

Détruire, dit-elle: Destruction or Deconstruction?

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Marguerite Duras's 1969 text, *Détruire, dit-elle*,¹ lends itself to varying interpretations of the seriousness of the author's cry for destruction, and of the object of that destruction. Should we take Marguerite Duras's words at face value when she declares that what she meant by "capital destruction" was "destruction of the individual personality" ("l'être personnel") and that in writing this work she was "in a complete Utopia"?² Or should we feel, as some readers have felt, that, in spite of the author's declarations, this work describes a trio whose impulses lead them to want to kill a person to whom they are attracted? Or, in a still broader speculation, should we perhaps see in the trio's destructive pursuit something similar to the Hegelian principle repeatedly represented by Sartre and Beauvoir, that each consciousness wishes the destruction of another consciousness in opposition to it? These are some of the varied possible readings of this puzzling work. It may be useful to approach this book by first observing some of its techniques of writing, especially those which deconstruct basic Western myths. A study of these techniques will lead us back to a consideration of the tension of certain elements existing in the work.

A device which is especially noticeable in the earlier part of the novel, but not entirely restricted to it, is the use of scattered elements of parody whose function is to deconstruct the Western myth of love, and particularly romantic love. The author subtly uses various literary reminiscences to demystify and discredit romanticism. She aims at both the romanticism which is inherent in courtly love, with its remnants in classical literature, and the romanticism of the nineteenth century, with its remnants in our time. According to the propositions implicit in this novel, all forms of romanticism should be swept away in the pursuit of a new idea of love and new organizations of human relationships. For this purpose, the author remains content to leave these parodic elements on the level of ironic literary allusion, without attempting to elaborate them into stylistic imitation or pastiche.

First, we notice the parody of the high romanticism of Lamartine's "Le Lac." As Lamartine fell fatally in love with an ill woman on the shores of a lake, Max Thor falls under the fascination of a woman suffering from a different malady, in a hotel on the edge of a forest. As Lamartine wrote poems to his beloved Elvire, Max Thor writes very romantic letters to Elisabeth, without daring to send them. Stein points out to him the great discrepancy between the passion he feels and the extreme restraint of his letters. In those letters, Max tries to idealize his love and to say that he asks nothing of the lady; however, we guess that he would really like to ask everything of her. These letters remind us also of the entire tradition of courtly love and of the inaccessible lady desperately loved as a faraway idol. The author, through Stein, suggests to us that all this idealism is quite false.

¹Marguerite Duras, *Détruire, dit-elle* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1969). Further references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation *Dét.*

²Marguerite Duras, "La Destruction, la parole," *Propos recueillis par Jacques Rivette et Jean Narboni, Cahiers du Cinéma*, 217 (Nov. 1969), 51-52. My translations; further references to this article will appear in the text after the abbreviation "La Des."

Next we find reminders of Stendhal and *Le Rouge et le Noir* in the fact that Elisabeth comes from Grenoble, that she has spent her life subordinated to her husband, never questioning him or the social system. Elisabeth, like Madame de Rênal, has strong emotions under the surface, which could form the point of departure of her emotional, intellectual, and psychological liberation.

Then also, there are parodic allusions to works which, though not romantic, nevertheless maintain the traditional Western idea of exclusive passion. Among these is such a detail as the letter from Elisabeth's admirer and her revelation of it to her husband, an ironic echo of the famous confession scene of *La Princesse de Clèves*. Here, however, it is by no means the husband who dies of painful jealousy, but the suitor who makes a desperate suicide attempt. There are, in addition, resemblances between the story line of *Détruire* and the legend of "Beauty and the Beast." The Beauty was awakened by the handsome prince with a kiss which simultaneously aroused her desires. This is exactly what the team of Thor, Stein, and Alissa is trying to do for Elisabeth, whom they often describe as being "asleep." There is perhaps an allusion to Valéry's "La Dormeuse," in which a man watches his beloved sleep, wondering about the mystery of her dreams and thoughts, which he would like to know and understand. A final element of parody gently mocks, not the Western view of love, but certain Occidental aesthetic habits. As in several "new novels," there is a detective-story aspect here: first, when Thor and Stein seek information about Elisabeth's life, and then in the trio's search for the true Elisabeth, which is a detective novel of the human psyche as well as an epistemological inquiry into human beings and desire. At the end of the novel the detective aspect remains, as the three plan to pursue Elisabeth even into the refuge of her country home.

