

1 The Story of her life: Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant* (1984)

The phenomenon of *L'Amant*

Why, in the mid-1980s, did a 70-year-old woman writer with a reputation for difficult, avant-garde texts, read by left-wing intellectuals, top the French best-seller lists and become an international star? In a variety of forms this question was posed repeatedly as sales of Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant* climbed up towards the two million mark and her text carried off the Goncourt prize, designed to reward young writers of promise.¹ In fact this was far from being the first time that Duras had caught the mood of her times: *Moderato Cantabile* (1958), a novel centring on a violent *crime passionnel* and jettisoning many traditional realist conventions had ensured her a place in the *nouveau roman* stable, the formalist literary movement spearheaded by Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute which dominated (some would say strangled) the French novel in the late 1950s and 1960s.² Though she took a relatively back-seat role in the grouping, she succeeded in establishing a literary reputation in this period such that her apparently radical espousal of the feminist cause in the early and mid-1970s was met with interest, and her international reputation began to grow rapidly. However, her mantle as a writer of the 'feminine', largely cast upon her by others, cut little ice in France once the women's movement began to lose its public impetus, and indeed she began to distance herself from feminism before the 1970s were over, though she remained a well-known media figure.

The advent of the Mitterrand era had a strong personal meaning for Duras. During the Second World War she had worked in a Resistance network headed by François Mitterrand, and he had been personally responsible for saving her husband from dying in Dachau. A former member of the Communist Party, Duras held strong left-wing views, though not necessarily ones that coincided with party political programmes; she campaigned hard for Mitterrand in the 1981 Presidential elections, and remained a figure closely associated with him throughout his tenure of office, visiting the Elysée Palace, recounting the story of his role in her husband's survival in *La Douleur* (1985), and publishing interviews with

¹ See e.g. Josyane Savigneau *Le Monde*, 'Duras face à l'avenir', p. 1 'Le Monde des livres', 8 Mar. 1996.

² See Introduction, pp. 9–13.

Mitterrand at the time of the parliamentary elections in 1986. She died only two months after him, in the spring of 1996.

Yet her association with Mitterrand, her left-wing reputation, and her feminist past, cannot account for the phenomenon of *L'Amant*. Journalists and critics disagreed over whether the book was a break with her previous writing, or essentially a reworking of her childhood in Indo-China, the source of motifs which reappear in so many of her novels, plays, and films. Most of her 1980s readers were not in a position to pronounce on this issue: they were responding to a powerfully emotional text, digging deep into the past of the woman at the centre of its narration, and into France's own colonial past, to uncover transgression, desire, separation, and death, the ecstatic and dangerous appeal of the mysterious other. The exploration of the relationship between a young poor white schoolgirl and her rich Chinese lover in the setting of 1920s Saigon evoked for French readers a colonial past pre-dating their inglorious forced withdrawal from Indo-China in 1954 after the French military defeat at Dien Bien Phu. The novel seems to have caught, or helped to create, a popular mood of desire to revisit a less problematic colonial past, a mood also evident in the popular success of Claire Denis's film *Chocolat* (1988), depicting her childhood in the French African colonies, and Wargnier's nostalgic film *Indochine* (1991).

The love affair was also of course in itself disturbing and intriguing. Was Duras really evoking a scandalous episode of her own past, as seemed to be suggested by the picture of her face accompanying the book, illustrating the narrator's description in the opening paragraphs of her ageing face 'lacéré de rides sèches et profondes, à la peau cassée' (10).³ The question of the autobiographical basis for the text was returned to repeatedly in press interviews, and in the special hour-long television interview with Duras which Bernard Pivot conducted for the prestigious literary book show 'Apostrophes', in September 1984.⁴ The notion of such a romantic and scandalous past for a public figure was in itself exciting. But the text does not deal only with the relations between 'la jeune fille' at its centre and the lover. Another, arguably just as central relationship, is the fraught tie between the girl and her mother (Pivot was keen to know if the mother had actually known of the nature of the liaison: Duras replied that she had not, though her mother had accepted money from him).⁵ The figures of

³ 'Scored with deep dry wrinkles, the skin cracked'.

⁴ Accounts of Duras's adolescence by biographers such as Françoise Lebelley follow the broad outlines of the narrative of *L'Amant*, and identify the lover. See F. Lebelley, *Duras ou le poids d'une plume* (Paris: Grasset, 1994).

⁵ In *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), a later and longer reworking of the same material, Duras writes that the mother not only knew but actually discussed the affair with her daughter.

the two brothers, and that of the girl's schoolfriend, H el ene Lagonelle, also swim sharply into focus at times, at others swirling more blurredly into the stream of desire which runs beneath the whole text, finding only one of its expressions in the relationship with the lover. Narrative modes, modes of re-enactement and of trawling the memory, thematics of displacement and otherness, madness and death, occupation of gender and racial borderlands, the tragic echoes of history in twentieth-century France—all these strands of the text will interest us as readers.

The sexual unconscious

But let us begin with the girl and the lover, and with the textual exploration of what might be termed the sexual unconscious of the relationship, that is to say, what each desires in the other, what roles each one calls upon the other to play. The lover's desire for the girl is constructed more conventionally than the girl's own feelings: she feels his gaze upon her, when they meet on the ferry, and is filled with the certitude of being desired, in a sense which she disassociates from ideas of beauty: 'Il n'y avait pas   attirer le d sir. Il  tait dans celle qui le provoquait ou il n'existait pas. Il  tait d j  l  d s le premier regard ou bien il n'avait jamais exist . Il  tait l'intelligence imm diate du rapport de sexualit  ou bien il n' tait rien' (28).⁶ The lover thus makes his first appearance as a desiring gaze, but he is not allowed to maintain it, as the narrative veers away from him for a long stretch; when it eventually returns to his gaze, we discover him to be trembling, intimidated. He has the advantage of being older, male, and visibly wealthy, but he is Chinese and she is white. In the expensive black car in which she allows herself to be driven to Saigon, she learns that he is a sophisticate, is familiar with the caf s and nightclubs of Paris, and with 'les adorables Parisiennes' (45). When he becomes her lover she declares him to be wonderfully expert, virtually defined by his amorous skills: 'c'est ce qu'il fait dans la vie, l'amour, seulement  a. Les mains sont expertes, merveilleuses, parfaites' (54).⁷ Yet he is also vulnerable, an only child whose mother is dead and whose father dominates him through the family fortune; he uses love and love-making to shore himself up against his insecurity, plunging at once into the absolute vocabulary of romantic love, giving the girl a diamond ring, and building promises of eternity. He even wishes for his father's death so that he can marry her.

