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Wartime Writings, or the Imaginary Lover of Marguerite Duras

Abstract

The publication in 2006 of Marguerite Duras's *Cahiers de la guerre*, 'Wartime Writings,' written between 1943 and 1949, made accessible to the reader the first known versions of the family drama that was to become the material of much of her fiction. As this work now takes its place as chronologically first in the intertext of Duras's autofictional writings, it sheds considerable light on our understanding of the transformations in these texts that occurred over her lifetime. Whereas *L'Amant* had been presented and accepted as the disclosure of a real occurrence and the origin of the other works, it presents several significant aspects of Duras's life at the time, as well as the lover himself, in a way that is not verifiably real. The "Cahiers" help establish the difference between the verifiably real and that which seems most true about herself to the author in later life when she fictionalizes her own coming of age. The first "Cahier" holds the key to understanding the exigencies that led to the invention of the character of the Chinese lover, as it reminds us that there is no moment before legend and story-telling, and that individual memory is always constructed imaginatively.

Keywords

wartime literature, Marguerite Dura, Cahiers de la guerre, wartime writings, autofiction, identity, Cahier, legend, real, imagination, memory

Wartime Writings, or the Imaginary Lover of Marguerite
Duras

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The publication by the IMEC¹ in 2006 of Marguerite Duras's *Cahiers de la guerre* 'Wartime Writings' written between 1943 and 1949 made accessible to the reader the first known versions of the family drama that was to become the material of much of her fiction. As this work now takes its place as chronologically first in the intertext of Duras's autofictional writings, it sheds considerable light on our understanding of the transformations in these texts that occurred over her lifetime. Duras is of course known for her rejection of any ordinary definition of autobiography as distinct from fiction. In this first piece of confessional writing we see not only all the elements of the many subsequent reworkings of her autofiction,² but also some fairly clear statements of what it meant to her in 1943, when she had been in France for thirteen years, to begin the lifetime labor of retrieving her own past.

I want to focus here on the first volume in particular (the "Cahier rose marbré" 'Pink Marbled Notebook'), which is composed of a lengthy, uninterrupted confession of sixty-six pages in which Duras yields to "an instinct to unearth" (32) her memories of childhood in Vietnam. She goes on to say that these memories are essential to the construction, understanding, and affirmation of self, for herself in 1943: "Si je ne suis pas fidèle à moi-même, à qui le serai-je?" (73) 'It's very simple. If I do not write (my memories) down, I will gradually forget them. ... If I am not faithful to myself, to whom will I be?' (32). This material should nevertheless not be considered solely as a personal diary, because the young Duras defends it from questioning by an imaginary reader or a Lacanian "other." In speaking of the

violence of her mother and older brother towards her and of their beatings, she says, “On est en droit de demander pourquoi j’écris ces souvenirs, pourquoi je soumets des conduites desquelles je préviens qu’il me déplairait qu’on les juge” (73) ‘One may well wonder why I write down these recollections, why I present behavior I announce it would displease me to see judged’ (32). Duras was already beginning to imagine the dialogue with a reader that was to become an integral part of her later autofiction. Thus it would seem that this long unbroken passage is most probably a very early draft of her life story, written with a possible and somewhat vague intention to publish, although in the end she published other texts that only resemble it.

Bearing in mind her avowed attempt to be faithful to herself and the fact that the reader necessarily discovers this document after having read *L’Amant*,³ we can find here some answers to the problematic of Durassian personal “truth” about herself, as distinct from the “verifiable reality” of her life that includes the existence of the Chinese lover. We can find some of the secrets of the mythology that created that truth in response to an urgent, personal necessity. This distinction between “truth” and “reality” and Duras’s life-long quest for her truth is best illuminated by Alain Vircondelet, in *Duras: Vérités et légendes ‘Duras A Biography.’* This volume includes photographs by Duras’s son Jean Mascolo and a long commentary and reflection by Vircondelet, who begins by citing some of Duras’s last words to Yann Andrea, on the eve of her death: “What is the truth of my life? If you know it, tell it to me” (Foreword). Vircondelet speaks of her tireless search for this truth, and of “the raging, frenetic, and creative impulses that made her one of the most paradoxical writers of the century, [but] that did not allow her to confront her truth” (Foreword). But he rightly asserts that “the greatness of her work lies in her waiting for the discovery of this truth” (Foreword).