By quite different and highly original techniques, Marguerite Duras has tended to deconstruct the Western concept of the self, and to suggest the deconstruction of certain well-established aesthetic beliefs. In an interview published by Jacques Rivette and Jean Narboni in the *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1969, Marguerite Duras stated that she would like human beings in general to fall into line with what society calls madness. She said, "A madman is a person whose essential prejudice—that of the limits of the self—is destroyed" (La Des., p. 15). For Duras, what is needed is to break down the limits of these "so well defined personalities," as Jean, a character in her 1953 novel *Les Petits Chevaux de Tarquinia*,³ had called them. Duras would like everyone to create within himself a state of total emptiness ("vacance," La Des. p. 52) typified by the insane Cambodian beggar-woman she had first created in *Le Vice-Consul* in 1966.⁴ In such a mental state, new types of human social relationships might be formed.

In *Détruire, dit-elle*, the author's stated precepts concerning the self and society find expression in an exactly coordinated writing technique: the interchangeability of the three active characters, Alissa, Thor, and Stein. Duras says in her interview with Rivette and Narboni: "There is slippage from one character to another, and why? I believe it is because they are the same. These three characters, I think, are completely interchangeable . . . What one says, the other could say" (La Des., p. 48).

Although there are slight differences between the novel *Détruire, dit-elle* and the film of the same name, both offer us many examples of techniques intended to make us feel that Max Thor and Stein are two intermingled personalities.

³Marguerite Duras, *Les Petits Chevaux de Tarquinia* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), p. 120.

⁴Marguerite Duras, *Le Vice-Consul* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), pp. 73, 149.

Even in their early conversations they almost always agree on opinions; they are both Jewish; Stein has been through an experience of love or fascination similar to Thor's present one; both have a potential to become "writers" in that they "ask questions only to arrive nowhere" (*Dét.*, p. 20). They share the same emotional excitement and become allies in the pursuit of Elisabeth. Stein does some basic investigation of the facts of Elisabeth's life. While Thor writes letters in his room at night, it is Stein who wanders in the forest as though consumed by Thor's passion. The arrival of Thor's wife Alissa at the hotel becomes an occasion, not for the separation of Stein and Thor, but for their further identification and interchangeability. Soon both love Alissa, too. For a while Stein participates in this love merely by watching the lovers through the window. He is also Thor's advocate, pleading his case with Alissa. Stein explains Thor's emotions to Alissa in a way in which Thor could not explain them. Stein also serves as an observer for Thor: if Thor wrote, he would write what Stein observes. Toward the end of the novel, Thor identifies himself and Stein to Elisabeth by saying, "We are Alissa's lovers" (*Det.*, p. 93). Alissa's words to Elisabeth also tend to lead Elisabeth and the reader into a greater identification of the two men, and Alissa repeatedly says that it is possible and even easy to confuse them. In later scenes, the interchangeability of the two men seems to grow: Max Thor spends the night in the park thinking of both Elisabeth and Alissa, as Stein had done earlier; Max's dream of Elisabeth (or of Woman) is interpreted by Stein; and there are instances where the two men or the trio of Max, Stein, and Alissa share a single reply.

The identification or interchangeability of Alissa and Stein is established by less evident techniques but seems to rest on a more profound inner resemblance. Stein's early identification is with Max; he then assumes Max's love and desire of Alissa. He communicates with Alissa when Max cannot. Then he tells Alissa that she is part of him, and eventually declares to Max Thor that Alissa is the woman for whom he has been waiting and hoping these many years. Alissa and Stein show a deep complicity; they intuitively understand underlying emotions and human relationships much more fully, it seems, than Max. Stein, upon seeing Alissa, had immediately grasped that she was "mad." Thor agrees, though he had not noticed this fact before. The "mad" Alissa and the "writer" Stein possess a special, rather frightening insight into human beings. Stein, like his namesake Lol V. Stein in the 1964 novel *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*,⁵ is the one who "sees." The identification between him and Alissa is especially evident in Stein's instant comprehension and espousal of Alissa's plan of "capital destruction" (*Dét.*, pp. 59, 71, et passim). Whereas Thor never uses the phrase and hesitates in his pursuit of Elisabeth, Stein appears quite committed to some form of destruction, even though he knows that for Elisabeth, "it will be terrible, frightful" (*Dét.*, p. 114). Our feeling of the close identity of Alissa and Stein is reinforced by reading Marguerite Duras's statement in the previously cited interview, that Stein and Alissa "belong to" her and are "completely familiar" to her, while Thor and Elisabeth are exterior to her, (*La Des.* p. 50).