⁶ 'There was no need to attract desire. Either it was in the woman who aroused it or it didn't exist. Either it was there at first glance or else it never had been. It was instant knowledge of a sexual rapport or else it was nothing.'

⁷ 'this is his occupation in life, love-making, nothing else. His hands are expert, marvellous, perfect.'

Her body appeals to him partly through its childish, half-developed nature; for him she is a child, his child, with whom he can play a semi-maternal role, bathing and dressing her. He is far from being always able to play the dominating seducer part which she craves; on the first occasion on which they make love he rips off her dress and throws her down on the bed to order, only to turn away in tears. He has to be comforted and the girl has to take on the mantle of seducer. His love is often agony and physical suffering, an 'amour-maladie' (love as sickness) in the Racinian tradition: 'Il gémit, il pleure. Il est dans un amour abominable' (50). When the date of her departure is eventually fixed, his suffering becomes more intense than his desire: 'Il disait: je ne peux plus te prendre, je croyais pouvoir encore, je ne peux plus. Il disait qu'il était mort' (133).⁸ As her boat departs for France she feels his gaze upon her once more, even though he is invisible, paralysed with distress in the back of his car. Later the girl imagines him acceding to his father's wish to marry a Chinese girl, and being capable of making love to his wife only after a long period and by substituting the white girl for the body in his bed. His last words to her, which carry the full weight of being the final words of the text, freeze him in the role of archetypal romantic lover, as he whispers that he has always loved her, will do so until his death.

The girl, in contrast, refuses to use the language of love, denies the romantic concept of being the only and absolute beloved, and enjoys the idea that she might be one amongst many of his women. Yet the fact that the narrative is entirely constituted by the recreation of the narrator's memories means that the lover's desire for the girl is itself part of her later reconstruction; we have only her reading of his desire for her. His role as besotted sufferer and consummate lover, bearing the keys to the magic kingdom of wealth, carries the whiff of an adolescent girl's absolutist expectations, retained in the account by the older narrator.

The narrative perspective produces a more extensive exploration of the girl's desire than of the lover's, drawing on both the narrator's past and present impressions. At the time, the girl is conscious of her own desire for the lover, at first expressed as a desire for his body, his skin and the rich sumptuousness of his clothing. The appeal of his wealth is also present from their first meeting, as he stands by his luxury black limousine, and becomes important not only in allowing the girl the powerful role in relation to her mother and brothers of getting them dined out in expensive restaurants, but also, crucially, in maintaining the provisional status of their relationship, which she seeks. As the affair progresses, the girl

⁸ 'He moans, he weeps. Wracked by love'; 'He'd say: I can't come inside you any more, I thought I could still manage it, I can't any more. He'd say he was dead.'

becomes aware of other figures creeping into her sexual imaginary: the younger brother, 'le jeune chasseur', is explicitly recognized between the lovers as a presence in her desire: 'oui, je le savais, quelquefois il était présent dans la jouissance et je le lui disais, à l'amant de Cholen, je lui parlais de son corps et de son sexe aussi, de son ineffable douceur, de son courage dans la forêt et sur les rivières aux embouchures des panthères noires' (122).⁹ This highly poeticized and lightly veiled confession avoids actually naming the brother, or his relation to her. The older narrator also perceives a trace of her elder brother, also referred to indirectly: 'L'ombre d'un autre homme aussi devait passer par la chambre, celle d'un jeune assassin, mais je ne savais pas encore, rien n'en apparaissait encore à mes yeux' (122).¹⁰ The poetic veiling occurs as the text begins to open up traditionally taboo areas in representations of love and desire: not only does the girl herself acknowledge that the desire she enacts with the lover has many origins, carrying with it echoes of desire running between herself and others, even forbidden others, but she reveals what she knows of it to the lover.

In *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (1991), a text published seven years after *L'Amant* which reworks much of the same material, the pivotal role of the younger brother in the narrator's sexuality is more developed and the narrator more fully realizes that 'elle avait vécu un seul amour entre le Chinois de Sadec et le petit frère d'éternité'.¹¹ Yet the younger brother already plays an important structural and thematic role in the earlier text, acting as a figure for the girl's feelings for the lover which she refuses to openly articulate. The most striking example of this is the positioning in the narrative of references to the younger brother's death, an event which belongs to a much later period in the narrator's life, ten years after the main events related in *L'Amant*, when she had long been in France. References to his death accumulate during the narrative, as if spelling out a future disaster, and culminate, less than twenty pages before the end, in a long account of the intense shock and pain which the narrator felt on receiving the telegram informing her of her brother's death—a distress which also mingles with the suffering she had endured a few months earlier when she lost a child. This material, deeply marked by pain and loss, immediately precedes the account of the girl's departure for France, and

⁹ 'the young hunter'; 'yes', I knew about that, sometimes he was present in my pleasure and I'd tell him, the lover from Cholen, I'd talk to him about the other's body and about his penis as well, about his indescribable sweetness, about his courage in the forest and in the river estuaries with black panthers.'

¹⁰ 'The shadow of another man must also have passed through the room, the shadow of a young murderer, but I didn't know that then, none of that was evident to me then.'

