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“Real” Places in Marguerite Duras’s Wartime Paris

Abstract

In the four autobiographical narratives in Marguerite Duras’s *La Douleur* (1985) *The War* (1994), over one hundred proper place names appear. While these place names all refer to real places, the relationship between these signifiers and their actual geographical referents is mediated, first by their signifieds—the reader’s mental constructs of the places mentioned—and further by their appearance in a text that necessarily creates its own, non-material world. Yet this essay argues that in this uncharacteristically realist text Duras works hard to create the illusion that the Paris there is in fact Occupied Paris, the real city in which she lived out the experiences recounted in her text. She does this, in large part, by indicating the location of each scene with meticulous precision, thus grounding the stories, quite literally, in a geographically and historically situated reality. While many of these sites are among the best-known, and literal, *lieux de mémoire* ‘sites of memory’ of the Paris of the Second World War, the mention of more obscure places might appear gratuitous. Yet it is precisely in their gratuity, that such details become essential elements of the forceful *effet de réel* ‘reality effect’ created in the text.

Keywords

autobiographical narratives, Marguerite Duras, *La Douleur*, *The War*, signifier, geographical referent, non-material, Occupied Paris, alternate reality, geographically situated reality, historically situated reality, *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, Second World War, Paris, World War II, *effet de réel*, reality effect

"Real" Places in Marguerite Duras's Wartime Paris

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In the four autobiographical narratives, which fill just ninety pages of text in Marguerite Duras's 1985 *La Douleur, The War* (1986), over one hundred proper place names appear. The types of places mentioned include countries, cities, streets, squares, apartment and office buildings, airports, train stations, metro stops, bridges, restaurants, cafés, gardens, parks, and prisons. For Duras, place and memory are inextricably linked; places do not just evoke memories, they contain them:

la mémoire pour moi est une chose répandue dans tous les lieux ... je perçois les lieux de cette façon-là. ... C'est très rare que je me promène dans mon jardin, à la campagne, ou ici [à Trouville], sur la plage, sans que je revive certaines choses très, enfin, incommensurablement lointaines. Ça m'arrive par bouffée comme ça. Et je me dis que ce sont les lieux qui la recèlent, cette mémoire.... Que si on n'offrait pas de résistance culturelle ou sociale, voyez, on y serait perméable. (*Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras* 96)

for me, memory permeates all places ... I see places in this way.... It's very rare that I take a walk in my garden, in the country, or here [in Trouville], on the beach, without reliving certain things that are, well, immeasurably far away. This feeling comes over me in waves, like that. And I tell myself that it's the places that contain it, that memory.... And that if we were to put up no cultural or social resistance, you see, we would be open to it. (*The Places of Marguerite Duras*, my trans.)¹

For Duras, then, memories are as if held (*recelés* 'concealed') in the air of a place ("ça m'arrive par bouffée," literally, 'it comes over

me like a breath of air’) that penetrate those open enough to receive them. Her description of the things she remembers as *lointaines* ‘far away’ illustrates the way in which human beings tend to use spatial terms to describe temporal phenomena; we often mentally tether the places we used to frequent to the periods in our lives in which we frequented them. Duras’s use of this commonplace expression (*un souvenir lointain*, ‘a far-off memory’) reinforces her message that places are bounded not only by the three dimensions of space but by that of time as well. For her, the past or history of a place is not gone forever but contained within it, only superficially masked behind the veneer of the present, like paving stones beneath asphalt. Her choice of the pen name Duras, a region in southwest France in which her father’s family owned land, clearly attests to her reverence for places and her belief in their capacity to resuscitate for us the past.

Considering that memory serves as the foundation upon which Duras built her œuvre—to use an appropriately spatial metaphor—it is no wonder, as Caroline Mohsen points out, that place names crowd the titles of her eighty-plus works. Eighteen titles—such as *Le Marin de Gibraltar* (1952), *The Sailor from Gibraltar* (1966), *Hiroshima mon amour* (1958, 1994), *Les Viaducs de la Seine-et-Oise* (1959) ‘The Viaducts of the Seine-et-Oise,’ *India Song* (1975), and *Aurélia Steiner, dit Aurélia Melbourne* (1975) ‘Aurelia Steiner (Melbourne)’—include proper place names, and another eight—among them “Les Chantiers” (1954) ‘The Building Site,’ *Le Square* (1955) *The Square* (1959), *Les Eaux et les forêts* (1965), *The Rivers and the Forests* (1964), and *Outside* (1981)—include generic place names. The majority of the proper place names in her titles and in the works themselves refer to locations in the real world: Calcutta, Saigon, the Normandy coast, the Café de Flore in Paris. Yet the relationship between these signifiers and their geographical referents is of course mediated, first by the signified—that is, the reader’s mental constructs of the places cited—and further by their appearance in a text that necessarily creates its own world, one which is never that in which we actually live, however closely it may resemble it. W.H.F. Nicolsen makes such a point about place names in autobiographical writing in general:

Since in the creation of the past through narration and naming

we fictionalize ourselves, as well as others, the real names we use ... also become fictions; [place names] are emancipated from the restrictions of the cartographic coordinates by their transfer into the narrated past of refracted memory. They only look and sound like the names of places that people know or that are knowable, but they now belong to a landscape that we see best when we close our eyes. The distance from convention through intervention to invention is much shorter than one thinks, for the ability to remember and the ability to imagine are twin skills of the human mind. (247)

Thus the Paris so minutely described in Duras's autobiographical *La Douleur* is necessarily an imagined Paris.

