

ONE AUTHOR, ONE STORY, TWO ACCOUNTS:
FROM UN BARRAGE CONTRE LE PACIFIQUE
TO L'AMANT

by

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A black rectangular box redacting the signature of Professor Jean-Pierre Martin.

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This thesis is a comparative analysis of two French novels by the contemporary author Marguerite Duras: Un Barrage contre le Pacifique and L'Amant. The comparison is made with regard to narrative techniques, such as dialogue and narrative perspective, and thematic subjects, such as their plots and characterization. First, these topics are discussed in relation to the two books in general, and secondly in relation to a specific excerpt from each book. The result is not a comprehensive enumeration of all the differences and similarities, but rather an attempt to open the way for an increasing number of possible understandings of the two texts.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. NARRATIVE STRUCTURES.....	3
Time and Place.....	3
Names.....	6
Dialogue.....	8
Intertextuality.....	9
Narration.....	11
Notes.....	18
III. CHARACTER AND PLOT CONSIDERATIONS.....	20
The Brothers.....	20
The Mother's Insanity.....	23
Sexual Awakening.....	27
Three Lovers and L'amant.....	29
Notes.....	34
IV. TWO SCENES.....	36
Time and Place.....	41
Narration.....	44
Dialogue.....	45
The Mother's Insanity.....	46
The Brothers.....	50
The Resolution.....	52
Notes.....	54
V. CONCLUSION.....	55
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	58

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Marguerite Duras, a well-known contemporary French author has always had a fascination with her youth and the consequences that it had on the rest of her life. From her earliest novels to those published recently, her life experiences have served as constant inspiration for her work. Due to this increasingly recognized fact, many critics have attempted to highlight the corollaries between the author's life and her creation. But this "bio-criticism" has severe limitations.

One simply cannot know how much of a given book is autobiographical. The lack of any "objective" biography of Duras' life also makes it difficult to compare fact and fiction. This is not to say that the autobiographical tendencies are not important to certain analyses of her work, but in this thesis I have tried to avoid a comparison of her works to what is known of her life. This is an especially critical point because of the two novels which I have chosen to analyze: Un Barrage contre le Pacifique, written in 1950, and L'Amant, published in 1984.

The first novel relates the struggles of a French mother and her son and daughter in French Indochina. The second novel takes up the same cast of characters in the same setting and develops one part of the previous plot, the love affair that the daughter has with a Chinese man.

The autobiographical argument enters into play because these two books describe more or less the childhood of the author. However, if I compare these

two texts as autobiographies, then one text must inevitably be "wrong." The first book, hereafter referred to as Barrage, can be considered only as a masked autobiography, a novel with autobiographical references. And the validity of L'Amant as a strict autobiography, though it does follow many of the traditional conventions of an autobiography, remains problematic indeed. Thus a comparison on this basis alone does not seem promising. The most one could hope for would be a gathering of conjectures.

In this thesis, then, I will examine these two texts as fiction. My analysis will compare and contrast them with little regard to what role the author may or may not play in the story. However, because these novels are written by the same author at different points in her life, certain questions must be raised. How are the two books similar to and different from each other? What effect do the thirty-four years between the two novels have on the re-telling of the story in L'Amant?

In order to answer these questions, I have divided my thesis into two chapters in which I will look at, in turn, the narrative techniques of each book and the differences in characters and plots. In my third chapter, I will analyze an excerpt from each novel. These two scenes are closely related in a number of ways. In analyzing these two sections, I will see how my findings for the works at large are born out on a smaller scale.

CHAPTER II

NARRATIVE STRUCTURES

Time and Place

The story of Barrage follows a relatively traditional narrative style. Some may argue that it is "anhistorique"¹ and that "la chronologie ne compte pas"² because there is a constant switching between time periods in the text. Though these switches are not explained outright to the reader, there are textual and grammatical indications of temporal changes which signal the reader of a discontinuity in time.

For example, near the beginning of the novel, the narrator gives a description of a certain illness that the mother has. This description leads to a flashback, or *retroversion*, which summarizes the mother's life up to the present situation:

Il n'avait pas qu'une seule cause [des crises de la mère]. Il en avait mille, y compris l'écroulement des barrages, l'injustice du monde, le spectacle de ses enfants qui se baignaient dans la rivière...

La mère avait eu pourtant des débuts qui ne la prédestinaient en rien à prendre vers la fin de sa vie une telle importance dans l'infortune. [author's ellipsis] [3]

This change of topic and time frame is developed in a fairly straightforward fashion. An ellipsis and a new paragraph indicate that the narrator is leaving, or at least expanding on, the former topic. A subsequent change in verb tense from the *imparfait* (Il n'avait pas...) to the *plus-que-parfait* ("La mère avait eu...") is also a clear indication of the switch to a *retroversion*. The fact that the

narrator does not enter into the text at this point and announce the arrival of a different time period is a departure from certain literary traditions, but the reader easily recognizes nonetheless that there is a change.