¹¹ *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, 201; 'she had lived a single passion with the Chinese man from Sadec and the eternal little brother.'

functions as an emblem of her unstated suffering. The figures of the lover and the younger brother become deeply entangled.

The narrator's passion for her younger brother is shown to develop in the hothouse family atmosphere between the violence of the older brother and the emotional vacuum left by the mother's apparent failure to love her younger children. But the intensity of this atmosphere is such that, as we saw above, the image of the elder brother also slips into her sexual unconscious. The elder brother's gambling, drug-taking, and social marginalization are, ironically, mirrored by the way in which the wealthy lover spends his days gambling and smoking opium. The girl draws attention to this when she refers to the lover as a millionaire layabout. In the restaurants to which the lover miserably accompanies the girl's family, the girl recognizes his fear as echoing that of her younger brother, whilst she herself both physically resembles the violent older brother and imitates his contemptuous behaviour to the lover.

The elder brother's violence is also echoed in a minor mode when the girl and the lover act out scenes of violence together in the lover's flat, which becomes an echo chamber of the family's extreme emotions. The narrator recognizes the link between the two, when she writes of the family: 'C'est là le lieu où plus tard me tenir une fois le présent quitté, à l'exclusion de tout autre lieu. Les heures que je passe dans la garçonnière de Cholen font apparaître ce lieu-là dans une lumière fraîche, nouvelle. C'est un lieu irrespirable, il côtoie la mort, un lieu de violence, de douleur, de désespoir, de déshonneur. Et tel est le lieu de Cholen' (93).¹² Outside the family, the girl's schoolfriend, Héléne Lagonelle, the only other white girl in the school, also comes to occupy a particularly mobile place in the narrator's sexual imaginary. Héléne Lagonelle is an innocent, resembling the younger brother in her incapacity to learn, and unconscious of the effect she produces when she walks naked through the school's dormitory. The narrator dwells upon the beauty of Héléne Lagonelle's white body, finally declaring herself 'exténuée du désir d'Héléne Lagonelle' (91),¹³ as fantasies of violent sexual relations with her friend take hold of her. Her imagination roves from playing the role with Héléne that the lover plays with the girl herself, to a more closely identificatory stance, in which she would take Héléne to the lover, and experience pleasure vicariously through Héléne.

¹² 'That's the place where I'll be later, once the present is left behind, all other places will be excluded. The hours I spend at his place in Cholen show that other place in a stark new light. It's an intolerable place, on the edge of death, a place of violence, pain, despair, dishonour. And so is the Cholen place.'

¹³ 'Worn out with desire for Héléne Lagonelle'.

The exploration of the girl's desire for the lover thus produces a whole network of transgressive desires, and makes sexuality into a core mode of being, channelling pain and pleasure, death and life. Desire is understood in the text not as object-fixated but as fluid, mobile, incorporating taboo sexualities—incest, lesbianism, violence—as much as heterosexual relations. Ever present in the background of all the girl's relations and desires, however, is a maelstrom of madness centring on the mother, sucking into its orbit almost all the figures in the girl's consciousness.

The heart of maternal darkness

Three years after the publication of *L'Amant*, Julia Kristeva, another major intellectual figure of the 1980s in France and, amongst other things, a psychoanalyst, warned that Duras's texts bring the reader so close to the brute experience of madness, that they present dangers to readers of a fragile mental disposition.¹⁴ In *L'Amant* the madness is centred on what Kristeva calls the lugubrious gothic madness of the narrator's mother, which drives the daughter into an attempt to efface her mother and escape from the stranglehold of their mutual passionate hatred. Yet, as Kristeva suggests, the attempt is doomed as the daughter merely tightens her obsessive bond, and the mother haunts her most intimate experiences. Thus, in the lingering description in the opening pages of the text of the idiosyncratic assortment of garments which the girl is wearing on the ferry, at the moment of the first meeting with the lover, the narrator tells us that she is wearing an old silk dress of her mother's, sleeveless and heavily *décolleté*, shoes and a hat that her mother has bought her, her face is made up with face powder also belonging to her mother, and her hair is held in the plaits that her mother has taught her to brush and braid.

Interwoven into this description, so heavily laden with the maternal presence, is the first account of her mother's depressive illness. The narrator states: 'J'ai eu cette chance d'avoir une mère désespérée d'un désespoir si pur que même le bonheur de la vie, si vif soit-il, quelquefois, n'arrivait pas à l'en distraire tout à fait' (22),¹⁵ and she describes the daily surfacing of her mother's disabling melancholia, her sudden incapacity to cope with ordinary tasks, the washing and dressing of her children,

¹⁴ In *Soleil Noir. Dépression et mélancolie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 235. A chapter entitled 'La maladie de la douleur' ('the sickness of pain') is devoted to Duras. Kristeva repeats her warning in a special issue of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* on Duras of March 1998.

¹⁵ 'I had the luck to have a mother so desperate with such pure despair that, sometimes, even the joys of life, however intense, could not altogether distract her from it.'

sometimes even the feeding of them. The visual image of the maternally identified girl is thus undercut by an evocation of maternal failure, and both are carried forward into the account of the meeting with the lover. The mother precedes the lover in the narrative, as well as in the chronology of the daughter's passions, and is never far from the daughter's consciousness. 'Elle est à enfermer, à battre, à tuer' (32)¹⁶ rages the narrator as she recalls her mother's lack of interest in her writing plans, her determination that her daughter will leave Indo-China, do the *agrégation* in mathematics, and not find herself in her mother's position.