But *L’Amant* was in fact presented and accepted by an enlarged reading public in France and elsewhere as the key to understanding Duras, the disclosure of a real occurrence that explained all the rest. Not coincidentally perhaps, it also catapulted her to international popularity. As Anne Cousseau explains in her book *Poétique de l’Enfance chez Marguerite Duras* ‘Poetics of Childhood in Marguerite Duras’ the reader has the impression of having been admit-

ted into the innermost intimacy of the writer's first sexual pleasure, always potentially the most scandalous, and thus *L'Amant* is read as the origin of all the other works. Because Duras uses the first person in an autobiographical fiction for the first time and is just a "child" in the story, the impression of having found the ultimate origin seems confirmed. It is relevant to review in this light Duras's appearance on Bernard Pivot's television series "Apostrophes," in which she uses the media to emphasize the self-revelatory aspect and to reinforce it: her speech is regularly interrupted by photos of her childhood and of her family, thus presumably equating the story with a verifiable reality and apparently entering into an "autobiographical pact" with the viewer/reader (Cousseau 136).⁴

This idea of "what really happened" was thus central to the reception of *The Lover*, which automatically reacted to the interpretations previously made of the other accounts of Duras's life. Duras confides to Pivot that aspects of *L'Eden Cinéma* 'The Eden Cinéma' and *India Song* had in fact been invented, and he and the viewer now see them as essentially different from *L'Amant* in this respect. When Duras wrote *L'Amant de la Chine du nord* in 1991, 'The North China Lover' she rearranged certain aspects of the "facts" presented in *L'Amant*, but not without referencing the latter as the ultimate source: "Ici, il est moins inventé que dans *L'Amant*" 'Here, he is less make-believe than in *The Lover*' (interview in *Libération*). Here she is referring not only to *L'Amant*, but also to the scenario of Annaud's film version of it, which Duras found unconvincing and incapable of conveying the experience as she had portrayed it originally.

But *The Lover* presents several significant aspects of Duras's life at the time, as well as the lover himself, in a way that is not verifiably real. The "Cahier rose marbré," as well as the piece entitled *L'Enfance illimitée* (357-71) 'Boundless Childhood' (229-39), helps establish the difference between the verifiably real and that which seems most true about herself to the author in later life when she fictionalizes her own coming of age. The "Cahier rose marbré" also holds the key to understanding the very real exigencies that led to the invention of the Chinese lover. It is of particular value in this regard precisely because it was never published in Duras's lifetime and thus was not part of the available intertext of her writing on the family and her childhood.

The authors of three biographies of Duras, Laure Adler, Jean Vallier, and Vircondelet, have all wrestled with the ambiguous status of Duras's texts as fictional as well as autobiographical. Vircondelet often takes the writing itself as his point of departure for a description of the family's standing within the white community, and thus he appears to accept Duras's account of her early years as if it were verifiable reality, though he is nevertheless aware that this may be an error: describing the meeting of the girl and the Chinese lover on the ferry, the "photo that was not taken," he says, "How can we distinguish between the true and the plausible, what happened and 'what must have happened?'" (35). These reservations do resemble the more recent understanding of her work as autofiction, but Vircondelet does not wish to probe into the distinction of what was real and what was the work of the writer's imagination: "This is where the Chinese lover supposedly appeared. We know the story, which is perhaps just a story, a legend she invented but which, having ripened during her whole life, finally became true" (27).

