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The Absent "I": Autobiography and the Image in the Work of Marguerite Duras

by

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"Here is where the act of writing—the third element of autobiography—assumes its true importance: it is through that act that the self and the life, complexly intertwined and entangled, take on a certain form, assume a particular shape and image, and endlessly reflect that image back and forth between themselves as between two mirrors." (James Olney)

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INTRODUCTION

The Work of Marguerite Duras

The work of Marguerite Duras is marked by repetition. A prolific author, Duras's work returns again and again to certain themes: love, loss, death, madness, desire and alienation permeate a vast amount of her artistic output. Images repeat themselves: light, the sea, the plain, the city. Similar characters and stories reiterate. We can trace the origin of some of these concerns back into Duras's own childhood, particularly the portion spent in French occupied Indo-China with her mother and two brothers. A study of Duras's work raises certain questions. Why does Duras feel the need to write and rewrite similar material so frequently? Why do elements of this material change over time? In what manner do the formal and thematic alterations of the material relate? This project will focus on the portion of her oeuvre that is most easily identified as autobiographical and will use those works in an attempt to address these questions.

The past told in these texts is simple. The main character is a girl, barely an adolescent, living in the colonies with her mother and brothers. The family lives in abject poverty due both to the injustice of the colonial system and the

mother's delusional behavior. The girl meets an older man, much wealthier than her family, and begins a romantic relationship with him. The romance ends necessarily with the girl's departure from the plains and her lover's arranged marriage to a rich bride. From what we know about Duras's life and inferring from the way in which she wrote these texts, this story is her own life story. This basic plot appears in three of Duras's texts: *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950), *L'Amant* (1984) and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (1991). While the essential plot remains consistent throughout the three texts and connects them as a group, the three texts also demonstrate distinct variations. Details of the story, in addition to the emotional tone of the events recounted, differ widely between the three texts. The manner in which the story is formally constructed also alters with each rewriting.

It seems unsettling to talk about factual differences in texts that are assumed to be autobiographical in nature. What varies most between the texts is the focus of the story being told. In *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*, the emphasis clearly falls on the story of the family and the girl engages with her admirer largely in the interest of his wealth. In *L'Amant*, the girl is clearly divided between her family life and the strong feelings that she experiences towards the lover. In *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, the story almost entirely focuses on the girl's relation with the lover. It seems apparent that as Duras progressed in years, the manner in which she thought about this episode of her past altered. Through the process of rewriting, Duras reorients her own history.

In addition to the plot of the story changing, the form in which the story is told changes over the course of the three iterations. *Un Barrage* is a traditionally realist text told in a linear fashion. The main character is named "Suzanne" rather then being identified as Duras herself. *L'Amant* is the least linear of the three, following a scattered logic between the past and the present. The text alternates between the first and third person, but the protagonist is easily understood to be Duras due to the overriding influence of the first person "I". *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* could be considered Duras's attempt to rewrite *L'Amant* for adaptation to the cinema. While the whole text is written in the third person, the protagonist is again understood to be Duras.

Formally, the works increasingly refer to images of the girl. In *Barrage*, there is very little reference to any images of Suzanne, though a fascination with the cinema shapes the two children of the book. *L'Amant* is structured around an absent image of the young female protagonist in addition to referencing several other photographs through out the text. *Chine du Nord* is written as a description of a film with the female protagonist in the starring role. As we will investigate, alterations in the story and the autobiographical premise relate to the presence or absence of the image.

The three texts share the same events from Duras's childhood but differ in their understanding of the event and their manner of recounting it. Something in the author's changing relationship to her own past is reflected in the recurring act of writing. As Duras's relation to the past changes, so must her form of representation. We come upon the way in which the present is always at work in

the retelling of the past: the present self determines not only the manner in which the past is written but what past is retold. A study of the three retellings as an autobiographical project opens questions about the nature of the autobiographical self; questions that lead us into fundamental queries about the self in general.

Autobiography and the "I" Fiction

Autobiography is a notoriously difficult genre to define. Fundamentally, autobiography consists of a self telling the story of its past. Dura's work seems to qualify as autobiographical by this definition: at least *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* describe the period of time identified as a formative experience for the author. Dura's work is concerned with the moment at which the writing self came into existence. For the purpose of this project, the formal definition of autobiography used will be that of Phillippe Lejeune's *On Autobiography*. Lejeune, like many theorists, rejects the necessity for strict resemblance to actual events of the past, defining autobiography as: "Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality." (4) While Lejeune is willing to compromise on some qualifications, necessary autobiographical conditions exist: the work must concern the life of the individual; the work must be written about the past from the perspective of the present; and the reader must understand that the author, the narrator, and the protagonist are unified by identity. Without these qualities, the text cannot achieve the fundamental

function of autobiography: organizing the past into a story that explains the present of the self.

Modern critics seem to agree that the constancy and continuity of the central self through time, rather then the exact details of the past events of the life, is central to the autobiographical venture. The retrospective nature of autobiography organizes events of the past around the presumption of a constant self, one that structures the narrative of the life. Gusdorf writes:

> "The recapitulation of ages of existence, of landscapes and encounters, obliges me to situate what I am in the perspective of what I have been. My individual unity, the mysterious essence of my being—this is the law of gathering in and of understanding in all the acts that have been mine, all the faces and all the places where I have recognized signs and witness of my destiny. In other words, autobiography is a second reading of experience, and it is truer than the first because it adds to experience itself consciousness of it." (38)

The autobiographical effort is also a narrative one: it is the attempt by the self to organize the past in a form that connects fluidly and logically to the present. The self unifies what could be disparate periods of existence.

In order to serve as this unifying principle, some solid notion or feeling of self must exist. The formal unity of identity between author, narrator, and protagonist reflects a certain line of thinking about what the self is and how the self should be expressed in a literary fashion. The self of the present must be the same in identity with the self of the past, meaning that the self that writes, narrates, and serves as subject must all be consistent in order for the work to be considered autobiography. Identity of self implies that within autobiography the self is at once the observing subject of the writing present and the observed

object of the written past. Through the rest of this thesis, the autobiographical self that perceives and is perceived simultaneously will be referred to as the "reflexive self".

The language with which autobiography is constructed turns out to be a medium sympathetic to the representation of a reflexive self. As linguist and semoitician Émile Benveniste notes, the pronoun "I" simultaneously serves to denote the self as speaker and the self as subject of speech. He describes the instance in which "I" is used: "There is thus a combined double instance in this process: the instance of *I* as referent and the instance of discourse containing the *I* as referee. The definition can now be stated precisely as: *I* is 'the individual who utters the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance *I*.'" (218) The dual instance of the "I" as speaking subject and object of speech parallels the dual instance of the writing self and the written self of autobiography: "Thus the structure of autobiography, a story that is at once by and about the same individual, echoes and reinforces a structure already implicit in our language, a structure (not accidentally) very like what we usually take to be the structure of self consciousness itself: the capacity to know and simultaneously be that which one knows." (Bruss, 301) Autobiography, whether or not it is written in the first person, relies upon a capacity for self reflection represented grammatically by the "I".

The self as subject and the self as object might seem like quite different entities, especially when separated by temporal distances, but autobiography depends upon the assumption of their being unified. Without such a unified self,

no principle would exist which could organize the past into a narrative. Thus, the simultaneous nature of the perceiving and the perceived self, designated by the "I", is a critical condition for the creation of autobiography: "This fundamental identification (or conflation) of two subjects—the speaking subject and the subject of the sentence—is, then, crucial to the autobiographical project, to the unity of observer and observed, the purported continuity of past and present, life and writing." (Bruss, 301) The unity of the speaking subject and the self as subject of speech, as perceived and perceiving, contributes importantly to the concept that there is a constant or solid self that persists throughout our lives. The perception of an identity between the perceiving self and the perceived self, between self as subject and object, will be referred to from this point onward as the "I" fiction.

Duras's autobiographical work seems particularly of interest due to the fact that it lacks a fundamental "I" fiction. The three works vary widely in terms of how they establish a structure of self-reflection. However, none of the three seem to posit a strict identity between the writing self and the written self. Duras's work demonstrates the search for a self that emerges from the shattered assumption of unity, an emblematic quest in a modern age that has questioned the very concept of a unified or essential self.

Problematics of the "I" fiction

Duras can be fit into a tradition of thought that questions the continual existence of an essential self. What is particularly interesting about Duras's

project is that she attempts this questioning through a medium that typically depends upon the notion of such a permanent self. Modern literature and philosophy has made a particular project of pointing out that no stable, constant substance makes up the kind of self that the autobiographical venture posits. The self is never simultaneously at once subject and object: it is impossible to perceive and be perceived at the same instance without the aid of certain exterior tools or fictions. A mirror is one of those tools, a fact that will be investigated more fully later in this chapter. What this implies for autobiography is that the self that unifies the past with the present, subject and object, is somehow fundamentally a fallacy or fiction. Of course, even through we might fundamentally question the existence of a stable self, the way that we live our lives and represent ourselves depend on the assumption that such a self exist. Our interaction with language and the world around us depends on a conception of self represented symbolically by the "I".

The autobiographical effort implies that there is some direct link connecting the self of the present to the self of the past: the act of writing autobiographically and recollecting autobiographically works along this logic. Without a unified self, no identity exists between the object self of the past and the subject self of the present. We particularly see this difficulty at work in Duras, where the self of the past is often referred to in the third person. Her work highlights the notion that a relationship between the present and the past is a fiction constructed from the perspective of the present:

> "Autobiography is not simple repetition of the past as it was, for recollection brings us not the past itself but only the presence in

> spirit of a world forever gone. Recapitulation of a life lived claims to be valuable for the one who lived it, and yet it reveals no more than a ghostly image of that life, already far distant, and doubtless incomplete, distorted furthermore by the fact that the man who remembers his past has not been for a long time the same being, the child or adolescent, who lived that past. The passage from immediate experience to consciousness in memory, which effects a sort of repetition of that experience, also serves to modify its significance." (Gusdorf, 38)

If there is no consistent, unified self, we lose the logic that connects the past to the present. Recollection of the past becomes a fiction ordered by the present rather than a reference to an absolute reality.

A close investigation of the autobiographical premise raises some difficult questions as to the relationship of the events of the past to the autobiographical act of the present. The past has, presumably, shaped in some manner the self that does the remembering and telling. However, this past is fundamentally lost—it only exists again in the act of recollection. The nature of the present, in this way, always influences what of the past is recollected and the form in which the past is told. On a formal level, the fundamental question arises whether the autobiographical form imposed by the self of the present shapes the version of the past that is presented or whether the events of the past determine the form of the present autobiography. For the purpose of this thesis, we will assume that the function of the present self reflection alters the nature of the past recollected, using this structure to investigate how formal changes motivate changes in the story told. The underlying assumption remains that the manner in which the self reflects on itself in the present undeniably influences the story of how the self develops in the past.

Maintaining this assumption, I will investigate what elements of the story change in response to Duras's increasingly cinematic and image driven style of self-reflection. Each chapter will begin with a formal investigation of the manner in which the "I" fiction is or is not present in the autobiographical structure. I will move then to an investigation of the past presented and how it accounts for the existence or non-existence of a reflexive self. From there, I will see what structure of self reflection Duras presents as an alternative to the "I" fiction. Just as a fiction of the "I" structures the autobiographical effort of recounting the past, so does the absence of that fiction.

Even though the work of Marguerite Duras formally deviates from the expectations of autobiography, it attempts to present a past that explains the present. Ultimately, each autobiographical effort tells a story that accounts for the present self that writes the autobiography. Duras's work is significant to an understanding of autobiography as a whole because it shows the formal innovation that occurs in the face of the absence of an "I" fiction, moving from a traditionally realist form to one which constantly refers to images not included within the text. Duras relies on the structure of a gaze directed at a self-image instead of the grammatical "I" fiction for structuring self-reflection. The image of the self is that which comes into existence through the desiring gaze of another person, in this case the gaze of the lover. This structure for self-reflection is inspired by Duras's experience with desire, while the absence of the "I" fiction is represented as arising from a problematic experience within her family. It is this

experience with desire that allows Duras to develop the reflexive self that goes on to construct autobiography.

The Mirror Stage

Duras's formal focus on her own image takes on particular significance in light of Lacan's theory of the mirror stage. This theory helps to explain how the reflexive self represented by the "I" fiction comes into being through the use of a visual image. According to Lacan, in the infantile stage the individual has little conception of a self that is separate from the world around him. Eventually, he gathers from the manner in which exterior objects reflect his existence that there is a material presence that contains and represents his self. In the process of learning how to function in the world, he gains the notion that the subjectivity he experiences and his self as object are fundamentally the same self. The "I" fiction is the grammatical representation of this unity.

A tool through which the self as subject and object are unified is the mirror. Lacan's mirror stage is an explanation for how the infantile self gains a conception of a self that exists distinctly from the world around it. As Lacan describes, during the mirror stage the mother holds the child up in front of the mirror and indicates vocally the presence of a self or individual there, usually by name. The child, looking at the image of its self reflected in the mirror, forms an idea of itself as an object distinct from the world around it. This is the first notion of a separate self that the individual obtains, and Lacan refers to this concept of the self as the "Ideal I". In the act of looking into the mirror, the perceiving self

and the perceived self are unified conceptually. The mirror acts as an aid to forming the first concept of an "I" fiction.

Psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott affirms that the mirror stage as when the child first gains a notion of itself as an object separate from the environment around it. Winnicott does not think that the source of the ideal I is necessarily a mirror but rather the gaze of others, primarily the mother. The mother's gaze forms the first mirror, and the mother's reaction to the child gives the child a notion of its independent existence. Winnicott writes: "We can include in all this the actual mirrors that exist in the house and the opportunities the child gets for seeing the parents and others looking at themselves. It should be understood, however, that the actual mirror has significance mainly in its figurative sense." (118) While some mirrors do figure in the work of Duras, the gaze of both the mother and the lover act far more significantly. Through this gaze, the girl obtains a notion of herself as a distinct object in the world. Throughout the thesis, the image will generally be understood to be one that is seen through a gaze. It is through the gaze of another person that the concept of the self comes into being. The object self exists as an image in that gaze.

