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Karen Piper

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# The Signifying Corpse: Re-Reading Kristeva on Marguerite Duras

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*Karen Piper*

Wherever I go, I see signs of society's death everywhere. It's like hallucinating.

—Marguerite Duras<sup>1</sup>

**P**olitics, in the postmodern arena, has been driven underground.<sup>2</sup> Althusser's "overdetermination," Baudrillard's "simulation," Foucault's "death of man"—each of these figures speaks out of the same political impotence. The postmodern subject finds himself irrevocably welded into the structures that contain him—the postmodern subject finds himself a *body without organs*.<sup>3</sup> I say "him," however, precisely because I propose that the overdetermined subject is also a gendered subject, and that "body without organs" is a figure not for some revolutionary androgeny but precisely the impotence of the overdetermined subject. In contrast to this neutered figure (man *minus*), I intend to examine the textual reproduction of intact female bodies as allegorical signifiers for political revivification in the work of Marguerite Duras. Situating Freudian "lack" back where it belongs (upon the male desire for

his missing phallus), I will return the female *parts* (roles) to their political significance.

Kristeva's recent study *Black Sun* situates the novels of Marguerite Duras within that tenuous psychological space called depression, or what she terms "*la maladie du grièf.*" This psychological status acts upon the text, producing the language of Duras as "distorted speech" or "the discourse of dulled pain" (226). This reading of Duras' language may lead to positioning her characters within a space of psychological subjectivity (abstracted from the absolute subjectivity of Duras herself);<sup>4</sup> while no one could deny Duras' melancholia, one may easily question what (Duras'?) melancholia may produce. Duras, as product of melancholy, writes. I will ask not, "who is Duras?" but, "what is this writing and how does it relate to the politics of production?" Walter Benjamin has suggested that writing produces knowledge as *stored* (dead) object, that all writing is allegorical in the sense that it produces death. What contributes to the production of allegory, according to Benjamin, is precisely *melancholy*: "If the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and it remains behind dead, but eternally secure, then it is exposed to the allegorist . . ." (184). We come full circle to Kristeva, but with a drastic revision: Duras' *grief* becomes not an "individual psychic unease" leading to "independent, unified subjects" but a method and result of social production. Melancholy (which is non-locatable) produces allegory, which is dead and so dissolves melancholy.<sup>5</sup> As Kristeva suggested, Duras confronts a "nothing" (and much has been written on this "white space"/silence); however, this "void" is her own construction and so cannot absent itself (258). Benjamin writes, "these allegories fill out and deny the void in which they are represented, just as ultimately, the intention does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones but faithlessly leaps forward to the idea of resurrection" (233). I propose to read Duras' characters as positions taken within the order of structure/knowledge/power inside(out) her texts. If one concurs with Jameson that politics is the "Unconscious" undercurrent animating (post)modern textual production, what becomes important in any hermeneutic model is de-centering the subject/character in order to subvert the reified symbols of imagination. If politics indeed is "underground," then interpretation becomes not an assignation of

possible meanings, but an archaeology of dead objects: interpretation becomes exhumation.

The desire of Duras (through her characters) to eliminate herself/(themselves) as object is far from an impotent suicidal response to depression, but a restructuring of how these knowledge-objects (“man,” characters, corpses, governments) themselves are organized and controlled. Duras destroys the illusion of self-determination,<sup>6</sup> and in so doing, reorganizes subjectivity around a different order. As Foucault has suggested in *The Order of Things*, “[m]an is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end” (386). “Man” as object is eliminated, but only under the melancholic gaze of a woman. The *character* can no longer signify—only the *corpse*. The character cannot signify precisely because the “character” as representation of a monadic subject is merely a production of recent history. Duras demolishes the character for the sake of the corpse—Benjamin likewise suggested of the characters of *Trauerspiel*, “[i]t is not for the sake of immortality that they meet their end, but for the sake of the corpse. . . . Seen from the point of view of death, the product of the corpse is life” (217).

The “corpse,” according to Benjamin, is the gateway to the “homeland of allegory” (216). If the *symbol* is the appropriation of the eternal essence of things, *allegory* is the acknowledgment that these essences are *dead*; the object can always and only be a corpse. “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things,” Benjamin explains (178). The *character* is killed, but the *corpse* is cracked open for signification. “Even the singular, the individual character, is multiplied in the allegorical,” Benjamin writes (193)—and the character is multiplied precisely through his/her *decay*, through the fecundity of decomposition.

