

An Interview with Marguerite Duras

Susan Husserl-Kapit

Marguerite Duras, the distinguished French novelist, dramatist, and filmmaker, is loosely grouped with the writers of the New Novel. Linked by their revolt against the traditional novel, writers such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, and Claude Simon have each found their own style and vision. Marguerite Duras, who has written sixteen novels, thirteen plays, and six film scripts over the past thirty years, is a strong case in point. In recent years, most notably since the student and worker rebellion of 1968, which crystallized French unrest and mobilized the discontented, Duras's work has taken on a new political tenor. The title of her 1969 novel is significant in this regard: *Détruire: Dit-elle* [*Destroy, She Said*]. And destruction of the old order is what Duras intends to accomplish in her literature as well as in her politics. The impact of the women's movement has led her to broaden her conception of the oppressor, to confront issues that she had formerly been able to transcend or ignore. The powers to be overthrown now include male supremacy, as pernicious in its domination of thinking, feeling, judging, and creating as in its economic and political suppression of women. It is the destruction of the male ethic that Duras attempts in her literature. No longer proud of critics' early claims that she wrote "like a man," she now sees this as a trait to be purged. Indeed, she makes a conscious effort in her writing to rid herself of everything learned from men—rules, theories, techniques—to create an art which invalidates traditional logic and confounds systematic political and philosophical thinking. Since *Les Petits Chevaux de Tarquinia* (1953), she has rejected the descriptive, analytic, and linear qualities of her early style in favor of one that is suggestive, poetic, and disdainful of chronology (e.g., as in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* [*The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*]). The well-

Susan Husserl-Kapit also provided the translation and introduction.

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thought-out, tightly constructed plot of a novel like *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* [*The Sea Wall*] has given way to the freer-flowing "organic" creation of atmosphere in *Moderato Cantabile*, for instance. Her primary tool is rhythm, which she uses to suspend the readers' critical judgment and to carry them into the world of "darkness" she creates. She writes from what she believes to be the essence of women, that part of her directly connected to her pain, her yearnings, and her joy.

In this interview, Marguerite Duras talks about the creation and nature of her fictional world, one that she sees as the representation of a strictly female vision. There are several disconcerting elements in her comments which, lacking the poetic rhythm of her fiction, it might be helpful to discuss. The first is Duras's terminology, the use of familiar words in an unfamiliar, profoundly personal way. Significantly, it is the words that obsess her which undergo this semantic transformation; among the more striking ones are "neurosis," "madness," "intelligence," "silence," and "darkness." For Duras the first two are positive forces; they suggest a closeness to nature and to the self that shuns useless theories, empty facts, and irrelevant knowledge (all male constructs in her eyes). The notion of "intelligence" is ambiguous in this interview; when used negatively, it refers to theoretical, and thus sterile, male intelligence; when used positively, it refers to "organic," and thus fertile, female intelligence. The terms "silence" and "darkness" are related to "neurosis" and delineate the state in which Duras believes women exist. Primarily because of their oppression and their potential to give birth, women are turned inward, unable really to express themselves. And yet, because they are not distracted by the deafening clatter of "male distortions of reality," women are directly in tune with themselves.

Another possible source of confusion in this interview is the concatenation of five paradoxical statements: (1) all women are neurotic; (2) women know what they want; (3) women have not used their intelligence or their silence; (4) women are not in a natural state; (5) women must emerge from their silence. According to Duras, all women are neurotic, so in touch with themselves that they know intuitively what they want. And yet some women deny their silence, accept male standards, and emulate men; by refusing their own intelligence, they deny their own nature. What Duras wants is for women to emerge from silence *not* by rejecting it but by acknowledging it as their strength, expressing it artistically and politically, and finally, by affirming it as a superior principle, making *this* the standard by which everything, including masculinity, is judged.