Both Adler and Vallier had access, through the IMEC, to the *Wartime Writings*. Both were aware in their works of the difficulty of clearly discerning fact and imagination in Duras's own accounts of her life; this is clearly one of the major sources of inspiration for their work, though they approach the question differently. For Adler, the problem of knowing the status of any part of the story is more insoluble and troubling; she begins her book with the caveat "So who was Duras really? To her, the very word 'truth' was open to doubt and reality so touching she moved out of its reach...⁵ This book endeavors to separate out and compare the various versions, although it cannot claim to be a truthful account of a person who so loved to conceal herself" (5).

Adler visited Saigon and the other sites mentioned by Duras, in order to discover what they could reveal, but Adler shows very little skepticism of the apparent "marketing" to tourists that appears to be going on both in Léo's former home and by the man who claims to be the nephew of the Chinese lover. With respect to the "Cahier rose marbré" Adler examines its status:

It would be too easy to say that at the end of her life Marguerite's memory was beginning to fail her and that she thought what she'd

written was more real than her own life. But the discovery of a document after her death does shed new light on the affair. Written ... with no crossings-out, the piece had been carefully placed in an envelope, sealed and never again opened. Is it a confession? ... Who knows? This story, recorded like a diary, certainly has the ring of truth about it. (56-57)

A quotation follows from the “Cahier” itself – the meeting of the girl and the future boyfriend on the ferry from Sadec—and finally Adler observes ‘We know what happened next’ (86). But in fact, the rest of the “Cahier” is only very roughly the same as the continuation of *L’Amant*. This slippage shows that Adler has accepted this text as the origin of *L’Amant*, but I think it is worth examining the differences carefully, rather than simply to claim, as Adler does, that a certain reality was “so touching she moved out of its reach” (5).

In his *C’était Marguerite Duras, Tome I, 1914-1945* ‘This was Marguerite Duras,’ Vallier attempts a thorough archival researching of the facts of Duras’s early life. He consistently endeavors to separate to the extent possible the verifiable from the imagined truth. He too considers the “Cahier” to be a founding document in terms of *The Lover*. In this article I have privileged Vallier’s account of the verifiable truth over Adler’s and Vircondelet’s, in large part because his archival work seems to me more solid and he is able, for instance, to provide proper names for characters like the Vietnamese lover of “Le Cahier rose marbré,” Léo (Huynh Thuy Lè), and records of the French Colonial administration concerning the situation of the Donnadiou family, which include letters by Duras’s mother and their financial requests. Vallier, unlike Adler, consistently refuses to take the autobiographies alone as points of departure for his research, and thus he methodically separates the verifiable from the autobiographical account. Vallier’s professed goal is not to show that Duras deliberately made the truth unknowable, any more than it is mine; rather, he begins by saying that for all of us, there is no moment before legend and story-telling: individual memory is always constructed imaginatively. The value of studying Duras’s successive versions of her autofiction is to understand the transformative processes that led to their various versions.⁶

From his account, as in those of Duras, it is clear that the three

children of Marie Donnadiou (Duras's real surname) saw their place in society as the mother described it: as very poor, even destitute, and definitively wrecked by the adventure of the concession. But there is convincing proof that things were never that dire, that the concession, for instance, was not purchased from the cadastral agents but from the chettys, because it was in Cambodia rather than Vietnam and thus under a more autonomous regime. The mother ultimately came into possession of all of it, and the government finally built a dike to protect it (Vallier 336). While the story of the floods at the beginning of the venture was real, the social exclusion of the Donnadiou family was not: all the functionaries in the various posts socialized with them, though not the governor and his high-ranking officials. After the settlement of the father's estate, Duras spent a year with her entire family in Vanves, just outside Paris, a fact that alters the meaning of the departure as portrayed in *The Lover*. With the estate settlement, Mme Donnadiou was able to buy a quite handsome villa in Saigon (445). She then acquired a certain status in Saigon by virtue of her acquaintances at the Colonial Ministry in Paris. As for Marguerite, after the significant interruption of her year in Paris, she had for her final year at the *lycée* a room of her own in the new villa in Saigon rather than the boarding school in Sadeq that required a ferry crossing, and two surviving witnesses who lived in the Donnadiou household as a child or knew Marguerite at the *lycée* are sure that there was no car that picked her up after school, and no evidence of a Chinese lover (456, 460). The same can be established from eyewitness accounts concerning the time spent at the boarding school before the family's departure for Vanves (Adler 78).