However, we notice in the work of Duras the constant absence of the mother's gaze. Without this gaze, the self cannot develop the capacity to consider itself as both subject and object. This failure to develop a reflexive structure of self is reflected both in the story of the character of Suzanne and the form in which the autobiography is constructed. The girl's experience within the family accounts for the absence of a reflexive self through the absence of this gaze. With

no image of the self acknowledged by an exterior gaze, the structure of the "I" fiction fails to develop.

We can explain the lack of an "I" fiction as a structural element of autobiography through the story of the upbringing and family environment told within the text. In each written version of Duras's personal history, and particularly in *Barrage* and *L'Amant*, the family environment is one that prevents the development of the self. The protagonist suffers from both verbal and physical abuse from her mother and older brother. Within the sphere of the family, the girl does not function as an individual but is rather subsumed by the collective will. The protagonist does not demonstrate any capacity to desire or ability to reflect on herself as a result of this lack of a conception of self.

Aside from the generally toxic atmosphere of the family, the lack of recognition from the mother is manifested by the almost complete lack of a gaze. As we have seen, this gaze is crucial in the mirror stage to initiate the child into a sense of self or separate being. Within the family, the protagonist is rarely looked at, particularly within the story of *Barrage*. The lack of this gaze means that the girl does not come to develop a reflexive sense of her self as independent from the family environment. A lack of recognition from the family stunts the development of self-recognition for the girl.

Without the gaze, the reflexive self fails to develop and no writing self emerges. The girl does not demonstrate the degree of self-awareness or independence necessary to consider her self both as subject and object. This is aggravated by the mother's lack of capacity to recognize the girl's desire to

become an author, particularly as demonstrated in "L'Amant." Writing implies the existence of a self that reflects upon itself, and it is just this independent self that the mother seems to consciously or unconsciously wish to prevent. The story that is told about the past in family is not a story that could explain the autobiography-writing self of the present.

While the family environment prevents the development of a reflexive or writing self, we see that as Duras writes and rewrites her past she is clearly gravitating towards identifying her work as autobiographical. However, this autobiographical effort does not utilize the traditional "I" fiction of self-reflection that develops through the mirror stage. An alternative structure has been employed which allows the self to reflect upon and represent itself. It is the gaze of the lover rather than the mother that helps to forge this autobiographical self. Through the desiring gazes exchanged between the girl and the lover the reflexive self comes into being and the autobiographical self develops.

The Desiring Gaze as Mirror

Lacking the reflexive self that psychoanalytic theory suggests is produced within the family unit, Duras's autobiographical self comes into existence through the experience of desiring and being desired by the character of the lover. It is in the interplay of this desiring gaze that the protagonist experiences a kind of secondary mirror stage. Through the expression on the face of the lover the girl sees her self as an object in the world. She perceives this desiring gaze by looking at the lover with desire herself. In this sense, the lover forms a mirror in

the manner that the mother should. This secondary mirror stage takes the place of the absent proper mirror stage, and initiates the protagonist into a manner of self reflection that allows her to write later in her life. It does not seem coincidental that the later autobiographical efforts are increasingly biased towards the story of the lover, a story that reinforces Duras's identity as a reflexive self and an author.

Each of these autobiographical efforts in some manner attends to this story, though the importance of the lover or the family varies throughout the project. This corresponds to the manner in which the autobiographical self is or is not accounted for by the story of the text and the degree to which the text demonstrates the existence of a reflexive self. In *Barrage*, the story of the love affair is given very little importance as the pressure of the family still prevents an experience of desire. In *L'Amant*, the two stories intersect, with the form of the autobiography demonstrating this conflict between a self in the process of separation and a self that cannot separate from the family. In *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, the focus is almost entirely on the story of the lover. The intersection of the story of the family and the story of the lover is particularly pertinent because it represents a separation from the family and the development of a reflexive, writing self.

The structure of the reflexive self that develops from this experience of desire comes to dictate the form of Duras's autobiography. Her autobiographical narrative parallels the structure of self-reflection developed through the mirror of the desiring gaze. The exterior gaze perceives the self as an image. In the case

of the mirror stage, the mirror acts as a tool for permitting the self as pure subject or gaze to see itself as an object or image. Ultimately, the mirror is erased from the thinking of the child and the simultaneous subjectivity and objectivity of the self are abbreviated into the unity of the "I" as the child enters language. The secondary mirror stage created by the desiring gaze does not allow for such an abbreviation. The desiring gaze is necessarily other. In order for the desire to be reciprocated, this other must always be separate from the self.

This split structure of spectator and spectacle created by the mirror of desire takes the form of the image of the past looked at from the present in the work of Duras. Through out Duras's texts, we see an increasing presence of this image in the form of both absent photographs and filmic images. As the work becomes more focused on the story of the lover, the structure of the work reflects the structure of the desiring gaze by substituting the image for the self of the past. It is through utilizing the structure of the image that Duras manages to construct an autobiographical effort outside of the "I" fiction. This image structure becomes increasingly prevalent as her work progresses. In *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*, we see no evidence of this image in a past written outside of the autobiographical context. In *L'Amant*, the image begins to permeate the text, and the work is organized loosely by a sense of self. In *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, the image is the focal point of the text and the work is the most explicitly autobiographical. However, the movement towards the image structure is also a movement towards a self increasingly split between perceiving and being perceived. Duras's use of the image structure signals a relationship to the past

that deviates from traditional autobiography and ultimately a structure of self reflection that allows alterations to the past itself.

CHAPTER 1: *UN BARRAGE CONTRE LE PACIFIQUE*

Barrage: Not Autobiographical

Insofar as autobiography is authenticated by resemblance between the events of the text and the known life of the author, the similarities between the reported life of Marguerite Duras and the story told in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* tempt us to categorize it as autobiographical. Like Duras during her teenage years, the protagonist of *Barrage* lives in French occupied Indo-China with her mother and brother after the death of her father. Like Duras's family, the family of *Barrage* faces abject poverty after the mother's unwise purchase of an uncultivatable piece of property from the colonial authority. Each year the land floods with sea water, rendering the soil infertile. An attempt to build a wall against the sea, organized by the mother and executed by the local peasants, fails spectacularly. The mother reacts to this misfortune with a mixture of delusional optimism and wildly unpredictable behavior towards her children. Few whites beside the family live on the plain. In a multitude of details, Duras's life parallels the life described by the text.

Much akin to Duras's experience during her adolescence, Suzanne, the central character of *Barrage*, has a romantic encounter with a wealthy older man. The man's wealth is of great importance to the mother in particular, who

wishes to use him to leverage the family out of their poverty. Suzanne experiences a mixture of apathy and repulsion towards the lover. Eventually, the romance between the two becomes impossible due to M. Jo's forced engagement to another woman.

While the resemblance between the story of *Un Barrage* and the reported life of Marguerite Duras is striking, it is also obviously imprecise. We know that Duras had two brothers instead of the one that she features in the text. While the wealthy lover, M. Jo, is assumed to be white in this book, the actual lover was Chinese. Though Duras's feelings might have been ambiguous, it seems clear that she did feel some romantic pull towards this lover. Entire aspects of Suzanne's schooling and life outside of the family are excluded from the events of this text. Clearly, Duras has some motivation for changing details of the past as she experienced it. The simple resemblance between the events of the author's past and the events of the text is not sufficient to render the text autobiographical. In order for the work to qualify as autobiographical according to Lejeune and other theorists, the self must recount and organize a version of the past that explains the present. Underlying this project of recounting remains the assumption that some same self has existed continuously from past into the present.

The fact that Duras names the protagonist of "Suzanne" renders it impossible to entirely identify the written story with the past of the author in the manner typical of autobiography. According to Philip Lejeune, autobiography depends on a unity between author, narrator, and protagonist. In short, the person telling the story must be understood to be the same as the person who

serves as the subject of the story. It is possible to write autobiography in the third person, though unconventional: it remains an autobiographical text if we understand nonetheless the connection between the third person narrator, the protagonist, and the author despite the lack of the grammatically expressive first person. By giving the protagonist a proper name that is not her own, *Un Barrage* fails to formally qualify as an autobiography, no matter how much matters of resemblance might tempt speculation.

Beyond the issue of the renamed protagonist, an autobiographical impossibility emerges from the absence of a writing present anywhere in the text. Lejeune asserts that most autobiography establishes itself through the use of an autobiographical pact, whether it be through the title of the book or through a note that prefaces the story. (14) This pact takes the form of a reference to the writing present, assuring us of the presence of an author who uses the text to reflect on the past. *Barrage* lacks any such evidence of the moment of writing, allowing us no speculation based on the text itself that the past presented might be that of the author on the cover of the book. This is a not a past that will be employed to explain the writing present.

The way in which *Barrage* formally divides and renames the self that existed in the past from the present self renders impossible to label autobiography. Autobiography attempts to unify the self that existed in the past with the self in the present that composes the texts. The story of autobiography usually hinges around a logic that connects the past to present, and a notion of consistent selfhood that links the two selves. Autobiography is in almost all cases

the story of the development of the self that will go on to write autobiography. Either the story told in the autobiography must already contain such a reflexive self or must explain how the self came to understand itself in a reflexive manner. In texts such as *Barrage*, this consistency and reflexivity of self are missing.

The idea of a continuous self corresponds to an identity between the self that perceives and the self that is perceived. This identity is reinforced by a commonly used grammatical structure—that of the first person "I". The "I" refers both to the speaking subject and the subject as referent of the phrase. Lejeune's demand for a unity of narrator, protagonist, and author follows the structure of the unified "I". The kind of reflexive self necessary for traditional autobiography is that of the "I" fiction. This "I" fiction doesn't necessarily demand the use of a first person narration but simply means that the self can exist both as an object and a subject at the same time. Without this fiction, no autobiographical effort is possible: it is impossible to connect the subject that writes in the present with the self that is remembered from the past. Only a self which has some fiction of unity can create a narrative from past to present. I will suggest that the character Suzanne never demonstrates the possession of a reflexive capacity or "I" fiction that would later allow her to write her own story.

The formal choice to tell the past as if it did not relate to the present necessitates a past that explains the disconnect. Throughout this investigation of the process of autobiography, we will see how the formal manner of retelling in some sense motivates what past is told. The version of the past featured in *Barrage* provides an insufficient origin story for the writing self of the present. In

order for an "I" fiction to exist, the self must be able to perceive itself as a distinct object, separate from the forces and environment around it. In *Barrage*, the reflexive self does not develop in the face of an overwhelming and overbearing family environment. Throughout the book, Suzanne does not function as a distinct character but rather as one who is entirely determined by her relationship to her family. Her inability to act as an independent agent or to see herself distinctly demonstrates why this self could not have grown into the authoring self of the present and why this past could not be told autobiographically. The past described by *Barrage* is a past in which no "I" fiction developed.

A Non-Reflexive Past

The fact that Suzanne never tells her own story demonstrates that she is a character without a developed "I" fiction. The narrator of *Barrage* is never identified, though the story is told from a retrospective perspective and with the implication that the narrator has an intimate insight into the history of the family. On a formal level, Suzanne's lack of distinction from the family is shown by the scarcity with which she utilizes the word "I". In many ways, Suzanne's story is entirely determined by the story of her mother and brother, Joseph. Much of how Suzanne understands her own nature is determined by the way that her mother describes her; her life exists entirely within the context of the family's poverty. In terms of thinking about escaping the poverty of the family, Suzanne's fantasy comes to resemble Joseph's clearly: to be spirited away by a

rich lover, breaking the bonds of the family through passion. What Suzanne lives out in Joseph's retelling, Joseph actually accomplishes. While at a movie theater during the family's excursion to the city, Joseph meets a wealthy woman and her husband. The woman and Joseph fall passionately in love and the woman eventually comes to rescue Joseph from his life on the plain. Suzanne's only eventual escape from the family comes through leaving with Joseph and his new lover after the death of the mother.

The embedded nature of Suzanne's story is also shown in the formal construction of the novel. While the story is told primarily by a third person narrator, both Ma and Joseph are given chapters which are entirely devoted to their first person voices. Ma and Joseph are both subjects capable of telling their own stories in a way that Suzanne is not. Ma's chapter comes in the form of a letter composed to the colonial agents, shown by Joseph to Suzanne. The letter contains the story of the mother's misfortune but is not organized by any kind of rigid linearity. Ma's voice is clearly one of an unhealthy self, shattered by the events of a life that cannot be made sensical. The letter's non-linear nature resembles the way in which Duras comes to tell the story of the family in her later text, *L'Amant*.

Joseph's story, by contrast, is extremely linear. In a first person passage, he tells Suzanne how he met the woman who would purchase the flawed diamond ring given to Suzanne by M. Jo. This same woman eventually provides Joseph with an exit from the plain and the family. Joseph's story of his first encounter with the rich woman is one characterized by both an extreme and

overwhelming feeling of passion and by an unprecedented level of intoxication. For Joseph, this evening revealed aspects of himself that he felt he already contained: « Toute cette intelligence que je me sentais, je devais l'avoir en mois depuis longtemps. Et c'est ce mélange de désir et d'alcool qui l'a fait sortir. » (All that intelligence I felt in myself, I must have had in me for a long time. And it was this mixture of sex and alcohol that made it all come out.) (275, 217) The manner in which Joseph describes both alcohol and desire as being already with in him closely resembles the way in which Duras will go on to describe her own experience in *L'Amant*. Joseph also meets this lover at the cinema, a pertinent detail considering the role that the cinema will take on in determining both concepts of desire and notions of the self. While both Joseph and the mother have the kind of reflexive self which can speak of the past using the "I", we see no evidence in this text that Suzanne develops a sense of self completion that might allow her to think autobiographically.

