Perhaps, in the end, as the book's title suggests, it is simply a love story? But even love stories are seldom simple, not least in the context of colonial racial categorization or the complex family history with which Duras's narrator's story is entwined.

The novel is also a story about memory, time, and ultimately death, as the events that it describes took place over half a century before its publication, and many of its key players are now dead: the narrator can try to settle accounts with them, but they are also beyond her judgment, just as what exactly took place can only now be told, but never definitely confirmed. Something happened: some kind of threshold was reached and perhaps crossed, even double-crossed; some kind of event to which Duras (or her narrator) seeks to be faithful, to hold onto something even as what she has to tell us is in the end about betrayal, leaving, and loss. But in the end, it may well be she who is betraying the lover in writing about him, in reimagining him as the victim less in an act of homage than in a belated gesture of revenge. *And in rewriting the lover, she also rewrites herself, her origin as writer, in a precarious zone shuttling between past and future and back again.*

1. Approaching Agency

The narrative of *The Lover* takes some time to emerge, both in that it takes fifty years to take this form, and also within the novel itself. The book opens with a portrait of old age—"I was already old"—and the image of a face (the narrator's) that is described as "ravaged," "a face laid waste" (3, 5). But this image of physical devastation leads to a memory of how things once were, and a very different image of the narrator at fifteen—young enough that it is worth clarifying that she is in fact "fifteen and a half"—"on a ferry crossing the Mekong River" in the late 1920s (5). Interspersed with other memories

and reflections (of her brothers, of her son, of her mother), this image gradually comes into focus and is fleshed out. She is on the ferry at the end of "some school vacation," returning from the town, Sadec (now Sa Đéc), where her mother is "the headmistress of the girls' school," to the colonial capital, Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), where she goes to boarding school (9).This fifteen (and a half) year old narrator has been entrusted to the care of the bus driver for the journey, but she steps off the bus on the ferry: "because I'm always afraid, afraid the cables might break and we might be swept out to sea" (12). Little does she know that she is about to be swept away, despite (or because) of such precautions. After what happens next, she knows that "Never again shall I travel in a native bus" (34). What she is remembering is a pivotal moment, a turning point in her sense of self and her relationship to the world around her.

The narrator remembers what she was wearing, what she must have been wearing—a sleeveless silk dress "with a very low neck [. . .] a leather belt with it, perhaps a belt belonging to one of my brothers [. . .] the famous pair of gold lame high heels" (11)—and imagines how she must have been seen by others, as she envisages herself "as another, as another would be seen, outside myself, available to all, available to all eyes" (13). She is on display, an object of the gaze, both because of her gender and her race: "People do look at white women in the colonies," she comments; "at twelve-year-old white girls too." Beside her, she notices a car, "a big black limousine" driven by a chauffeur; in the back "there's a very elegant man looking at me. He's not a white man" (17). As the narrator continues meditating and digressing—on her desire to write, on her instinct to escape—something like a trap is about to close. The man leaves the car, approaches the girl, "his hands [. . .] trembling" (32). He strikes up some casual conversation. He invites her into his car: "Will you allow me to drive you where you want to go in Saigon?" The narrator by now is described in the third rather than the first person: "She looks at him. [. . .] She asks him what he is. [. . .] She says she will" (33). And as soon as she gets into the car, she knows some kind of line has been crossed: "She knows [. . .] that the time has probably come when she can no longer escape certain duties toward herself. And that her mother will know nothing of this, nor her brothers" (35). Leaving her family behind, at only fifteen (and a half), she is now, like it or not, a woman of the world.