L'Amant may by no means be considered a traditional novel in the chronologically linear sense that the term "novel" might imply. Gisele Brémond states, "L'œuvre de Marguerite Duras ne s'écrit pas linéairement; d'une part parce que la même histoire est reprise plusieurs fois et sous-tend souvent une autre histoire."⁴ This is exactly the case in L'Amant. There are numerous story lines, or at least numerous time periods of the same story line, occurring simultaneously throughout the book. The time periods cannot be considered as entirely simultaneous, but the illusion of simultaneity is greatly enhanced by Duras' use of separated sections. These sections are mixed around in varying orders: each new section may or may not continue the story of the section preceeding it.

Is there a significant difference between these sections of L'Amant and the chapter divisions in Barrage? I believe there is. There are a total of thirty chapters in the latter which are grouped into two parts. Because there are only eight chapters in the first part and twenty-two in the second, Yves Stalloni says that the first is characterized by a certain "lenteur" and that the second is more "cahotique."⁵ Chaos is pushed to the extreme in L'Amant, for there are one hundred and forty-three separate sections. These sections average one page in length, but there are a large number which contain only one or two sentences.

With this irregularity inherent in the writing style, L'Amant is extremely discontinuous. As Carol J. Murphy notes: "There is little 'chronological progression' in a narrative that oscillates back and forth between childhood in a poeticized Indochina and adulthood in Paris."⁶ But even the use of the word "oscillation" here implies a certain logical or at least rhythmic shift between two

plots, but no such logic may be ascertained from the text.

The one central plot of the novel, that of the love affair between the young girl and her Chinese lover, is the subject of approximately seventy-seven sections, representing slightly more than half of these "fragmented flashbacks from the past."⁷ Also, at one point in the novel, there are fourteen sections in a row which deal with this same time period of the protagonist's life. This makes the reader focus his/her attention on this specific part of the plot.

The other sections interspersed into the text deal minimally with time periods before that of the main plot. For the most part, they refer to the time periods surrounding the death of each of the protagonist's family members.

As I mentioned briefly before, verb tenses play an important role in transmitting the overall feeling of time in the novel. Duras treats the story of Barrage as a series of events which take place in the past. The verbs are almost always, excluding dialogue, in one of the past tenses. Even the first foreshadowing, or anticipation, is written in the past tense: "Et c'est le lendemain à Ram qu'ils devaient faire la rencontre qui allait changer leur vie à tous."⁸

In L'Amant, there is a great diversity of verb tenses, but the reader gets an overall impression of a narrative in the present tense. It is difficult to imagine the way in which Duras accomplishes this impression, since the book is made up of so many individual sections which deal with so many different time periods.

Many sections start in either the past or future tense, and then quickly switch to the present tense. For example: "Il a arraché la robe, il la jette, il a arraché le petit slip de coton blanc et il la porte ainsi nue jusqu'au lit."⁹ The narrative does not even wait for the end of the sentence before switching to the present tense. Another example shows a switch from the future tense to the

present:

Je lui expliquerai lorsque nous nous retrouverons à la garconnière. Je lui dis que cette violence de mon frère aîné, froide, insultante, elle accompagne tout ce qui nous arrive. [10]

Thus there is an effort on the part of the author to transcend time and bring the events of the book closer to each other. Ideas of "before" and "after" become problematic and it is difficult to even speak of a chronology in the text precisely because of these sorts of discrepancies.

Names

One interesting difference between the two texts is the subject of names. In Barrage, all characters are named, as is the case before the introduction of techniques used in the *nouveau roman*. The only character without a proper name is *la mère*. In the English translation Sea Wall, *la mère* is translated to "Ma." However, because "Ma" can be used as a proper noun, especially with the capitalization, I feel that this translation takes too much liberty with Duras' text. Duras seems to be saying, by her use of *la mère* instead of "Maman," that the essential element of the mother's personality is to be a mother. This is borne out in the rest of the text as well.¹¹

In L'Amant, the act of naming becomes even more important, because it is done much less frequently than in Barrage. None of the principal characters have proper names. In this way, Duras follows the trends of the *nouveau roman* as it was influenced especially by Nathalie Sarraute. Dominique Noguez interprets the absence of proper names in the following way (An *antonomase* is a term for common names which are substituted for proper names):

Chez Duras, les antonomases ou les périphrases ne cessent pas ('l'homme,' 'l'enfant,' 'l'étranger' dans La Douleur ...), comme pour laisser constamment ces êtres à une certaine distance. [12]

Thus the lack of a name separates the character from the reader.

The characters are usually referred to from a certain perspective, and this perspective dictates the role they are given. For example, if the narrative is given from the young girl's point of view, which is usually the case, then her brothers are referred to as "le frère aîné" and "le petit frère." But if the narrative is from the mother's point of view, then they are called "le fils aîné" and "le petit fils." Interestingly, *la mère* is always *la mère*, except once. One time in the text she is named: "Marie Legrand de Roubaix."¹³ The reference comes in a long sentence which spells out the mother's roles in life. This name is only one of the roles she has, perhaps the role she played before she became primarily "the mother."