Suzanne's inability to form or tell her own story, figured formally by the lack of the "I", indicates a deeper trouble in Suzanne's character psychology. We find little evidence in the book that Suzanne has formed any notion of self that is not shaped and contained by the family circumstances around her. She shows no personality traits or desires that are not determined by her home situation. When she rejects M. Jo romantically, he accuses her of being cruel. Instead of explaining her personal motives, Suzanne responds « On est comme ca. » (We are like that.) (154,123) Suzanne cannot explain herself without the context of

the family, partially because she does not appear to have motives apart from those of either the mother or Joseph.

No Initiation to the "I"

We can look to the events of the past told here for an explanation of Suzanne's lack of an "I" fiction. In order for this self to develop, the individual must as a child first come to understand themselves as distinct from the world around them, particularly from the mother and the family environment. Throughout *Barrage*, Suzanne demonstrates that she has not developed this conception of self outside of her family. The overbearing influence of her mother, in addition to Suzanne's almost obsessive love for her older brother, entirely dictate her feelings and self understanding. Suzanne is not encouraged to think of herself as separate by the mother. The lack of a reflexive self in this story is determined by an absence of the gaze directed at Suzanne, an issue that will be investigated later in this chapter.

Within the story of the book, little happens to Suzanne that is not shaped by her family. The text can be properly understood more as the story of the family than as a story about Suzanne: she is barely discernable as the protagonist and is given scarce privilege in the narration. The presence of her emotionally and mentally unstable mother is tyrannical: Suzanne suffers from both verbal and physical abuse. In this stunted family environment we are shown a character without a proper sense of self or self-determination. This lack of self-formation is indicated also by the lack of visual attention that Suzanne

receives within the family. The text both begins and ends with no family members looking at Suzanne. The family environment in the text prevents Suzanne from forming a strong and stable sense of self, the kind of self that could continue through life and develop an autobiographical project.

In part, this home life is consuming due to the totalitarian influence of Suzanne's mother. Referred to solely in the book as "Ma," Suzanne's mother wishes to exert almost complete control over her two children. She also is clearly emotionally and mentally unstable, fixated on the failure of the sea walls and the unfair nature of her poverty. This fixation extends to her children, who she abuses as an expression of her frustration. Joseph has physically outgrown this abuse, but Suzanne has not:

> « Elle s'était jetée sur elle et elle l'avait frappée avec les poings de tout ce qui lui restait de force. De tout la force de son droit, de toute celle, égale, de son doute. En la battant, elle avait parlé des barrages, de la banque, de sa maladie, de la toiture, des leçons de piano, du cadastre, de sa vieillesse, de sa fatigue, de sa morte. Joseph n'avait pas protesté et l'avait laissée battre Suzanne. »
>
> (Then it was that Ma had stood, had flung herself at Suzanne, had hit her with her fists, using all the strength that remained in her. With all the strength of her convictions, and also of her misgivings. While beating Suzanne, she had talked about the sea walls, about the debts, her illness, the roof, the piano lessons, the cadastral agents, her old age, her fatigue, and her death. Joseph had not protested and had let her beat Suzanne.) (108,136)

This physical abuse has less to do with actions that Suzanne has taken and more to do with the frustrations of the mother with her own life. Suzanne, particularly in the first part of the book, submits in an entirely passive way to this treatment: « Elle en oubliait que cette force venait de sa mère et la subissait comme elle aurait subi celle du vent, des vagues, une force impersonnelle. » (She forgot that

this force came from her mother, she endured it as she would have endured the wind, the waves, or any impersonal force.) (109, 137) Suzanne never exercises personal agency in the face of the overwhelming force of her family. She does not make her own decisions, rather allowing her fate to be determined by the will of her two family members. This lack of a developed self can be understood through the mirror stage, a theory of child development proposed by Jacques Lacan. The absence of a gaze directed at Suzanne means that she is not initiated into the mirror stage, explaining an absence of the defined self of the "I" fiction.

An Absent Image

If the image of the self in the mirror serves to create a notion of separate identity, it is worth noting that this image is notably absent in "Barrage." In one of the rare moments of the text where Suzanne considers her own personal nature, she looks into a mirror for evidence for or against something both her Mother and M. Jo have claimed about her: « La mère le disait aussi. Était-ce vrai ? Elle se regarda dans la glace et chercha sans le trouver un signe quelconque qui l'eût éclairée. » (Ma said the same thing. Was it true? She looked at herself in the glass, hunting for, without finding, some sign which would enlighten her.) (106, 83) The image, which in later texts serves as a source of unification and identification, here does little work to provide Suzanne with a conception of her self. The image of herself, unauthorized and unidentified by the gaze of the other, fails to designate a distinct self.

While in later texts it becomes clear that the gaze helps form a coherent notion of self, it is particularly significant to note in this text just how little Suzanne is looked at. From the beginning to the ending of the book, Suzanne is rarely visited by the gaze of the other members of her family. In the very opening of the book, we find her appearance obscured by shadow:« Suzanne était assise sous le bungalow, le dos contre un pilotis. Elle se leva et s'approcha du terre-plein, sans toutefois sortir de l'ombre. » (Suzanne was sitting under the bungalow, her back propped against one of the wooden piles of the foundation. She got up and went out towards the terrace, without leaving the shade.)(15, 11) She is clearly the least emphasized of the three family members presented in the opening scene. If the gaze is a source of self-conception and unification, Suzanne is not receiving what would be necessary to form an independent notion of self.

According to Lacan's mirror theory, this might be seen as a reasonable explanation for some of Suzanne's lack of agency and self conception: "The mother's gaze is the child's first mirror; the child's identity or notion of itself as a whole being is first formed in that gaze; it is a narcissistic maneuver that underpins the development of identity." (Bailly, 37) In the face of a mother who could not provide a reasonable reflection due to her own psychological struggles, Suzanne fails to develop a healthy and whole notion of self:

> "[The mother] may see the child as a fragment of herself, or as a living creature with which she can't identify; or she may fail to anticipate the child's future development as a mature, talking being, viewing it simply as a parcel of needs and demands. A mother who is severely depressed or mentally ill, or for some reason entirely self-centred, may provide the effect of a distorting mirror or no mirror at all for the child. The distorting mirror may produce a narcissistic line of weakness, a 'faultline' upon which

> identity is built. Even worse, the child who sees *no* 'alter ego' of itself at all may remain at the fragmented body stage in its imagination for far too long, with damaging long-term effects." (Bailly, 38)

While the lack of the mother's gaze certainly can be seen as the source of Suzanne's undefined self, her encounters with other gazes throughout the book are hardly more helpful.

Winnicott believes that the original mirror was the gaze of the mother, and this interpretation allows us an even deeper understanding of how the lack of the mother's gaze might have impacted Suzanne. The expression on the mother's face acknowledges that the child exists and reflects back recognition of the child's essential selfhood: "What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother's face? I am suggesting that ordinarily, what the baby sees is himself or herself. In other words the mother is looking at the baby and *what she looks like is related to what she sees there."* (112) In this sense, if the mother looked at the child simply with apathy or as an extension of her self, the child would never come to understand herself as a separate being.

In this text, the fact of being looked at serves to destroy rather then to distinguish Suzanne's sense of self. The moment when Suzanne is most aware of this gaze comes in the city, when she has been dressed up in order to go walking in the upper class quarter. This dressing up comes as an attempt to attract desire, something that will become important and effective in later texts. Instead of feeling empowered, Suzanne feels entirely out of place in these upper class quarters, and the gaze of those around her only serves to enhance her sense of

shame. The gaze here is experienced as something degrading, which Suzanne would never dare return:

> « C'était venu insensiblement, depuis qu'elle s'était engagée dans l'avenue qui allait de la ligne du tram au centre du haut quartier, puis cela s'était confirmé, cela avait augmenté jusqu'à devenir, comme elle atteignait le centre du haut quartier, une impardonnable réalité : elle était ridicule et cela se voyait. Carmen avait tort. Il n'était pas donné à tout le monde de archer dans ces rues, sur ces trottoirs parmi ces seigneurs et ces enfants de rois. Tout le monde ne disposait pas des mêmes facultés de se mouvoir. »
>
> (Insensibly a feeling had come over her from the very moment she had entered the avenue which went in a direct line from the trolley tracks up to the center of the Haut Quartier. It became more pronounced, augmenting until, by the time she had reached the center of the fashionable district, it was an unpardonable reality she was ridiculous and everyone saw it. Carmen had been wrong. Not everyone could walk in these streets, on these sidewalks, among these lordlings and these children of kings. (186, 150)

Here, the gaze only affirms Suzanne's powerlessness: « Plus on la remarquait, plus elle se persuadait qu'elle était scandaleuse, un objet de laideur et de bêtise intégrales. » (The more they looked at her the more she was convinced that she was something scandalous, an object of complete ugliness and stupidity.) (186, 150) Disconnected from desire or affection, the gaze has a terrible power to deform the self. Suzanne does not recognize the gaze as affirming her individual self in this instance, instead suffering a further degradation in the manner that the abuse of the mother had initiated.

Similar to the manner in which the young female protagonist of *L'Amant* attempts to author an image that will attract attention through an unusual choice in clothing, in *Barrage* Suzanne attempts to attract desire by putting on the blue dress that Carmen gave to her in the city. However, this attempt to

attract attention fails: « Maintenant, c'était comme si le bungalow avait été invisible : personne ne semblait remarquer qu'il y eût là un bungalow et là, plus près encore, une fille qui attendait. » (Now it was though the bungalow were invisible, as though she herself, near the bridge, were invisible. No one seemed to remark that there was a bungalow and, nearer still a young girl waiting.) (320, 251) Suzanne still belongs to the bungalow and the family, and this renders her impossible to distinguish as her own person or as a possible site of desire.

The Unreciprocated Gaze

If so many of Duras's writings of her past focus on the particular intersection of the family and the lover, it is because the story of the lover distinguishes the girl from the self-less story of the family. In an effect that will be investigated in later chapters, the lover's desiring gaze initiates a secondary mirror phase, succeeding where the mother's gaze has failed. As I have just argued, the family environment as shown in *Barrage* does not permit for the development of a reflexive and defined self in the girl Suzanne. The mother's gaze, which both Winnicott and Lacan see as an important mirror to reflect the objective self, fails to land on the figure of Suzanne. In later texts, the interaction with the lover is particularly important in that it substitutes for the gaze and mirror of the mother the desiring gaze of the lover.

The story of the family is clearly the primary story of the book, entirely subsuming the story of Suzanne's love affair with M. Jo. Formally, the plot of the book begins before and extends far after Suzanne's encounters with her lover.

Suzanne's affair with M. Jo only occurs because of the pressures exerted by the mother with hopes for financial salvation: « Ce mariage était nécessaire, disait-elle. Il était même leur seule chance de sortir de la plaine. S'il ne se faisait pas, ce serait un échec de plus, au même titre que les barrages. » (This marriage was necessary, she said. It was, moreover, their last change to get out of the plain. If the marriage did not take place, it would be one more defeat, in a class with the sea walls.) (124,98) The narrator also makes it clear that the love affair with M. Jo is significant more for the family then for Suzanne individually.

That M. Jo's gaze cannot reach Suzanne is shown by one of the first interactions between M. Jo and the family. The entire family has gone out together, and Ma is just starting to suspect that the wealthy man's desire for her daughter might be advantageous for the family. Ma effectively intercepts and distorts the gaze that M. Jo directs towards Suzanne: « Il regardait Suzanne. La mère vit qu'il la regardait. La mère à tour regarda sa fille. » (He was looking at Suzanne. Ma noticed the direction of his gaze and she, too, looked at her daughter.)(42,33) The mother acts as a lens for M. Jo's gaze. Instead of Suzanne looking back at him, we find the mother interpreting this gaze in the interest of the family.

One of the few sexually explicit encounters that occur between M. Jo and Suzanne is the showing of Suzanne's naked body. During one of their rendez-vous at the family's home, M. Jo begs Suzanne to open the door of the shower and reveal her naked form to him. There is no question of mutuality in this exchange: M. Jo remains outside of the closed door, begging simply for a gaze of

what lurks within. The first time that he requests this, Suzanne comes close to granting it willingly in what is the first instance of evidence that she might desire M. Jo or at least be intrigued by his desire for her. Before she can willingly open the door, however, M. Jo offers her financial compensation for the sight: « C'est ainsi qu'au moment où elle allait ouvrir et se donner à voir au monde, le monde la prostitua. » (So then, it was just when she was going to open the door to let the world see her that the world prostituted her.) (73, 57). Before Suzanne has a chance to take up her personal agency, she is once again rendered subject to the material realm of prostitution where her mother has placed her. The material considerations of the family crowd out the possibility of reciprocated desire. The gaze here is distinctly one sided.

The one notable exception to this general tendency in the book comes when Suzanne encounters M. Jo during the family's excursion to the city. During this trip Suzanne experiences significantly more freedom and independence from the family then she ever does on the plain. Her brother has gone entirely missing, her mother is preoccupied with the necessity of selling the ring. During this encounter, Suzanne lets herself be touched by M. Jo for the first time and in some manner seems fully present in the encounter. Despite her reaction of revulsion only moments later, Suzanne asks M. Jo if her waist too is beautiful after he comments on the beauty of her breasts. Suzanne emerges as a sexual being during this instance, and the sight of her sexually desirable body inflates her self enormously: « Et au-dessus de la ville terrifiante, Suzanne vit ses seins, elle vit l'érection de ses seins plus haut que tout ce qui se dressait dans la ville,

dont c'était eux qui auraient raison. Elle sourit. Puis, frénétiquement, comme s'il était urgent qu'elle le sache tout de suite, elle reprit les mains de M. Jo et les plaça autour de sa taille. » (And above the terrifying city, Suzanne saw her breasts, saw the erection of her breasts higher than anything that stood up in the city. Her breasts, then, would be justified. She smiled. Then, frenziedly, as if it were urgent that she know at once, she again took Monsieur Jo's hands in hers and placed them round her waist.)(226, 180) The vision of a self as sexual object leads to a more solid and powerful notion of self. This moment stands out as one of the few in the text in which Suzanne has a real experience of desire or agency. This passage hints at the possible power of desire to create a strong sense of self that will be more fully developed in further iterations of Duras's autobiographical project.