What finally emerges from Vallier's massive compilation as relevant to our concerns is the nature of the relationship to the mother and family generally, and of course the possible models for the Chinese lover. As a diary kept in Vanves in 1931 confirms, the young Marguerite's problems were more affective than material. She suffered from an absence of tenderness in her family, especially from her mother. This is of course consistent with the fictionalized mother, as is her quasi-divine status; interestingly, there are strong declarations of faith in God in the same diary, and in the "Cahier" she refers often to a connection between her mother and God: "Les

mains de Dieu ne me semblaient pas plus belles” (62) ‘God’s hands did not seem more beautiful to me’ (25). In *L’Enfance illimitée*, written later in the 30s in Paris, she describes the nature of this fusional relationship which knew no bounds or boundaries: “Très jeunes, nous avons participé à sa vie. Nous fûmes ses amis, et je crois que c’est d’elle que nous tenions ce sens de la réalité. Sa réalité était notre rêve. Nous fûmes nourris d’elle comme les autres enfants le sont de chimères” (361) ‘Quite young, we took part in her life. We were her friends, and I believe our sense of reality came to us from her. Her reality was our dreams. We were nourished on her as other children are on wild and idle fancies’ (232); “... tous entassés, blottis contre ma mère, fruits d’une même grappe, emmêlés les uns aux autres avec encore la même chair et le même sommeil” (364) ‘... all crowded together, huddled against my mother, fruits of a single cluster, tangled up with one another, sharing the same flesh and the same fatigue’ (233). Thus they were profoundly united by their mother in their perceived isolation from the world, an important point because in her many accounts Duras stresses both the love and the hatred they had for their mother, but not this fact of a deeply shared identity. For a daughter who suffered from a lack of motherly affection, this was clearly a problem to be dealt with, as she indicates as early as the “Cahier” where she says “Nous étions tous abîmés dans une enfance illimitée, et qu’en somme nous tentions vainement d’en sortir. On passait même sa vie entière à tenter d’en sortir par n’importe quel moyen” (67) ‘... we were sunk in a boundless childhood from which, all in all, we were trying in vain to escape. We were even spending our whole lives trying to get out of it any way we could’ (29).

From the evidence of the “Le Cahier rose marbré,” the girl’s adolescent rebellion and desire for autonomy while typical, was at the same time quite different from most in that she inhabited the physical but also the psychological space of her larger-than-life, archetypal mother. In 1943, Duras asserts that her childhood was devoid of hope and dreams of her own, as well as of friends and relatives: “Vous vous demandez ce qu’il reste? Il reste ma mère. Pourquoi me le cacher?” (360) ‘You wonder, what is left? My mother is left. Why hide it from myself?’ (231-32) Because there was no space between her mother’s construction of reality and her own, there was no question of rebellion against this mother who beat her, a fact she also

confirms in her Paris diary; in fact, she says “Je vivais dans un état de culpabilité à peu près constant” (51) ‘I lived in a more or less constant state of guilt’ (18-19).⁷ She preferred to bring her family along on her *rendez-vous* with Léo because “dans mon refus de sortir avec Léo seul il y avait surtout ... le désir le plus sincère et le plus constant de voir mes frères et ma mère profiter également de ma bonne fortune” (60) ‘... my refusal to go out alone with Léo reflected above all ... the most sincere and steadfast desire to see my mother and brothers profit as well from my good fortune’ (24). Of course the woman of thirty who is writing this text has distanced herself to some extent, but she frames it in an interesting way: “Lorsque, plus âgée, je me révoltai, ce fut toujours un peu à contre-cœur, et la joie que j’en éprouvais n’était pas sans rapport avec une joie blasphématoire” (73) ‘When, older, I rebelled, it was always a bit reluctantly, and the joy I felt thereby was not unrelated to a blasphemous delight’ (32). In *L’Enfance illimitée*, she expresses a desire to separate by writing about her mother (360), but she discovers an effective means to do so only in *The Lover*, forty years later.

