

Susan D. Cohen

*Women and Discourse in the Fiction of Marguerite Duras*  
Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993. Pp. 239  
Reviewed by Karen Levy

Given the number of critical works devoted to Duras's varied repertoire that have appeared in the last twenty-five years, it would be extremely difficult for a new study to be both so original and so well argued as to be considered a turning-point effort. And yet this is exactly what Susan Cohen has accomplished. Her meticulously researched analysis explores in great depth and with great critical dexterity the subversive qualities of Duras's discourse from the dual perspective of narrative strategies and stylistic techniques. She reveals the ways in which Duras both exposes the controlling and exclusionary tactics of male-dominated systems of communication and develops alternative notions of shifting subjectivity and cross-cultural identity, thereby empowering women as actors and tellers of their own tales.

This intricate, though clear, study should not be considered as an introduction to Duras's work. It should be read against the background of existing Duras scholarship precisely because Cohen deals so deftly and so persuasively with the vast body of material devoted to this author, praising where appropriate and exposing the shortcomings and insufficiencies of other studies with detailed textual documentation that leaves the reader at once dazzled and convinced of the incisiveness of her arguments. Cohen's introduction situates Duras's work with respect to postmodern critical theory in general and feminist criticism in particular. She singles out the importance of the issues raised, for example, by Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Monique Wittig, and, more recently, Judith Butler, and succinctly sets up the framework for the two parts of her own study, entitled "Strategies of Narration" and "Toward a Poetics of Duras' Pros" respectively.

Using *Le Vice Consul* as the point of departure for her non-linear analysis, Cohen explores how ignorance, absence, or uncertainty operates at the textual level to produce an irreducible plurality of narratives that point up how the male characters attempt either to appropriate or to separate themselves from the danger posed by Anne-Marie Stretter and the beggar woman. On the one hand, she discusses how these females are eliminated from traditional discourse and, on the other hand, how their very silence becomes both a form of resistance and another form of communication. One of the most significant aspects of Cohen's analysis is her emphasis on the shifting pronouns in the work and the specific role of the French "on," which, since it is only one voice among many in the text, linguistically displaces the power of white colonial discourse. The same perceptiveness and attention to detail evident in Cohen's treatment of this work likewise characterize that of all the others discussed in this chapter, perhaps the most fascinating of which is her treatment of *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*. She first reveals the dichotomy between Lol's phantasm and that of the possessive and sadistic narrator Jacques Hold and then analyzes how Hold himself becomes caught in the net of his own tale, to produce a work that simultaneously points up the cannibalistic quality (48) of Hold's discourse and exposes the fissures in that very structure.

In subsequent chapters Cohen analyzes the different kinds and manifestations of repetition and intertextuality in Duras's works as her female characters struggle to find their own voices and eventually, as in the deeply moving case of the Aurélia Steiners, to speak and write from the triple perspective of daughter, mother, and lover. And in what is perhaps the most critically provocative part of her study, Cohen examines the specifically erotico-pornographic texts *La Maladie de la mort* and *L'Homme assis dans le couloir*. She exposes the many different ways in which Duras subverts the goals and expectations traditionally associated with this kind of text, foregrounding the relationship between the genre and gender and emphasizing the role of irony and parody in the whole deconstructive process.

In the second part of her study, Cohen examines the particulars of how Duras's stylistic techniques produce the subversiveness and openness discussed in the first part. She deals here with a number of phenomena that have figured extensively in other studies of Duras's work, such as the significance of silence, of blanks, of hesitation, of questioning, of lying etc. Yet she treats these issues in a way that offers new insight and opens new dimensions to Duras's use of these techniques. In her final chapter Cohen discusses the importance of the ritualistic, mythologizing qualities of Duras's texts, once again emphasizing the deprivatizing, communal, cross-cultural quality of the legends this author seeks to produce.

The one small criticism I would make is of a purely technical nature, stemming from the fact that the quotations from Duras's texts were presented only in English. Since this study examines in detail the intricacies of Duras's discourse, it would have been very helpful to have the quotes in the original French as well as in translation. Nevertheless this criticism in no way detracts from the importance of Cohen's analysis, the incisiveness of her own discourse, and the significance of her contribution to both Duras scholarship and the broader domain of feminist criticism.

Norma Rosen

*Accidents of Influence: Writing as a Woman and a Jew in America*

Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992. Pp. 210. \$34.50

Reviewed by Melvin J. Friedman

Norma Rosen is one of the best-kept secrets among contemporary American novelists. She is the author of four novels and a collection of short stories. Unlike so many novelists who till the same monotonous soil from fiction to fiction, she seems to acknowledge "the imagination's new beginning" (Wallace Stevens's words) with each subsequent work. She started her career with a predictably 1960s dose of Jewish comedy and victimization in *Joy to Levine!* (1961). Its hero, Arnold Levine, is a born loser who has been accident prone since childhood—which accounts for his limp and his missing finger. Rosen's first novel seems to indulge in the kind of black humor we associate with Jewish contemporaries like Bruce Jay Friedman and Stanley Elkin. *Touching Evil* (1969) takes a quite different and more serious turn as it measures the impact of the Holocaust on non-Jews. As she remarked in the Foreword to the 1990 reissue of the novel: "*Touching Evil*