Even after Suzanne's entirely passionless affair with M. Jo, all affairs outside of the family are represented as lacking in any genuine feeling of desire. She loses her virginity to Agnosti, another hunter from the plain, only after Ma arranges for their encounter. Suzanne appears to desire Agnosti only is as much as he resembles Joseph. During the actual act, Suzanne surrenders entirely: « Elle fut dès lors, entre ses mains, à flot avec le monde et le laissa faire comme il voulait, comme il fallait. » (From then on, she was in his hands, adrift with the world, and she let him do as he would, as it had to be.)(340, 266) It is difficult to ignore the similarity between the description of this experience and of the physical abuse by her mother. Suzanne submits to her first sexual experience with the same utter passivity as she submitted to the violence of her mother's

feelings. She experiences sex without desire, not with the agency of a separate self but according to the general will of her family.

The only strong feelings of desire that Suzanne experiences are towards her older brother, who she seems to entirely idolize. She rejects M. Jo and his successor in part because they are not like Joseph and will never be hunters. Joseph in his part seems almost entirely passive to Suzanne, failing to defend her against their mother and leaving both the family and Suzanne for a life with another woman. It becomes clear by the end of the book that no man, not even Agnosti, will live up to Joseph in Suzanne's mind. It is not until *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* that this desire for the brother is consummated. It does not appear that a sensation of desire ever makes Suzanne aware of her separateness from her family, in the way that desire later comes to serve as a force of separation.

Cinematic Possibility

While the under nourishing family environment seems to be the primary force in preventing Suzanne from forming an independent notion of herself, the release from the rule of the mother is not enough to instigate the development of an independent self. At her mother's funeral, Agnosti offers Suzanne the beginning of a life with him on the plain. Given their burgeoning romance, this offer seems like it might have some appeal. Suzanne opts instead to leave with Joseph and Joseph's lover. She seems to think she has little choice in the matter, perhaps because she is still totally determined by the family: « Je pars, lui dit Suzanne, je ne peux pas faire autrement. » ("I'm leaving," Suzanne said to him. "I

can't do anything else.") (365, 288) Suzanne sees no choice but to remain with her brother, not yet considering that she might follow her own desires and forage a life outside of the family. If the desiring gaze serves in later texts to create and affirm the separate self, it seems significant that Suzanne remains invisible even to the end of the book, especially in the eyes of her brother: « Lui non plus il n'avait plus de regard pour elle et elle, au contraire, elle ne le quittait plus des yeux, pas une seconde. » (No one looked at Suzanne, not even Joseph, but she on the contrary did not stop looking at him, not for a second.) (365, 288) The death of the mother is not sufficient to liberate Suzanne from the family; it will take some other event to create a notion of self separate from the story that exists here.

Significantly, in *Barrage*, it is the experience of the cinema that offers the potential power to separate Suzanne from the family and to incite her into the experience of desire that completes that separation. Both Suzanne and Joseph love going to the cinema, frequenting it when they are in the city:

> « Pour Suzanne, comme pour Joseph, aller chaque soir au cinéma, c'était, avec la circulation en automobile, une des formes que pouvait prendre le bonheur humain. En somme, tout ce qui portait, tout ce qui vous portait, soit l'âme, soit le corps, que ce soit par les routes ou dans les rêves de l'écran plus vrais que la vie, tout ce qui pouvait donner l'espoir de vivre en vitesse la lente révolution d'adolescence, c'était le bonheur. »
>
> (For Suzanne, as for Joseph, to go every evening to the movies represented, along with motoring, one of the forms which human happiness could take. In sum, everything that carried you off, everything that bore you up—whether your soul or your body, whether along the roads or along the truer-than-life dream-paths of the silver screen, everything which could give the hope of living quickly the slow experience of adolescence-- these things represented happiness.) (123,97)

The cinema is eventually the site of Joseph's encounter with the woman who will serve as his exit from the family. Cinema facilitates desire, as Carmen describes: « Avant de faire l'amour vraiment, on le fait d'abord au cinéma, disait-elle. Le grand mérite du cinéma c'était d'en donner envie aux filles et aux garçons de les rendre impatients de fuir leur famille. » (The great value of the movies, according to her, was that they aroused desire in girls and boys, making them eager to leave home. And the first thing necessary was to leave home and get rid of one's family, even if it was a real family.) (199,160) While the cinema as a site of desire is complicit in the children's escape from the family, Suzanne does not manage to fully experience the desire described by the images.

Suzanne forms her notions of desire from watching the cinema as much as from hearing the stories of the experiences of others. Just as Carmen describes cinema as having the force of separating children from their family, so we see that the cinema gives Suzanne notions of a life away from the family: « Déjà, à force de voir tant de films, tant de gens s'aimer, tant de départs, tant d'enlacements, tant d'embrassement définitifs, tant de solutions, tant et tant, tant de prédestinations, tant de délaissements cruels, certes, mais inévitables, fatals, déjà ce que Suzanne aurait voulu c'était quitter la mère. » (Already, from having seen so many movies, seen so many departures, embraces, definitive kisses, so many solutions and predestinations, so many desertions, cruel but inevitable and fatal, already what Suzanne could have wished for was to go away from Ma.) (203, 163) The idea of desire, the desire that the girl sees in the images of the

cinema, is what gives the girl the ache to leave the family. Desire forages a self outside the family, a self that can write reflexively.

CHAPTER 2: *L'AMANT*

L'Amant as Autobiography

In *Barrage* we find a personal past written outside of the structure of autobiography. While the events that are described by the text align with what we know of Duras's personal history, the book does not formally indicate that the person writing the story and the protagonist might be one and the same. The use of the third person, in addition to a protagonist named "Suzanne", renders the relationship between the protagonist, the narrator, and the author ambiguous. The past described in *Barrage* is one in which the self that organizes autobiography has not come into being. The writing self and the written self are essentially disconnected.

The separation between the writing and written self, between present and past, does not exist in the same way in the next iteration of the story, *L'Amant*. From the beginning of *L'Amant*, we understand that the author and the protagonist are the same. This is achieved by the use of the first person in the very opening of the book, as well by the establishment of a time in the present from which vantage the past is described. From Lejeune's perspective, the unity of the narrator, protagonist, and the author qualify this work as autobiographical in a manner that *Barrage* does not. While the formal qualities of the book vary, we understand that the text is fundamentally concerned with one self, and that self is that of the author.

Duras establishes a present time of writing at the beginning of the text, making it clear that the events described are recounted retrospectively. The opening of the book addresses the connection between the past and present selves. In the first paragraph of the book, the narrator is approached by a stranger who says that he heard that she was beautiful when she was younger but that he prefers her "ravaged" older appearance. Duras explains her rapid aging at the age of 18, with the story offered presumably as an explanation for the way that her face has deteriorated and altered. In this manner, the events of the past are understood to lead in some sort of linear fashion to the state of the present; their retelling is organized and motivated by this principle. Interestingly, it is the story of her appearance rather then the story of her personality that structures the retelling of Duras's past. I will offer an explanation for this focus on Duras's image later in the chapter.

While the text does demonstrate a technical unity of identity, it deviates from the conventions of autobiography in a noteworthy manner. Though much of the book is told from the first person, the narration at times switches into the third person, referring to the protagonist as "l'enfant" or "elle." This use of the third person is meant to be figurative rather then literal: the reader maintains an understanding that the character referred to is the same as the narrator. While this does not undermine identity as stressed by Lejeune, it certainly challenges the unity and coherence of self typically displayed in autobiographical undertakings. Additionally, the tense of the narration fluctuates between the past and present. Events are recounted not in temporal order, and the narration

frequently jumps forward and backward in the life of the author. While *L'Amant* certainly qualifies as an autobiography, these deviations from the conventions of the genre challenge the autobiographical notion of identity usually formed around the "I" fiction.

Absence of the "I" Fiction

The "I" fiction both demands and motivates certain conventions. Typically autobiography is written in the first person; when exceptions are made it remains evident that the perceiving and the writing selves are the same despite the split. Moreover, since the "I" signifies that the self is unified, this explains a temporal continuity of events experienced by this continuous self. The events of the story are retold essentially in the order that the individual experienced them, typically using a perfect tense that implies retrospective. The "I" fiction denotes that one self has been continuously present throughout the entirety of the life; this self provides the narrative logic in recalling the past. In its formal deviations, *L'Amant* defies these conventions.

The formal inconsistencies of the work are due to an absence of the "I" fiction that usually structures autobiography. Typically, autobiography relies upon the notion of an essential self that unites past and present, subjective self and objective self. Where this "I" fiction did not exist at all in *Barrage*, we also must conclude that it does not entirely exist in *L'Amant* either. The lack of a consistent grammatical person and the inconsistency of the narrative suggest that the narration is not organized around a unified "I" as usually found in

autobiographical efforts. While the text does facilitate and demonstrate self-reflection, this self-reflection does not depend on the notion of a unified self usually central in autobiography.

The person of the narration changes throughout the text in a technique that draws attentions to the problems of the grammatical first person. In *Barrage*, the use of the third person demonstrates the differing nature of the protagonist and the narrator. This distinction is extenuated by the use of a name other than that of the author. In *L'Amant*, we never question whether or not the "elle" and the "je" are the same person: they clearly describe the same child, who is also the same person as the narrator. Instead, we see through the use of the "elle" a manner of looking at the self which stresses the distance between the self that existed in the past and the self that recounts in the present: "It is another way of achieving, in the form of a *splitting,* what the first person achieves in the form of a *confusion:* the inescapable duality of the grammatical 'person.' Saying 'I' is more customary (hence more 'natural') than saying 'he' when one talks about himself, but its not simpler." (Lejeune, 33) The "elle" demonstrates the difference between the self of the present and the self of the past as well as the difficulty of uniting a subjective and objective self.

In the same manner in which the person is not consistent, the tense used in *L'Amant* alternates between past and present. This fluctuating tense is not meant to challenge the reader's understanding of the retrospective nature of the events but rather to demonstrate the problems with the past as contained and organized within a narrative. Where the concept of an essential self acts as a

logic that stabilizes the recall of the past, in the case of *L'Amant* there is no such solid relationship between past and present. Duras uses alternation in tense to show the problems inherent in the recall of an event: in the same way that one remembers an event as in the past, the self experiences the remembering in the present. This lack of strict temporal organization is tied to the instability of the person used in narration and connects to an unclear relationship between the recounting self and the self of the past.

In the same way that the lack of a consistent tense signals the absence of the "I" fiction, so does the fact that the events of the plot are not recounted in a linear fashion. Short passages of the text are separated by non-numbered breaks. Events unroll in a fashion that does not appear to follow the same logic of causality usually employed by narratives. In particular, the story of the family is shattered, with Duras skipping forward and backward temporally. Events that lie far outside of the events of the book are included, including the death of the mother and the existence of Duras's own family. On the other hand, the story of the lover is much more contained. The events involving the lover occur within the text in roughly the order that they would have occurred in temporal reality. The more typical narrative style of the story of the lover demonstrates that it creates an autobiographical stability in a manner that the family does not. The episode with the lover leads to the development of a reflexive self later capable of writing autobiography, while we have already seen in *Barrage* that the family environment prevents the development of a writing self.

The Family Environment

Within *L'Amant* remain definite traces of the story of the family told within *Barrage.* The non-self entirely determined by the will of the family remains to some degree present in *L'Amant*. Duras describes how the mother allows the sexually promiscuous conduct of the girl knowing that it will be to the material advantage of the family: « C'est pour cette raison, elle ne le sait pas, que la mère permet à son enfant de sortir dans cette tenue d'enfant prostituée. Et c'est pour cela aussi que l'enfant sait bien y faire déjà, pour détourner l'attention qu'on lui porte à elle vers celle que, elle, elle porte à l'argent. Ca fait sourire la mère. » (That's why, though she doesn't know it, that's why the mother lets the girl go out dressed like a child prostitute. And that's why the child already knows how to divert the interest people take in her to the interest she takes in money. That makes her mother smile.) (33, 24) For this self subsumed by the family, the affair with the lover is materially based. Under this light, the girl does not actually desire her lover but uses him for the sake of her family. At other points in the book, her feelings towards the lover appear radically different, but these feelings remain consistently subject to the influence of the family.

Reinforcing the unformed self of the story of the family are the circumstances of abuse also present within *Barrage*. In *L'Amant*, there is even an element of sexual abuse in the actions of the mother: « Dans des crises ma mère se jette sur moi, elle m'enferme dans la chambre, elle me bat à coups de poing, elle me gifle, elle me déshabille, elle s'approche de moi, elle sent mon corps, mon ligne, elle dit qu'elle trouve le parfum de l'homme chinois, elle va plus avant, elle regarde s'il y

a des taches suspectes sur le ligne et elle hurle, la ville à l'entendre, que sa fille est une prostituée… » (My mother has attacks during which she falls on me, locks me up in my room, punches me, undresses me, comes up to me and smells my body, my underwear, says she can smell the Chinese's sense, goes even further, looks for suspect stains on my underwear, and shouts, for the whole town to hear, that her daughter's a prostitute…) (73, 58) The abuse seems designed to desensitize or desexualize a child in whom desire is just beginning to appear. In the case of the girl, desire means separation. The actions of the mother do as much possible to negate the possibility of sexual independence or personal desire. The mother firmly places the child within the sphere of the prostitute, implying that her sexual forays would be for the family or for money.