The narrator's rage swings from hatred to love: 'la saleté ma mère mon amour' (scum my mother my love); both mother and daughter plan on separation but only succeed in a geographical sense. Before the narrative of the meeting with the lover has reached the moment when he approaches her, the narrator has leapt long years ahead, to the last few years of her mother's life in a château in the Loir-et-Cher, to her final realization that her mother has always been mad: 'De naissance. Dans le sang' (40).¹⁷ Later, when the narrator evokes her first love-making in the flat, thoughts of the mother again invade repeatedly: as the girl is initiated into sexual pleasure, she experiences a triumphant sense of separation from and superiority over her mother, relegating her to a childlike status, outside the knowledge of pleasure. But this sense of separation is counterbalanced by a fear that she is only fulfilling her mother's predictions. The swinging from love to hatred, from bitter accusation to pride in her mother, continues throughout the narrative, producing often irreconcilable views of the maternal figure, at one moment presented as colluding with the liaison for financial gain, at others as punishing her violently on suspicion, as the daughter pursues the struggle to disentangle herself from a mother whose madness has filled the space of the child's dreams: 'le malheur de ma mère a occupé le lieu du rêve' (58).¹⁸

Mother-daughter narratives are a common thread in women's writing, often producing a highly complex and less idealized narrative than those of mother-son relationships—indeed within *L'Amant* itself the mother-daughter relation stands in stark contrast to that of the mother and elder brother, for whom the mother repeatedly sacrifices everything she owns before eventually, at her own request, being laid to rest with him in his tomb, an image of such intolerable splendour that the narrator can hardly bear to contemplate it. Duras's mother-daughter narrative in this text resembles what Adrienne Rich has called 'the heart of maternal darkness', in other words a narrative which draws on maternal

¹⁶ 'She should be locked up, beaten, killed.'

¹⁷ 'From birth. In the blood.'

¹⁸ 'My mother's unhappiness filled the place of my dreams.'

violence and on daughterly anger.¹⁹ In the extreme case of matrophobia, according to Rich, the daughter so dreads the deep pull towards identification with the mother that she must try to purge herself of her mother's bondage and perform radical surgery to become free. The daughter's drive in *L'Amant* towards the lover, towards social disgrace and repudiation, is one that she barely understands herself. When she says that: 'je devais le faire, [. . .] c'en était comme d'une obligation' (51), she underlines her feeling of being driven by unconscious forces; they can be read as a desperate attempt to free herself from maternal identification, even though the mix of violence and mothering she seeks from the lover, together with the certainty that she will be separated from him, essentially mirror her relationship with her mother. 'Il me traite de putain, de dégueulasse, il me dit que je suis son seul amour' (54–5),²⁰ records the narrator happily, duplicating her address to her mother as 'la saleté ma mère mon amour'.

The daughter admires her mother's quality of persistence, recognizes that her mother was driven to despair by her betrayal by the corrupt administration of the colony and the tragedy of the concession into which she poured all her efforts and resources for seven years of their childhood. Yet her madness is not containable, spills over into the violence of the elder brother, and fills her daughter's universe with images of the mad, the distraught, the dead, and the suicidal. The narrative contains the deaths of all four of the other family figures—father, mother, elder and younger brother—and that of the baby of the mad woman beggar, who gives away the baby to the family to look after, as well as the narrator's loss of her own baby, much later in life. The relationship between the girl and the lover is in the narrator's mind a dark doubling of the liaison between another white woman in the colony whose young lover kills himself when the woman leaves him to accompany her husband to a new posting. The narrator dwells on the disgrace the two women share, on the infamy of their 'jouissance à en mourir' (111)²¹ and on the woman's despair. As the narrator comes to the account of her departure for France she remembers the story of a boy she had known at school who, at the age of 17, had walked off in the middle of a game of cards on board ship and drowned himself in the sea. This memory is linked to the temptation the girl herself feels, as she stands on board deck, listening to a Chopin piece she had never mastered, to jump overboard in her turn, suddenly no longer convinced that she had not loved the man from Cholen. All these doubling

¹⁹ See Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1977), 247–80.

²⁰ 'I had to do it, it felt like an obligation'; 'He calls me a whore, a slut, he tells me I'm his only love.'

²¹ 'pleasure to die from'.

of roles with the despairing and the suicidal return the girl each time to the fraught identification with the despair of the mother, perhaps the most strikingly and darkly mirrored in the mad beggarwoman whose children are 'tous morts ou jetés' (106)²² and who gives up her last baby to the girl's family, before setting off on an immense and apparently senseless journey, through mosquito-infested forests, over plains and mountains, forever wandering and haunting the imagination of the narrator-writer, peopling her books.

The madness of war

Beyond the girl's family history, and the narration of episodes taking place within the colony itself, the despair of the narrative also encompasses evocations of more generalized disaster and conflagration, through a frame of reference to war, and to the Second World War in particular. 'Je vois la guerre sous les mêmes couleurs que mon enfance' (78)²³ writes the narrator, who apprehends the nature of war via her experience of her elder brother and his violation of the minds, bodies, and lives of the weak. The narrative veers back from the lovers in the flat but, barely two paragraphs later, returns to the stories of two American women living in wartime Paris during the German occupation. Marie-Claude Carpenter is curiously out of place: 'Pourquoi elle était là plutôt qu'ailleurs, pourquoi elle était aussi de si loin, de Boston, pourquoi elle était riche, pourquoi à ce point on ne savait rien d'elle, personne, rien, pourquoi ces réceptions comme forcées, pourquoi, pourquoi dans ses yeux, très loin dedans, au fond de la vue, cette particule de mort, pourquoi?' (82)²⁴ The 'cauchemar blanc' which the narrator traverses when she visits Marie-Claude Carpenter, suggests the absence, the nightmare displacement of war and exile, in which death lurks. The dissonance of Marie-Claude Carpenter's name is echoed by that of Betty Fernandez, 'étrangère elle aussi' (82),²⁵ beautiful, like Marie-Claude, and equally strangely attired. The horrors of the war, only hinted at in the portrait of Marie-Claude, are more suddenly and brutally evoked through the similarity of Betty Fernandez's greeting to that of one of her guests: 'Bonjour vous allez bien? Cela, à l'anglaise,

²² 'all dead or thrown out'.