The other main character who receives a proper name in the story, again only mentioned once, is the younger brother: "[Le frère aîné et moi] nous nous sommes revus une fois, il m'a parlé du petit frère mort. Il a dit: quelle horreur cette mort, c'est abominable, notre petit frère, notre petit Paulo."¹⁴ Why does this character, so long known as only "le petit frère," suddenly receive a name? If the absence of names is really a distancing technique, why does Duras suddenly bring the reader closer to this character, especially at the time of his death? Or is it that the characters of the book come to realize their own love for this brother who is now lost forever? It is significant that the older brother is the character to name the younger brother, for it is precisely this character who receives the narrator's blame of the death for "Paulo."

Last of all, the character of M. Jo is referred to once in the text of *Barrage* as *l'amoureux*: "Ce fut là l'amoureux qui échet à Suzanne, un soir à Ram."¹⁵ This term closely approaches the term of *l'amant*. However, one must see the difference in these two terms on the same level as the difference between "suitor" and "lover." The latter carries with it all the force of a sexual

relationship, while the former can imply any number of types of characters, including the selfish M. Jo. There is also a certain irony implied in the use of "amoureux" for M. Jo. He is ridiculed throughout the novel and there is a certain bite in this sentence which comes after the introduction to M. Jo and his attitudes.

Dialogue

In Barrage, the speech takes the form of both direct and indirect discourse, always signifying the beginning of direct quotes by a hyphen (-) or quotation marks. The rules change a bit in L'Amant. In this latter text, the only use of quotation marks to signify direct speech¹⁶ occurs on the first page of the text when a man approaches the protagonist and addresses her: "'Je vous connais depuis toujours...'"¹⁷ he says.

Throughout the rest of the text, there is a predominance of indirect speech and the use of colons as introduction to speech. I will distinguish between the use of quotation marks and the use of colons to introduce the spoken word and thus conclude that there is no direct speech in the novel except the single instance cited above. This distinction would be hardly valid if Duras did not use quotation marks at all in the text, but the fact that she uses them even once shows a consciousness on her part that there is a difference between the two types of marking systems.

This tendency to get away from the confines of literary traditions in quotation is another aspect of the *nouveau roman*. Nathalie Sarraute in her book L'Ere du Soupçon was already concerned with this issue of doing dialogue in 1956. Sarraute finds that the markings and conventions of identifying the speaker separate the reader from the text and characters:

Mais plus gênants encore et plus difficilement défendables que les

alinéas, les tirets, les deux points et les guillemets, sont les monotones et gauches: dit Jeanne, répondit Paul qui parsèment habituellement le dialogue; ils deviennent...non plus une nécessité, mais une encombrante convention. [18]

Duras has certainly undergone an evolution in this element of her novels. In Barrage she followed most of these "encombantes conventions," but by the time she wrote L'Amant, her style was more in tune with the *nouveau roman* authors.

Intertextuality

The reference to one text within the context of another is referred to by critics as intertextuality since Julia Kristeva first invented the term. As Sarah J. Capitanio remarks,

L'intertextualité se transforme en ré-écriture surtout par le fait que grand nombre des références à des œuvres antérieures opèrent une modification ou une extension du texte original. [19]

This raises the idea of re-writing in the texts of Marguerite Duras. Normally, the term intertextuality is used in the context of references to another author's works. Duras is among those authors who refer to their own texts. Instead of intertextuality, this may be thought of as intratextuality since it is a reference to another work by the same author.

This aspect of her work may be studied in terms of her change of media, from narrative texts, to drama, and finally to film, but the study takes on new meaning when restricted to a comparison of two of her works. L'Amant is full of references to her previous novels, especially Barrage. In my third chapter, I will explore one side of intratextuality as I compare two texts which tell the same story. Here I want to give three examples of intratextual statements from L'Amant and show how they refer to Barrage. One way of referring to her

earlier text is through an allusion to her writing:

L'histoire d'une toute petite partie de ma jeunesse je l'ai plus ou moins écrite déjà... Ce que je fais ici est différent, et pareil. Avant j'ai parlé des périodes claires, de celles qui étaient éclairées. Ici je parle des périodes cachées de cette même jeunesse. [20]

Here, Duras creates what Philippe Lejeune calls a "pacte autobiographique," in her use of the "je" as an identical reference to the author, the character, and the narrator.²¹ Most importantly, however, she sets up a contrast between what she did before, in Barrage, and what she is in the process of creating, the revelation of herself, in L'Amant.

There are also instances of direct references to small facts in her previous works: "Sur le bac, à côté du car, il y a une grande limousine noire avec un chauffeur en livrée de coton blanc. Oui, c'est la grande auto funèbre de mes livres. C'est la Morris Léon-Bollée."²² M. Jo in Barrage says in response to a question about his car, "C'est une Maurice Léon Bollée. C'est ma marque préférée."²³ Thus only the spelling changes.

One final example takes the idea of "re-writing" to the point of correction:

Ce n'est donc pas à la cantine de Réam, vous voyez, comme je l'avais écrit, que je rencontre l'homme riche à la limousine noire, c'est après l'abandon de la concession, deux ou trois ans après, sur le bac, ce jour que je raconte... [24]

Here, she comes straight out and corrects her previous work, the scene in Barrage where the family meets M. Jo in a bar. In so doing, she seems to annihilate this entire scene of Barrage. There is also a change in spelling of the small colonial outpost, which was spelled "Ram" in Barrage. This change in spelling, though, occurred for the first time in L'Eden Cinéma, the play version of Barrage.