An Absent Mirror

The circumstances of the family environment prevent the development of a separate and self-reflective identity. Beyond the obvious presence of an overbearing mother and an abusive atmosphere, the emergence of self is prevented by the lack of the mother's gaze to affirm it. The gaze of the lover later becomes a substitute for the gaze of the mother in terms of developing a sense of self. It is in the exchange of gazes between the child and the lover that a secondary mirror stage occurs, allowing for a process of self-distinction and reflection. While the self of the "I" fiction never develops within the family, we see an emergent self within the story of the girl and the lover.

The manner in which the self develops or fails to develop in Duras's autobiographical works falls largely in line with Lacan's theory of the mirror stage. In the mirror stage, the child is held before a mirror by its mother and told how the image it sees corresponds to its self. The child, seeing a distinct image of its self that is separate from the rest of the visual reality surrounding it, gains a conceptual understanding of itself as distinct. This concept is called the "Ideal I", and Lacan identifies this conception as a fiction through which much psychic struggle is perpetuated. It is this initial concept of separation that gives rise to separation from the Real and to the lack that gives birth to desire. It also indicates the entrance into the symbolic order that is language: the child learns to collapse the idea of itself as a both an image and a gazing consciousness into the grammatical "I".

Like Suzanne in *Barrage*, the girl in *L'Amant* suffers from a lack of the gaze within the sphere of her family. The mother of *L'Amant* does not seem capable of gazing at the child in manner that would recognize her as separate, leaving her child without a firm sense of individual existence. This failure is at least in part manifested by the absence of an objective point of view on the mother's part: « Ma mère nous fait photographier pour pouvoir nous voir, voir si nous grandissons normalement. Elle nous regarde longuement comme d'autres mères, d'autres enfants. » (My mother has us photographed so that she can see if we're growing normally. She studies us at length, as other mothers do other children.)(115) The mother does not have the necessary distance from her own children to see them as individuals. Her direct gaze at them can not recognize

them as separate beings, leading her to look at them in photographic images. By looking at a photograph, she looks at their images without actually gazing at them. The power of the photographic image to distance the gaze becomes significant particularly in Duras's later work.

Part of the family's inability to see the child as an image or a separate object is manifested as the mother's unwillingness to accept the girl as an individual who could go on to write. To write demands a degree of self-reflexivity and self-recognition that the mother does not aim to nurture. The mother dismisses the girl's dreams of becoming an author: « Pas de réponse la première fois. Et puis elle demande : écrire quoi ? Je dis des livres, des romans. Elle dit durement : après l'agrégation de mathématiques tu écriras si tu veux, ca ne me regardera plus. Elle est contre, ce n'est pas méritant, ce n'est pas du travail, c'est une blague—elle me dira plus tard : une idée d'enfant. » (No answer the first time. Then she asks, Write what? I say, Books, novels. She says grimly, When you've got your math degree you can write if you like, it won't be anything to do with me then. She's against it, it's not worthy, it's not real work, it's nonsense. Later she said, A childish idea.) (29, 21) While the mother labels the urge to write as the desire of a child, it appears to Duras to have opposite significance: writing about the family is only possible after separation from the family.

At the same time that the abuse described seems to attack the notion of the independent self, we have within *L'Amant* a self of the present that can place the incidence of abuse within the story of her life. In the passage cited above,

Duras describes the abuse using the first person, signaling that the episode has been integrated into her reflexive self of the present. Duras no longer needs to necessarily separate from this self within the family: she has become capable of putting the experience of living with her mother into a larger narrative: « A cette époque-là, de Cholen, de l'image, de l'amant, ma mère a un sursaut de folie. » (At that time, the time of Cholen, of he image, of the lover, my mother has an access of madness.) (72, 57) While in *Barrage* Suzanne never seems to truly question the sanity of the mother, the child/I realizes that the mother is not emotionally or mentally stable:« C'est là, dans la dernière maison, celle de la Loire, quand elle en aura terminé son va-et-vient incessant, à la fin des choses de cette famille, c'est là que je vois clairement la folie pour la première fois. Je vois que ma mère est clairement folle. » (It's there, in that last house, the one on the Loire, when she finally gives up her ceaseless to-in and fro-ing, that I see the madness clearly for the first time. I see my mother is clearly mad.) (40, 30) This realization implies both a breaking from the family and an already existing distance from the events within this family. This distance is created by the affair with the lover and the experience of desire.

It is only upon the exit from the family and the developed conception of a separated self that the possibility of writing emerges. At the same time that this is a liberating sensation, it also appears to be intensely emotionally painful for Duras:

> « Je crois que ma vie a commencé à se montrer à moi. Je crois que je sais déjà me le dire, j'ai vaguement envie de mourir. Ce mot, je ne le sépare déjà plus de ma vie. Je crois que j'ai vaguement envie d'être seule, de même je m'apercois que je ne suis plus seule

> depuis que j'ai quitté l'enfance, la famille du Chasseur. Je vais écrire des livres. C'est ce que je vois au-delà de l'instant, dans le grand désert sous les traits duquel m'apparaît l'étendue de ma vie. »
>
> (I think I'm beginning to see my life. I think I can already say, I have a vague desire to die. From now on I treat that word and my life as inseperable. I think I have a vague desire to be alone, just as I realize I've never been alone any more since I left childhood behind, and the family of the hunter. I'm going to write.) (126, 103)

Somehow looking at her own life opens up an absence or wound, a desire to die. The ability and instinct to write is connected to an absence and emptiness. Leaving the family through the initiation into desire opens up the possibility of writing, but it also creates a loss that can never be filled, simply aggravated.

In *L'Amant* it is the experience with the lover that brings the reflexive self into existence. This is evidenced by the more traditionally linear form of the story of the lover in juxtaposition with the shattered story of the family. We can take this to indicate that the story of the lover leads to a self capable of organizing the past into a narrative. The story of the family, on the other hand, never leads to the existence of a self that can write. What we find in *L'Amant* is a moment of crossing between these two stories. This transition between the story of the family to the story of the lover is figured physically in the book by the crossing of the river:

> « 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 garconnière 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. De l'autre côté du fleuve. Une fois le fleuve traversé. »

> (That's the place where later on, once the present is left behind, I must stay, to the exclusion of everywhere else. The hours I spend in the apartment show it in a new light. It's a place that's intolerable, bordering on death, a place of violence, pain, despair, dishonor. And so is Cholon. On the other bank of the river. As soon as you've crossed to the other side.) (93, 75)

It is this crossing that allows her to look at her time within the family as something that could be written about. It is at the moment of this crossing, and of the first gaze from the lover, that she wishes an image had been taken—an image, one that would correspond to what the lover had first seen and desired in her, an image that could stand in as an absolute version of her self.

The Mirror of Desire

In the face of this stifling family environment, the lover enters the life of the girl as the important source of a distinguishing and defining gaze. The desiring look of the lover creates a kind of mirror stage that replaces the traditional mirror stage. Through this gaze the idea of self as both subject and object are married, making room for a concrete self capable of reflecting upon itself. This desiring mirror makes a way for the girl to create a self that is distinct from the family. We see in way this book is titled that the episode with the lover is central to this story of the past.

The desiring gaze holds the power to make the self into a distinctly perceived object. Sartre describes how the gaze transforms pure subjectivity into a material iteration: "The look which the eyes manifest, no matter what kind of eyes they are is a pure reference to myself. What I apprehend immediately when I hear the branches crackling behind me is not that there is someone there;

it is that I am vulnerable, that I have a body which can be hurt, that I occupy a place and that I can not in any case escape from the space in which I am without defense—in short, that I am seen. Thus the look is first an intermediary which refers from me to myself." (259) The gaze of another anchors an experience of unbounded consciousness into an experience of being in a place and within a distinct body. It creates notions of material boundaries that do not necessarily exist in pure consciousness. This is not dissimilar to what happens to the child seeing itself for the first time in the mirror. For Duras, too, this being seen by others is critical to her capacity to see herself as distinct. This structure of self-reflection seems to be one that begins with the experience with the lover.

In order for the gaze to fill the function of a mirror, the one gazed at must look back into the gaze. It is important that in *L'Amant* the girl desires the lover in a manner that Suzanne of *Barrage* never felt towards M. Jo. M. Jo looks at Suzanne's naked body; Suzanne sees his grotesque expression and rushes to close the door. In the absence of her reciprocated desire, this gaze does nothing to create an awareness of the self as a distinct or reflexive object. In "L'Amant," the desire for the lover is clearly reciprocated: while at times passive, the child does nothing to repel his advances and even ends up being a passionate participant in their intimacy. Most importantly, the reciprocation of desire means the reciprocation of the gaze.

In "L'Amant," the child looks hungrily back into the desiring gaze. On first meeting the lover, she describes him in some detail: « Dans la limousine il y a un homme très élégant qui me regarde. Ce n'est pas un blanc. Il est vêtu à

l'européenne, il porte le costume de tussor clair des banquiers de Saigon. Il me regarde. » (Inside the limousine there's a very elegant man looking at me. He's not a white man. He's wearing European clothes—the light tussore suit of the Saigon bankers. He's looking at me.) (25,17) The fact that he is looking at her is noted by Duras, but it is also apparent that she is looking back at him. She sees in his expression the acknowledgement of her self as a desired object. The act of looking into a gaze that makes the self into an object is parallel to looking at the image of the self reflected by a mirror. The subject which looks and the subject as image are married in a reflection, this time through the desire of the lover.

While the desiring gaze creates a notion of self for the girl, this self is still vulnerable to the effacing influence of the family. The desire for the lover and for the lover's gaze is critical in initiating of the mirror structure of interchanged gazes. However, this desire diminishes in the presence of the family. Particularly, the presence of the older brother precludes the experience of desire for the lover: « En présence de mon frère aîné il cesse d'être mon amant. Il ne cesse pas d'exister mais il ne m'est plus rien. Il devient un endroit brûlé. Mon désir obéit à mon frère aîné, il rejette mon amant. » (In my elder brother's presence he ceases to be my lover. He doesn't cease to exist, but he's no longer anything to me. He becomes a burnt out shell. My desire obeys my elder brother, rejects my lover.) (66, 52) The brother, who in *Barrage* had simply served as an object of complete devotion, has in *L'Amant* split into two characters. The older brother, Pierre, exerts a tyrannical control over the family with Duras frequently referring to him as the assassin. She describes his influence on the family as poisonous,

contributing in some way to the mother's instability. This older brother is capable of extinguishing the girl's desire for the lover and thus stunting the mirror of desiring gazes. This pull for the girl between the lover and the family, a self capable of desire and a self not yet capable of independence, creates the formal instability of the text observed earlier in the chapter.

L'Amant shows us the portrait of a self in a point between non-existence and existence. In the family, as shown by the story of *Barrage*, self-reflection does not structure an autobiographical effort. However, the interactions with the lover draw the child out of the realm of the family and into the mirroring structure of the desiring gaze. The self cannot exist consistently at the intersection of these two stories, prompting Duras to struggle with any attempt at linearity in retelling this moment of transition. The simultaneous presence of the self of the family and the self of the lover affair create a paradox of Duras's personal past: « L'histoire de ma vie n'existe pas. Ca n'existe pas. Il n'y a jamais de centre. Pas de chemin, pas de ligne. Il y a des vastes endroits ou l'on fait croire qu'il y avait quelqu'un, ce n'est pas vrai, il n'y avait personne. » (The history of my life doesn't exist. Does not exist. There's never any center to it. There are great spaces where you pretend there used to be someone, but it's not true, there was no one.)(14, 8) The self that would unify and organize the story of the lover and the story of the family does not exist. We see this non-existence of a continuous self reflected in the lack of an "I" fiction.

In this book, the "I" fiction that autobiography typically depends on is noticeably absent. There is not a unity between the self of the present and the

self of the past along which the story can be organized, at least not in the sense of unity that the grammar of the first person usage implies. The fact that the book lacks traditional formal qualities of autobiography can be ascribed to this missing fiction. However, Duras proposes another structure of self-reflection with which to organize the text. Instead of using the "I" that implies in some sense a unity of the self as subject (writing) and the self as object (recollected), Duras writes about the self in the past through the notion of looking at an image. This structure of self as both spectator and spectacle emphasizes the difference between the self of the past and the reflecting self of the present while simultaneously creating a structure of self reflection in the absence of the "I".

Image as Autobiographical Structure

The fact that Duras proposes a visual image of herself at the center of this moment of crossing reveals something significant about the structure of self reflection used in the work. Instead of writing around the fiction of a stable self, Duras writes around images. This central image of herself has never been photographed, meaning that it remains specifically as the site of a gaze of another person. If that moment had been photographed, Duras would be able to look at the image. The photograph mechanically allows the viewer to view an image without looking at the thing that it refers to. In the case of the mother looking at the photograph of her children, this means that she can look at their image without ever actually bestowing the gaze upon the actual children. In the

absence of a photograph, it takes the presence of the gaze of another in order for the image to exist.