²³ 'I think of the war in the same way as I think of my childhood.'

²⁴ 'Why she was there rather than anywhere else, why she too was from so far away, from Boston, why she was rich, why no one knew anything at all about her, no one, not anything, why these social gatherings, as if they were obligatory, why, why in her eyes, far away in the depths of her sight, this fragment of death, why?'

²⁵ 'also a foreigner'.

sans virgule, dans un rire et durant le temps de ce rire la plaisanterie devenait la guerre elle-même ainsi que toute souffrance obligée qui découlait d'elle, la Résistance comme la Collaboration, la faim comme le froid, le martyr comme l'infamie' (85). Betty Fernandez, announces the narrator in matter of fact tone, was a collaborator—a position, the narrator adds, absolutely equivalent to her own past membership of the Communist Party, in its complete lack of judgement and its assumption that a political solution can be found to a personal problem. Betty Fernandez's perfect social grace is now inseparable, for the narrator, from all that happened during the war, including the discovery of the concentration camps.

This irruption of the question of personal and political positions taken up during and immediately after the war, together with the reference to the Holocaust, corresponds both to the mood of guilty self-examination over the events of the war, which gripped the French consciousness in the 1980s and 1990s, and to Duras's own writing preoccupations in this period. In 1985, the year following the publication of *L'Amant*, Marguerite Duras was to publish *La Douleur*, a collection of short texts which set out to throw into question the boundaries between Resistance and Collaboration and suggest that the personal realities of wartime existence cannot be seen in black-and-white terms. The collection also contains the diary form account of Duras's agonizing wait for the return of her husband from Dachau, a text heralded within *L'Amant* itself by the apparently casually offered account of the way in which the elder brother stole the food rations she had been storing up for her husband's return.²⁶ *La Douleur* appeared in the same year as Claude Lanzmann's long and harrowing film *Shoah*; both works thus served as grim prefaces to the 1987 trial of Klaus Barbie for his part in the murder and deportation of French Jews under the Vichy regime.²⁷

In *L'Amant* the evocation of the Holocaust, and of the issues of Collaboration and Resistance, muddies the boundaries between private and public disaster; the violence and loss enacted between the girl and her lover, the girl and her mother, and between the girl and the younger brother are paralleled on a wider, cataclysmic scale. It also raises questions about the possibility of ethical judgements of individual behaviour.

²⁶ For a reading of *La Douleur* in the context of 1980s questioning of representations of the war years see Claire Gorrara, *Women's Representations of the Occupation in Post-68 France* (London: Macmillan, 1998).

²⁷ See the Introduction for a discussion of the questioning of France's own collaboration in wartime crimes which reached as far as Mitterrand himself.

Narrative paths

La Douleur purports to be in part a diary found by Duras long after the events recorded in it. This is by no means an unproblematic claim and the status of *L'Amant* is just as difficult to resolve, if not more so. Critical reaction at the time of publication, as already mentioned, fastened on the text as autobiography and it has since been treated as an autobiographical piece of writing in a number of critical studies of autobiography as a genre, despite the fact that the narrator states at the beginning: 'L'histoire de ma vie n'existe pas. Ça n'existe pas. Il n'y a jamais de centre. Pas de chemin, pas de ligne' (14). However there is no intrinsic reason, as Michael Sheringham writes, why the autobiographical genre cannot evolve and innovate, like any other genre: the 1980s saw the publication of several 'nouvelles autobiographies', the term being especially appropriate as two of the most notable examples, alongside Duras, were Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute, former *nouveaux romanciers*.²⁸ The lack of belief in a coherent narratable linear development of the self need not debar the writing of autobiography. It does, nevertheless, require different techniques, and most readers are struck by the way in which the narrative constantly fluctuates between past events and the writing present, by the switches from the narrating first person to a third person 'jeune fille', by the dislocation of conventional syntax in many sentences, the way in which the progress of the narrative depends on association and memory in the writing present, rather than on a chronological ordering of the past, and by the lingering attention paid to photographic images, both remembered and imagined.

The focus on the writing present, and on lapses and contradictions of the narrator's memory, make self-evident the fact obscured by many an autobiographer that the text bears a much stronger relation to the writer's current preoccupations and construction of the past than to a historically verifiable set of facts. The willingness of the narrator to follow the unruly path taken by her own thoughts draws the reader not into an illusory past, but into something resembling a dream experience, with all the sudden changes of locale, apparently implausible disruptions of subject and strong visual images of the uncensored mind. It is precisely this privileged admission to intensity of experience, together with the implied invitation to become the dream analyst, which is one of the strongest appeals of the text. As the story of what happened on the ferry is constantly deferred,

²⁸ 'The story of my life does not exist. There is never any centre. No path, no line.' Michael Sheringham, *French Autobiography. Devices and Desires* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 16.

it grows in significance, drawing into its orbit a rich collection of jagged pieces of the memory which connect to it, illuminate it, and are illuminated by it. Like the branch of the Mekong river which the ferry crosses, with its current so strong that 'il emporterait tout, aussi bien des pierres, une cathédrale, une ville' (18), the relationship between the girl and the lover becomes a fast-flowing channel leading the girl imperiously towards the ocean on which she will set out in the last few pages of the narrative. Images of water and the sea frequently recur, from the girl's early fear, 'j'ai peur, j'ai peur que les câbles cèdent, que nous soyons emportés vers la mer' (18), to the moment in the lover's flat when restraints do snap and she is 'emportée vers la jouissance' represented by 'la mer, sans forme, simplement incomparable' (50), and to the instant on the boat when she contemplates throwing herself into the sea, understanding at last that she had lived through 'un amour qu'elle n'avait pas vu parce qu'il s'était perdu dans l'histoire comme l'eau dans le sable' (138).²⁹ Where her mother becomes overwhelmed by her failure to keep out the ocean through the wall she constructs so laboriously, the girl manages the same powerful forces by allowing them to take their course. Perhaps the narrative is above all a survival story.