How is the “allegorical” related to “overdetermination”? Benjamin would claim that allegory reveals history “as petrified, primordial landscape,” a space in which “man’s subjection to nature is most obvious” (166). All of history’s sorrows, in effect, become “expressed in a face—or rather in a death’s head” (166). While “overdetermination” has as its object a specific individual/character, the “allegorical” reveals *subjection* with the mock faciality of “death’s head.” Allegory puts history back together as a *face*; politics acquires a mouthpiece, but only dialectically. If the overdeter-

mined male bemoans his (specific) loss in the face of (his) structures of power, the overdetermined female *dies* (the only true loss of agency). What happens, however, when a woman enacts (or writes) this death as allegory? It is dialectically reclaimed; the corpse speaks.

Reading the corpse in this fashion postulates not only a new formation for this particular text, but also a methodology for the reading of the postmodern—the corpse acts as both subject and method of critique. The corpse designates distance, stoppage, and abjection; but in order to understand this reading of the corpse, we must first redirect our notion of *symbolic* representation to that of *allegorical* representation. Paul de Man has laid out this distinction carefully in “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” where he writes:

The subjectivity of experience is preserved when it is translated into language; the world is then no longer seen as a configuration of entities that designate a plurality of distinct and isolated meanings, but as a configuration of symbols ultimately leading to a total, single, and universal meaning. (*Blindness* 188)

What is significant in de Man’s formulation of the *symbol* is that it is not a totalizing signifier in its own right, but that it tends to an absolute reading of *subjectivity*. de Man explains:

Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin. . . . In so doing, it prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully, though painfully, recognized as non-self. (207)

The (mimetic) symbol in this sense pronounces nostalgia, origin, and “the illusion of self-determination.” The mimetic reading of texts postulates its own identity-theory; allegory renounces the desire to identify. The corpse, therefore, can only be *dead* in a mimetic sense—allegorically, the corpse is *alive*.

What de Man describes at the level of the symbolic order, Georg Lukács recognizes as the production of the bourgeoisie:

Man finds himself confronted by purely natural relations or social forms mystified into natural relations. They appear to be fixed, complete and immutable entities which can be manipulated and even comprehended, but never overthrown. But also this situation creates the possibility of praxis in the individual consciousness. Praxis becomes the form of action appropriate to the isolated individual, it becomes his ethics. (19)

Individual praxis is, in this sense, made *possible* only by (symbolic) reification. What in de Man's figuration appears to be a strictly literary hermeneutic becomes for Lukács a product of material relations. Capitalism provides the structural framework for individually acting agents/characters. Just as structural overdetermination *requires* that the subject speak, so narrative overdetermination prescribes that only a hermeneutical breach can offer a resuscitation. To let *destruction* be spoken out (of the symbolic/class order), not through itself, but through a series of veils that would disclose its meaning—this, I propose, is the subject of *Moderato cantabile*.

Rather than situating anarchy in an abstract ideology, Duras embodies and refigures it into bodily processes within her texts—the corpse becomes a site representing both destruction and political liberation. Duras defines “*destruction capitale*” during an interview: “The destruction of someone as a person . . . The destruction of all police . . . The destruction of memory . . . The destruction of judgment . . . I am in favor of closing schools and universities, of ignorance . . .” (108). This destruction recognizes human beings as objects of capital, commodities to be moved and controlled, who find liberation only in their refusal to exist. Walter Benjamin has described this type of character in *Illuminations*: “The destructive character knows only one activity: clearing away . . . because everything cleared away means to the destroyer a complete reduction, indeed eradication, of his own condition” (300). This is an anarchy of self-immolation, in which textual beings as objects are extirpated, symbolically tearing down the structural certainty of their surroundings (the text, the city, the commodities of capital).<sup>7</sup> The corpse becomes the imploding center in *Moderato cantabile*, drawing the characters into itself while at the same time annihilating

the anesthetizing distance between reader/narrative structure. The abstract power of any *structure*, which is maintained through an implied impotence before it, becomes at once disrupted and grounded in the power of the body.

