

Marguerite Duras

L'AMANT

Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1984. Pp. 142

Reviewed by Germaine Brée

"The story of my life does not exist. It doesn't exist. There was never any center. No path, no line" (p. 14; my translation). Nobody, of course, opening a book by Duras, would expect a linear narrative. As a writer she has been intensely involved with the inner spaces of memory, oblivion, loss, and desire. A more suitable comparison for the formal characteristics of her narratives would be a mobile, the whole delineating some absent space within which each fragment seeks its equilibrium. *L'Amant* (The Lover), autobiographical though it is, is no exception. The equilibrium is fragile and its mechanisms are delicate.

It would seem at first reading that Duras has set out to tell a simple story: the story of her initiation to sexual passion, at 15 1/2 at the expert hands of a gentle young man, the son of a rich Chinese banker. And indeed this is a central motif of the narrative. But the real story, retrieved fragment by fragment, is in fact the desperate, stubborn, and blind will of the adolescent girl to wreak upon herself the inner havoc which will free her from the monstrous, claustrophobic bondage to unrecognized, quasi-incestuous family relations, worthy of Greek tragedy. The Chinese lover is the means to that end and opens the way to an inner "territory" of solitude which is the realm of Marguerite Duras, the writer, who as an adolescent screened off her "self" from an intolerable reality.

The time frame is the present, the time of the writing. The narrative moves freely from meditation to recollection, reactivating on its way sometimes apparently unconnected moments in time, leaving wide gaps between them. "The story of a very limited part of my youth, I have already more or less written . . . Before, I spoke of the transparent periods. Here I have spoken of the occulted parts of that childhood, of a kind of repression I had brought to bear on some of the facts, some of the feelings and events" (p. 14). The book is, then, a prospection, a slow uncovering of a central traumatic situation, the source of Duras's imaginary world of obsessive desire, anguish, and death. The initial distancing of narrator-spectator and image leads to the reader's involvement in the unfolding of the text, in its dramatic stage-like potentialities.

The book opens with the narrator's scrutiny of an image, her own "ravaged" face as reflected in a mirror, a face nonetheless loved by an unidentified man. The link between love and devastation thus established sets in motion the return to an origin: it was, the narrator informs the reader, at eighteen that the ravaged face became hers. The chronological underpinnings of the narrative are thus set, although not rigidly. It was in 1931, when she was eighteen that Duras left what was then Indo-China for good. The "experiment" as she calls the love affair with the "man from Cholen" (Cholen was then an entirely Chinese suburb of Saigon) lasted, in her account, one and a half years, presumably ending with her seventeenth year.

The cast of characters and the background are familiar to Duras's readers: the widowed, embattled, destitute mother doomed to failure in her reiterated attempts to survive in an alien society; the older son, cruel and feckless; the girl and her "little brother" living in terror of their older sibling. The "décor" is the strip of land between the tropical forest and the powerful Mekong River described in *Barrage Against the Pacific* with Saigon, city of wealth and light, in the background. Enveloping the whole, the presence of Asia is rarely absent from Duras's work. Temporarily eclipsed by the story of the "man from Cholen and the little white girl" the question of the ambiguous nature of the "invisible family community" surfaces little by little, breaking through the amnesia in which it had been held. Mother and brothers are now dead; memory in its affective violence too. Duras can now weave their separate quasi-picaresque, previously absent story into her text.

The point of departure of this complex process of remembrance via writing is also an image, the barely sketched silhouette of an adolescent girl leaning against the railing of a Mekong ferry which regularly takes her back to her boarding school in Saigon. The image slowly becomes more visible: a faded silk dress, a man's pink felt hat with a broad ribbon,

high heeled gold spangled shoes. Another image takes shape: a black chauffeured limousine draws up beside her on the ferry.

One may wonder, at this juncture, what part memory, fiction, myth, and fact play in the subsequent unfolding of the text. Without any doubt the love story has a complex symbolic value, encompassing as it does the breaking of taboos familial, sexual, social, and racial, producing some harshly comic scenes along the way. Beyond this it has all the strange aura of a Freudian dream: the feminine softness of the man; the lustral purification rituals regularly reenacted before love-making; the tomb-like room, shut off from the daily world; the passage from one world to the other in the coffin-like limousine. These suggest maternal images. The lover calls the child "mon enfant." One wonders if the plunge into the depths of the unconscious has not secreted its own mythic mask, a displacement of the violent desire for the maternal body transferred to the phantasm of the lover from Cholen.

There is one passage in the book which gives an insight into the alchemy that presides over the genesis of Duras's world. She describes two moments of overwhelming fear. The first when, as a little girl, she was pursued by a mad, screaming, native beggarwoman; the second when, as she looked at her mother, a sudden panic seized her along with the conviction that the woman sitting there was a stranger who had usurped her mother's body. She tells us how from the fusion of these events came the mythic beggar woman whose song and adventures haunt *India Song* and *The Vice Consul* as she wanders from Savannah to Calcutta. The "man from Cholen" and "the little white whore" join the procession of Duras's mythic figures: the beggar-woman, Anne-Marie Stretter, the Vice Consul of Lahore, Nathalie Granger, Aurelia Steiner, Lol V. Stein, strangers all to the social life of a community.

L'Amant is a fascinating book. As is the case with all Duras's writing, fragments of the tale already live in the reader's memory. Autobiography and fiction merge and open up new vistas into the shaping of a compelling multi-faceted literary world, an achievement belatedly recognized by the award to Duras, in 1984, of the Goncourt Prize.

Geir Kjetsaa, Sven Gustavsson, Bengt Beckman, and Steinar Gil

THE AUTHORSHIP OF The Quiet Don

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Reviewed by Vasa D. Mihailovich

The authorship of one of the best novels in twentieth century Russian literature, *The Quiet Don*, has been a bone of contention ever since the first volume was published in 1928, and the contention does not seem to abate. Witness the three books in English alone—by an anonymous Russian critic D*, by Roy A. Medvedev, and by the collective authorship of the book under review—which are devoted to this subject, not to speak of articles and mentions in other books on Mikhail Sholokhov. Since the recently deceased Soviet author has been judged often on political grounds rather than on the literary merits of his works, the stand concerning the problem in question has often depended on the political view of the critic. Since, unfortunately, most of the original manuscript of *The Quiet Don* has been lost or is, for some reason, inaccessible, one wishes for a magic wand that would provide answers to the critical questions: did he or did he not? and, if he did not, who did? Or for some trustworthy, ironclad, "scientific" way of resolving this controversy that has lasted more than half a century.

Such a way seems to be presented in this slender book. Although not foolproof and admittedly still not a solution beyond any doubt, this study by four scholars at the universities of Oslo and Stockholm comes as close as we ever will get to a definitive answer. By examining meticulously by way of computer science the styles of Sholokhov and the most-often alleged author, Fedor Kriukov, they have reached a firm conclusion that Sholokhov is indeed the author of *The Quiet Don*. However, in the true spirit of the controversy, they hedge somewhat by comparing their method to the way the fatherhood of a child is established—they conclude that Kriukov is *not* the author, while Sholokhov is the most likely author of the book.