Yet, I argue in this essay, Duras does her very best in *La Douleur* to convince her readers that the Paris there is in fact Occupied Paris, the city of concrete, steel, and stone in which she lived at the time. She does this, in large part, by carefully situating each scene in real and recognizable locations throughout the city; over sixty of the one hundred-plus places named in the volume are located in or near Paris. The effect of the inclusion in the text of all of these often precisely indicated locations is to ground the stories, quite literally, in a geographically and historically situated reality. While many of these sites are steeped in historical significance and are among the most recognizable, and literal, *lieux de mémoire* 'realms of memory' of the Paris of the Second World War, the mention of other, more obscure or banal place names (as well as certain other details of setting, some of which I will discuss below), would at times appear gratuitous. But it is precisely in their gratuity, that such details become essential elements of the forceful *effet de réel* 'reality effect,' as theorized by Roland Barthes, created in the text.² Indeed, *La Douleur* is arguably the most realistic text in Duras's oeuvre, which is replete with dream-like atmospheres, elliptic dialogue, and enigmatic characters.

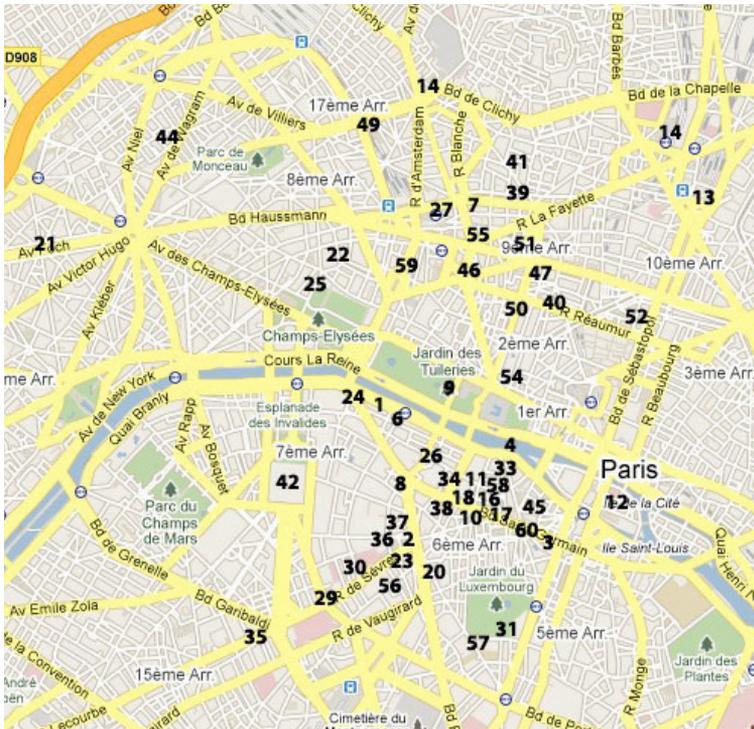
The numerous dates, detailed descriptions of objects and people, and place names in the four narratives of *La Douleur* are meant to function not just as marks of realism but, inscribed as they are in these openly autobiographical accounts, as proof of the accuracy of the author's memory and therefore, the reader is invited to assume, of the historical reality of her account, on which she frequently insists ("Il s'agit d'une histoire vraie jusque dans le détail" [*Douleur* 90])

‘This is a true story, right down to the details,’ she notoriously claims in the preface to the second story, for example [*War* 71]). Duras’s insistence on the truth-value of these four narratives has invited critics and contemporaries to question their author’s sincerity, the acuity of her memory, or both.³ Some readers have been skeptical of her contention in the preface to the volume that she wrote several of the stories at the war’s end, when her memory of events was presumably vivid, but that the drafts had subsequently lain hidden away in an armoire until she discovered them years later. But the transcription and publication in 2006 of four notebooks Duras left to the *Institut Mémoires de l’Edition Contemporaine* (Imec) upon her death in 1996 confirm in great part this assertion. These notebooks, in which she wrote between 1943 and 1949 and which she herself designated as the *Cahiers de la guerre*, *Wartime Notebooks*, contain long-hand drafts of three of the four autobiographical stories in *La Douleur*. Still, the factuality of the details of the many, often extraordinary events Duras describes in these narratives may still be, and is, contested. One thing of which we can be certain, at least, is that the one-hundred-plus sites she names in *La Douleur* have, or in some cases had, real referents in the world.