The lover who did exist in both the “Cahier rose marbré” and in all of Vallier’s evidence was close to Monsieur Jo of *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* ‘*The Sea Wall*’ both physically and temperamentally, except that he was not white.⁸ But “Léo” was from a good Vietnamese family and actually considered appropriate for Marguerite in the eyes of Saigon society, although marriage might have presented a different problem. Marguerite did see him fairly often and attempted to be “faithful” to him as he wanted, but he had no apartment in the Chinese district, and whether or not their affair was consummated is at least open to some doubt, in view of the account of their kiss, which I will describe below. Theirs was not a love affair in any case, but a different model for love did exist in the “Notebook,” in the person of a Vietnamese fellow student, who finally ruled out their budding passion because his dawning political conscience had turned him against the French. Of him, Duras says “Je crois que nous avons été très près de nous aimer” (78) ‘I believe we came very close to being in love’ (35). And as many critics have pointed out, the younger of Duras’s brothers, Paul, was also an object of desire.

In fact, the invention of the Chinese lover and the secret erotic relationship with him allowed Duras to open up a space between

herself and her mother and brothers, even as the story continues to unfold within the autobiographical space of the family unit. In this newly created space in *The Lover*, she gains distance from and perspective on the others, which allows her to experience and write about their contradictions and oxymoronic quality. From within this triangular structure, she can show us explicitly the madness of her mother in those moments when she appears to lose her identity (105). Not coincidentally, this passage is followed by a description of the beggar woman, seen in *L'Amant* as a madwoman who chases the terrified girl at night. This madness had already been suggested in Duras's work by certain other women who appear to have had their identity "ravished," including Lol V. Stein, the silent Anne-Marie Stretter, and the versions of the beggar woman from Savannakhet. Recalling these characters in *The Lover*, along with Marie-Claude Carpenter,⁹ seems to be a reference to an absence not only of the mother's consciousness but of Duras's own separate consciousness and identity, which after long years of portraying silent women in this way was established through her writings of the 1980s, and finally in *L'Amant*. In the *Cahier* we also see a constant weaving of mother and family with the lover, if Léo can be characterized that way, in many circular sequences that begin either with Léo or with the family and end where they began, so that the lover and the family are thoroughly intertwined.

The reader of the "Le Cahier rose marbré" is struck by the absence of the younger brother from the text, though in the slightly later *L'Enfance illimitée* there is a short, untitled piece which functions as a hymn to his beauty. We know that Duras's love for him often structured the form of desire in her works, a desire either blocked by a social obstacle or forbidden, as in *Agatha*, *L'Amant de la Chine du nord*, or *La Vie tranquille* 'A Quiet Life.' In the latter, written just a year after the *Cahier* and two years after the death in Vietnam of her brother, strong physical parallels exist between the young woman François's brother Nicolas and Duras's lover Tiène, just as they do in 1984 between her brother Paolo and the Chinese lover in *L'Amant*, who shares the brother's physical delicacy and vulnerability. The later invention of the relationship with the Chinese lover, while opening a vital space for the young girl's existence within the context of mother and family, simultaneously opened the possibility

of talking about her “little” brother, albeit indirectly, as an object of love and desire. Readers are familiar with the triangles formed in the girl’s imagination between the lover, the brother whom he closely resembles, and herself: the lover imagines her as “His child, his blood sister” (100)¹⁰ and she says that in his apartment, their place for love-making, “The shadow of a young hunter must have passed through the room too, but that one, yes, I knew about, sometimes he was present in the pleasure and I’d tell the lover from Cholon, talk to him of the other’s body and member, of his indescribable sweetness, of his courage ...” (100).