The last disconcerting element in the interview is Duras's ambivalence toward maternity, what she calls the "fantastic shackles of motherhood." If it appears to be a miraculous "swallowing up," a positive loss of self, if it further connects women to the eternal continuum of nature, maternity also limits freedom which, the author claims, women must

assert in order to express themselves. But isn't the reconciliation of maternity and freedom an impossibility? Only on the practical, logical level, one with which Duras is rarely concerned. Listening at a deeper level, we sense that she has accepted this contradiction and creates from within it.

Indeed, contradictions are an integral part of the art of Marguerite Duras. That they confuse, frustrate, and enrage us stimulates the search for our personal resolutions. The questions raised by Duras's answers are as important a part of the dialectic as the answers themselves: if all humans did function on the basis of their instincts and emotions, would this not lead to destruction and chaos? If the lies surrounding men were cleared away so that their true selves could emerge, what would they find? If women function without concerted thought, how can they become ideologues, philosophers, and the like? Regardless of our opinion of Duras's postulates, an acceptance of the silence she sees as naturally female will allow us to experience her and, perhaps, to perceive human nature in a new and unexpected way.

The Interview

MD: I think "feminine literature" is an organic, translated writing . . . translated from blackness, from darkness. Women have been in darkness for centuries. They don't know themselves. Or only poorly. And when women write, they translate this darkness.

SHK: More so than men?

MD: Men don't translate. They begin from a theoretical platform that is already in place, already elaborated. The writing of women is really translated from the unknown, like a new way of communicating rather than an already formed language. But to achieve that, we have to turn away from plagiarism. There are many women who write as they think they should write—to imitate men and make a place for themselves in literature. Colette wrote like a little girl, a turbulent and terrible and delightful little girl. So she wrote "feminine literature" as men wanted it. That's not feminine literature in reality. It's feminine literature seen by men and recognized as such. It's the men who enjoy themselves when they read it. I think feminine literature is a violent, direct literature and that, to judge it, we must not—and this is the main point I want to make—start all over again, take off from a theoretical platform. The other day you were telling me, "Yes, but women can also be ideologues, philosophers, poets, etc. etc." Of course. Of course. But why go over that? That should go without saying. We should be saying the opposite: can *men* forget everything and join women?

SHK: They should try.

MD: That's the problem. You know, in his *Discourse on Politics* Aimé Césaire, the black poet, says that when someone is brown, people always wonder if he or she has black blood, but never do they wonder if he or she has white blood. And when we have a male in front of us, we could ask: does he have some female in him? And that could be the main point. That's it: reverse everything, including analysis and criticism . . . Reverse everything. Make women the point of departure in judging, make darkness the point of departure in judging what men call light, make obscurity the point of departure in judging what men call clarity.

SHK: What interests me is that behind all this you seem to think there is a specific feminine and masculine nature.

MD: I think there probably is, but how can we know since we're not there yet? It's intangible.

SHK: And yet, *all* your female characters are mobile, independent, aware, active, and rebellious, whereas all your male characters are immobile, dependent, unaware, and passive.

MD: Because it is the women who *talk*, the women who decide. I mean, what appears in my films is the language of women, the action of women. The men are forced to follow. They do it the best they can, but they lag behind. It's already the beginning of an inverted world.

SHK: But the presentation of your men and women seems to indicate that you challenge the accepted sex roles. Your women are more masculine according to the traditional definition.

MD: No, my women are not more masculine.

SHK: They're active and independent.

MD: Masculine for me is authority.

SHK: Well, your women don't have authority. But they do have power in the sense that it is they who arrange and control their lives—within the limits of the unchangeable world you place them in.

MD: They're not changing it yet. But they will.

SHK: What is admirable in your women is that they act and fight in spite of their awareness that their efforts won't change anything. Your men, on the contrary, give up. It seems to me that it's a contradiction to create such active, strong women in your novels and then to think that women are "organic."

MD: I don't see where you find this activeness of the women. Women occupy all the *space* of my films. They are *there*.

SHK: I'm not talking about your films but about your novels.

MD: Yes, but even in the novels.