The narratives in *La Douleur* have, in a sense, the reverse function of the hundreds of plaques and memorials placed throughout Paris that mark the sites of wartime events that have been deemed worthy of remembrance. Whereas these markers bring text to geographical sites—the text inscribed on each of them that recounts the site’s significance—with *La Douleur*, Duras brings geographical sites into text, drawing with her words a rather detailed map of wartime Paris. Or more accurately, she draws a map of her wartime Paris, the one that she, as the declared referent of the female protagonists in the narratives, presumably frequented during this period. If we plot the Parisian sites mentioned in the text on a map of the city, as I have done on the accompanying map, we can see the outline of this Paris, which is, unsurprisingly, a circumscribed, partial Paris. The vast majority of the map points are clustered in the 6th and 9th arrondissements; Duras lived in the former from 1943 until her death in 1996, and the latter, the administrative heart of occupied Paris, plays an important role in the stories in *La Douleur*. So although place names are abundant in the text, their concentration in a few

areas of the city suggests a certain limitation of movement or confinement, a theme in the text to which I will return below.

In situating the events in *La Douleur* so precisely in real and recognizable spaces, Duras grafts her personal *histoires* 'stories' onto the *Histoire* 'History' of the Occupation and Liberation as it has been written and rewritten since the war. The personal stories corroborate official histories of the war in that they are woven around real and well-known events (such as D-Day and the Liberation of Paris) and people (such as Charles de Gaulle and François Mitterrand). Yet they also at times contest official history, Gaullist history in particular, which the general began composing well before the smoke of the last battles for liberation had cleared. They contest this history directly through the narrator's invectives against the political right and De Gaulle himself, and indirectly, and more forcefully, through the amply commented ambivalence of their representations of various wartime acts, acts which Gaullist history divides neatly into the two supposedly irreconcilable categories of collaboration and resistance.⁴



Parisian sites mentioned in Marguerite Duras's *La Douleur*. Page numbers refer to the original French edition.

1. Gare d'Orsay (12 et al.)
2. Hôtel Lutétia (13 et al.)
3. Ecole de Médecine (15)
4. Pont des Arts (17)
5. Aéroport de Bourget (24 et al.) (not shown on map)
6. Pont de Solférimo (26)
7. Carrefour de Châteaudun (29)
8. Rue du Bac (32)
9. Jardins des Tuileries (36)
10. Rue Bonaparte (36)
11. Restaurant le Petit Saint-Benoît (37)
12. Cathédrale de Notre Dame (45)
13. Gare de l'Est (49 et al.)
14. Gare du Nord (49)
15. Gaumont Palace, Place de Clichy (theater) (51)
16. Place Saint-Germain-des-Prés (62)
17. Café des Deux Magots (6, place Saint-Germain-des-Prés) (62)
18. Café de Flore (172, boulevard Saint-Germain) (81 et al.)
19. Prison de Fresnes (91 et al.) (not shown on map)
20. Rue de Rennes (91)
21. Avenue Foch (92)
22. 11, rue des Saussaies (Gestapo headquarters) (92 et al.)
23. 5, rue Dupin (93 et al.) (apartment in which Robert L. is arrested)
24. Chambre des Députés (95)
25. Jardin de l'avenue Marigny (97 et al.)
26. Éditions Gallimard (5, rue Sébastien-Bottin) (97)
27. Gare Saint-Lazare (102 et al.)
28. Place de la République (102)
29. Métro Duroc (102 et al.)
30. Rue de Sèvres (103 et al.)
31. Jardins du Luxembourg (103)
32. Verrières-le-Buisson (104) (not shown on map)

33. Rue Jacob (105)
34. Rue des Saints-Pères (105)
35. Rue Lecourbe (105)
36. Square Boucicaut (107)
37. Métro Sèvres-Babylone (108)
38. Rue du Dragon (108)
39. Rue Saint-Georges (109)
40. Bourse (2, rue de la Bourse) (117)
41. Carrefour de la rue Saint-Georges et de la rue Notre-Dame-de-Florette (122)
42. Invalides (129)
43. Drancy (suburban housing estate used to hold Jews before deportation) (134) (not shown on map)
44. Rue des Renaudes (134)
45. Boulevard Saint-Germain (134 et al.)
46. Place de l'Opéra (the Kommandantur) (141)
47. 100, rue de Richelieu (141)
48. Noisy-le-Sec (143) (not shown on map)
49. Café les Capitales (rue de Rome) (143)
50. Bibliothèque Nationale de France (58, rue de Richelieu) (145)
51. Boulevard des Italiens (145)
52. Rue Réaumur (151)
53. Levallois (151) (not shown on map)
54. Place du Palais Royal (151)
55. Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin (173)
56. Rue du Cherche-Midi (186)

Places where Duras lived, studied, or worked before and during the war:

57. Ecole de Droit (92, rue d'Assas)
58. 5, rue Saint-Benoît (Duras and Antelme moved into this apartment, which Duras owned until her death in 1996, in October 1942. While the address of the protagonist's apartment is not given in *La Douleur*, she can see Le Petit Saint-Benoît restaurant from her window)
59. Ministère des Colonies (rue Tronchet) (Duras worked here from June 1937 until August 1940)
60. Service du Contrôle du Papier de l'Édition (35, rue Grégoire de Tours) (Duras worked here from July 1942 until early 1944)