One may ask many questions concerning the reasons behind these

corrections and re-writes. Is Duras trying to restore an autobiographical precision that her previous novels lacked? Are these revisions the final "truth," or is there such a thing as absolute truth when someone writes about their own experience? Could it be that Duras is simply trying to give critics something to do with their time?

One thing is certain: the reader of L'Amant and many other novels will miss these references and changes unless s/he has a firm base in Duras' writings. Duras expounds on her previous novels, judging them or giving her opinion of them, and even goes so far as to correct them from within the text that she is currently writing. If anything, I think that she considers writing as an "experiment,"²⁵ and that she plays with the ideas of writing and re-writing

Narration

The last element of Duras' texts that I will discuss, and perhaps the most important, is her use of different narrative perspectives. The narrator of Barrage is impersonal and omniscient. The reader is privy to the thoughts of each of the main characters, and much background information about even minor characters in the book. Most of the time, this narrative voice is not an active participant in the book, nor does it tie itself by prejudice to any particular character. For all practical purposes, the narrative is conducted from the third person, distancing the reader from the events and characters. Yet there are six examples in which one cannot consider the story as a third-person narrative. These examples have received no critical attention to my knowledge, even though the narrative style of L'Amant is constantly discussed in criticism. First, then, I will examine the style of the latter and then return to the anomalies of Barrage.

The intricate narrative style of L'Amant merits substantial attention. I will

summarize the views of contemporary critics, for they are numerous. One critic, Susan D. Cohen, points out the duality of the *je* in L'Amant, signifying that this aspect alone is complex enough without talking of the *elle*. "The authorial 'I' talks about her own life. But the 'I' is double; it refers to Marguerite Duras now as a young girl growing up in French Indochina, now as the contemporary, older writer. Typically, ambiguity permeates both aspects."²⁶ This is an integral part of the book from the first page. The opening sentence, "Un jour, j'étais âgée déjà, dans le hall d'un lieu public, un homme est venu vers moi," shows the adult I, or the "je-narrant." This is the narrator who will look back and reflect on her life and, as I just pointed out, her past books as well.

Two pages later, however, narrative ambiguity is again introduced with this sentence: "Que je vous dise encore, j'ai quinze ans et demi."²⁷ No longer are matters simple for the reader. Who is the *je* addressing the reader? Who is the *je* who is fifteen and a half years old? If these two *je* are the same, which is implied by their inclusion within the same sentence, how is this *je* different from or similar to the *je* introduced on the first page? Is this all just a *jeu*? I think that Cohen's duality claim is a good answer to these questions.

The narrator of the beginning two pages introduces herself to the reader and can be seen as the I addressing the reader in this last citation. By declaring that she is fifteen and a half years old, the I places herself directly into the story. She assumes the role of her younger self. From this point forward, when the reader reads "je," s/he will be able to assume that the narrator is speaking as the younger I. However, the very next page takes up where the introductory page left off: "On m'a souvent dit que c'était le soleil trop fort."²⁸ Once again the reader is thrust into the future to look retrospectively at the past from the eyes of the older I. There is a certain notion that Duras, in her constant switches between the I as a youth and the I as an adult expresses her desire to bring the

two together. In this way she transcends time and eliminates in another way the idea of chronology.

Now, to add the consideration of the third-person narrative creates even more confusion. Murphy has the following to say on the subject:

Although all remembering is fictional narrating, ... Duras drives this point home for the reader in a deliberate shifting throughout the text from the *je* of an autobiographical *discours* to the more impersonal *elle* of a *récit*. This distancing technique is a narratological illustration of the deconstructive nature of Duras' work in general where something is posited (in this instance, autobiography) only to be put in question (autobiography or novel?)." [29]

This critic, then, relates the issue to Duras as an elusive author, the author who does not want to reveal if she is indeed telling her readers the truth. By "deconstructive," the critic implies a critical view of Duras' *œuvre*, and indeed the movement of the *nouveau roman* on on the whole. This movement is trying to destroy the once-accepted norms of literature.

Perhaps the best interpretation of this shifting voice phenomenon is explained by Capitanio. She finds, and I agree, that it is undeniably the same character identified by the narrator as both "she" and "I," and goes on to give her interpretation of this continual shift in voice:

Ce n'est que dans une perspective thématique que cette apparente confusion peut s'éclaircir. Une lecture globale du texte révèle en effet qu'un de ses thèmes majeurs est la recherche d'une identité personnelle par la narratrice. De là, l'idée que la jeune fille semble à certains moments ne pas être la narratrice à une étape antérieure de sa vie, et donc alors le sujet de son propre récit. Etroitement lié à ce phénomène est le fait que cette 'autre' dont la narratrice parle est souvent définie par l'image que les autres paraissent se faire d'elle. [30]

This interpretation strikes me as akin to the double image of the I to which Cohen refers. It is also very similar to the switches in narrative perspective

which may be found in other contemporary novels, Les Belles Images of Beauvoir for example.