Another feature of the narrative much remarked upon, and which ties it more strongly to autobiography, or at least to family history, is the use of photographs, both imagined and in existence.³⁰ The role of the family album in constituting an official version of family history is familiar to most of us: it is only when an event occurs that does not fit the official narrative and cannot be included that the essentially unrepresentative nature of the album strikes home. In true Orwellian style photographs may disappear from the album's pages, as family history changes, or even, now, be altered to add or remove figures. Duras's text insists on the tension between the photograph and the family narrative, both by including descriptions of the profoundly disunited family grouped together in an illusion of group identity for the camera, and, more radically, by creating her text from a highly pictorial scene, lovingly and lengthily evoked, and referred to as the photograph which was never taken:

Elle aurait pu exister, une photographie aurait pu être prise, comme une autre, ailleurs, dans d'autres circonstances. Mais elle ne l'a pas été. L'objet était trop

²⁹ 'It would carry anything away, not just stones, a cathedral, a town'; 'I'm afraid, I'm afraid that the cables might give way, that we might be carried out to sea'; 'carried away by pleasure'; 'the sea, formless, simply incomparable'; 'a love that she had not noticed because it had got lost in history like sea in the sand'.

³⁰ The following discussion owes much to the excellent article by Pierre Saint-Amand entitled 'La photographie de famille dans *L'Amant*', in *Marguerite Duras. Rencontres de Cerisy*, ed. Pierre Vircondelet (Montreal: Editions Ecriture, 1994), 225–40.

mince pour la provoquer. Qui aurait pu penser à ça ? [...] C'est pourquoi, cette image, et il ne pouvait pas en être autrement, elle n'existe pas. Elle a été omise. Elle a été oubliée. Elle n'a pas été détachée, enlevée à la somme. C'est à ce manque d'avoir été faite qu'elle doit sa vertu, celle de représenter un absolu, d'en être justement l'auteur. (16–17)³¹

This insistence on the absence of the photograph situates the whole text as resting on a lacuna; as Pierre Saint-Amand remarks, the missing photograph is an illustration of the negating gesture which Duras makes about her writing project when she writes that there cannot be a narrative of her life, because there is no centre. In one sense, the missing photograph is the missing centre. However, the absence of a historical photograph can also be said to be the ideal circumstance for the imaginative exploration which the writing self carries out. The absence becomes the 'author', as she writes above; in the absence of the photograph, the text elaborates in the written word the image of the girl on the ferry. An inversion has taken place: where a photographic image normally speaks for itself, bearing at most a laconic written label of the type 'Sadec, 1927', here the writing continually expands and takes the dominant place. This issue of the tension between photographic image and accompanying written label is one which resurfaces in a number of contemporary texts and it exemplifies ironically a trend in defining a written self in relation to a visual medium.³²

The missing photograph would have been incongruous, potentially scandalous, certainly bursting with life and sexuality. The contrast with the other photographs of the family referred to in the text is striking. The narrator recounts her mother's determination that photographs of the family should be taken: 'Elle se plaint du prix mais elle fait quand même les frais des photos de famille. Les photos, on les regarde, on ne se regarde pas mais on regarde les photographies, chacun séparément, sans un mot de commentaire, mais on les regarde, on se voit' (115).³³ The photographs lie, evoking unity and communication where there is none. However, two

³¹ 'It could have existed, a photograph could have been taken, like others, elsewhere, in other circumstances. But it wasn't. The event was too insignificant for that. Who could have thought of taking one? [...] That's why the picture, and it could not have been otherwise, does not exist. It was omitted. It was not thought of. It was never detached, picked out from the rest. And it is this lack of having been taken that makes it so valuable, allows it to represent an absolute, to be precisely its author.'

³² Marie Redonnet's *Rose Mélie Rose* (1987) uses twelve imaginary photographs to structure her heroine's life narrative. Annie Ernaux also draws on photographs from her past, and Barthes famously comments on family photographs in his *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975).

³³ 'She complains about the price but she pays out anyway for family photos. We look at them, the photos, we don't look at each other but we look at the photographs, each of us separately, without a word of comment, but we look at them, we see ourselves.'

other photographs are more tellingly eloquent in their representation of the mother: in one, which the narrator calls the photo of despair, the children are grouped around their mother in front of their ill-fated house in Hanoi. The children look neglected and the mother is gripped by depression. The second forms part of the mother's ritual preparation for death, the last photo for the family to cherish, retouched like a body prepared for its final viewing. Although it too is a lie, its presence in the text truthfully speaks of the narrator's struggle with her mother, her desire for her death. In their representation of despair and death, these two last photographs, at least, are in tune with the narrative.

Borderlands and indeterminacies

The ferry crossing across the Mekong river with which the narrative opens, and the ocean crossing with which it comes to a close, signal the constant crossing of frontiers and borders which the text sets up. Geographic, racial, cultural, and sexual frontiers are confronted and sometimes dissolved as the poor white girl of French parentage meets her rich Chinese lover in the ill-reputed Chinese district of Saigon, bringing with her her desires for her brothers and her white friend, Hélène Lagonelle. Writer and theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, herself a product of the borderlands between the United States and Mexico, writes of a 'mestiza' (mixed) consciousness arising from borderlands in which cultures and races occupy the same territory. The *mestiza* 'flounders in uncharted seas' as languages and cultures collide, learns to operate in pluralistic mode and to flee the rigid boundaries and walls erected by fixed notions of identity, whether racial or sexual.³⁴

The narrator of *L'Amant* spends her childhood in the forests, the creeks, and the pepper plantations, hunting black panthers and eating the fish and vegetables that the natives eat. Her family circle includes Dô, the family servant so devoted to the narrator's mother that she accompanies her everywhere, even unpaid, even to France. The lover claims that the girl resembles the local girls:

Lui, l'amant de Cholen, il croit que la croissance de la petite blanche a pâti de la chaleur trop forte. Lui aussi il est né et a grandi dans cette chaleur. Il se découvre avoir avec elle cette parenté-là. Il dit que toutes ces années passées ici, à cette intolérable latitude, ont fait qu'elle est devenue une jeune fille de ce

³⁴ See Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

pays de l'Indochine. Qu'elle a la finesse de leurs poignets, leurs cheveux drus dont on dirait qu'ils ont pris pour eux toute la force, longs comme les leurs, et surtout, cette peau, cette peau de tout le corps qui vient de l'eau de la pluie qu'on garde ici pour le bain des femmes, des enfants. (120)³⁵

In Saigon she lives in a boarding-school mainly frequented by 'métisses', the mixed blood daughters of local women abandoned by their French fathers; only the girl and Hélène Lagonelle are white. Yet in the girl's imagination Hélène Lagonelle's white flesh merges across race and gender with that of the lover himself: 'Je la vois comme étant de la même chair que cette homme de Cholen' (92).³⁶

The girl inhabits a borderland, in which boundaries dissolve and identities merge, and yet she is constantly called upon to compartmentalize her life. She may resemble the girls around her in the school but she receives a formal French education at the French lycée in Saigon, and she rides in the front of the local bus in the place reserved for white passengers. She has to promise her mother that she could never bring herself to make love with a Chinese man: 'Comment veux-tu, je dis, avec un Chinois, comment veux-tu que je fasse ça avec un Chinois, si laid, si malingre?' (74). She is unable to treat the lover with even a minimum of courtesy when she is with her brothers 'parce que c'est un Chinois, que ce n'est pas un blanc' (65). Instead, she writes in a phrase that evokes the horrors of war, 'il devient un endroit brûlé' (66).³⁷

In the lover's room, barriers lack material substance. Lying on the bed, separated from the crowds outside by only a cotton blind, both part and not part of them, the girl has an intense sense experience of the town:

Le lit est séparé de la ville par ces persiennes à claire-voie, ce store de coton. Aucun matériau dur ne nous sépare des autres gens. Eux, ils ignorent notre existence. Nous, nous percevons quelque chose de la leur, le total de leurs voix, de leurs mouvements, comme une sirène qui lancerait une clameur brisée, triste sans écho.

Des odeurs de caramel arrivent dans la chambre, celle des cacahuètes grillées, des soupes chinoises, des viandes rôties, des herbes, du jasmin, de la poussière, de l'encens, du feu de charbon de bois, le feu se transporte ici dans

³⁵ 'The lover from Cholen believes that the little white girl's growth has suffered from the heat, that it has been too much for her. He too was born and grew up in this heat. He discovers that he has this in common with her. He says that all the years she's spent here, at this intolerable latitude, have made her turn into a girl from Indo-China. That she has their slender wrists, their hair so thick that it seems to have taken all the girls' strength, and her hair is long like theirs too, and, above all, she has their skin, all over her body, a skin that comes from the rainwater which is kept here for the women and the children to bathe in.'

³⁶ 'I see her as being of the same flesh as the man from Cholen.'

³⁷ 'A Chinese, I say, how on earth do you imagine that I could do that with a Chinese, so ugly, such a weakling?'; 'because he's Chinese, because he's not a white man'; 'He becomes a scorched place.'

des paniers, il se vend dans les rues, l'odeur de la ville est celle des villages de la brousse, de la forêt. (53)³⁸

Although some of these sense impressions are specifically of the Chinese quarter, they are extended to the wider surroundings and evoked with an intensity which suggests a close identification with a country which is not in fact primarily evoked in idealized or exoticized terms. The magical luminosity of the nights in the dry season are, certainly, lovingly dwelled on, but more frequently the narrator recalls the stultifying heat, the monotony of a climate which has no springtime, the frequency of the epidemics, and the sight of the disease-ridden crowds.

Sometimes she speaks as an insider, sometimes as an outsider; the struggle which the girl has to live several lives at once echoes her mother's ambivalence. Her mother wears cotton stockings in the heat, in order to play the role of the French headmistress, but her hair is in a Chinese chignon; she retires back to France but then changes her mind and returns. The strains of keeping the compartments and contradictions going are an obvious root of her mental disturbance; but, where the mother is above all symbolized by her attempt to build a dam, to hold back the ocean, the girl becomes unwilling to categorize, make boundaries. It is in this spirit that the narrator can describe her decision to join the Communist Party as equivalent to the decision to collaborate with the German occupying forces.

Like moral judgements, gender roles also become indeterminate. The girl relishes her appearance on the ferry, the clash of the man's felt hat, itself thrown into question by its pink colour, and its ambivalent relation to her high-heeled gold lamé sandals. Here the girl appears literally to enact Judith Butler's theory of gender as performance for if, as Butler argues, gender identity, like other identities, is generated by repeated rule-bound discourses, then it is open to the individual to vary and subvert the various styles and positions which we repeat.³⁹ The illusion of gender identity can be exposed by parodic and subversive elements, here represented by the hat and the sandals. A similar gender and racial blurring occurs when, in an effort to find an existing image that would resemble the non-existent photograph, the narrator turns to a photograph of her son: 'Il est en Californie avec ses amies Erika et Elisabeth

³⁸ 'The bed is separated from the town by the latticed shutters, the cotton blind. Nothing solid separates us from the people in the street. They know nothing of our existence. We perceive something of theirs, the sum of their voices, their movements, like a siren starting up and breaking off, mournfully, with no response. Caramel smells enter the room, and smells of roasted peanuts, chinese soups, roast meats, herbs, jasmín, dust, incense, charcoal fires, fire is carried in baskets here, it's sold in the street, the smell of the town is the smell of the bush villages, of the forest.'

³⁹ See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).