SHK: In *The Square*, for example, we see the contrast between the man and the woman. The woman is determined to change her destiny

and acts to bring this about, whereas the man gives in to despair and inaction. After he laments his passivity and expresses his admiration of her determination, she explains this difference by saying: "Perhaps it's because you would have to change less radically than I. As far as I'm concerned, I have the feeling that I have to change from scratch." In *Moderato Cantabile* it's Anne who directs the conversation as well as the action of the book. Chauvin follows her, but sometimes he can hardly manage that. I'm thinking of the climax of the story, the consummation of the act toward which the whole novel gravitates; it is Anne who makes the gestures that Chauvin is incapable of. Accepting the fear that is paralyzing Chauvin, she's the one who carries out their "adultery." And then she leaves him sitting there, immobile, impotent: "Chauvin's hand beats the air and falls down again on the table."

MD: And in *Destroy, She Says* also.

SHK: Yes, there, it is Alissa who directs the action. But it's a little different, because Stein directs indirectly.

MD: But Stein is already androgynous.

SHK: In *The Sailor from Gibraltar* it is Anna who travels from place to place (mobility) looking for her former lover, whereas the narrator, who is never even named, follows her, not knowing where he's going, for how long, nor even why. In *The Sea Wall* . . .

MD: It's the mother.

SHK: . . . Not only the mother. It is also Suzanne who strikes us with her independence and with the active role she plays in her own life. Throughout the book she waits for a hunter, a man who would be able to take her away from the desolate plain where she lives. And then, when he finally comes, near the end, and asks her to marry him, she refuses, declaring that she must leave alone, on her own. And she leaves him. To go who knows where, but forward. As for him, he will remain on the plain, continuing his meager life. I find it interesting that Suzanne's brother Joseph is also waiting for someone—a woman, in his case—to take him away from the plain. Well, this woman does come—with a fancy car and lots of money. Joseph doesn't say "no" to her the way Suzanne did. He goes off with her, getting everything he wanted through her. The contrast between the brother and sister is very telling.

MD: It is power, if you like. I would rather call it the power of the women. In my books, in my films, they have a power that is almost involuntary. That's it, it isn't directed. It *is*. It's the difference between "being" and "appearing." It is power that operates directly, that functions directly. The women go straight into action without any programming.

- SHK: It seems strange that everything is instinctive, everything organic. You're so radical and then so traditional. You . . . seem to stay behind.
- MD: But why not act like that? You say that's all behind, that's all traditional. Yes, but if you say it mustn't be like that, action should be concerted, intentional, thought out, conceptualized, you come back to the masculine ethic. And then there is no way out.
- SHK: Are women trained to act organically, or are they that way naturally, because of their biology?
- MD: I can't say. For the moment, that is how they are.
- SHK: That is how they *can* be, but they can also be cerebral. You, for example, you're not like that.
- MD: I know that when I write there is something inside me that stops functioning, something that becomes silent. I let something take over inside me that probably flows from femininity. But everything shuts off—the analytic way of thinking, thinking inculcated by college, studies, reading, experience. I'm absolutely sure of what I'm telling you now. It's as if I were returning to a wild country. Nothing is concerted. Perhaps, before everything else, before being Duras, I am—simply—a woman.
- SHK: But . . . men writers . . .
- MD: Have you ever seen them write? They usually work from outlines. They know where they are going. They construct.
- SHK: Poets are different, but maybe that's because they have what you would call a feminine mind.
- MD: Yes. Poets are androgynous. In poetry, you no longer have sex. But couldn't one say that my books are more musical or poetic than . . . intellectual?
- SHK: Yes, but there is still a lot of thought behind them.
- MD: There is less and less. There is thought but in the background. It is pushed completely behind the action.
- SHK: We haven't talked about awareness, and it's very important. Your feminine characters are lucid; they are aware of everything. Your men are unaware of everything.
- MD: No, they are unaware of women.
- SHK: But also of life. Of the possibility of changing it.
- MD: Yes, but they have lost sight of themselves. Just as when you are grown up you forget the child you once were. You no longer know anything about that. Men have gotten lost in the same way, whereas women have never known what they were. So they aren't lost. Behind them, there is darkness. Behind men, there is distortion of reality, there are lies.
- SHK: Yes, but men could at least know the world they live in, be aware

of their surroundings. In *The Square*, for example, the man seems totally unaware. He lives without questioning. The woman, on the other hand, shows an uncommon relentlessness to know life. She says at one point, "If life isn't happy, I want to learn that on my own, you understand, by myself, to the very end, and as completely as possible; and then, well! I will die doing what I wanted and my death will be mourned."