The protagonist is indeed at a very insecure stage of her life, searching for herself in many ways. She reflects on her image in a shop mirror and says: "Soudain je me vois comme une autre, comme une autre serait vue, au-dehors, mise à la disposition de tous, mise à la disposition de tous les regards."³¹ She feels watched by others and struggles to come to an understanding of her own identity. She tries to reconcile her own wish to conform and fit in to society with her desire to be independent of this society and her mother. The "autre," then, represents the pull of society and is later seen in the use of the pronoun *elle*. Again, this search for identity is common in other works. Antoine Roquentin, the protagonist in Sartre's La Nausée also finds himself face to face with his image in a mirror. He, too, looks at his face as others would look at it: "Je ne peux pas décider s'il [mon visage] est beau ou laid. Je pense qu'il est laid, parce qu'on me l'a dit."³²

As I have stated, the diversity in narrative style is much less noticeable in Barrage. In general, one assumes that the text follows the conventions of a third-person narrative. Upon a closer reading, however, I was surprised to find distinct instances where the flow of third-person narrative is interrupted. Each time the narrator speaks from Suzanne's point of view. There is a gradation in the seriousness of these interruptions, with the less noticeable occurrences taking place near the end of the novel, so I will start with these and work toward the more difficult examples.

The I in Barrage occurs once without quotation marks, but with a reference to Suzanne in the text: "Comme ça, se dit Suzanne, j'aurais même pas l'occasion de fiche le camp avec un autre"³³(quotation marks are mine). This direct reference, showing that these are Suzanne's thoughts, is absent in the

other examples, though one other example comes close: "Suzanne souriait. J'amènerais l'auto sous le bungalow, la nuit, pendant qu'il chasserait et sur le volant je pendrais un petit carton sur lequel j'écrirais: Pour Joseph."³⁴ This way of writing, free indirect speech, has been used since the time of Flaubert and is fairly clear to the reader. The reference to Suzanne just before the account of her thoughts and the general context of the immediate text help the reader come know that she is the speaker.

There are two examples of first-person narrative which resemble each other very closely, though separated by twenty pages. They are also the easiest to analyze:

S'il foutait le camp, j'irais me baigner avec Joseph.³⁵

S'il foutait le camp, j'irais rejoindre Joseph.³⁶

The parallelism of these two sentences is indeed striking. The *il* in both cases refers to M. Jo who puts off his inevitable departure. From the context, it may be ascertained that Suzanne is the speaker, yet there are no quotation marks to indicate a spoken utterance. The reader is left with little choice but to assume these to be Suzanne's thoughts, but the absence of any indication of her thoughts, such as: "Suzanne pensait en ce moment, 'S'il...'," is confusing. As I discussed earlier, Sarraute would look down upon such conventions as an encombrance which should be done away with.

The last two instances of first-person narrative come ever closer to Sarraute's ideas of unencombered communication to the reader, for they lack even the most basic referential information. In addition to this problem, the question of verb tenses again becomes significant. The first example is comprised of two sentences and comes at the point of M. Jo's departure: "Parfois une sarcelle descendait et dansait sur l'eau trouble du lac. Voilà tout ce que je

verrai du monde pendant des mois, des mois encore."³⁷ Suzanne anticipates the boredom that will invade her life once M. Jo is gone. The sudden introduction of the *je*, coupled with the change to the future tense, is highly irregular in a text written almost entirely in third-person and retrospective styles. One cannot say that the narrator steps into the story, but Duras chooses to leave the reader somewhat confused by the ambiguity inherent in this section of the text.

This is especially noticeable in the last example of first-person narrative, and thus it is at this point which Duras comes closest to the style she later adopts in L'Amant. This small paragraph occurs midway through the description of the family's relationship with M. Jo after Joseph presents his ultimatum to M. Jo that he either marry Suzanne or else leave:

Il parlait tous les jours à Suzanne des sentiments qu'il éprouvait pour elle. Moi si je l'épouse, ce sera sans avoir aucun sentiment pour lui. Moi je me passe de sentiments. Elle se sentait du côté de Joseph plus fortement que jamais. [38]

It is interesting that the English translation takes a bold liberty with this citation in translating it as follows:

He told Suzanne every day of the feelings he had for her. "As for me," she thought, "if I marry him, it will be without any feelings for him! I can do without such feelings." She was more strongly on Joseph's side than ever before."[39]

The translators had no qualms about adding quotation marks and an indication of the speaker.

In the French text, the juxtaposition of M. Jo and this *je*, and their expression of feelings shows that the *je* is indeed Suzanne. The insistence on the first-person is very marked with the repetition of "Moi je...", and the present tense signals the reader that it is Suzanne who speaks in the citation since the

narrator speaks in the past tense. The immediate switch to third-person and past tense in the last sentence is equally striking. This is a switch which rivals the oscillations between first- and third-person narrative in L'Amant.