Over half of the locations named in *La Douleur* appear in the second narrative, "Monsieur X. dit ici Pierre Rabier" 'Monsieur X, Here Called Pierre Rabier,' which covers the period from the arrest of the narrator's husband (Robert L.) in early June 1944 to the liberation of Paris in late August 1944. This account of the three-month period following the arrest of Duras's then-husband, Robert Antelme, for resistance activities was not drafted in the *Cahiers de la guerre* like the other autobiographical narratives. Rather, certain scenes in it were written, Duras said in a 1985 interview, "dix ans

après la guerre" ("Avril 45" 37) 'ten years after the war,' and the rest was presumably added shortly before the text's publication. Jean Vallier, Duras's most recent and meticulous biographer, confirms Duras's assertion, noting that he found drafts of some of the passages in "Monsieur X." among other papers, dating from 1958, that Duras had left to the Imec (647). Since "Monsieur X.," and *La Douleur* as a whole, covers an extraordinary and traumatic period in the author's life, it seems logical that the events recounted in it would be well ensconced in her memory. At the same time, it is somewhat paradoxical that the story whose various settings are described with the most geographical and descriptive precision was written significantly later than the others, when Duras's memory of the events was presumably less fresh. Perhaps it is precisely for this reason that the author furnishes such detail, as if to compensate for a certain mnemonic fuzziness and to enhance, by means of the *effet de réel*, the vividness as well as credibility of the events described. And perhaps it is for similar reasons that Duras later added to the original draft of the first narrative in the volume ("La Douleur," an account of her anguished wait for the return of Antelme from the Nazi camps in April and May 1945) the numerous dates that punctuate the narrative, thereby setting this story as precisely in time as she sets "Monsieur X." in space.⁵

There is no lack of temporal markers in "Monsieur X." either, however. The narrative's opening line—"C'est le 6 juin 1944 au matin dans la grande salle d'attente de la prison de Fresnes" (*Douleur* 91) 'It's the morning of June 6, 1944, in the main waiting room of the prison at Fresnes' (73)—immediately invokes a place and a time of considerable historical significance: the prison of no return for captured French resisters on the first day of the Liberation of France. Unable to deliver a package of food to her husband there, the narrator goes to Gestapo headquarters on the rue des Saussaies in the 9th arrondissement, to office number 415 E4, to be exact, to obtain permission (unsuccessfully) to leave the package for him there (92; 74). While in the building, she meets a French Gestapo agent, Pierre Rabier, whom she has the misfortune of encountering again three weeks later on the streets of Paris while acting as a liaison agent for her resistance group. The same kind of temporal and onomastic detail that opens the narrative introduces this scene as well, again with

the effect of making it ring with veracity.

Le premier lundi de juillet à onze heures trente du matin, je dois mettre en contact Duponceau (à ce moment-là délégué du M.N.P.G.D. en Suisse) et Godard (chef de cabinet du ministre des Prisonniers, Henry Fresnay).⁶ Nous devons nous rencontrer à l'angle du boulevard Saint-Germain et de la Chambre des Députés du côté opposé à la Chambre. (95)

At eleven-thirty in the morning on the first Monday in July I'm to establish contact between Duponceau (at that time the MNPGD's delegate in Switzerland) and Godard (chief secretary to Henry Fresnay, minister for prisoners). We're to meet at the angle of the boulevard Saint-Germain and the Chamber of Deputies on the side opposite the Chamber. (76)

No fewer than ten proper nouns are contained in these two brief sentences. The precision with which the time (“onze heures trente du matin”) and the location (“à l'angle du boulevard Saint-Germain et de la Chambre des Députés du côté opposé à la Chambre”) are given mimics the military-like precision with which disciplined resistance groups planned the logistics of their meetings and actions. The use of the present tense, moreover, lends to this and to many other scenes in the volume a suspenseful urgency. Rabier's presence there, which the narrator learns only later was pure coincidence rather than a trap, terrifies her: “Je serre les mâchoires pour ne pas claquer des dents” (96) ‘I clench my jaw to prevent my teeth from chattering’ (77-78). Her insistence in the narrative on the intense fear that gripped her during this and later meetings with Rabier serves the function of justifying to readers the extraordinary exactness, and presumably the accuracy, with which she appears to remember them.

Rabier's motives to see the narrator are multiple, but the most significant one appears to be that she is a writer and an intellectual (*Douleur* 94), for Rabier is “fasciné par les intellectuels français, les artistes, les auteurs de livres. Il était entré dans la Gestapo,” she notes in a subtly ironic line of free indirect discourse, “faute d'avoir pu acquérir une librairie de livres d'art (*sic*)” (98) ‘fascinated by French intellectuals, artists, authors. He'd gone into the Gestapo because he

hadn't been able to buy an art bookshop (*sic*)' (79).⁷ He therefore arranges meetings with her most often in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés neighborhood of Paris, to which the French intelligentsia, fleeing the tourists and rising rents of a Montparnasse that the "lost generation" had made too fashionable, had begun to flock during the 1930s (Marchand 291). He chooses a different meeting place in the neighborhood each time—rue Jacob, rue des Saints-Pères, rue Lecourbe (105), Duroc (102), Sèvres-Babylone (108)—presumably to reduce the risk of falling into a trap laid by the resistance, whose epicenter of activity in 1944 was the neighboring Latin quarter. For one meeting Rabier chooses the increasingly trendy café de Flore (109), perhaps in the hopes of spotting Sartre and Beauvoir, then quickly on their way to becoming international celebrities.