MD: *The Square* is a completely political novel. That is, it shows two dialectics confronting each other: the dialectic of courage—marxist, if you will . . .

SHK: The female character.

MD: . . . and the dialectic of cowardice.

SHK: Yes, but it just so happens that courage is represented by the woman and cowardliness is represented by the man.

MD: Do you think the traveling salesman of the book could be a woman?

SHK: Yes, in traditional novels. That's how you're different. It's in this that your conception of women is revolutionary, I think. An ordinary writer would have reversed the roles.

MD: Actually, there must be a problem, since people are talking about that now, about Duras's women. The woman in black in *Woman of the Ganges* doesn't do anything. She welcomes the traveler. She's the one who gets him into the community of mad people. She's the one who welcomes him. What do you think of that?

SHK: I don't feel as competent to talk of your films as I do of your novels—especially this film, since I've only seen it once. But if we refer to one of the novels this comes from, *The Vice-Consul*, the woman of the Ganges is Anne-Marie Stretter, whom we know already. And there we have a good example of what I was just saying: Anne-Marie chooses her man, gets him, and then goes to India (her mobility) where she directs everything that happens with the Vice-Consul and Michael Richardson.

MD: Yes.

SHK: She's the one who controls everything. Lol V. Stein is another example. She's superb. She also arranges her life. She decides what she wants and how to get it.

MD: Because women know what they want.

SHK: But how? Instinctively?

MD: They listen to their feelings. Men don't know how to. Of that I am absolutely sure—and more and more so. There are many things that women do that men could not do. And if they did, people would think they were crazy.

SHK: Do you feel you have a special intelligence that emanates from your biology?

- MD: I feel I make use of it less and less. I use my intelligence to clear away lies. And for the rest, I let it happen. When the lies are removed, I let the rest happen.
- SHK: One of the things that bothers me about your concept of women's intelligence is that men have been insisting on the same one for centuries—especially Freud. I think that limits us.
- MD: They did not talk about organic intelligence but about intuition. That's not the same.
- SHK: Yes, but if you speak of the intelligence of the womb, that's not challenging the concept of femininity.
- MD: Listen, when men say women have an organic intelligence, since they talk that way, they have contempt for this intelligence. I think that's true. I think that women have, above all, an organic intelligence. All women.
- SHK: Why? That's what I want to know.
- MD: Because the intelligence of women has not yet been used.
- SHK: So, it has nothing to do with biology?
- MD: Who knows? I think men have no children. When a man says, "I have a child," that is a ridiculous statement.
- SHK: Then a man can't love as much as a woman? A man can't be as tender, as giving, as "organic" as a woman? The fact that a woman can bear children determines her character?
- MD: That's not the problem. You seem to be saying that, because men say it, it must be wrong. Men say it, and it is perhaps correct. What we have to change is the perspective of the men who say it. When they say it, they say it with contempt.
- SHK: Yes, and you say it with admiration and respect.
- MD: I say it with even more than that. I say it, I propose it as a superior principle. When I say a man has a theoretical intelligence, it is always pejorative. Always.
- SHK: So you think women have not used their intelligence.
- MD: Or their silence. The silence in women is such that anything that falls into it has an enormous reverberation. Whereas in men, this silence no longer exists.
- SHK: Why do women possess it?
- MD: Because they *exist* in silence.
- SHK: Why?
- MD: Because men have established the principle of virile force. And everything that emerged from this virile force—including words, unilateral words—reinforced the silence of women. In my opinion, women have never expressed themselves. It is as if you asked me: "Why aren't there writers in the proletariat? Why aren't there musicians among the workers?" That's exactly the same thing. There are no musicians among the workers just as there are no musicians among women. And vice versa. To be a com-

poser, you must have total possession of your liberty. Music is an activity of excess, it is madness, a freely consented madness.