If, then, the corpse is alive, what might we say it signifies? While I would not suggest that the corpse is important for any *one thing* other than a method of reading, it does offer a site in which the political *may be allowed to* emerge, regardless of authorial intent. Duras' novel *Moderato cantabile* allows for the destruction of the subject as a site for containing knowledge, the scream of rebellion, the sight of the abject—all configured in the dismembered body of the heroine, the corpse. The corpse is the body/non-body Kristeva describes in *Powers of Horror*:

The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall) . . . is cesspool and death. Without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit-cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled. (4)

The subversive nature of the heroine/corpse exists precisely in these borders—encroaching upon everything, yet remaining indefinable. The corpse is the refuse that cannot be washed away, for it is the refuse that constitutes identity itself. *Moderato cantabile* represents the refuse of the author, which will remain forever a part of her identity—her corpse—into which her readers delve and emerge.

*Moderato cantabile*, far from the sweet and melodious story the title suggests, is centered around the sound of a scream. Anne is a character drawn toward a scream coming from a bar; she enters into this world in order to discover its absent source, the corpse. She tells Chauvin, the man in the bar who saw the murder, "I think I must have screamed something like that once, yes, when I had the child" (79). Anne describes the state of child-bearing as the nearest comparison she can make to the scream of abjection, but the child became a carrier of cultural models and piano lessons,

losing that connection with the animalistic scream that produced him. Maturation for the child becomes a process of acquiring signification, which does not correspond to the passion of his production. Language, in the same way, is a barrier that hides the scream—having an abstract significance that Duras serves to exploit, reverse, and eliminate by demonstrating its ironies and misnomers. Duras' movement beyond paradigmatic borders/limitations creates first and foremost a site of narrative possibility.

Duras depicts other screams in *Moderato cantabile*, the screams of trees outside Anne's house. These are screams that Anne fears, saying, "People ought to live in a town where there are no trees trees scream when there's a wind . . . you hear them screaming on the beach like someone murdered" (89). Chauvin replies, "[y]ou have never screamed. Never" (90). This statement seems to contradict Anne's earlier claim to have screamed during childbirth. Is Chauvin denying the scream of child-bearing or is he contrasting her repressed status to the release of sound from the trees? Connecting this statement with the one which precedes it further complicates the meaning. Chauvin claims, "[y]ou go to the railings, then you go away and walk around the house, then you come back again to the railings. . . . You have never screamed. Never" (90). Why would Chauvin connect a walk outside with screaming? Possibly Chauvin has anticipated, even hopefully awaited, a scream as Anne has walked out by the railings, with him watching. In this sense, the child-birth scream is a long-forgotten and repressed emblem of what Chauvin has been waiting to hear. He is waiting for Anne to break, to find what makes the trees scream, to bring herself to an orgasmic scream that will destroy her husband's power (as shadow of domesticity) over her.

Anne finds herself on the verge of madness as she enters further into the story of the heroine/corpse. She forfeits her boundaries of self-definition through class (upper) and status (married) to enter into the realm of an elusive storyteller. When the ability to define selfhood is forfeited, what then remains? Duras answers this question during an interview: "It's a hope that I'm expressing. I hope that there will be more and more madmen: I make this statement with pleasure, with satisfaction" (121). She earlier defines *le fous*: "A madman is a person whose essential prejudice has been destroyed: the limits of the self" (109). Capital destruction is

the vaporization of the self—as soon as the self disintegrates, there are multitudes. The loss of the self as definitive site becomes the death of the infrastructure of civilization; as Foucault explains, “[m]adness invokes and makes necessary the world’s end” (120). This statement is only apocalyptic in the sense that the complete destruction of *sense* is predicted . . . and without contemporary formulations and organization of reality, it is impossible to say what would follow.

In order for there to be an “I,” there must be something against which the “I” is defined. This other is what Kristeva calls the “abject,” that which revolts me, which makes me flee into my own skin, which sets my boundaries. The abject, however, is also that which is hidden within the very refuse of the self, as Kristeva explains:

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced . . . when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject. (5)

To recognize that this body which sustains life is also refuse and corpse is to accept the rejection which is the abject. When the other that is expelled is recognized as myself, I lose my boundaries. Duras writes, “I would like to destroy it (knowledge) in order to replace it with a void. The complete absence of man” (114). This absence is the beginning and end of madness, the space where other voices emerge from the silence—the voice of the oppressed, excluded, corpse (whether this be earth, woman, feces, dead races, or political prisoners).