Finally, Duras’s self-disclosure occurs in her dialogue not only with the lover, but most of all with the reader who observes the process. With the lover, the emergence of the self is illustrated, as Mireille Calle-Gruber noted in *Pourquoi n’a-t-on plus peur de Marguerite Duras*: “L’amant est faire-valoir, producteur pour le partenaire de valeurs et de significations nouvelles ... C’est un rapport entre trois termes qu’instaure la nouvelle fonction narrative: Je/Il/Elle où la mise en relation s’inscrit aussi, et où un plus un ... font trois” (116). (The lover) is a *means, a passage* ... His new narrative function lies in the relation among the three terms Je/Il/Elle, where the *relationship itself is inscribed*, and where one plus one ... equals three’ (my emphasis). The triangular structure that facilitated the girls’ individuation with respect to her mother is figured here. We as readers are spectators of the coming into being of the girl, in that we witness the creation of Duras’s deeply felt interpretation of her life, as distinct from an account of what had actually happened. To make that even clearer, the narrator reminds us that the identity of the girl, that is to say Duras’s own, is never really finished, but constantly evolving, always going beyond what we can see and think we see (*The Lover* 121). In this *mise-en-scène* of her self-revelation Duras uses the body of the girl, but we know from her work that this can be read as writing herself into being.

In the *incipit* of the “Cahier rose marbré,” we can already see the material that will later be reworked into the imaginary truth of *L’Amant*: “Ce fut sur le bac qui se trouve entre Sadec et Saï que je rencontrai Léo pour la première fois” (31) ‘It was on the ferry that plies between Sadec and Saïgon that I first met Léo’ (7). The “real” makes an immediate intrusion into the text we think we recognize:

“quelqu’un, je ne sais plus qui, m’avait prise en charge dans son auto en même temps que Léo. Léo était indigène mais il s’habillait à la française, il parlait parfaitement le français” (31) ‘someone, I no longer remember who, had given me a lift in his car along with Léo. Léo was a native but he dressed like a Frenchman, he spoke perfect French ...’ (7). Marguerite finds the outfit she wore on the ferry ridiculous, but,

Ma mère m’affirma péremptoirement que (la robe) était admirable et je la crus ... J’oublie de dire que lorsque je rencontrai Léo, je portais entre autres le feutre d’homme bois de rose que maman affectionnait particulièrement et dont elle me coiffait elle-même d’une façon inattendue ... et bien que Léo finit par me dire carrément qu’il l’indisposait, je le portais quand même, en cachette de Léo et sous les yeux et à la barbe de tout le lycée. (53)

My mother assured me peremptorily that the dress was wonderful and I believed her ... I forgot to mention that when I met Léo, I was wearing the brownish-pink fedora that Mama particularly liked and that she placed on my head herself in a rather unusual way...and even though Léo finally told me flat out that it upset him, I wore it anyway, behind Léo’s back and before the eyes and under the nose of the entire *lycée*. (20-21)

And at the end of the “Cahier,” she is dressed still more bizarrely, and here she does suffer from it: “People noticed me, looked back at me, smiled, surprised, sorry for me. ...I was fourteen, with breasts, an apple-green hat, a blue-flowered dress with a hem below my knees, patent-leather shoes, a small handbag, and I was walking with downcast eyes ... in a state of horrible embarrassment ... I felt disguised; ... I was a walking ambiguity” (94-95). Although in *L’Amant* the various articles of clothing she wears at the beginning also belonged to other people and thus added to her estrangement from herself, she assumes this problem as being what she wants, and eroticizes it, which ultimately makes her more seductive (18).