SHK: Then the silence of women is imposed by men.

MD: Oh, of course.

SHK: Women must find their own answer. That's the important thing. I am no longer interested in books about women written by men. Even if I could believe in their objectivity, I just can't find their opinions relevant. Now I will only believe what a woman has to say about women, because even if it's not entirely true, it's *her* struggle and she's on the way to the answer. And men have to follow.

MD: That reminds me of something that made me come to the same conclusion. I told a man, a close friend, "Please don't say anything when we talk about ourselves." He got angry and told me, "You're not giving me a chance to change." I answered, "You can't change until we've changed." I asked, "Can you imagine being black?" He said, "Sure." I told him, "A woman would never give that answer. Now, can you imagine being a woman?" He answered, "Sure," so I told him, "OK, keep quiet." . . . What should be done, because it is not being done enough, is to analyze misogyny.

SHK: I think it *is* being done.

MD: Yes, but as if men were dishonest. I think men are sick. In my opinion, men are in a more grave condition than most women. Men are very limited. It is downright extraordinary to what extent they are limited.

SHK: It's worse in America, I think.

MD: No, it's the same. Do you know the thesis by Michelet about witches? It's admirable. (By the way, I think, and many people think, on the basis of letters and journals, that Michelet did not have a normal sex life—which is certainly in his favor.) He says that in the Middle Ages, when the lords went off to war or on the Crusades, when the women stayed alone for months at a time on the farms, in the middle of the fields, hungry and lonely, then they simply started talking. To whatever was around them: trees, animals, forests, rivers. . . . Perhaps to break the boredom, to forget the hunger and the loneliness. The men burned them. That's how witches came into being. Men said, "They're in collusion with nature," and they burned them. That's how the reign of witches began. I add, personally, that what they did, in effect, was punish those women because they turned a little away from them and became less available to them. The women who began to come into contact with nature, as if by osmosis, took part of themselves away from men. So men killed them to punish them. And that madness—talking to animals, trees, that part of them—

selves which suffocates and explodes, that transference—you find it in all women, including women of the middle class. It's what I call their neurosis. Neurosis in women is so ancient, thousands of year old—all women are neurotic in my opinion—that people are used to their behavior. And much female behavior that one finds normal would be considered neurotic if exhibited by males. Of course women express this neurosis differently in our day. They no longer talk to animals or trees, because, apparently, they aren't alone. In fact, however, they are completely alone in their millions, in their poverty, in their comfort, and in their slums, in all their completely functional marriages—whether rich or poor. They are as alone as before. And everywhere. Madness has found other expressions, but it is still there. It is still the same madness.

SHK: Today also there are many women who are turning away from men. Not toward trees but either toward other women or just toward celibacy.

MD: That's a problem, you know, because, well, I have only loved men. And erotically I only have a valid—violent, passionate—experience with men. I have had many lovers. I have known passion with men. Real passion. There are many women in France in my situation who are forcing themselves to forget men. So we're witnessing a kind of decrease in libido. Not really a decrease, because the libido is still there. It is a decrease in eroticism, in sexuality. I think it's a mistake. Why go against nature? Why change it?

SHK: From what I understand, these women think it natural to be bisexual. I think it's a mistake to force oneself in any direction.

MD: Any at all.

SHK: But I see their logic, because in a relationship between two women there isn't the same oppression as in a heterosexual couple.

MD: I've had experiences with women, but they've always been . . . well, positive but completely inadequate. After two days, I missed men. What is desirable is that nature be followed. Everywhere. That what is natural extend itself, because women today are not in a natural state. Women must behave more and more naturally in their daily life. Insolently. Every barrier that falls is good. Women must speak out. They must dare. They have to say, "No, today I will not work." . . . They have to tell men: "What you say bores me. Your intelligence doesn't interest me. I don't know to whom it is directed. Not to me. It bores me. I am bored with you." Women must leave the community—I'm speaking of a daily process. Wherever they feel bad, they must leave.