Anne’s identity proceeds to lose the boundaries created through social ritual and culturally prescribed morality; as this occurs, the narration itself changes form. Punctuation becomes arbitrary; the conversation between Anne and Chauvin becomes dissolving language. Chauvin describes, or fabricates, the story of a relationship that led a man to shoot a woman at her request, while the responses of Anne begin more and more to resemble those of the murdered woman. By overlapping these two narratives to the

point of synthesis and imbuing her characters with a shadowy but all-knowing presence, Duras usurps and over-turns the believability (implying distance) of her narrative stance. The novel becomes the site of the corpse itself, with the corpse taking preeminence over the boundaries of the possible in a realistic narrative.

Anne and Chauvin do not talk *to each other*; they talk *away from themselves*. This may be seen as the same conversation between reader and author, described by de Man as the opposite of a self-clarifying dialogue:

It would be more accurate to say that the two subjectivities involved, that of author and that of the reader, co-operate in making each other forget their distinctive identity and destroy each other as subjects. Both move beyond their respective particularity toward a common ground that contains both of them, united by the impulse that makes them turn away from their particular selves . . . it brings the reader back, for a moment, to what he might have been before he shaped himself into a particular self. (64)

This is where we may return to the concept of “overdetermination” as a masculine project, for I propose that the coming out of the overdetermined self is a coming into a bodily ground—that the “he” of de Man’s quotation should really be a “she,” for this project has always been explicitly feminist.

Anne, at the sound of a scream, embarks on a journey toward her own annihilation. She tries to break through the rules of her class in society by becoming fascinated with a realm with no rules—the realm of revulsion, alcoholism, vomiting, and death. Hers is the story of a seduction, but a seduction that is intentionally sought out. Anne is sexually seduced by the idea of death, and Chauvin is the narrative vehicle: he brings death to her with his story. Only he knows the secret of the murder in the bar, which she must draw out of him in order to account for the scream. She beckons Chauvin into revealing the story of death just as the woman who was murdered seduced her lover into creating death itself. Anne embarks along the same path, following the parallel leads. Anne says of that other couple, “[t]hey talked for a long time, a very long time, before it happened” (81). And so they talk for a long time, a very long time.

Chauvin is trying to break Anne of a habit, the habit of life. He says, “[y]ou get into the habit of living. But it’s only a habit” (103). He is there to free her from dinner parties where “the salmon passes from guest to guest, following a ritual that nothing can disturb . . .” (106). His power over Anne is sexuality itself, in which the scream of orgasm may be released. His power is the power of perversion. Kristeva writes:

The abject is related to perversion . . . abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them. It kills in the name of life—a progressive despot; it lives at the behest of death . . . (15)

Anne begins to live only “at the behest of death.” Chauvin possesses a secret death-narrative with which he draws her to the threshold. He lives only in the obsessively desirous state of her presence.

Finally, Anne deserts her husband and leaves her child at home to go and meet Chauvin. Even after this decisive act, after she has been publicly condemned as a drunken adulteress, Anne does not remain with Chauvin. There is a premonition of death as they first kiss: “They lingered in a long embrace, their lips cold and trembling, so that it should be accomplished, performing the same mortuary ritual as their hands . . .” (117). Anne, however, rejects. Kristeva describes this rejection of that which attracts:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. (1)

The death of the woman attracts Anne and leads her to Chauvin, who has been waiting for her a long time. She is fascinated, but not seduced. She turns back in the end to her familiar life, confronting, instead, a *different* form of death: a life of habit that is no longer

life. "I wish you were dead," Chauvin says after his rejection. Anne responds, "I am" (118). It is difficult to say, however, that this death will be final. Anne says she might not be able to leave things as they are, and we never know if the affair continues on the next day, just as before. Duras implies a compulsion toward life, even among the dead, that cannot be ignored. When Anne says that the murdered woman will never speak again, Chauvin responds:

Of course she will. Suddenly one day, one beautiful morning, she'll meet someone she knows and won't be able to avoid saying good morning. Or she'll hear a child singing, it will be a lovely day and she'll remark how lovely it is. It will begin. (116)

This statement enacts not only a sudden leap from realistic narrative, but also a premonition of the death/life dialectic, which the narrative textually intertwines.