Devices to show the identification between Max Thor and Alissa are somewhat less obvious. Perhaps one reason why we are less aware of them is that when Alissa arrives at the hotel she is immediately confronted with Max Thor's confessed fascination with Elisabeth, and as a result feels a loss of verbal communication with her husband. Stein, who pleads Max's case with Alissa, emphasizes the profound union between her and her husband, saying that they are melted together like a mass of tar. He also repeats to Alissa that Max loves her so much that he could not live without her and could not even imagine his

⁵Marguerite Duras, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

existence without her. All of this, it seems, is true, in spite of Max's attraction to Elisabeth. Alissa's feeling of union with Max is less evident in her repetition of his phrases than in her adoption of his project of amorous pursuit of Elisabeth. Alissa assimilates the two men's fascination with the bourgeois woman, until it is she who appears the most fascinated and the least willing to abandon the pursuit. It is the assumption of Max's project, as well as her understanding of his language, which best expresses Alissa's identification with her husband. Thus, through all of these identifications a trio is formed which functions, in desire and in project, as a single individual.

Although Marguerite Duras herself did not speak of the interchangeability of the two female characters, Alissa and Elisabeth, the reader-spectator can observe a degree of identification between them. This identification is a perplexing one and adds to the generally enigmatic quality of this work. The first identification of the two is external to them, taking place in Max's mind. Early in the book, Max Thor, fascinated by Elisabeth, begins to juxtapose mentally, then to mix, images of Alissa and Elisabeth. While he is speaking to Stein of Alissa, his verbal descriptions of his wife are interspersed with his visual perceptions of Elisabeth walking through the hotel. Max leaves the letter written to Elisabeth for Alissa to find. Both women are constantly present in his mind. Stein, as he adopts Thor's desire for the one woman, adopts it for the other. The blending of the two women remains in Thor's unconscious, as seen when, near the end of the book, it is said that while asleep and dreaming he pronounced the name "Elisa," a blend of the two women's names.

Another means employed by the author to link the two women is Alissa's uncanny knowledge and comprehension of Elisabeth. In the dining room, soon after her arrival, Alissa senses that Elisabeth is crying, although she cannot see her. When Elisabeth relates fragments of her story to Alissa, the younger woman quickly finds questions which touch upon the heart of Elisabeth's life and feelings. Elisabeth is amazed and frightened by Alissa's perspicacity. Alissa admits to Stein and Max that she too is fascinated by Elisabeth and cannot cease pursuing her. However, we can discern a deliberate design in Alissa's attempt to lead Elisabeth into identification with her: cutting her hair to resemble Elisabeth, standing with her in front of the mirrors and emphasizing their resemblance, telling her that she loves and desires her.

Perhaps the most intriguing example of interchange of characters, and once again one which the author did not comment upon, is the one between Max Thor and Elisabeth. In the early part of the book, Thor constantly observes Elisabeth. He is clearly the observer and she the observed. The reader sees what Max sees. Elisabeth, the woman, is the object only; the reader never sees through her eyes. However, in one of the final scenes of the novel, Max Thor unexpectedly challenges Elisabeth with the statement that it is she who, for ten days, has looked at him with fascination. Surprisingly, she answers, "It's true" (*Dét.* pp. 128-29). She then leaves the hotel immediately, followed by her husband. The woman, object of the lover's look, has become herself the observer and fascinated one. The reader knows this only from an exterior remark and not from any technique giving access to Elisabeth's mind or experience. This example of interchange, though limited, is astonishing. Its place in the meaning of the work remains uncertain. It indicates a reversal of roles, or perhaps complementarity of roles. It reminds us that Elisabeth is also a consciousness, a subjectivity capable of perceiving others and assessing them. Furthermore, the fact that the role of observer can be filled by either a man or a woman suggests the similarity, equality, and reciprocity of the sexual roles of men and women.

The novelistic techniques of interchangeability just described correspond to a cinematographic technique pointed out by Narboni, who says: “. . . we never know whether it [the camera] is assuming the look of a character; at the moment when we thought so, as it happens, it [the camera] once again assumes the ‘objective’ point of view, and at the moment when we think that it is surveying events, it is assumed by a character, and that change takes place within a scene or sequence.” His fellow-journalist Rivette refers to “. . . some scenes I have seen beginning as the glance of a certain character, and which finally, in the movement of the shooting, become a glance at the same character who was looking, we thought, at the beginning of the scene” (*La Des.*, p. 48).

Marguerite Duras herself wondered whether the equivalent in writing of this slippage technique in cinema would not be the role of the author. Narboni felt that it would be something which happens between the character and the reader (*La Des.*, p. 48). In the absence of a camera to direct his gaze, the reader of a novel is led by the various techniques cited to see a fairly high degree of identification among the characters and to experience some of this slippage of his own identification from one character to another.

The various deconstructive devices we have pointed out are used by Marguerite Duras in a presentation of some of the problems of the individual personality and of intimate and social relationships. The members of the trio—Max, Stein, and Alissa—are identified with each other in what appears to be a project of loving, albeit with somewhat sinister overtones. In Marguerite Duras’s total work, seen as an exploration of the ambiguities, ambivalences, and contradictions of human attempts at love, this book seems to be a key, if only we can decipher its meaning.