A relationship then unfolds between the narrator and the man in the black limousine, who proceeds to pick her up daily from her school, and then to take her back to his

apartment—and his bedroom—in Cholon (Chợ Lớn), a majority Chinese city, still at this time separate from Saigon, though it would be incorporated into the colonial capital in the 1930s. For a year and a half, on the margins of the everyday life of the colony, behind shuttered windows, their liaison has to be mostly clandestine, not least because she is "so young, so young he could go to prison if we were found out" (63). It is then not just from our perspective today, in hindsight, that it feels somehow exploitative, even abusive: the older man (he is 27 when they meet, twelve years older than she is) taking advantage of a much younger girl. And yet Duras does not write it that way! Or rather, the affair is indeed portrayed as exploitation (if not only that), but it is just that it is not always clear who is exploiting whom. Pause the video here, and consider the hierarchies and inequalities at work between the two lovers. Write down some thoughts. Which of the two is in control? Who has the upper hand? How much freedom or agency do either of them have? While you do that, I'll have a cognac with Perrier, but I'll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Cognac with Perrier

The lover takes the narrator and her family to dinner, where her brothers "gorge themselves without saying a word to him" (50). They go on to a night club: "We all order Martells and Perrier. My brothers drink them straight off and order the same again. [. . .] But they still don't speak to him" (53). Martell and Perrier are both imports from France—by contrast, and for all his European clothing and moneyed sophistication, when he and his driver are on their own, the lover drinks arrack (103), a distilled liquor made in India and Sri Lanka, as well as Southeast Asia and Indonesia, but hard to find elsewhere. By forcing him to buy them fine imported cognac—Martell is the oldest of the "big four" cognac houses—and drinking it to excess, the narrator's brothers are both rubbing his nose in their privilege, by squandering his wealth, but also revealing their dependence upon his resources. No wonder they cannot bring themselves to say a word about it.

From the moment that the narrator meets the man who will become her lover, she tells us that she feels in control: "From the first moment she knows more or less," she tells us, "knows he's at her mercy" (35). Despite her youth, despite the fact that she is inexperienced, alone, unprotected, exposed to his gaze, she has a sense of self-belief, almost of invulnerability. Duras thus implicitly contests the feminist critique of the "male

gaze," which emphasizes how women are objectified as they are portrayed through men's eyes. Or as critic Toril Moi puts it, contrasting Duras's perspective to that of French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre: "For Sartre, the person looking always dominates the person being looked at. [. . .] Duras inverts the power relationship: for her, the person doing the looking is revealing weakness. [. . .] To look makes you vulnerable, because what you look at reveals your desire." Hence, Moi continues: "The young girl in *L'Amant* declares that she doesn't love the man. Yet she craves his gaze: by looking at her, he becomes her inferior; refusing to look back, she exults in her own power" ("Don't Look Back"). Similarly, the distance between them—the gulf in age, the cultural difference—is taken not as an indication of her vulnerability, but on the contrary a sign of her strength: "Suddenly, all at once, she knows, knows that he doesn't understand her, that he never will [. . .]. And that he can never move fast enough to catch her" (37). She may indeed be his prey, but she is sure that she will always escape him, and delights in the game of hide and seek that he is perpetually destined to lose.

2. Rewriting Hierarchy

The narrator's social status is also uncertain and perhaps not what we might expect. She and her family are white, French, representatives of the governing colonial order—as headmistress, the narrator's mother works for the state, incarnating the colonial mission of "civilization." Duras's biographer says of the writer's father, also a head teacher in French Indochina, that "he had arrived with his head ringing with the fine words that had been drummed into him before he left: to be head of a school is to represent France [. . .]. Ideologues repeated it at every possible opportunity: the real, gradual and day-to-day colonization of a country is done through the school" (Adler, *Marguerite Duras* 17). Yet her father died not long after the family moved to the colonies, leaving her mother a widow in a precarious financial position, not least after an investment in land went disastrously wrong. The family are therefore "*petits blancs*"—little whites, poor whites. Moreover, as anthropologist Ann Stoler comments, "Single women were seen as the quintessential *petit blanc*, with limited resources and shopkeeper aspirations. Moreover, they presented the dangerous possibility that straitened circumstances would lead them to prostitution, thereby degrading European prestige at large" ("Making Empire Respectable" 643). Another reason, then, that the narrator's love affair has to be kept secret is that it might seem to confirm the fear that this was her destiny, or even the result

of the mother's (perhaps unconscious) strategy for survival: "That's why, though she doesn't know it, that's why the mother lets the girl go out dressed as a child prostitute" (24). The lover "calls [her] a whore, a slut" (42); similarly, the lover's father is imagined

Image: Former house of Huynh Thuy Le, Sa Đéc (Sadec), Vietnam

to see her as "the little white whore" (35), which is why the possibility of legitimation through marriage is also unimaginable. The scandal of their union involves a complex entanglement of gender, age, race, and class.