Several critics have described Anne and Chauvin's kiss as a symbolic recreation of the murder of the woman in the bar, inferring a certain sadism in Chauvin's desire.<sup>8</sup> This reading repeats precisely the error of using symbol to return to psychological unities. While tenable if the characters are seen as possessing separate and individualistic psychological spaces, this reading disregards the main credo of Duras—destruction. What may be witnessed as sadism becomes liberation under this light. The question then becomes not, "[d]id Chauvin succeed in killing Anne?" but "[d]id destruction take place?" The destruction that was occurring was not only the (apocalyptic) abolition of class distinctions, but the destruction of society itself.

Just as the title of this novel suggests a misleading opposite to the tone of the novel, so the sign "Chauvin" may be read as a severed representation (or ironic reversal) of the character it introduces. Duras releases her characters from the bounds of fixed meaning in language by drawing contradictions between work and happening to an extreme—they act both as destroyers of the social order of capitalist class distinctions and of the linguistic order of fixed meaning. Class barriers are eclipsed through the sexual attraction between dock-worker and aristocrat, and linguistic order is eclipsed by the disruption of the readers' association between sign/signifier. Chauvin, in the position of destroyer in this novel, is

also rendered completely helpless outside of the presence of this woman. For the reader, then, interpretation becomes not so much a game of de-coding as a game which disrupts the codification process entirely. Death, in *Moderato cantabile*, is at once death and absolutely non-death. Duras' figuration of death becomes an allegorical signifier of political liberation. She enters into the perversity of reasoning backwards, toward death instead of life, in order to subvert the bourgeois order of oppression (or, in psychosexual terms, the order of repression) in which Anne resides.

The corpse becomes the amorphous site of possibility, which does not resist or react. This is a form of extreme pacifism, which Duras saw as being best exemplified by the May '68 protests in Paris, and which Blanchot describes: "It is that absence of reaction which permitted the manifestation to develop . . . Everything was accepted. The impossibility of recognizing an enemy . . . all that was vivifying" (31). For three weeks in May 1968, the life of the city of Paris stopped—because so many students and workers simply refused to continue producing, whether knowledge or goods. They placed themselves outside of everything, outside of the means of production or any sort of definition. They represented a force that could not be easily quelled, because it lacked any direction or cohesiveness. Duras wrote of the corresponding 60's protests in the United States: "They're creating a vacuum, but we can't yet see what is going to replace what was destroyed in them . . ." (115). The presence of the people in their refusal to submit to existing definitions of themselves creates a site for absolute possibilities for definition.

The immediate aims of the '68 protests were both silenced and quelled; however, the disruption and refiguration of the life of Paris had occurred. The city, as process, was arrested—the (in-)ert)ia of the city, whose movements were internalized within its dwellers as paradigm for cognition, (dis)rupted; non-moving bodies replaced the reified motion of the city.<sup>9</sup> This stoppage, according to Marx, could have revolutionary affects in its own right. Marx (reading Feuerbach) claims:

So much is this activity, this unceasing sensuous labor and creation, this production, the foundation of the whole sensuous world as it now exists that, were it interrupted only for a year,

Feuerbach would not only find an enormous change in the natural world, he would very soon find that the whole world of men and his own perceptive faculty, nay his own existence, were missing. (*German* 46)

Such is the way in which modes of production become means of perception so that one cannot cease without the other. *To find oneself missing*: this is precisely the attraction of the signifying corpse.