We find that the structure of looking at an image of her self in the past structures the autobiographical effort in somewhat the same manner as the "I" fiction. The image self of the past is understood as continuous with the image self of the present. Duras achieves this by presenting the reader with something like an autobiographical pact. She establishes that the image and the self writing are the same person by recounting an episode closer to the present which concerns her aged appearance:

> « Un jour, j'étais âgée déjà, dans le hall d'un lieu public, un homme est venu vers moi. Il s'est fait connaître et il m'a dit : « Je vous connais depuis toujours. Tout le monde dit que vous étiez belle lorsque vous étiez jeune, je suis venu pour vous dire que pour mois je vous trouve plus belle maintenant que lorsque vous étiez jeune, j'aimais moins votre visage de jeune femme que celui que vous avez maintenant, dévasté. »
>
> (One day, when I was already old, in the entrance of a public place a man came up to me. He introduced himself and said, 'I've known you for years. Everyone says you were beautiful when you were young, but I want to tell you I think you're more beautiful now than then. Rather than your face as a young woman, I prefer your face as it is now. Ravaged.') (9,3)

This passage makes it clear that the image of the youth and the image of the writer at the present are unified by identity, creating a kind of unity usually achieved by the use of the first person. It also introduces another player in the creation of this autobiography: the onlooker, who creates the image through their gaze.

The writing self of the present is also established as gazing at the past. This use of the image in the place of the "I" is demonstrated by the way Duras

considers her own image: «Au contraire d'en être effrayé j'ai vu s'opérer ce vieillissement de mon visage avec l'intérêt que j'aurais pris par exemple au déroulement d'une lecture. » (But instead of being dismayed I watched this process with the same sort of interest I might have taken in the reading of a book.) (10,4) Duras is able to use her own image as a manner of reading her life. The image in important ways organizes the story of her past and functions to organize the narrative. This is also demonstrated by the beginning of the book, in which Duras signs the autobiographical pact with her aged image.

The image as it functions here necessitates the gaze of another to exist. This style of self-reflection, structured by the original experience of desire, demands that the self be looked at from the exterior. This is demonstrated by the manner in which Duras opens the autobiography. The comment from a spectator about her face prompts Duras to begin telling the story of the birth of the image and of her self. While this gaze is not desiring, it continues to affirm the image developed by desire and the variety of self reflection that the image prompted. In the instance with the lover, we can see how this desire to be looked at might be conflated with a sexual desire for the lover himself.

It is this very exterior nature of the image that renders it both impossible and absolute. While the interplay of gazes creates both a subjective and objective experience of self, the problem lies in the fact that the gaze that makes the self distinct as an object will itself always be outside of the self as subject. This breaks the unity of self as subject and object that structures the "I" fiction. The image in the eyes of the other is a true grasp of self somehow always out of

reach. Duras describes the image of herself that would be taken at the moment of crossing, presumably when the lover first laid eyes on her:

> « Elle n'aurait pu être prise que si on avait pu préjuger de l'importance de cet événement dans ma vie, cette traversée du fleuve… 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. »
>
> (The photograph could only have been taken if someone could have known in advance how important it was to be in my life, that event, that crossing of the river…And that's why—it couldn't have been otherwsise—the image doesn't exist. It was omitted. Forgotten, It never was detached or removed from all the rest. And it's to this, this failure to have been created, that the image owes its virtue: the virtue of representing, of being the creator of, an absolute.) (17, 10)

By its very nature of not existing and not being taken as a photograph, it becomes absolute: the gaze of desire that creates the self. The fact that the image is "justement l'auteur" signifies its importance in initiating Duras as a writing self.

Implications of the Image Fiction

While the image is evidently an important source of self-reflection, it is also a style of reflection that alienates the perceiving self from the self of the past perceived. Even within the past, the distinct mode of dressing which Duras favors functions to defamiliarize her image, to make it into something that could be seen distinctly. This also renders her image a site of authorship. She describes the man's hat which she often wore: « Ce ne son pas les chaussures qui font ce qu'il y a d'insolite, d'inouï, ce jour-là, dans la tenus de la petite. Ce qu'il y a ce

jour-là c'est que la petite porte sur la tête un chapeau d'homme aux bords plats, un feutre souple couleur bois de rose au large ruban noir… L'ambiguité déterminant de l'image, elle est dans ce chapeau. » (It's not the shoes, though, that make the girl look so strangely, so weirdly dressed. No it's the fact that she's wearing a man's flat-rimmed hat, a brownish-pink fedora with a broad black ribbon. The crucial ambiguity of the image lies in the hat.) (19, 12) Up until this moment in the text, the first person has been used consistently. This is the first moment where "la petite" comes to stand in for Duras and the indication that the third person will be in play. The image, made strange by the hat, takes on a new power:

> « …sous le chapeau d'homme, la minceur ingrate de la form, ce défaut de l'enfance, est devenus autre chose. Elle a cessé d'être une donnée brutale, fatale, de la nature. Elle est devenue, tout à l'opposé, un choix contrariant de celle-ci, un choix de l'esprit. Soudain, voilà qu'on l'a volue. Soudain je me vois comme une autre, comme une autre serait vue, au-dehors, mise à la disposition de tous, mise à la circulation des villes, des routes, du désir. »
>
> (… beneath the man's hat, the thin awkward shape, the inadequacy of childhood, has turned into something else. Has ceased to be a harsh, inescapable imposition of nature. Has become, on the contrary, a provoking choice of nature, a choice of the mind. Suddenly it's deliberate. Suddenly I see myself as another, as another would be seen, outside myself, available to all, available to all eyes, in circulation for cities, journeys, desire.) (20, 13)

If we see nature in this book as often meaning the biological fact of the family and the almost elemental seeming force of the mother's abuse, this manner of looking at the self as distorted image is a rebellion from the family. Duras is active in the creation of the image, hoping to attract the desire that will allow her to form a true notion of self. This authorship takes the form of alienation.

While this style of self-reflection effectively drives the autobiographical effort within this book, it creates a distance between the experience and the perception of the experience. The consciousness self removes in order to inspect itself as an object, never employing the useful abbreviation of the "I" fiction that allows for experience and perception of experience to be unified. Even within the way that Duras writes about the intensity of her love affair, this distance is evident: « Je m'aperçois que je le désire. » (I notice that I desire him.) (51, 40) Duras perceives desire rather then directly experiencing desire. The self has been rendered an exterior, an image, in her perception of it. Even as she comes to control her own story, the story and the experience stop being precisely her own.

Understanding this structure of distance in Duras's method of self-reflection, it comes as little surprise that her autobiographical efforts increasingly tend towards the cinematic. Instead of a narrator retelling the events, we instead have a gaze directed at an image of the past, rendering a strange form of autobiography and to some extent further diminishing what traces of an "I" fiction that might have made their way into the work. Mary Anne Douane cites Christian Metz: "The voyeur… must maintain a distance between himself and the image—the cinéphile *needs* the gap which represents for him the very distance between desire and its object." (78) The cinematic structure of a camera directed at a spectacle effectively recreates the structure of desire as built in *L'Amant*. The autobiographical effort of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* is

structured by a cinematic distance between the writing present and the image of the past.

CHAPTER 3: *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*

An Autobiographical Project

With the addition of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, we can begin to think of the trio of retellings as an autobiographical project. Duras is struggling to find a form that will allow her to tell her own story in the absence of the traditional "I" fiction that structures autobiography. The question becomes how a narrative can be organized by self when the telling self and the told self are not experienced as unified, leaving a divide between the perceived past and the perceiving present. In *Barrage*, the connection between the self of the past and the self of the present is entirely absent, leading Duras to write her past as though it happened to a third person. In *L'Amant*, we are caught at the moment of intersection between a not yet reflexive self of the past and the self that will continue to the writing present. In the absence of the grammatical fiction of the "I", Duras employs the image as a reflexive structure. In *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* we see what appears to be the fulfillment of the image structure developed in *L'Amant*.

In contrast to the fact that this text does not on the whole employ the pronoun "I", Duras opens the story with the closest she comes to a traditional autobiographical pact. This opening section of the book is written in the first person and details Duras's motivation for undertaking the construction of this text. Duras reports that she learned of the death of the Chinese lover and found herself compelled to rewrite the story of the affair between him and the girl. This note affirms the presence of a writing self more tangibly then either of the two

preceding texts. However, by calling the story that of the girl and the lover rather then her own personal history, Duras demonstrates that a degree of distance remains in the way she reflects on her own past. This distance is affirmed by the formal qualities of this iteration of the story.

Even within what appears to be an autobiographical context, Duras notes that this text is a rewriting of a former text rather then an attempt to rewrite her own past. This is a representation of an already existing representation rather than a reflection of an external reality. Throughout the written story, Duras habitually refers to details that have appeared in former stories. She admits that some of what she refers to within this text is a reality that existed in other texts: « C'est le bac sur le Mékong. Le bac des livres. » (This is the ferry across the Mekong. The ferry in the books.) (35, 25) What is critical is not that these details correspond to her actual life but to other written versions of that past. In admitting that her project does not resemble an external past, Duras seems prepared to admit that she has constructed her own history, writing in her introduction: « Je suis redevenue un écrivain de romans. » (I became a novelist all over again.) (12, 2), Duras admits to the presence of a fiction in the retelling of the story.

Despite what appears to be an autobiographical pact referring to the writing present, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* is lacking the "I" fiction that structures traditional autobiography. Typically, the identity of narrator, protagonist and author leads the reader to understand that the self that experienced the past and the self that writes in the present are consistent and

continuous. In *Chine du Nord*, Duras continues to depend on the structure of the gaze that emerges in *L'Amant*: the past self is seen as an image, while the present self looks at and describes that image. In this text, however, the present writing self is diminished to the solidification of the image-self of the past. The image structure fails to unify the perceiving and perceived self, leading to the absence of a unity of identity typically central to autobiography.

Cinematic Paradoxes

The very form of *Chine du Nord* challenges its status as autobiography. While Duras prefaces the work with an autobiographical pact, the text that follows takes a form that would more commonly be identified with a screenplay. The language describes images that remain absent, with the narrator gazing at these images. The "I" fiction in which the perceiving and the perceived can be unified by identity is rendered impossible by the structure of cinema, as Elizabeth Bruss describes: "The unity of subjectivity and subject matter—the implied identity of author, narrator, and protagonist on which classical autobiography depends—seems to be shattered by film; the autobiographical self decomposes, schisms, into almost mutually exclusive elements of the person filmed (entirely visible; recorded and projected) and the person filming (entirely hidden; behind the camera eye.)" (297) The fact that Duras tells the story through a cinematic form shows us that there exists a fundamental split between the perceiving self and the perceived self and therefore a parallel gap between

the self of the past and the self of the present. This distance is affirmed by the use of the third person.

While *Chine du Nord* remains a written text instead of an actual filmed series of images, the text is to some extent emptied of the presence of a narrator. In *Barrage*, even if the narrator was never explicitly described, it was evident that a consciousness was narrating the past from a point in the future and that this narrator had some kind of intimate involvement with the family and characters described. In *L'Amant*, the writing present and the written past are intermingled frequently. While the opening note of *Chine du Nord* clearly signals the existence of a writing present, the prose seems to lack an organizing and authoring subject. Where in *L'Amant* sentences sprawl in subjective and poetic associations, in *Chine du Nord* the syntax is frequently concise and objective. The text is meant to describe the images, not to draw attention to its nature as a text.

Instead of the presence of the narrator as the author, we instead have a narrator who acts as a pure gaze describing an image of the past. This narrating gaze is fundamentally faceless: as if behind a camera, the person behind the gaze cannot possibly the same as the person in front of it, leading to what would appear to be an autobiographical paradox. The most tangible presence of the present narrator is a voice describing the images shown:

> « La voix qui parle ici est celle, écrite, du livre.
> Voix aveugle. Sans visage.
> Très jeune.
> Silencieuse. »
>
> (The voice speaking is the written voice of the book.
> A blind voice. Faceless.
> Very young.

Silent.) (17, 7)

The voice--presumably that of the narrator and the person directing the gaze of the text--appears to be distinct from the image. In this way, the present and the past self, the narrating and narrated self, are not connected by a continuous image such as they are by the ruined face of *L'Amant*.

The connection between the narrator and the protagonist depends on our knowledge of *L'Amant*. The protagonist of *Chine du Nord* and *L'Amant* are the same: the protagonist of this text is the third person « enfant », the absolute image self of « L'Amant ». Duras explicitly describes this extension of the image self very early in *Chine du Nord*:

> « Elle, elle est restée celle du livre, petite, maigre, hardie, difficile à attraper le sens, difficile à dire qui c'est, moins belle qu'il n'en paraît, pauvre, fille de pauvres, ancêtres pauvres, fermiers, cordonniers, première en francais tout le temps partout et détestant la France, inconsolable du pays natal et d'enfance. crachant la viande rouge des steaks occidentaux, amoureuse des hommes faibles, sexuelle comme pas rencontré encore. Folle de lire, de voir, insolente, libre. »
>
> (She, she has stayed the way she was in the book, small, skinny, tough, hard to get a sense of, hard to label, less pretty than she looks, poor, the daughter of poor people, poor ancestors, farmers, cobblers, always first in French at all her schools, yet disgusted by France, and mourning the country of her birth and youth, spitting out the red meat of Western steaks, with a taste for weak men, and sexy like you've never seen her before. Wild about reading, seeing—fresh, free.)(36, 26)

The self functioning in this text is explicitly one that has already been formed in previous texts. In both texts, this image self is referred to using the third person rather than the "I". We see an amplification of certain personality traits nascent

in *L'Amant*. The ideal image of the self that we caught glimpses of in *L'Amant* emerges fully in *Chine du Nord*.

An Unbroken Mirror

The formal solidification of the image signals a change in the story of how the reflexive self developed. In *L'Amant*, we saw the beginning of an image self that came into being in the presence of the desiring gaze of the lover. The exchange of desiring gazes was able to replicate the mirror stage that the family environment could not provide. However, the continued presence of the family prevented the full solidification of the image self. *L'Amant* is caught at the moment between the existence and non-existence of the reflexive self, and thus the image is not always present in the text. In *Chine du Nord*, the image created by the desiring gaze no longer suffers interference. The family becomes part of the background rather then the main story of this text. The story of the past has changed, with elements that interrupted the development of the image self losing prominence. In *Chine du Nord*, the emergence of a cinematic style of self-reflection is explained through the pervasive presence of desire in the story of the self's development.