In the “Cahier,” Marguerite does have a moment of desire for Léo while they are riding in his car. Again in this scene, it is possible, albeit horrifying, to see how this girlhood rendering of the first act

of love was later transformed into the more satisfying version of her later writing, as it was in the descriptions of her clothing. She allows Léo to kiss her, but she is immediately repulsed, disgusted, in a way that “truly cannot be described” (86). When she has finished spitting and wiping her mouth, she experiences a moment of terrible lucidity, a sort of opposite of what will happen in *L'Amant* after she makes love for the first time:

Je découvrais mon existence sous un jour horrible, blanc et nu. Pour une fois, je ne m'illusionnais pas, et je *savais* ce que j'allais trouver à Sadec ... C'était comme si s'était déclenchée en moi une machine à fabriquer de la lucidité... J'étais embarquée dans la vie avec cet être informe qu'était Léo et je ne pouvais en sortir ... je ne reconnaissais plus (ma bouche), je la subissais violée, polluée, comme je subissais ce que je croyais être la vie: ma vie. (87)

I was discovering my existence in a horrifying light, naked and bleak. For once, I was not deluding myself, and I *knew* what I would find in Sadec. ... It was as if a machine to manufacture lucidity had suddenly started up inside me ... I was setting out in life with the misshapen creature that was Léo and there was no escape for me ... I no longer recognized [my mouth], I was suffering its violation, its pollution, just as I was suffering what I thought was life: my life. (40)

The ending of the “Cahier,” which comes almost immediately after the description of the kiss, is also suggestive of the possibility of transformation. As she is writing, Duras suddenly remembers that after that kiss, she went alone to the movies and she wonders why it suddenly seems “urgent” to write about it (90). Before describing the movie experience, however, there is a digression into the way her family members speak to each other. She compares her appreciation of her brother’s grotesquely vulgar speech to the illumination offered by Rimbaud or Dostoevsky, and she attributes to it her preference for “works of inspiration” (92). Are we witnessing an early understanding of this transformative power of writing? She goes to the movies in the flowered outfit described earlier, cringing in shame, but there she sees a man on the screen kiss a woman pas-

sionately and declare his love, as Suzanne will in the movie in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*, and she finds the film very beautiful and consoling. The reader is struck both by the urgency of transforming the remembrance of the kiss from Léo, and by the way the pleasure she experiences soothes her feelings of ridiculousness in her mother's choice of clothing.

Finally, the only value of the autobiographical accounts is derived from their subjectivity, and because this evolves over time and stories can contradict each other, there is no single, definitive character who corresponds to the "je" of these writings. Yet there emerges from this variety of fleeting autobiographical subjects a strong writing subject. Our comparison of passages from the "Le Cahier rose marbré" and *L'Amant* shows the development of this scriptural subject in the apartment with the lover, as the "je" is occasionally replaced by "elle" and our attention is drawn to this ideal character. There are also passages in the works that followed *L'Amant* that explicitly mention the writing self. A good example would be the presentation of the lover in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*:

De la limousine noire est sorti un autre homme que celui du livre, un autre Chinois de la Mandchourie. Il est un peu différent de celui du livre: il est un peu plus robuste que lui, il a moins peur que lui, plus d'audace ... Il est plus "pour le cinéma" que celui du livre. (36)

The man who gets out of the black limousine is other than the one in the book, but still Manchurian. He is a little different from the one in the book: he's a little more solid than the other, less frightened than the other, bolder ... He is more "cinematic" than the one in the book. (26)

This mention of the character's cinematic qualities can be explained by the fact that *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* was in part a film scenario, while the use of the phrase "another Manchurian" subtly but clearly suggests that there was no single model in reality (Cousseau 140-41).

Of course the "Cahier rose marbré" confirms in a different way this absence of a single model. Now, as it becomes part of the Duras-

sian intertext of autobiographical writings, its special significance will ultimately lie not in its verifiability as the reality of Duras's childhood, because it is already and necessarily a very subjective account, but rather in its status as a point of departure for the reading of the other texts. It allows us to see the childhood pain and lack and the resulting exigencies that inspired Duras's imagination. In particular, it illuminates the problem of becoming, the importance of dialogue and closeness to Duras, and it thereby explains the creation of identity and meaning in terms of disclosure and dialogue with another. In the texts that followed, Yann Andréa and the Chinese lover—one real, the other not—made possible the construction of Duras's multiple selves. And because the esthetic relationship is a variant of love, the reader like the lover, subscribes to the dynamic of desire, and reads to find Duras. The succession of invented selves ignites in the reader a desire that is never entirely satisfied, but the sense that a little something has been left out only acts to prolong the voluptuous experience. Towards the end of her life Duras was able to write even of this incompleteness of her self-revelation, in her truest voice, that of the scriptural self that gathered together all the others.