Jean Baudrillard in *The Ecstasy of Communication* describes the way in which what was once spectacle (e.g., television, car, radio) has become present within the spectator, to the extent that the distance from the spectacle is annihilated (confirming its absolute authority through its absorption into the subject).<sup>10</sup> Baudrillard writes: "Our private sphere has ceased to be the stage where the drama of the subject at odds with his objects . . . is played out: we no longer exist as playwrights or actors but as terminals of multiple networks" (16). Car, war plane, television are in this way made active participants within the life of the subject—there is no more room for private deliberation or decision, only for reception and push-button control.<sup>11</sup> Liberation from this invasive totalitarian spectacle can be achieved only through active non-participation in the life of the spectacle-subject. No longer is the annihilation of the offending object (war plane, pollutants, city) as *other* sufficient or even possible—the self that has subsumed these telematic powers must participate in their death, in order to re-vivify the bodily powers of its origin.<sup>12</sup>

Abjection, in this communal presence, signifies the corpse-like anarchy of doing nothing. "If all the young people in the world start doing nothing . . . the world is in danger. So much the better. So much the better" (116), Duras claims. It is in this way that May of '68 becomes the most successful failure. Instead of the overthrow of one government by another through revolution, Duras believes in the destruction of the previous order, and then a waiting period. "It is very hard to pass from one state to another. Abruptly. . . . It is necessary to wait . . . You don't do something unless you *undo* what's gone before" (120). Duras' solution (to capitalism-war oppressions) is essentially an ironic non-solution: decentralization of social life through popular (non)cooperation—the creation of a community that can only be defined

negatively. Duras writes of Woodstock: "It was simply an experience of life in common. Completely negative."<sup>13</sup>

Destruction is, for Duras, a non-doing that is an *undoing*—an act of discourse defined by the impossibility of definition—language folding in upon itself. As we read in Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, "physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language" (4). Just as physical pain disrupts language, so representations of destruction/pain for Duras become a practice of interpretation—the interruption of social and linguistic order provides a means of entering the text and disengaging from it. Duras places herself in the margins of the text, waiting for apocalypse and genesis.

"Take me. Deform me, make me ugly," the heroine of *Hiroshima mon amour* invokes her lover; "[y]ou destroy me. You're so good for me" (25). Duras describes this relationship in her notes: "To give oneself, body and soul, that's it. That is the equivalent not only of amorous possession, but of a *marriage*" (112). The "marriage" of *la Française* and *le Japonais* represents (and is always framed within) a language of opposites, juxtapositions. Even when *le Japonais* first meets *la Française*, he describes his attraction in opposites: "You're a beautiful woman, do you know that? . . . A trifle ugly . . . That's what I noticed last night in that café. The way you're ugly . . ." (32). Even the characters themselves are interchangeable and not-themselves. *La Française* is anonymous, unnameable "elle"—which is also Nevers. *Le Japonais* is Hiroshima, but also the corpse which *la Française* had once caressed.

As in *Moderato cantabile*, *Hiroshima mon amour* contains a secret death-narrative, the story of the corpse, which must be drawn out (or bodily re-possessed) in order to unite ("marry") the two lovers. As in *Moderato cantabile*, the man is continually encouraging the woman to drink—to compulsively drown in the language, the death, the alcohol. As in *Moderato cantabile*, *le Japonais* knows a story he could not possibly have known, drawing out secret details of the woman's life. *La Française* tells: "One day, I'm twenty years old. It's in the cellar. My mother comes and tells me I'm twenty. My mother's crying" (58). *Lui* asks, "[y]ou spit in your mother's face?" and *Elle* responds, "[y]es" (58). Duras adds the note of explanation, "[a]s if they were aware of these things together" (59). *Le Japonais*

has consumed and become the story of *la Française*'s madness in Nevers, as he has made himself corpse in his act of love for Riva.

Recognition of the self as corpse is a process through which Riva has always already gone in her love for the German. She states, "I can say that I couldn't feel the slightest difference between this dead body and mine" (65). In her sharing of the death narrative, she has shared of the corpse—which is *le Japonais*, which is Hiroshima itself, a city that ironically "never stops," for fear of suffocating, finding itself a corpse. When *le Japonais* discovers that he is the only one to have shared this narrative, he is overwhelmed with joy and love. This is now their shared immolation, their bodies "afire with his memory" (78), the memory of themselves on fire.