In conclusion, the narration of Barrage is a precursor of the ambiguous and complex narrative style that is introduced later in L'Amant. The anomalies in the Barrage text show a tendency toward the chaotic narration of the later text already at this early point in Duras' literary career. This is similar to the evolution of other considerations that I have discussed in this chapter.

Notes

1. Stalloni, p. 17.
2. *ibid.*
3. Barrage, p. 22.
4. Brémondy, p. 51.
5. Stalloni, p. 18.
6. Murphy, p. 184.
7. Murphy, p. 174.
8. Barrage, p. 14, emphasis added.
9. L'Amant, p. 49.
10. L'Amant, p. 68.
11. See Chapter 2.
12. Noguez, p. 30.
13. L'Amant, p. 59,
14. L'Amant, p. 98.
15. Barrage, p. 65.
16. There are a few instances where quotation marks signify a word used in a satirical manner, or the societal usage of a word. Cf ps. 45, 51, 132.
17. L'Amant, p. 9.
18. Sarraute, p. 125.
19. Capitanio, p. 22.
20. L'Amant, p. 14.
21. Lejeune, Chapter I.
22. L'Amant, p. 25.
23. Barrage, p. 44.
24. L'Amant, p. 36.
25. This word is italicized on pages 16 and 28 of L'Amant.
26. Cohen, p. 73.
27. L'Amant, p. 11.
28. L'Amant, p. 12.
29. Murphy, p. 173.
30. Capitanio, p. 16-17.

31. L'Amant, p. 20.
32. Sartre, p. 34.
33. Barrage, p. 217.
34. Barrage, p. 103-4.
35. Barrage, p. 132.
36. Barrage, p. 152.
37. Barrage, p. 131.
38. Barrage, p. 95.
39. Sea Wall, p. 74.

CHAPTER III

CHARACTER AND PLOT CONSIDERATIONS

In this chapter, I will primarily discuss the main characters of the two novels. There are many similarities and differences between the two sets of characters and their relationships to one another. In Barrage, there are three main characters involved in the action: the mother, her son Joseph, and her daughter Suzanne. One critical difference in the story of L'Amant, of course, is the addition of a second brother to this family microcosm. I begin my discussion with this element of the books.

The Brothers

In considering the plot of Barrage, Madeline Borgomano says, "Le frère 'assassin' est proprement effacé de l'histoire, tandis que le 'chasseur,' magnifié, connaît le bonheur."¹ The *assassin* and the *chasseur* refer to the older and younger brothers respectively in L'Amant. Leaving aside the issue of *le bonheur*, Borgomano thinks, then, that Joseph, the hunter in Barrage, is a representation only of the younger brother.

This interpretation is tempting, as Joseph is indeed viewed as a hunter, and also because of two particular sentences in L'Amant: "Pendant quelques années il [le frère aîné] n'a plus fait partie de la famille. C'est en son absence que la mère a acheté la concession."² By superimposing this quotation over the time period covered in Barrage, which relates the consequences of the purchase of the concession, one could explain the absence of a second brother in the text of

Barrage. From the information that one gathers in L'Amant, this brother is in Paris studying at school, and thus does not enter into the earlier story.

However, this view is rather simplistic. It is true that there is only one brother in Barrage, but to say that the other brother is "erased" from the text, when looking back retrospectively from the standpoint of L'Amant, does not seem right. Also, holding too tightly to the terms *chasseur* and *assassin* could prove not as fruitful as it may seem, for the narrator of Barrage does compare Joseph to an *assassin* at one point in the text as well.³

Rather than seeing the "erasure" of one brother in Barrage, I prefer to see the appearance of another brother in L'Amant. One might say that the character of Joseph is split into two characters, the older and younger brothers of the later text. One basis for this approach is the fact that the narrator of L'Amant recognizes in herself a tendency to think of the two brothers as one. She says, "Je parle souvent de mes frères comme un ensemble, comme elle le faisait, notre mère."⁴ Thus I propose that the character of Joseph is more complex than either brother in L'Amant, providing the raw material which is later used to form these two opposing characters.

The younger brother is portrayed as having a more gentle, some may say weaker, personality. He is typified as a frightened boy, frightened of his older brother. One scene shows the older brother instigating a fight with the younger brother: "Il attend que le petit frère ose dire un mot, un seul mot, ses poings fermés sont déjà prêts au-dessus de la table pour lui broyer la figure. Le petit frère ne dit rien. Il est très pâle. Entre ses cils le début des pleurs."⁵ The younger brother, then, is presented as a passive character, inhibited from lashing out against his brother.

In this way, Joseph in Barrage is different from the little brother. Joseph is free to express his feelings and often goes against the authority represented by

his mother and society. The best example of this is Joseph's attitude toward the colonial agents who come to check on the family's progress in cultivating the worthless land of their concession. We see him as an indignant young man, rebellious to the point of chasing off the agents with gun fire.⁶

However, there is a similar incident in the two books which closely links the younger brother to Joseph. In Barrage, Joseph meets an older married woman during the family's trip to Saigon and they spend a short time together in a passionately sexual relationship. There is an entire chapter in which Joseph recounts the story of his meeting with and conquest of this woman. The incident has a profound effect on Joseph's life: "C'est là, tout seul, que je me suis dit que j'étais en train de changer pour toujours."⁷

The same event, though much less developed and in a different setting, takes place in L'Amant as the family is on the steamer going back to France. There is no account of the effect of this incident on the little brother's life. Suzanne's and the mother's fears that Joseph will never return, developed extensively in this text, are also felt by the protagonist of L'Amant, summarized in a sentence or two.