While the first two works in the autobiographical series are focused on the self (or lack of self) in relation to the family, *Chine du Nord* is clearly more concerned with the story of the girl and the lover. The plot takes place almost entirely in the boarding school and with the lover, showing us scarce scenes within the domestic home. The mother clearly controls the actions of the young

girl much less than in the former two books. The elder brother who serves as the greatest source of terror in *L'Amant* in this book seems feeble and is ultimately sent away by the mother. While we hear of abuse in this book, we never see it occur, and instances of abuse in the past are explained and excused. The oppressive family that formerly prevented the development of a reflexive self no longer holds such a dominant role in the life of the girl.

If in *Barrage* Suzanne shows very little agency in the face of the family, we have almost a total reversal of dynamics in *Chine du Nord*. The girl seems to have almost total independence from the wishes of her family, displaying a fairly free relation with her mother and two brothers. In *L'Amant*, the child never tells the mother about the extent of her feelings for the lover, instead saying that her incentive was financial and family related. In *Chine du Nord*, the child tells the mother about the passion of the love affair and the mother responds without aversion. The child's sense of agency and self definition outside of the family is also demonstrated by the way that she explains herself and her actions to the lover: « C'est rien… c'est moi… je suis comme ca. » (I don't know. That's me, that's how I am…) (83, 72) In comparison with Suzanne's statement in *Barrage*: « On est comme ca » (We are like that)(154, 123), it seems very apparent that the child has a sense of self-possession and self-knowledge that does not depend on her place within the family.

The abuse that serves as one of the most vivid and visceral demonstrations of the child's powerlessness in former versions is almost entirely absent from *Chine du Nord*. In former versions, abuse at the hands of the

mother is a grave and uncontrollable fact, a manifestation of a deeper emotional instability that renders the mother incapable of recognizing her children as individuals. In this text, the same abuse is a manner of protecting the child from the more severe danger of the older brother. The mother explains this to the lover:

> « --Non, c'est moi, Monsieur, parce que lui, j'avais peur qu'il la tue.
> Le Chinois sourit à la mère.
> --Sur ses ordres à lui, votre fils aîné ?
> --… Si vous voulez… mais ce n'est pas si simple… pour l'amour de lui, pour lui plaire… pour de temps en temps ne pas lui donner tort… vous voyez… »
>
> ('No, Monsieur, I did, because I was afraid he would kill her.
> The Chinese smiles at the mother.
> 'On order from him, from your older son?'
> 'You could say that, but it isn't that simple. Out of love for him, to make him happy… not to put him in the wrong for a change. You understand…') (168, 154)

The abuse is no longer an indication of the mother's madness but rather a sign of her weakness and fear in the face of the older brother. The mother seems excused for her failings within this version of the narrative and even takes a more proactive role in protecting her children. In former books, the girl sees her older brother steal meat from the younger brother and objects, causing an altercation. This episode illustrates the tyrannical control the elder brother wields over the family. In *Chine du Nord* the mother witnesses this incident and tells the girl it was what inspired her decision to send the brother back to France. For the character of the older brother, we no longer have the unexplained absence of *Barrage* nor the dominating presence of *L'Amant*: in

"Chine du Nord," Pierre no longer reigns despotically over the mother and the family.

The mother's recognition of an independent and self-possessed daughter extends to her acceptance of the child's desire to write. This acceptance rescinds a tendency to claim control over the girl's life. In "Chine du Nord," the mother asks of the child: « Tu écriras sur quoi quand tu feras des livres ? » (What will you write about when you write your books?)(25, 15) The child confidently answers: « Sur Paulo. Sur toi. Sur Pierre aussi, mais là ce sera pur le faire mourir. » (Paulo. You. And Pierre too, but just so I can kill him off.) (25, 15) Rather then dismissing the desire to write as a childish idea, the mother seems to engage in a serious manner with her daughter's ambition for self-creation. The mother of *Chine du Nord* does not present a challenge or obstacle to the development of a reflexive self. What we find in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* is the uninterupted story of a writing self formed through desire.

The Mirror of Desire

In this reiteration of the story and in *L'Amant*, we find a lover whose desiring gaze reflects the girl's image and allows her to create a notion of self. In order for this reflection to occur, the lover must be someone who the girl could convincingly desire. If in *Barrage* M. Jo was repulsive and in *L'Amant* he was problematically feeble and effeminate, we see a reprise of the lover with a more appealing characterization by the narrator: « Il est un peu différent de celui du livre : il est un peu plus robuste que lui, il a moins peur que lui, plus d'audace. Il a

plus de beauté, plus de santé. Il est plus « pour le cinéma » que celui du livre. Et aussi il a moins de timidité que lui face à l'enfant. » (He is a little different from the one in the book: he's a little more solid than the other, less frightened than the other, bolder. He is better-looking, more robust. He is more 'cinematic' than the one in the book. And he's also less timid facing the child.) (36, 26) The story seems focused not so much on faithfully representing the character of the lover, but rather on creating a character who compels the reciprocation of desire. The lover, like the family, changes depending on the story which the self wishes to tell about its birth. In such a manner, *Chine du Nord* is primarily a story about looking and being looked at with desire.

The amplification of both desire and the cinematic structure is demonstrated in the text by proliferation of the gaze between the lover and the girl. There hardly seems to be a time at which the two are not looking at one another. The text is very attentive in noting the instances in which the pair gaze at each other, recording it even at times when the mutuality of the gaze would be easily assumed by the reader. This constant look seems to somehow solidify the image self of the girl as well as the image of the past.

One of the most important qualities of the gaze is its ability to render the site of its view into a discrete, distinct object. It is through this objectification that the self as subject begins to experience itself as a distinct being. While generally such objectification is considered degrading, within the context of the mirror phase it is a necessary step in self-realization. Within the sexual exchanges between the lover and the child, we see a powerful instance of such

objectification in their sexual intimacy. In the same manner that sexual objectification has come into play in each of the texts up until this point, the lover makes the child into an instrument of his desire:

> « Elle devient objet à lui, à lui seul secrètement prostituée. Sans plus de nom. Livrée comme chose, chose par lui seul, volée. Par lui seul prise, utilisée, pénétrée. Chose tout à coup inconnue, une enfant sans autre identité que celle de lui appartenir à lui, d'être à lui seul son bien, sans mot pour nommer ca, fondue à lui, diluée dans une généralité pareillement naissante, celle depuis le commencement des temps nommée à tort par un autre mot, celui d'indignité. »
>
> (She becomes his object, secretly prostituted to him alone. Nameless now. Offered up like a thin, a thing he alone has stolen. Taken, used, penetrated by him alone. Something suddenly unknown, a girl child without identity except that she belongs to him is his sole estate—there is no word for that—melded into him, absorbed in a totality that is itself just being born, called since the dawn of time by another, an unjust name: indignity.) (99, 87)

That the act of love strips the girl of her name shows us that it also effectively removes us from her family and from the markers of self by which she might have recognized herself up until that point. Indeed, she remains without name in both *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord.* This stripping of identity allows her to break from the oppressive lack of independence of the family and to author her own self. The name serves as a marker of the textual self: its removal makes space for the image to take primary importance. The removal of the name signals the kind of objectification that the desiring gaze initiates, allowing for the mirror effect of desire to take place.

The objectification of the self manifests formally in the text as a solidification of the image. It is only after recognition by the gaze of the other that the self-image can be distinct enough to be looked at by the self. After one of

their first encounters, Duras describes how the girl looks at herself. We rarely have this level of encounter with the mirror in other texts: « Elle se regarde elle – elle s'est approchée de son image. Elle s'approache encore. Ne se reconnaît pas bien. Elle ne comprend pas ce qui est arrivé. Elle le comprendra des années plus tard : elle a déjà le visage détruit de toute sa vie. » (She looks at herself—she has come up close to her reflection. She comes even closer. Doesn't quite recognize herself. She doesn't understand what has happened. Years later, she will understand: her face is already the ruin it will be for the rest of her life.) (88,76) Desire has changed the image, exteriorized it, made it into an object that is identified as foreign. At the same time that this represents a level of alienation from the self, it also allows for a structure of self-reflection. At this moment of perception of self post desire, Duras moves into a self that can look at its own image: this new self, split self will persist for the rest of her life. This is the moment of birth of the reflexive self, where the structure of looking at the self in the form of an exterior image takes root.

Extended Desire

The desiring gaze contributes importantly to the girl's experience of herself as a distinct and separate self. The incipient mirror stage of *L'Amant* seems to have been completed in *Chine du Nord*: the strengthened and continued image of the girl signals that a reflexive self has come into existence in this past. However, this image aspect of the self relies upon the gaze to affirm its existence, constantly needing the presence of the other. In this sense, a desire to be looked

at extends beyond the experience with the lover. Since the lover is the girl's first model of a reflexive gaze, it seems that the girl goes on to confuse the desire to be looked at with sexual desire in general. Thus, for the girl to be recognized by the various members of her life also means for them to desire her and for her to desire them. Through the original experience with the lover, the gaze and the experience of desire become intertwined in a manner that has important repercussions for the girl.

Along with the intensification of desire comes its broadening. While the main narrative of the text is clearly concerned with the exchange of desire between the girl and the lover, we also witness an iterative quality of the text's concern with desire. There are few characters in the book towards whom the girl does not seem to have some form of sexual feelings. Along with the lover, she is more explicitly sexually drawn towards Hélène Lagonelle, with the two sharing stories of their sexual feelings and thoughts. While this relationship was hinted at in *L'Amant,* it emerges powerfully in *Chine du Nord.* The girl admits that Hélène was the first she ever desired, upon seeing her naked out of the shower: « Je voudrais te dire une chose… c'est impossible à dire, mais je voudrais que tu saches. Pour moi, le désir, le premier désir, ca a été toi. Le premier jour. Après ton arrivée. C'était le matin, tu revenais de la salle de douches, complètement nue… c'était à ne pas en croire ses yeux, à croire qu'on t'inventait… » (I want to tell you something. I can't say it, but I want you to know. For me, the first time I wanted someone was you. The first day. After you got here. It was in the morning, you were coming back from the showers, stark naked. I couldn't

believe my eyes, I thought I was imagining you…) (68,57) This event mirrors an event in *Barrage* in which M. Jo begs to see Suzanne naked out of the shower. In *Barrage*, the importance of this desiring gaze is determined by the material pressure of the family and the financial offer of M. Jo. Suzanne is not given the opportunity to return the desire that M. Jo demonstrates through his gaze. The world prostitutes her, preventing her from the self that might be developed through the reciprocation of desire. In *Chine du Nord*, however, it is the girl that initiates this gaze, bringing both herself and her friend into the structure of desire.

Desire works to generate the gaze and with the gaze, the image. In this sense, desire is critical for the self's understanding of itself and of its past. We see this manifest in the text during the encounter that the girl has with her younger brother. The girl looks at herself in the mirror, a typical act of self-reflection that might bring the self into being. Instead, this gazing incites a moment of desire, as she sees her younger brother in the image of the mirror:

> « L'enfant va dans la salle de bains. Elle se regarde. La glace ovale n'a pas été enlevée,
> Dans la glace passe l'image du petit frère qui traverse la cour. L'enfant l'appelle tout bas : Paulo.
> Paulo était venu dans la salle de bains par la petite porte du côté du fleuve. Ils s'étaient embrassés beaucoup. Et puis elle s'était mise nue et puis elle s'était étendue à côté de lui et elle lui avait montré qu'il fallait qu'il vienne sur son corps à elle. Il avait fait ce qu'elle avait dit. Elle l'avait embrassé encore et elle l'avait aidé. »
>
> (The child goes into the bathroom. She looks at herself. They haven't taken down the oval mirror.
> The image of the little brother crossing the courtyard passes through the mirror. The child calls to him very softly: Paulo.
> Paulo came into the bathroom through the small door facing the river. They kissed a lot. And then she took off her clothes, and then

> she lay down beside him and she showed him how he should come onto her body. He did what she told him. She kissed him some more and she helped him.) (209, 194)

Through out all three works the girl desires the younger brother. This is the first moment in the project where this desire has both been rendered so explicitly. Interestingly, Duras recalls this moment of consummation while looking at her own image in the mirror. Some degree of question remains as to whether this episode is a memory or a fantasy, a scene she writes in her imagination to explain the image of the self that she sees in the mirror. At this moment of the text, we see the power of the image to generate stories without necessarily reflecting a reality.

The Cinematic Split

The increasing presence of desire and the desiring gaze corresponds to the cinematic inclination of the work. The autobiographical effort of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* is structured by the gaze of the narrator upon an image of the past. Instead of the unified self of the "I" fiction, the self of *Chine du Nord* is split between perceiving and perceived. At the same time that the girl shown in the filmic images is clearly Duras, there is a distance of spectatorship between the writing self and the self written about. The narrator describes: « Devant nous quelqu'un marche. Ce n'est pas celle qui parle. » (Someone is walking ahead of us. It isn't the speaker.) (18, 7) The experience of an always exterior desiring gaze creates a model of reflection paralleled by the formal construction of *Chine du Nord*. The story of desire renders possible the cinematic telling of the story, as

the strength of the girl's passion for the lover creates a self capable of recounting the past: « Avec notre histoire, je crois que ma vie a commencé. La première de ma vie. » (I think life started for me with our affair. the first in my life.) (189, 174) Before the mirror of desire, no reflexive self existed. After the experience of desire a new life begins, but it is a life in which the self can never quite experience and perceive experience simultaneously.

Chine du Nord creates a continuous and solid image of the self at the expense of the narrating self. The narration centers around the image seen by the narrator and recorded by a camera. The whole of the text is structured by these absent images. However, the narrating self—the written present self of former books, and presumably of this book—is faceless. While it perceives, it perceives through a camera, and it cannot itself be seen. The completion of the image self of the past is achieved at a loss of the solidity of the narrating, perceiving self of the present. Aside from the note at the beginning of the book, there is no real reference or sense of the self that exists in the present. While we are given a fully developed past, there seems to be something fundamentally destabilizing about what this structure does to the present.