Riva's interior monologue reveals the desire for destruction in the love of *le Japonais*:

This city was made to the size of love. You were made to the size of my body. . . . I always expected that one day you would descend on me. . . . Take me. Deform me to your likeness so that no one, after you, can understand the reason for so much desire. . . . A time will come. When we'll no more know what thing it is that binds us. (77)

The name that unites them is the name of their deaths—Hiroshima, Nevers—made into one death, one body, one word. Riva, however, rejects—seeing in the loss of memory an impending separation. Chauvin, in *Moderato cantabile*, says after Anne's rejection, "I wish you were dead" (118); *le Japonais* repeats this cycle in *Hiroshima mon amour* with, "I would have preferred that you had died at Nevers," and Riva responding, "[s]o would I" (84). Riva chooses to forget, due to the fear of forgetting, what had been discovered in the body of the corpse with *le Japonais*. She keeps the lights in the city running, for fear of suffocating in the silence.

*Moderato cantabile* and *Hiroshima mon amour* follow each other's parallel leads, demonstrating the inter-changeability of characters within each text, but also *between* each text. Opposites are fused, then forgotten—but remain present in the lapse of time that is a text. Duras has noted at the end of *Hiroshima mon amour*: "Certain spectators of the film believed that she 'ended up' by staying at

Hiroshima. It's possible. I have no opinion" (13). In the same way, the question about whether the affair will go on between Chauvin and Anne is a mute point. What is crucial is the disruption of boundaries between yes/no, life/death, text/non-text. The "limit of her refusal" (*Hiroshima* 13) to which Duras takes Riva could just as easily be called a realization of affirmation—what is important is the threshold or crossing-over point, beyond which no opinion is necessary.

Recognizing themselves corpse while dwelling within the limits of refuse—or refus(e)al, Duras' characters act out their rebellion. What Kristeva has called "grief" could also be called "grievance"—both imply a malady of sorts, but with different loci. Duras has said during an interview that there is only one true democracy: "The true democracy is to feel every day the loss of the world" (my translation).<sup>14</sup> This type of democracy would preclude investment, accumulation, and competition—the very things that define "democracy" in most parts of the world. Duras explains in the same interview: "living together with the world, this very poverty, that I call the loss of the world" (my translation).<sup>15</sup> Thinking the disaster may in this respect bring about not depression, but community.<sup>16</sup> Admittedly, Duras may be said to be often looking back to Hiroshima, the Holocaust, and other disasters of the past. We must not, however, delimit our reading of Duras to a language founded upon these facts, thereby precluding the language of resistance (the French Resistance, the community of lovers, madness, May of '68) that shapes her texts.

Detouring around Kristeva's reading of Duras' "dulled discourse" for these reasons, we find nevertheless that Kristeva's notion of the abject permeates the works of Duras. Baudrillard recognized the submersion of the subject in the spectacle, Marx recognized the submersion of the subject in the commodity (both processes leading to control and submission of the subject)—Kristeva, on the other hand, recognized the *equation* of subject and abject (a bodily subversion to both of the former processes).

*Moderato cantabile* presents a communion of lovers that cuts through the barriers of social and linguistic stratification. Blanchot, in response to Duras, has commented: "The community of lovers—no matter if the lovers want it or not, enjoy it or not, be they linked by chance, by the passion of death—has as its ultimate

goal the destruction of society” (48). Within this realm called love or anarchy, the corpse is a figure of liberty, of satiated sexuality, of the “waiting period” after the scream, in the space of the unspeakable dismemberment of society.

Fredric Jameson claims that “politics” has gone underground; indeed all that remains may be the allegorical corpse, waiting to signify.

### Notes

1. I am constructing Duras in a specific historical moment (late 1960's to early 1970's), prior to the neo-conservatism of her later years.

2. Fredric Jameson makes this claim in *The Political Unconscious*.

3. “Body without organs” is Deleuze and Guattari’s equivocal term from *Anti-Oedipus*: “The body without organs is the unproductive, the sterile, the unengendered. . . . The death instinct: that is its name” (8). While I would not claim that the *body without organs* is—solely and essentially—the object of *overdetermination* (or *simulation*), there are definite linguistic overlaps. “Machines attach themselves to the body without organs as so many points of disjunction, between which an entire network of new syntheses is now woven, marking the surface off into coordinates, like a grid,” Deleuze and Guattari describe (8). Compare this to Baudrillard: “we no longer exist as playwrights or actors but as terminals of multiple networks” (16) or “[f]rom the moment that the actors and their phantasies have ceased to haunt this stage, as soon as behavior is focused on certain operational screens or terminals, the rest appears as some vast useless body, which has been abandoned and condemned . . . the human body, our body, seems superfluous in its proper expanse” (19). I would propose that Baudrillard’s “abandoned body” is similar to the “body without organs”—while this body is not necessarily located upon the individual subject, it does include (t)his body (the de-sexed) as an object of definition. Deleuze and Guattari have asked, What happens when anti-production (the body without organs) is injected into production? I intend to ask, What happens when gender is injected into the “unengendered?”