Notes

1 Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine

2 The term "autofiction" is used here because it subsumes the fictionalized autobiography that Duras is known to have produced over most of her life, and it also refers to the many ongoing discussions of this sub-genre which is perhaps a new genre among the writings of the self.

3 Of course *L'Amant* was hardly the first version of Duras's story; we should also keep in mind the role of *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* 'The Sea Wall,' *Le Boa* 'The Boa,' *L'Eden Cinéma* 'The Eden Cinema,' and *Des Journées entières dans les arbres* 'Days in the Trees' (as well as (*L'Amant de la Chine du nord* 'The North China Lover').

4 All translations are mine except when otherwise noted.

5 This contrasts sharply with Vircondelet's idea of Duras, for whom an active quest for the truth about herself drove her writing from beginning to end.

6 Adler takes from the supposed nephew a photo of the lover published long ago in *Paris-Match* as proof of the existence of the Chinese lover: "L'histoire existe parce que la photo de l'amant est dans *Paris-Match*. La photographie absolue, c'était le titre du travail, pendant longtemps, du texte qui deviendra *L'Amant*..."

'The story exists because the photo of the lover is in the magazine *Paris-Match*. The absolute photograph, that was the title of the work, for a long time, of the text which was to become *L'Amant*' (79). But can she here assert that Duras used the picture, or is she the one who is using it? Vallier, on the other hand, has a different explanation for Duras's return to the *Wartime Writings* in 1984. Rather than the magazine photo, he believes it was Duras's search for a text to give to Paul Otchakowsky-Laurence for publication, which became *La Douleur* 'The War.' Having thus returned to the *Notebooks*, Duras would then have used the Cahier rose marbré later that year as a basis for *L'Amant* when her son, a professional photographer, asked her to contribute to a work on photography.

7 Vircondelet builds a theory of Marguerite's childhood as one of transgression, in the forbidden, dangerous jungle and in her behavior with Vietnamese children, and steeped in a dynamic of interracial relations that defied the mother, her madness, and her all-white identity. While an element of rebellion was certainly involved in Duras's need for a space outside the maternal sphere, it was also infinitely complicated by an emotional fusion with the mother.

8 It is clear that Duras did not wish to offend her mother in 1957 by writing about a boyfriend who was not white, but it remains unclear why the lover of *L'Amant* became Chinese in 1984, when Léo was Vietnamese. Vallier suggests that Duras may have been inspired by the father's immense wealth and expensive, elite car, one of which belonged in 1930 to Hui Bon Hoa, a Chinese real estate developer responsible for the sort of project the lover describes (383).

9 Beginning with *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* 'The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein,' (1964), Duras created a number of women protagonists who seem to have had their identity, in part or entirely, taken from them. They tend to be silent and mysterious, but also beautiful and in the case of Anne-Marie Stretter who appeared in 1975 in *India Song*, they exercise a certain fascination over others by virtue of their beauty and vulnerability. Marie-Claude Carpenter is presented in *L'Amant* as another such character. A frightening variant of this character is the speechless beggar woman from Savannakhet, who appears in several works of the Lol V. Stein cycle, and also in *L'Amant* where she chases the young Duras and is clearly mad.

10 Here, Vircondelet offers the useful notion of a life-long Durassian paradigm of desire built on this kind of triangulation (102-05). He presents examples from Duras's writing, including *La Vie tranquille* 'A Quiet Life,' but also from her life, reminding us of the singular relationship created by her and maintained for years between herself, Robert Antelme, and Dionys Mascolo.

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