In describing a particularly terrifying rendez-vous with Rabier, the narrator of "Monsieur X." opens the scene, once again, with meticulous spatial and temporal detail: "Cette fois-ci c'est rue de Sèvres, nous venons de Duroc, nous passons justement devant la rue Dupin où mon mari et ma belle-sœur ont été arrêtés. C'est cinq heures de l'après-midi. C'est déjà le mois de juillet" (105-06) 'This time it's in the rue de Sèvres. We come from the direction of the Duroc metro, go past the rue Dupin, where my husband and sister-in-law were arrested. It's five o'clock in the afternoon. It's July already' (86). 5, rue Dupin was indeed the apartment, owned by their parents, in which Robert Antelme and his sister Marie-Louise were arrested. As the narrator and Rabier walk along, the *gestapiste* insinuates that he is going to arrest her that day, just as he recently had another man he had befriended in the same way. But just as she becomes nearly paralyzed with fear, the effect he had sought, he laughs at his own cruel joke and tells her to follow him, not to Gestapo headquarters, but to a restaurant where, he gallantly adds, "J'aurai l'extrême plaisir de vous inviter" (107) 'It will give me great pleasure to ask you to be my guest' (87).

It is some time, however, before the narrator's terror dissipates, and so the names of the landmarks she passes while in it—the square Boucicaut, the Sèvres-Babylone metro station, the rue des Saints-Pères, the rue du Dragon—become etched in her mind (107-08). "Dans la peur," she reflects, "le sang se retire de la tête, le mécanisme de la vision se trouble. Je vois les grands immeubles du carrefour

de Sèvres tanguer dans le ciel et les trottoirs se creuser, noircir. Je n'entends plus clairement. ... Le bruit de la rue devient feutré, il ressemble à la rumeur uniforme de la mer" (106-07) 'In my fear the blood ebbs from my head, the mechanism of vision wavers. I see the tall buildings at the Sèvres crossing swaying in the sky and the sidewalks going hollow and black. I can no longer hear clearly. ... The street noises are muffled, like the regular murmur of the sea' (87). The sea is a familiar place-trope in Duras's œuvre, comforting at times, but more often pitiless, as when it inundates the mother's land concession or carries away the lifeless body of the tormented Anne-Marie Stretter.⁸ The metaphorical sea in this scene is of the latter type, as the streets cave in and the narrator is engulfed in a tidal wave of terror. The description of both the surroundings and the physical impact of fear on the narrator's body (her sight and hearing become impaired) is particularly vivid here.

The striking realism of this scene is, however, ever so slightly disturbed for the (very) attentive reader by one incongruent detail. This is that Rabier asks the narrator to follow him to a restaurant to dine even though it is only five o'clock in the afternoon, as she is careful to indicate at the beginning of the scene. The eating establishments the French properly call *restaurants* would not have been open at that hour, for all-day service, a relatively recent innovation prompted by American tourism, was inexistent at the time. Assuming that such a scene did indeed take place, Duras seems to have misremembered either the time of day or the kind of place to which the *gestapiste* invited her (perhaps it was a café or bar). Although this is rather a minor point, it illustrates, if we need reminding, that realism in an autobiographical or historical account does not guarantee factuality.

The proximity of most of the narrator's numerous meetings with Rabier both to one another and to her apartment on the rue Saint-Benoît (as the accompanying map illustrates) gives the reader the sense that during this three-month period she turns in circles in a relatively small geographical area, one in which she has been as if caged, not only by Rabier but by the wartime penury of means of transportation. To join him at their various meeting places she most often walks or bikes, or if necessary takes one of the overcrowded metro lines still open during the Occupation.⁹ Her contact

with him, although encouraged, she says, by her resistance leader François Morland (Mitterrand), has made her untouchable to the other members of the network, for their protection. She therefore finds herself "dans un isolement presque total" (99) 'in almost total isolation' (76), her Paris having been reduced to a few square miles and her social circle to a few familiar faces. The dwindling of the narrator's social circle reflects moreover that of the population of wartime Paris in general: the city had already been emptied of its army-eligible men and thousands of its children during the *drôle de guerre* 'phoney war,' and while most of the four-fifths of the remaining population that had fled the approaching German army in June 1940 had returned shortly thereafter, by 1944 the vast majority of the city's roughly 200,000 Jews had either escaped south or been deported to the extermination camps (Diamond 2, 124). Rabier, the narrator notes, seems to delight in the sight of this shrunken and confined Paris:

Il regarde bien toutes les choses autour de lui, les rues vides, la foule sur les trottoirs. ... Il regarde Paris avec amour, il le connaît très bien. Dans des rues pareilles à celles-ci il a arrêté des gens. A chaque rue, ses souvenirs, ses hurlements, ses cris, ses sanglots. Ces souvenirs ne font pas souffrir Rabier. Ils sont les jardiniers de ce jardin-là, Paris, de ces rues qu'ils adorent, maintenant exemptes de juifs. (117)