SHK: That's starting to happen.

- MD: Men will find themselves alone. As soon as a woman is natural, when she wears no makeup and places herself outside functional coquetry, she is called a lesbian.
- SHK: As soon as a woman thinks, she's called a lesbian.
- MD: You see the process of simplification. It's fantastic. Men are really very simple actually. It's funny the things men can say to you. I once had a lover who told me: "Ah, you see, I love you very much, but I would so much like you to be just a little bit less intelligent and just a little bit more beautiful."
- SHK: What did you do with him?
- MD: I was very much in love with him. I kept him. I asked him: "Why are you staying with me? If you only love beautiful women, why are you staying with me?"
- SHK: Why were you on the defensive?
- MD: An age-old habit. . . .
- SHK: There's one other thing I'd like to ask you about, because there are very strong feelings about it in America: How do you feel about childbearing and motherhood? I know that in your novels, almost all your female characters have children and that the relationship between the mother and the child is very powerful. How does this fit in with your views on women in general?
- MD: The question of children is full of pitfalls. It's dangerous ground. The women who talk the most about it, in general, don't have children. Those who *do* have children find it difficult, if not impossible, to talk about it. I cannot hear childless women talk about the problems of motherhood without smiling a little. I try with all my might to take them seriously, but I haven't yet succeeded. It's as if they were trying to legislate passion, mad love, madness. *To give laws to what is transgression of all law.* Why discourage women from the colossal swallowing up which is the essence of all motherhood, the mad love (for it is there, the love of a mother for her child), and the madness that maternity represents? For her to feel like a man, free from the consequences of maternity, from the fantastic shackles that it implies? That is probably the reason. But if I answer that men are sick precisely because of this, because they do not have the only opportunity offered a human being to experience a bursting of the ego, how would I be answered? That it was man who made motherhood the monstrous burden it is for sure. But to me the historical reasons for the burden and the drudgery seem the most superficial, because for those there is a remedy. And even if men are responsible for this enslaving form of motherhood, is this enough to condemn maternity itself? At the base of the problem, at the very base, I see a homage to masculinity, a postulate which, although never articulated, amounts to this: men have been what they have been,

they are what they are, because they have been spared this obstacle to their freedom. But it is right here that things go wrong. I can take exactly the same terms of the sentence and reverse their meaning: men are what they are, that is, invalids of nature, because they do not have the possibility of experiencing anything like motherhood.

SHK: But it's true, isn't it, that this "obstacle to their freedom" limits the possibilities of women?

MD: I have a very serious doubt about this: women—even unconsciously—make a connection between the concreteness of maternity and the fact that they deal less in abstractions than men. Of this I am sure: women tell themselves that it is because they wipe their children, are buried, submerged by this inevitable concreteness that women are not philosophers. But how false, how childish that is. When you think or say that, your criterion becomes masculine: you think philosophy is the spoken (or written) expression of philosophy, that the concept, likewise, is the articulation of the concept. *I think there is more generality in women than in men and that the "concept" is lived more by the feminine than by the masculine.* Basically you are inconsolable, because you do not talk or because you talk in a way judged by men to be inadequate. You yearn for the masculine way of talking and writing. And often, in your indictment of men, in your analyses, you even resort to a theoretical masculine approach. Moreover, many of you seek masculine approval. Even though you have inside you your way of talking and writing, you have mountains of it inside you, and even though it is enough to begin expressing yourselves so long as it is with *your* vocabulary, *your* abstractions, and your own conceptualization, I think you are still afraid of the master: men. Of their judgment. As long as you have this fear, you will not progress. I think the future belongs to women. Men have been completely dethroned. Their rhetoric is stale, used up. We must move on to the rhetoric of women, one that is anchored in the organism, in the body.

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