The older brother in L'Amant exerts his will over the other members of the family, forcing them to comply to his wishes in many instances. At one point, the narrator points out that this desire for control even pushes him to try to rape the housemaid.⁸ The older brother is also typified as violent and uncontrolled at points in the book: "Le frère aîné souffre de ne pas faire librement le mal, de ne pas régenter le mal, pas seulement ici mais partout ailleurs."⁹

Similarly, Joseph in Barrage, as the man of the house, often makes decisions for the family. For example, he decides when M. Jo must go away¹⁰ and the mother can do nothing to change his mind, though she disapproves of

his decision. Though Joseph is not as inclined toward violence for its own sake, as seems to be the case with the older brother of L'Amant, there are times when he has murderous thoughts. Before leaving Suzanne and the mother, for example, the narrator says: "Ce qu'il [Joseph] regrettait, c'était de ne pas pouvoir tuer les agents de Kam avant de partir."¹¹ These agents are the people most responsible for the mother's intense depression.

There is also the issue of the interpersonal relations between the characters. How are the brothers viewed by the mother and sister? In Barrage, Suzanne loves her brother very much. She feels very close to him. There are also times when she expresses her hate for her brother, as when he openly rejects her on the street in Saigon. The mother has a fairly constant love for her son, willing to forgive him and constantly seeing the best in him.

The protagonist of L'Amant loves her little brother, wanting to protect him from the world. She goes so far as to call him "mon enfant."¹² On the same page, however, she expresses her hate for her older brother: "Je voulais tuer, mon frère aîné, je voulais le tuer." The mother, however, prefers the older brother.

The Mother's Insanity

The mother's character is complex and yet fairly consistent from one book to the next. The mother of Barrage takes pride in her children: "C'était de beaux enfants. Elle avait quand même fait de beaux enfants."¹³ She is also very protective of them. In one of the first scenes of the book she yells at them as they swim in the river, fearful for their lives. Of course, this kind of protectiveness, even overprotectiveness, is wearying and often stifling for children.

If the love she feels for her children is expressed in her protective attitude,

Liliane Papin makes the point that this love "overflows" for the rest of the world as well: "In love, the Mother is 'measureless, limitless,' and this is where she finds the strength to confront the colonial world, indeed the whole of society, and even to defy the Pacific Ocean by building dams...." ¹⁴

As I said earlier, the name of "la mère" instead of a proper name, especially in the Barrage text where the other characters are named, seems to indicate that this character is more a function of the role she plays than a character in her own right. She is identified by her relationship to other characters in the story and thus may be viewed as a universal mother. She takes on mythical and archetypal proportions. This is exactly what Micheline Tison-Braun suggests in her book Marguerite Duras:

Parmi les personnages, c'est la mère qui atteint le plus clairement la qualité mythique - on ne sait dans quelle mesure l'assimiler à Madame Donadieu, mère de l'auteur, telle qu'on la voit dans l'album de famille. Dans le roman, elle est La Mère, et n'a pas d'autre nom, étant symbole.... Si pauvre que soit la nourriture familiale, elle s'efforce de la préparer soigneusement, toujours heureuse de voir manger ses enfants.... Parfois elle grandit aux proportions d'un archétype maternel. [15]

She takes on the responsibility of helping the other settlers on the plain, hoping to improve her life as well as theirs by building the dams. She takes in stray children and feeds the Caporal and his family. She does not deny a crippled woman the help that she needs, and she does not refuse to keep her sick child, knowing full well that the baby will die. She lets her love "overflow."

Jean Pierrot approaches the mother from a slightly different angle:

...elle [la mère] ne paraît considérer le mariage de sa fille que comme un simple marchandage, dont elle attend le rétablissement de sa situation financière. De toute façon, elle entraîne tous ceux qui vivent autour d'elle dans la ruine et le malheur: les paysans, qui l'ont suivie en vain, chez lesquels elle a suscité des espoirs exagérés, et qui

se retrouvent comme avant, dans une misère encore plus désespérée; ses enfants qu'elle brutalise volontiers,... et qu'elle ne semble considérer que comme des instruments destinés à lui permettre de récupérer son argent. [16]

Thus, actions of the mother which we could interpret as a protective attitude can also be seen in a self-serving light. The mother yells at her children to come in from the river not because she is fearful for their personal safety, but out of her own fear of abandonment. She is entirely dependent on them for her well-being. The reader becomes aware of this when, during their stay in *la ville*, Joseph leaves on his own adventure. The mother immediately sinks into a depression bordering on suicide, relying on pills to help her sleep through the day. Carmen, a friend of the family's and proprietor of the hotel in which they stay, sees through the mother's outward appearances and believes her to be a "monstre dévastateur."¹⁷ She thinks that if the two children did not leave her immediately, "[ils] risquaient, pour la consoler de ses malheurs, de ne plus jamais la quitter, de se plier à ses volontés, de se laisser dévorer à leur tour par elle."¹⁸