He looks closely at everything around him, the empty streets, the crowd on the sidewalks. ... He looks at Paris with love; he knows it very well. In streets like these he has arrested people. Every street has its memories, its shrieks, its shouts, its sobs. These memories don't cause Rabier any pain. He and his like are the gardeners of that garden, Paris, of the streets they adore and that are now free of Jews. (96)

Evident here once again is the notion that places contain or possess memories ("à chaque rue, *ses souvenirs, ses hurlements...*" 'Every street *has its* memories, *its* shrieks...' emphasis added), and that these memories are revived each time one passes through them. The Paris-garden that Rabier has weeded of Jews and resisters holds for him fond memories of the success he has enjoyed at his war-

time profession. For the terrified and isolated narrator, on the other hand, the Paris through which she takes the reader on a lugubrious and unremittingly circular walking tour looks and feels increasingly like a prison cell.

Although somewhat less abundant in the remaining three autobiographical narratives in *La Douleur* than in “Monsieur X.,” places nevertheless play a prominent role in them and include both obscure sites and some of the most significant *lieux de mémoire* of occupied Paris. The third narrative, “Albert des Capitales,” contains a real place name in its title, the café les Capitales, which Duras cites in her deposition for the post-Liberation trial of the real Pierre Rabier, Charles Delval, as one of the cafés in which he had asked her to meet him. Interestingly, whereas in this deposition Duras stated that the café was on the rue de Rome and so in the 9th arrondissement, in the story she places it “près de la gare de l’Est” (143) ‘near the Gare de l’Est’ (118), in the more working-class 10th, perhaps feeling that this was a more appropriate setting for the story with the grittiest content—the torture of a suspected collaborator.¹⁰

It is in the 9th, however, that much of the action of “Albert des Capitales” and the fourth narrative, “Ter le milicien” ‘Ter of the Militia,’ takes place. These stories pick up nearly where “Monsieur X.” leaves off, at the insurrection then liberation of Paris in late August 1944. In them, Thérèse (Duras’s literary double) and her resistance group are occupying offices on the rue de Richelieu and are thus in the administrative center of Paris, which, having been taken over by the Germans in 1940, is now one of the hot spots of the insurrection.¹¹ From their building, Thérèse notes, she and her comrades can hear the rattle of machine guns coming from the direction of the Bibliothèque Nationale down the street and even closer from the corner of the rue de Richelieu and the boulevard des Italiens (145). “Albert des Capitales” begins with the same kind of spatial and temporal detail as do many of the scenes in “Monsieur X.,” with the difference that the reader must deduce the actual date: “Deux jours étaient passés depuis la première Jeep, depuis la prise de la Kommandantur de la place de l’Opéra. C’était dimanche” (141) ‘It was two days since the first jeep, since the capture of the Kommandantur in the Place de l’Opéra. It was Sunday’ (116). The Kommandantur, just a few blocks from the group’s base on the rue

de Richelieu, was taken by the Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur on August 25, 1944. The fact that August 25 was indeed a Friday either attests to the accuracy of Duras's memory or suggests that she did research before the text's publication to render the details of her narrative as factually accurate as possible (since this detail does not figure in the *Cahiers* draft of "Ter," the latter explanation seems more likely). Although "Albert" and "Ter" are more fictionalized than the first two narratives in *La Douleur*, in part because of the creation of the protagonist Thérèse and the concomitant switch from homo- to heterodiegetic narration, the author's commitment to realism is as strong in the former as it is in the latter.

The first and longest narrative in the volume, itself titled "La Douleur" (whose literal translation is 'pain' or 'suffering'), takes place last, in spring 1945, as the first of the liberated deportees begin arriving in Paris and as the narrator anxiously awaits news of her husband, whose whereabouts have been unknown to her for nearly a year (12). Seeking information on deportees, including her husband, for the newspaper her resistance group has established (*Libres*), as well as information on her husband's whereabouts, she visits many key sites of the Occupation and Liberation. She spends several days at the Gare d'Orsay in the 7th arrondissement, which functioned under De Gaulle's provisional government as the city's principal repatriation center and which becomes in *La Douleur* a battleground in the war between right and left to lay claim to the Resistance and to determine France's uncertain political future. Another *lieu de mémoire* cited in the narrative is the art deco Hôtel Lutétia at 45, boulevard Raspail in the 6th arrondissement, a luxury hotel used to house and feed German officers in high style during the Occupation, then as another repatriation center in 1945. The narrator also visits a third repatriation center (for there were a lot of returnees to sort through in the space of a few months), the Gaumont Palace in the Place Clichy, the hub of the 9th, 17th, and 18th arrondissements. This enormous hippodrome-turned-movie theater had also, like the Lutétia, been of much use to the Germans, not as housing but as a superb forum in which to propagate Nazi ideology through film. While the Lutétia is still an opulent hotel today, the Gaumont Palace was torn down in 1972 (Delamare).