One important linguistic pattern revealing the meaning of this ambiguous book is the repetition, with variations, of a certain statement about loving. This statement takes the syntactical form of a conditional sentence which, significantly, sometimes lacks one clause. Alissa first uses it in her conversation with Elisabeth in front of the dining room mirrors. Alissa tells Elisabeth that they would both love Stein if it were possible to love. Further on in the same scene, she says that if Elisabeth had ever loved her husband, she would have loved Stein and Max—suggesting, though not declaring, that Elisabeth is incapable of loving (*Dét.*, p. 103). Later, during the luncheon scene, Alissa tells Bernard that Elisabeth could have loved him if she were capable of loving (*Dét.*, p. 128). In each of the recurrences of this motif, the condition is expressed. However, in the variation which seems of most importance, the condition is omitted. This is when the trio tells Bernard, “We could love you also. We could” (*Dét.*, p. 121). Although the condition, “if it were possible to love,” or “if we were capable of loving,” is not expressed, it occurs to the reader or listener, who has been programmed by previous statements to expect it. Indeed, we see little in the trio to suggest human warmth and concern. Among themselves, they question the meaning and consequences of desire alone. Alissa and Stein, as usual, seem to understand more than Thor. To Stein’s question, “What is possible?” Thor replies that desire is possible. But Alissa seems to understand that desire, rather than being the answer to the question, is the question itself; she cries out, “How can we live?” (*Dét.*, p. 107). Stein understands the seriousness of her query. The closing remarks of Thor and Stein suggest only two possible outcomes for the quest of desire: the wearing out of the object, Elisabeth, by Thor’s desire, or Elisabeth’s “death”—what kind of “death” we do not know—by means of Alissa (*Dét.*, p. 131). Indeed, in Duras’s works, passion seems to end either in exhaustion or in death. There seems to be no intermediate result—hence Alissa’s anguished cry, “How can we live? What is going to become of us?” (*Dét.*, p. 107).

The questions of the message of this work and of the readership appropriate to it hinge upon the author's concept of character and the techniques used to convey it. The reader who retains the habit of seeking a single, unified message in a novel must be disconcerted by *Détruire, dit-elle*. In the absence of a clearly defined, privileged narrator or observer, the reader is forced to accept the burden of being the novelistic subject, of experiencing and integrating all personalities and events. Marguerite Duras, by establishing her principal characters as similar and interchangeable, has intentionally made the process of reader identification and integration quite difficult. Duras was well aware of operating here in an experimental area, as she reveals in her interview with Narboni and Rivette. She says that the time-honored principle, enunciated by Sartre in his famous essay on Mauriac,⁶ whereby the reader must identify with A, and could see B and C only through A, is false. Duras would like to refute this notion, which she calls a "nineteenth-century prejudice." Her hope was that the reader-spectator could identify with all of the interchangeable characters of this work (La Des., p. 48). The novelistic subject would then be constituted in the reader's mind of his own personality, of the various characters, and of Marguerite Duras, creator of the characters and forms of the novel.

The deconstruction of the myths of love and the self has thus led our author to certain aesthetic extremes. She has shown her characters intermingling their emotions, projects, and words. She has prevented the reader from identifying exclusively with any one character, hoping for identification with all. By the great fragmentation and dispersion of the novelistic subject, Duras has made it very difficult for the reader to form an integrated view of the action and meaning of this book. If we do so, it may have to be in spite of the author and by relying on a knowledge of Marguerite Duras's other works.

The tensions and ambiguities in this book are indeed expressive of the author's stage of development in 1969. We see here much of the earlier, essential Marguerite Duras, obsessed with intense passions which can be at the same time attraction and the desire to kill or dominate, and with the tangled web of relationships within even a very small social group. We also see evidence of the leftist Marguerite Duras of the late sixties, who in 1969 still had hopes of a future Marxist Utopian society in which individualism would be reduced, in which typical bourgeois sexual and social relationships might cease to exist, in which the limitations both of individual personalities and of social structures might fall away. The profound tensions between the two Marguerite Durasses and the two messages present in this book make its meaning very difficult to assimilate. Any given reader, according to his own viewpoint, may tend, in Durassian terms, to "swallow" one message and to "vomit" the other.

Marguerite Duras has gone to great lengths in this book to deconstruct existing ideas of the self and of love and to invent aesthetic means of suggesting how she thinks human personalities do interact and intermingle. Because she has given us such an extremely floating, relative, fragmented point of view, we, the readers, bear a heavy burden in the creation of the signification of this highly deconstructive work.

⁶Jean-Paul Sartre, "M. François Mauriac et la liberté," *Situations I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), 36-57. (Sartre, in this essay, is preoccupied with the technique of the omniscient narrator. Marguerite Duras is transmitting her impressions of Sartre's essay.)