4. I am aware that Kristeva may object to this view of a unified subject. Nonetheless, Kristeva’s analysis suggests that Duras’ work presents us with an impotent psychosexual melancholia, impotent in the subject’s inability to either consume or name herself. She writes, “[e]ven the soundest among us know just the same that a firm identity remains a fiction. Suffering, in Duras’ work, in a mannered way and with empty words evokes that impossible mourning, which, if its process had been completed, would have removed our morbid lining and set us up as independent, unified subjects” (258). I propose that the realization of “independent, unified subjects” through the completion of suffering is far from the impossible teleological end/goal of Duras. Instead, active and bodily disruption of structural domination is Duras’ credo.

5. Benjamin calls this process “the essence of melancholy immersion” (232), a method by which objects producing melancholy are turned into allegories rather than being “secured” symbolically.

6. Duras has stated in a collection of interviews, *Woman to Woman*, that her work is an attempt to destroy “the illusion that man determines himself” (105).

7. Marx describes clearly the absorption of the self into the object of labor, which is also a distancing from the object: “The worker puts his life into the object and this means that it no longer belongs to him but to the object. So the greater the activity, the more the worker is without an object. What the product of the labor is, that he is not” (79). The distance of the worker from the *objectives* of production relegates him/her to the status of object itself. The relationship of worker to object becomes absorption of the worker and domination of the object.

8. Trista Selous writes: “The reader is strongly encouraged to assume that the dog-like behavior and final death of the woman correspond in some sense to Anne’s desires, even if she and Chauvin stop at a kind of symbolic resolution . . . the masochism of her position is evident” (207). Carol Murphy concurs: “We are prepared for Chauvin’s verbal murder of Anne by the crushing of the magnolia on her dress . . .” (78).

9. Herbert Marcuse describes the lifeless movement of “the machine” in *One Dimensional Man*: “Underneath its obvious dynamics, this society is a thoroughly static system of life: self-propelling in its oppressive productivity and in its beneficial coordination” (17).

10. As the distance from the spectacle is annihilated, Baudrillard claims that the distance from *origin* is inversely heightened: “Private telematics: each individual sees himself promoted to the controls of a hypothetical machine, isolated in a position of perfect sovereignty, at an infinity distance from his original universe; that is to say, in the same position as an astronaut in his bubble, existing in a state of complete weightlessness which compels the individual to remain in perpetual orbital flight and to maintain sufficient speed in zero gravity to avoid crashing into his planet of origin” (15).

11. Baudrillard describes the car as “something (or someone, since at this stage there is no more difference) to which you are *wired*, the communication with the car becoming the fundamental stake, a perpetual test of the presence of the subject” (13).

12. According to Baudrillard, within the “operational definition of being” the body “seems superfluous in its proper expanse” (18). For the same reasons, the landscape, “the immense geographical landscape seems a vast, barren body whose very expanse is unnecessary . . . from the moment that all events are concentrated in the cities” (19).

13. “C’était simplement une expérience de vie en commun. Complètement négative” (*Cahiers* 54). This part was edited from the translation—translation mine.

14. “La véritable démocratie—c’est de vivre chaque jour cette perte du monde.” From an unpublished interview, recorded by *les disques du crépuscule* and copyrighted by Duras (“interview”).

15. “. . . à vivre en commun avec le monde, cette pauvreté là, que j’appelle la perte du monde.”

16. Maurice Blanchot in *The Writing of the Disaster* describes the possible thought patterns that may result from living as-if-in impending apocalypse. He writes, “The thought of disaster, if it does not extinguish thought, makes us insouciant with regard to the results this thought itself can have in our life; it dismisses all ideas of failure and success; it replaces ordinary silence—where speech lacks—with a separate silence, set apart, where it is the other who, keeping still, announces himself” (12–13).

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