Walking home after a long day recording names and searching

in vain for her husband's face among those of the men arriving at Orsay, the narrator passes by a different sort of *lieu de mémoire*, one that would symbolize for Parisians not the devastation of war but the triumph of resistance and the renewal of French intellectual life during the postwar period. This was the crowded café des Deux Magots on the boulevard Saint-Germain, the other existentialist café (along with the Flore across the street) that was already well on its way to becoming a tourist venue. Most of the latter half of the story then takes place in another intellectual *lieu de mémoire*, one that would become so only gradually with Duras's increasing success as an author. This is the apartment at 5, rue Saint-Benoît, the regular meeting-place of the so-called "groupe de la rue Saint-Benoît," a coterie of friends and fellow communists who would become some of the most influential left-wing thinkers in postwar France. But in *La Douleur*, the apartment is not yet the venue for flowing alcohol, first-rate meals (for Duras was an excellent cook), and spirited intellectual exchange it would be after the war. Instead it was a sparse and gloomy space in which the narrator spends the last year of the war living in relative isolation and in total, excruciating ignorance of her husband's fate.

The uncertainty is finally dispelled in early May 1944 when the narrator learns that Robert L. has been discovered among quarantined inmates at Dachau thanks to none other than the future president of the Republic, Mitterrand (once again, the leader of the resistance group to which Duras and Robert Antelme belonged). Robert is then saved in extremis by two friends and fellow resisters who under Mitterrand's directions acquire a car and enough gas to drive from Paris to the camp, locate Robert L., disguise him as a French military officer, and remove him, against the American health regulations, from the camp. Duras herself could hardly have conceived of so fantastic a story; yet it appears to have happened nearly if not exactly as she tells it in the "La Douleur."¹²

One interesting detail that contributes to the *effet de réel* of the narrative but which, according to Vallier, is not factually accurate is the *clafoutis aux cerises* or 'cherry flan' that the narrator says was prepared for Robert L.'s homecoming, it being, she states, "la pleine saison" (*Douleur* 70) 'high season.' The actual dessert, according to a friend of the Antelmes, France Brunel, who told Vallier that she

herself had made it, was not a *clafoutis aux cerises* but a *tarte aux fraises*, 'a strawberry tart' (Vallier 683). Since Robert arrived home on the 13th of May—at the height of strawberry, not cherry season, which generally begins only in June on the Ile de France—the latter is indeed far more likely. The dessert in the *Cahiers* draft of the narrative, written within a few years of the war, was also a *clafoutis*, although the qualifier *aux cerises* is missing there. It would seem, then, that in Duras's memory over the forty years separating the event and the publication of *La Douleur* the dessert underwent two transformative linguistic processes: first substitution, or metaphor (*tarte* becomes a similarly round and fruit-laden treat, *clafoutis*), then combination, or metonymy (*aux cerises* is added to *clafoutis*, as this is the most common kind of *clafoutis* in French baking; the three words thus tend to roll off the tongue in combination). The *clafoutis* could therefore be read as confirmation of the notion that the recall of memory is never simply a calling up again of a detail *tel quel* but rather a creative, generative process in which each evocation of a detail is also its transformation. Duras's œuvre, offering as it does multiple versions of the same memories, certainly bears out this idea.

Whatever the dessert's actual composition, an important point in the story is that Robert L. is not allowed to eat it when he arrives at the apartment, for he is emaciated beyond recognition and cannot consume solid food without risk of tearing his fragile stomach lining. This *clafoutis*, then, is not just a gratuitous detail whose sole function is to contribute to the *effet de réel* of the story; it also serves to point up the piteous suffering that the continued refusal of food even after his liberation causes Robert L. As for the narrator, the joy she had anticipated experiencing upon his return dissolves at the sight of his withered body, the *clafoutis* and other marks of celebration are whisked away, and the apartment becomes for the two of them another infernal waiting room where, for seventeen days precisely, she notes, Robert L. "flott[e] entre la vie et la mort" (70) 'hovers between life and death' (55).

At the conclusion of the "La Douleur," the unbearable paralysis of waiting (for the Allied invasion, for Liberation, for the punishment of collaborators, for Robert L.'s return, for the annihilation of Nazi Germany) is finally broken. The narrator, Robert L., and the

city in its entirety slowly become mobile again. The final setting in the narrative is not, however, another Parisian site, but a beach on the Italian coast “entre Livourne et la Spezia” ‘between Livourne and la Spezia,’ from which “on voit les flancs neigeux des carrières de marbre de Carrare” ‘you can see the snowy sides of the marble quarries of Carrara.’ “Au-dessus” ‘Above them,’ the narrator continues,

il y a des montagnes plus hautes qui étincellent de blancheur. De l’autre côté, plus près, on voit Monte Marcello, juste au-dessus de l’embouchure de La Magra. On ne voit pas le village ... mais seulement la colline, les bois de figuiers et tout au sommet les flancs sombres des pins. (82-83)

are higher mountains, sparkling white. Nearer, on the other side, you can see Mount Marcello, just over the estuary of La Magra. You can’t see the village ... only the hill, the groves of fig trees, and right at the top the dark sides of the pines. (66)

In this lyrical description of the space in which the narrator finds herself a year removed from the war—a precise description which contains five proper place names but which contrasts sharply with the rigorously informational notation of locations in the rest of *La Douleur*—the gratuity of place names no longer serves *le reel* ‘the real,’ I contend, but rather, as in an earlier literary era, *le beau* ‘the beautiful.’ The war over and Robert L. nearly recovered, there is now time, it would seem, for at least a touch of literature, the mere thought of which during the pain and suffering of her wait, the author writes in the preface to “La Douleur,” “m’a fait honte” (12) ‘made me ashamed’ (4).