Lennard. Il est maigre, tellement, on dirait un Ougandais blanc lui aussi' (21). Far from clarifying the image of the girl on the ferry, this sudden entry into the picture of the narrator's son complicates all the categories already in place: Indo-China becomes California, female becomes male (but framed by two females), French becomes Ugandan. The girl on the ferry has not yet met her lover but she has already become a mother. And yet, because of a similarity of expression, of non-coincidence with his own appearance—'Il se veut donner une image déjetée de jeune vagabond' (21)—the narrator is able to conclude with satisfaction: 'C'est cette photographie qui est au plus près de celle qui n'a pas été faite de la jeune fille du bac' (21).⁴⁰

Masculinity, a gender category just as problematic as that of femininity, is also shown in the text to be tied to aspects of performance. The lover inhabits a 'garconnière' (batchelor flat), a space more or less exclusively intended for his amorous activities, but, as noted earlier, when the girl asks him to enact the performance, throw her on the bed and rip off her clothes, he breaks down half-way through, dissolves into tears, and has to be himself tenderly undressed by the inexperienced girl. If in some respects he plays the role of perfect lover, he does not do so entirely in accordance with Hollywood film tradition since the narrator describes his body in terms of a series of lacks of conventional Western masculinity: 'La peau est d'une somptueuse douceur. Le corps. Le corps est maigre, sans force, sans muscles, il pourrait avoir été malade, être en convalescence, il est imberbe, sans virilité autre que celle du sexe, il est très faible, il paraît être à la merci d'une insulte, souffrant' (49).⁴¹ This description makes clear how categories of race and gender identity are imbricated in the text, and further links the lover both to the little brother, also described in a blurring of gender and race as a little coolie, and to the girl herself, with her barely formed body 'encore sans formes arrêtées, à tout instant en train de se faire' (121). The lover's room is similarly described as a 'passage', and it becomes a borderland—a place built for the poor Chinese, furnished impersonally in modern Western style, open to the sounds and smells of the crowd in the street, a place which suits the girl perfectly because it is a displacement: 'Elle est là où il faut qu'elle soit, déplacée là' (47).⁴²

⁴⁰ 'He's in California with his friends Erika and Elisabeth Lennard. He looks thin, so thin that you would think he was a white Ugandan as well'; 'He wants to take on a twisted image of a young layabout'; 'This is the photograph that comes closest to the one which was never taken of the young girl on the ferry.'

⁴¹ 'His skin is sumptuously soft. His body. His body is thin, with no strength, no muscles, as if he has been ill, as if he was convalescing, he has no beard, no sign of virility other than his penis, he is very weak, he seems to be open to insult, distressed.'

⁴² 'It is still without finished form, at every moment still in the making'; 'She is where she should be, displaced.'

For Gloria Anzaldúa, the consciousness of the borderlands is the consciousness of the future, because the future 'depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures' and on an abandonment of dualistic thinking.⁴³ In this sense *L'Amant* may be a text which takes events of the past as its focus but it is inhabited by a very contemporary sensibility.

Conclusions

L'Amant is a love story, a post-colonial narrative, a confessional text. It evokes, directly and indirectly, many other texts in its pages. The seasoned Duras reader is directly addressed by the narrator-as-author and reminded of the more low-key version of events given more than thirty years earlier in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950). This reader will also recognize the beggar woman, and the distraught colonial wife whose young lover commits suicide, and find echoes of other figures from Duras's fictional and film narratives. This form of intertextuality, in which a single work by an author explicitly takes its place within an already existing *œuvre*, reworking familiar themes and characters, echoes the practice of other contemporary authors such as Michel Tournier and, to a lesser degree, Annie Ernaux. One of its main effects is to displace the centre of interest from the primary material with which the text deals to the ways in which the material is handled, to the writing or filmic process itself.

Less intentional and explicit echoes may also sound for some readers of an author of an earlier generation writing about rather different experiences of the French colonies of 1920s Indo-China. André Malraux's expedition into the Cambodian jungle, his subsequent trial and conflict with the colonial regime took place at much the same time as the events recounted in *L'Amant*, and are fictionalized in *La Voie royale* (1933). Malraux's focus on man's metaphysical struggle with destiny, symbolized in the threatening and alienating force of the Cambodian jungle and its native inhabitants, differs sharply from Duras's text, yet his protagonists too are uncertain of their identity, occupy borderlands, and are fixated by gender and sexual performance, threatened by impotency. Further back still, *L'Amant* has many resonances with the tradition of the French confessional text, in which a male, often curiously feminized first-person narrator confesses his own part in a love affair which has destroyed the other partner.⁴⁴ Here the tale is turned on its head since the woman both

⁴³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 79–80.

⁴⁴ Chateaubriand's *René* (1802), Musset's *Confession d'un enfant du siècle* (1836), and Constant's *Adolphe* (1816) are famous examples.

survives and narrates, but her narrative does resemble in some ways the confessional tale of Chateaubriand's René, driven overseas to live with the Natchez Indian tribe in the French American colonies in an unsuccessful attempt to bury a history of incestuous desire. In its runaway popular success, can *L'Amant* be said to have anything in common with less high culture? Its confessional tone certainly has links with popular romance, and its focus on the female narrator and her experiences is one shared by many best-sellers. The strong emphasis on the visual connects it to the influential film culture of contemporary France, a connection made evident by the film version of the text made by Jean-Jacques Annaud released in 1992. Although the film gained international success, its reception was dominated by the weight of its erotic material—it is perhaps inevitable that the cinematic exploration of sexuality carries an impact of such potency that it shifts the balance of the written text.

Novels highly acclaimed in their time by no means always retain their status for later generations. *L'Amant* was undoubtedly *the* text of the 1980s and, if it has a single characteristic which may guarantee its future, it may be its open, exploratory nature. Open to other tellings, open to other texts, and open, most importantly, to other readers.