The fundamentally problematic nature of this self-reflexive approach is demonstrated by the way in which *Chine du Nord* ends. Like *L'Amant*, the last scene of the book is a phone conversation between the lover and the girl, presumably one which takes place far in the future of the events described by the plot. The lover confesses that he still loves the girl, that he will always love her, and that he will love her until he dies. In *L'Amant*, this is the closing note. In

Chine du Nord, however, there is another paragraph of text following this confession, in which the girl *disappears:* « Et puis de plus loin, de sa chambre sans doute, elle n'avait pas raccroché, il les avait encore entendus. Et puis il avait essayé d'entendre encore. Elle n'était plus là. Elle était devenue invisible, inatteignable. Et il avait pleuré. Très fort. Du plus fort de ses forces. » (And then from further off, probably from her room—she hadn't hung up—he could still hear her crying. And then he tried to hear still more. She was no longer there. She had become invisible, unreachable. And he had cried. Very hard. With all the strength that was in him.) (242, 226) The self of the present is not the girl of the past that the lover saw so clearly as an image. As the image disappears the self ceases to exist, becoming silent and unreachable.

An Absent Past

One of the most noticeable characteristics of the autobiographical project by this point is that a sense of reference to the past has almost entirely disappeared. In *Barrage*, Duras writes what is perhaps the truest account of her past as if it were fiction. In *L'Amant*, she attempts to write the elements of her past that she had not formerly written. In "Chine du Nord," however, she admits that she is writing not about the past but rewriting a story that she had already written. As Duras writes without reliance on the "I" fiction, she also drifts away from the fiction of reference. If in *L'Amant* absent but actual photographs generated a text about the past, in *Chine du Nord* that text generates a new and continuous but fictionalized image. We have in the representational project

another level of mirroring between text and image, through which a fiction of the now absent actual past is sustained.

The impact of this fiction is apparent by the ending of *Chine du Nord*. In "L'Amant," the lover tells the girl that « … c'était comme avant, qu'il l'aimait, encore, qu'il ne pourrait jamais cesser de l'aimer, qu'il l'aimerait jusqu'à sa mort. » (… that it was as before, that he still loved her, he could never stop loving her, that he'd love her until death.) (142, 117) In *Chine du Nord*, the lover tells the girl « … que pour lui, c'était curieux à ce point-là, que leur histoire était restée comme elle était avant, qu'il l'aimait encore, qu'il ne pourrait jamais de toute sa vie cesser de l'aimer. Qu'il l'aimerait jusqu'à la mort. » (He said to him it was strange how much their story had remained what it was before, how he still loved her, how he would never stop loving her for the rest of his life. How he would love her until he died.) (242, 226) While something has been preserved from the past to the present, it is the story rather then the reality. What lives on is not that actual love, but the story of that love—the story has bypassed the past that was supposedly its material. In the reflection and re-reflection between text and image, the reality that served as reference and truth disappears.

The structure of self-reflection that constantly divides the self into a perceiving and perceived also translates experience into a representation of experience as soon as it occurs. Throughout *Chine du Nord*, the girl seems aware even as it occurs that her experience with the lover is something which she will later transform into a piece of writing. She discusses the book that she will write about it with him during one of their encounters:

> « --Puis un jour on parlera de nous, avec des nouvelles personnes, on racontera comment c'était.
> --Et puis un autre jour, plus tard, beaucoup plus tard, on écrira l'histoire.
> --Je ne sais pas.
> Il pleurent.
> --Et un jour on mourra.
> -- Oui. L'amour sera dans le cercueil avec les corps.
> --Peut-être. On ne peut pas encore savoir.
> Le Chinois dit :
> --Si, on sait. Qu'il y aura des livres, on sait.
> Ce n'est pas possible autrement. »
>
> ('Then one day we'll talk about us with new people, we'll tell them how it was.'
> 'And then some other day, later on, much later on, we'll write the story.'
> 'I don't know.'
> They cry.
> 'And one day we'll die.'
> 'Yes. Our love will be in the casket with our bodies.'
> 'Yes. The books, they'll be outside the casket.
> 'Maybe. We can't know that yet.'
> The Chinese says:
> 'Yes, we know it. That there will be books, that we know.'
> It can't be any other way.) (195, 180)

The very possibility of the experience, its truth and authenticity, lies in the fact that it will go on to generate representations of itself. The representations themselves will outlast the experience, the memory of the experience, and even the self that did the remembering.

Just as the past disappears in the project of representation and re-representation, so the fiction of the self becomes noticeably less solid as the process of rewriting progresses. The act of turning image to language and language to image parallels the mirror stage as described by Lacan. Lacan, however, thinks that the "I" fiction developed through the mirror stage is fundamentally a deception, hiding the fact that there is no solid self represented

in either the image or the "I". Duras has failed to buy into this fiction early enough, and we see in her autobiographical efforts an attempt to find a solid sense of self in what is actually just an endless series of representations.

CONCLUSION

Fiction of the Past

If the function of autobiography is to use the past in order to explain the present of the self, a tension arises between the need to faithfully retell the past and the desire to select elements of the past best suit the present self. In Duras, we see a past that changes dramatically in accordance with the writing present. Factual differences between the story told in the three versions of Duras's childhood story lead us to question whether the aim and intention of these works is to actually represent Duras's past. While the story presented in each respective work explains Duras's literary identity, it also deviates from what is known of her history. Over the course of the autobiographical process, Duras shifts from a personal past to a past she herself authored.

Out of the three works that might be identified as concerning her own life, Duras primarily recognized *Barrage* as factually representative. (French Review, 645) Duras intended the book as a tribute to the strength of her mother; her mother read the book as a personal attack. (Adler, 182) We can see the very act of writing *Barrage* as an attempt to gain recognition by the mother, resulting in the same lack of attention or acknowledgement so brutally represented by the story itself. Duras had hoped that the book would win her a Prix Goncourt and

was bitterly disappointed when the prize was awarded elsewhere. To some extent, Duras's rewriting of this story can be seen as motivated by dissatisfaction with the reception of its first published version.

Though *L'Amant* was not written as an autobiography, it is typically interpreted as such. This interpretation has contributed to its international success. Duras wrote the book around a collection of family photos that an editor later encouraged her to remove. (Glassman, 141) In this way, the very writing of the book replaced a mechanical reflection of her past (photographs) with a more subjective representation (text.). *L'Amant* won Duras widespread recognition, including the Prix Goncourt that *Barrage* had missed. At first, Duras fiercely rejected the notion that the past of the book was her own personal past. As time passed, however, she would increasingly take ownership of the history that she had created in the work.

If *Chine du Nord* formally resembles a screenplay, it is because Duras wrote the work in response to her exclusion from the production of the cinematic version of *L'Amant.* (Adler, 378) In *Chine du Nord,* Duras replaces the photographs of *L'Amant* with new, filmic images. Despite the opening note that claims the writing of the book was motivated by the death of the lover, Duras wrote this book as a defense of her right to author the representation of her life and a bid to maintain control of the history she created. The autobiographical preface was added near the completion of the work. (Adler, 378) By the time she wrote *Chine du Nord*, Duras was leaning into an autobiographical interpretation of a story that she still maintained was not her actual past.

Especially in later works we see a conflation of the written past with the actual past. *Chine du Nord* is more a writerly mythology than an actual reflection of Duras's history. The written past and the actual past are openly confused and intermingled in Duras's work. We see even within *Chine du Nord* evidence of the written nature of the past:

> « Elle se souvient. Elle est la dernière à se souvenir encore. Elle entend encore le bruit de la mer dans la chambre. D'avoir écrit ca, elle se souvient aussi, comme le bruit de la rue chinoise. Elle se souvient même d'avoir écrit que la mer était présente ce jour-là dans la chambre des amants. Elle avait écrit les mots : la mer et deux autres mots : le mot : simplement, et le mot : incomparable. »
>
> (She remembers. She is the last to remember. She still hears the sound of the sea in the room. And she remembers having written that. As she remembers the Chinese street. She even remembers writing that the sea was present that day in the lover's room. She wrote the words: *the sea,* and three other words—the words *simply* and *beyond compare.*) (Chine du Nord, 81, 69)

Here, memory and writing are mixed. It is difficult to ascertain what is recalled first, the memory or the writing. In Duras's attempt to write a past that explains the present, the written past serves just as well as the actual past.

Autobiography as Mirror

All autobiography aims to organize a past in which both the writer and the reader can recognize the self of the author. As Duras increasingly thought of herself as a writing persona, the story of her past becomes a story that explains a writing self. Duras herself acknowledges that this process of replacing reality with representation lead to a disorientation and alienation: 'The story of my life does not exist. It is not to tell my story that I write. Writing has taken from me

was left of my life. It has emptied me and I no longer know what – in what I have written about my life – is real, and what I actually experienced." (Adler, 348) Duras seems to view her own past and the past of her work with as much distance as her readers.

Throughout this thesis, the mirror stage has been discussed as an element shaping the story and the form of Duras's work. Up until this point, I have not discussed the manner in which autobiography acts as a mirror for the autobiographer. In the same way that the mirror of the mirror stage provides a representation of the self as distinct and defined object in the form of an image, autobiography provides a representation of the self in the form of a text. An objective self is created through the process of representation in autobiography, a self that is seen both by the autobiographer and the reading public.

What the child sees in the mirror is an image of itself, which it takes to be a copy of what others see and proof that the self exists as a distinct object in the world. Important to the conceptual leap of the mirror stage is that the representation reflects a reality. Unlike the image in the mirror, autobiography is more dubious in how closely it resembles the authoring self. Autobiographies that claim factual veracity are ones in which we take the representation for a verisimilitude of the exterior reality of the self, just as we mistake the image for a verisimilitude of the objective self. In these autobiographies, the autobiographer might see themselves as a solid, contained self. For Duras, the artificiality of her autobiography seems to be an attempt to make her self and past more recognizable, tailored in accordance with what the public recognized. Just as she

authored her own image through dress in *L'Amant,* so too she alters and alienated the past presented in her autobiography

Just as we observe the importance of the exterior gaze in the work of Duras, so can we observe the importance of this gaze for the whole autobiographical project. In the mirror stage, the gaze of an exterior individual is important in designating a distinct self to the child. Throughout the work of Duras, the gaze of the mother and lover is critical in either creating or preventing the development of a reflexive self. Like the image, autobiography is something read and affirmed by an exterior, the reading public. As we have seen in Duras's process of rewriting her autobiography, the manner in which the public responded to her work corresponded to some degree in how she presented and altered her story. What the public recognized as Duras's history she came to accept as such, authoring a past that would fit the writing persona of Marguerite Duras.

If the mirror of desire initiated by the lover creates a style of self-reflection that consistently split the self, so the mirror of autobiography initiated by the public creates a similar split in Duras. Duras seems to have craved the gaze of her public, and the autobiographical inclination of later works in this series was surely an attempt to attract the attention and interest of her readers. Adler writes: "Marguerite Duras only went on return journeys between herself and herself. If she spoke to you, it was to talk about herself. To her Paris was like a huge glass cage with watchtowers everywhere." (Adler, 369) As Duras's authorial fame increased, so did her awareness of the eye of the public on her.

The self of her literary works, a self that could sense itself only through the gaze of another, seems to have been present in the literary act.

Beyond always wanting to be watched, Duras seems to have been watching herself. Born Marguerite Donnadieu, she began to speak of herself in the third person as "La Duras" as her writing self solidified. The alterations in her autobiography increasingly reflect the writing self seen by the public. Her autobiography allowed her to look at herself as a writing self: "Henceforth she would believe only in the myth she had created. With *The Lover,* Marguerite had given up the story of her life in favour of the novel of her life. Having already adopted the strange habit of referring to herself in the third person, she would now, ironically or narcissistically, call herself *la* Duras. 'If you only knew how fed up I am with me,' she confided one day to a friend." (Adler, 350) This habit of referring to herself in the third person is one reflected in the works we have investigated. The actual drift away from the use of the "I" shows us that the divided self found in her autobiography existed outside of her autobiography.

An Author's Fiction

By most psychological standards, this lack of an "I" fiction would not be described as healthy or desirable. The temptation exists to read the absence of reality in Duras's work as a psychic wound. The psychoanalytic concept of trauma would explain this absence as a break in the narrative that structures a healthy self. Trauma occurs when an event is so disruptive or shocking to structures of the self that the self dissociates from what is occurring. These

traumatic events are usually completely outside of the individual's fundamental understanding of themselves and the world around them and are threatening enough to these understandings that they are rejected by the ego. This inability to integrate the event into the framework of memory leaves a gap where recall should occur. Traumatized individuals usually find themselves incapable of recounting the event on their own will, rather suffering from impulsive recollections or re-enactments of the event. The fact that Duras represented the same episode from her past many times and that this event included incidents of abuse creates a case to analyze this autobiographical project in the context of trauma. My initial instinct with thesis was to read Duras through this lens, but the work of Duras resists this interpretation.

To psychoanalyze the work of Duras in this manner is to ignore the fact that Duras knowingly privileges representation over reality. She seems to understand that she referred to an absence and that this same absence was the source of her creative drive. Even if there was a silence or lack, it was this space that generated words. The work of Marguerite Duras in ways stresses the fact that the concept of solid self and definable past that we rely upon are actually fictions. These fictions arise from an initial misrecognition in which we mistake a representation for the real and thus slip into the symbolic. These are fictions that both facilitate and are facilitated by language. Duras openly acknowledges that these concepts are artificial and unstable. If the self and the past are fictions, they are at least fictions that Duras authors.

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