Still, it would be five years of silence between Robert L.’s return and the publication of Duras’s third novel, *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950) *The Sea Wall* (1952). Significantly, it was her first novel to take place outside of France, in a distant land (colonial Indochina) that in her memory remained untouched by war. Aside from parts of *L’Amant* (1984) *The Lover* (1985) and one short story drafted in 1946 (“Madame Dodin”), whose action does not leave a barely fictionalized rue Saint-Benoît, *La Douleur* is the only text in Duras’s œuvre to take place in the city of Paris, though the author continued to live primarily there until her death in 1996.¹³ Not

only do her subsequent texts take place elsewhere, most of them, according to the author, were written elsewhere—in her house in Neauphle-le-Château or her apartment in Trouville. It is as if Paris had become for her too real for literature, its hard surfaces impermeable to imagination, or at least to an imagination untethered to a traumatic personal and collective history. And so Duras's Paris will always be a wartime Paris, a Paris of deprivation, violence, fear, and sorrow—a *Paris douloureux*, a painful and pain-filled Paris—that is revived with every turn of a page of the text in which it is so carefully mapped.

Notes

1 The translation here is my own. The translations of quotes from *La Douleur*, however, are generally borrowed from Barbara Bray's translation of the novel, *The War*, with some alterations.

2 Barthes's *effet de réel* is generated in a text by the notation of insignificant details, whose function is in fact to mimic the contingency and meaninglessness of such details in real life, and therefore to render the text more realistic.

3 See, for example, Pierre Péan's lengthy discussion of Duras's wartime activities in his biography of François Mitterrand (449-74). In it Péan interviews a number of Duras's fellow resisters who contest her version of events. See also Jacobs for an example of criticism that fruitfully questions Duras's insistence on the factuality of the stories in *La Douleur*.

4 See Kritzman, for example.

5 "[L]e manuscrit révèle," note the editors of the *Cahiers* in regard to the draft of "La Douleur," "que les dates qui le ponctuent ont très vraisemblablement été ajoutées après la première rédaction" (161) "The manuscript reveals that the dates scattered throughout were most likely added after the text was first set down to paper."

6 The *Mouvement national des prisonniers de guerre et déportés*, the National Movement for Prisoners of War and Deportees, was the resistance movement, headed by François Mitterrand, in which the Antelmes became involved.

7 The *sic* is Duras's; presumably it indicates that these were Rabier's exact words.

8 These events transpire in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950) *The Sea Wall* (1952) and *Le Vice-consul* (1966) *The Vice-Consul* (1968), respectively.

9 Because of the chronic lack of gasoline, bus service was suspended in oc-

cupied Paris. Despite the closing of over half of the city's metro stations in the interest of saving electricity, and the diminishment of the city's population, the number of riders skyrocketed during the war, reaching an all-time high of 1.6 million in 1946 (today, the expanded network carries around 1.3 million travelers per year). The use of metro stations as bomb shelters further contributed to overcrowding and to the accumulation of trash, making travel by metro significantly more unpleasant than even its worst critics today could imagine ("Métro de Paris").

10 In "Monsieur X.," the narrator states that one of Rabier's preferred neighborhoods is Saint-Lazare, which suggests that the café les Capitales, which Rabier patronizes regularly, was indeed in that neighborhood, as Duras stated in her deposition. Since there is no mention of les Capitales in the *Cahiers* draft of the story, Duras probably recalled and added it when she was preparing the manuscript for publication in the 1980s. It is possible that she simply misremembered which train station it had been near, but I prefer the above hypothesis.

11 Thérèse, Duras writes in the preface to the story, "c'est moi" (138) 'is me' (115).

12 In his biography of Duras, Vallier reproduces two short letters written by Robert Antelme to his wife from Dachau in early May 1945. These letters were among the documents Duras left to the Imec after her death, but she does not mention them in *La Douleur*. In one of these letters, Antelme indicates that he was discovered by Mitterrand "sous la douche" 'in the shower' rather than lying amidst hundreds of dying detainees, as Mitterrand himself maintained in a 1985 interview with Duras (Vallier 671-73; Duras and Mitterrand 19-20). Mitterrand had perhaps been influenced by the account of the scene in *La Douleur*, which he had read shortly before the interview.

13 *La Pluie d'été* (1990) 'Summer Rain' takes place in Vitry-sur-Seine, an eastern suburb of Paris, and the film *Nathalie Granger* (1972) in an unnamed Parisian suburb (it was filmed in Duras's house in Neauphle-le-Château, a village 40 kilometers west of Paris), but *La Douleur*, "Madame Dodin," and sections of *L'Amant* appear to be the only narratives to take place in the city proper.

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