The lover, meanwhile, is Chinese, rather than a "native," and so not exactly a colonial subject. He is also rich, immensely so. "He belongs," we are told, "to the small group of financiers of Chinese origin who own all the working-class housing in the colony" (33). Hence the fancy chauffeur-driven limousine, the elegant clothes, the "English cigarettes, expensive perfume" (42), the recent trip to Paris, the bachelor pad in Cholon, "hastily furnished" with "ultra-modern furniture" (36), where they hole up, far from the prying eyes of the outside world. He is rich, and pampered, and can afford to pamper the

narrator—and her begrudging family, who take his money, including eventually to cover their passage on a ship back to France, without ever wanting to think about where the money comes from and what the narrator may be doing to "earn" it. These are transactions that cannot be acknowledged as such. In so far as status depends upon recognition, the *petits blancs* maintain the power to withhold it from the man without whom they cannot even return "home" to Europe, without whom they would remain stuck and desperate as colonial paupers. Moreover, the lover is also denied recognition or agency from his own family: his money is, after all, not his but his father, who ultimately calls the shots. No wonder the lover is strangely disempowered—"I discover he hasn't the strength to love me in opposition to his father, to possess me, to take me away" (49)—infantilized, in that he apparently has no role in the family business, and even emasculated: "he's hairless, nothing masculine about him but his sex" (38). It is as though *he* were the defenceless young girl, and not the narrator.

Finally, however, we should beware taking too much for granted in this account. Not only did Duras write this episode very differently at various points of her life—in the version found in her earlier novel, *The Sea Wall*, for instance, the lover, there going as "Monsieur Jo," is not Chinese but white, "a planter," though he also "looks like an ape" (33)—but the mere fact that it is the prompt for writing itself comes to be perhaps the most important aspect of the narrative. As the narrator tells us: "I want to write. I've already told my mother: That's what I want to do—write." The mother asks: "Write what?" To which the narrator responds in terms of genre or form: "Books, novels" (21). More importantly no doubt, the lover also gives her something to write *about*. But not only him: the book is equally a settling of accounts with her mother, her brothers—the younger of the two who is soon to die, the older one who becomes (we are told) an addict and a thief—as well as a cast of other characters whom she meets at school or on the boat home, for instance. In her introduction to the translation of the book, Maxine Hong Kingston notes that "One of the pleasures of loving the Chinese man is to write him down. She may be loving him to have something to write. She has a story to tell because of having loved him" (viii). Or as critic Susan Cohen puts it, the novel's "the story is essentially one of creativity, in particular the self-making of a woman and of a writer whom we watch in the process of creating out of that very initial non-presence" that is the age-ravaged face with which the book begins ("Fiction and the Photographic Image"

59). The event, then, the threshold that the narrator crosses in her encounter with the man on the Mekong ferry, is Duras's coming into writing, her seizing the power to craft a description of that event itself, a description that may be more or less faithful to the what happened in that it also enables her to escape it and represent it in ever new variations.

As such, however, writing also allows—or perhaps forces—her continually to return to that threshold, to reimagine herself once more betwixt and between the various entangled hierarchies that structure her experience in colonial Indochina. Cohen notes that "One must not neglect the fact that the rite of passage takes place on a ferry, which, rather than transporting one to a permanent destination, shuttles back and forth. The ferry has neither port of origin nor end port" (62-3). Duras cannot leave her story alone, but instead continually returns to rewrite it, perpetually bringing back into focus that image—an image without an image, because "the image doesn't exist. It was omitted. Forgotten. It never was removed or detached from all the rest" (10)—of the young girl on the ferry, subject to the gaze of the lover, always on the cusp of something. Fifty years later, Duras is still coming back and putting new touches to a story that is forever about to begin, but always already in motion.

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Song: "What is Love?" (Howard Jones)