This selfish aspect of the mother's character is even more evident in L'Amant. In this book, the mother openly encourages her daughter in a line of conduct which could be termed as nothing less than prostitution:

Autour d'elle c'est les déserts,... c'est bien fini. Reste cette petite-là qui grandit et qui, elle, saura peut-être un jour comment on fait venir l'argent dans cette maison. 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. [19]

Here, there is a noticeable ambiguity in "elle ne le sait pas." Does this *elle* refer to the mother or to the daughter? If it is the mother, then one must interpret the sentence as a disclaimer of the mother's motives; she is not conscious of the things she does. If it refers to the girl, then we are free to interpret the mother's

intent as at least willful if not malicious. In either case, the mother is teaching her daughter, consciously or unconsciously, to use her body for financial gain.

And yet, as Pierrot later points out, the reader is forced to sympathize with this controlling character because of the horrible life she has lived. She is portrayed as startlingly poor, having only one dress to wear (she sleeps when she washes it) and *la déveine* (bad luck) finds her wherever she goes.

There is still another possible interpretation which accounts for many of these events in the plot. One may also consider the mother insane. In using this word, I do not mean to imply any clinical meaning other than an unsound mind. She is unstable in her view of reality, easily duped by the colonial government, and insecure without the continual presence of her children. The building of the dams, which Papin attributes to her insurmountable love, is a foolhardy endeavor. Her belief that she can build these dams without any technical advice shows a mind that puts her passions above logic. In fact, there are times when she seems incapable of reason.

This is pointed out several times in the text with the use of the word "cinglé," a slang word for "insane." Because she stays up until all hours of the night figuring out accounts which are entirely useless, Joseph calls these accounts "ses comptes de cinglée."²⁰ This is her source of hope, helping her to maintain some tie to the real world. Later, in moments of deep despair, she will herself say, "Je suis une imbécile, une vieille cinglée."²¹ Her hope vanishes and, with the departure of Joseph she loses all will to live.

In L'Amant, one begins to suspect a certain illness when the narrator describes the extreme depression that the mother experiences at times: "Ce grand découragement à vivre, ma mère le traversait chaque jour.... J'ai eu cette chance d'avoir une mère désespérée d'un désespoir si pur que même le bonheur de la vie ... n'arrivait pas à l'en distraire tout à fait."²² It is interesting

that the protagonist considers it a stroke of good luck to have an insane mother. Her own sanity comes under question at several points in the novel, and she says at one point that she never had access to her mother's insanity.²³ The depression at the root of the mother's unsound state involves many factors, certainly including the diverse failures of her life. It finally causes her to lose all touch with reality, negating her motherly instincts to wash, clothe, or even feed her children.²⁴ Her primary reaction is to escape from the world, retreating into sleep.

At a later point in her life, the narrator of L'Amant refers blatantly to the insanity of the mother at several points in the text. In a section dealing with the mother's last days, the narrator says: "C'est là, dans la dernière maison,... c'est là que je vois clairement la folie pour la première fois. Je vois que ma mère est clairement folle."²⁵ And later she remarks, "Elle n'était pas malade de sa folie, elle la vivait comme la santé."²⁶

The insanity of the mother is dealt with in different ways in the two books. Though the symptoms of insanity are explored more deeply in Barrage, there are more direct references to the mother's illness in L'Amant. The reason for this difference is that in the process of re-writing this story, Duras no longer put as much emphasis on the character of the mother. She is not as central to the story of L'Amant.

Sexual Awakening

The heroines of the two books, Suzanne and the protagonist, are both at a critical point in their lives when the books open. Suzanne is seventeen years old when she must deal with many new experiences in her life. Men begin to tell her that she is beautiful²⁷ and she realizes that with her body she can control these men. From the beginning of the novel, she is aware of her

impending sexual maturation, evidenced by her desire to leave her mother and find security in a man. She dreams: "Un jour un homme s'arrêterait, peut-être, pourquoi pas? parce qu'il l'aurait aperçue près du pont. Il se pourrait qu'elle lui plaise et qu'il lui propose de l'emmener à la ville."²⁸ This theme of waiting, this *attente d'un homme*, is consistent throughout the novel. And yet, despite the fact that three eligible bachelors present themselves during the course of the text, Suzanne's dream is never realized.

While Suzanne takes a rather passive role in her development, typified by her wait alongside the road, the protagonist of *L'Amant* takes an active role. She is also on the verge of adulthood, though at a slightly younger age. During the crossing of the Mekong River, the young girl steps out of her bus onto the ferry and there meets the rich young man next to his shining black limousine. After conversing with him for a short time, she accepts his offer of a ride to her school. With this, the narrator states: "Dès qu'elle a pénétré dans l'auto noire, elle l'a su, elle est à l'écart de cette famille pour la première fois et pour toujours. Désormais ils ne doivent plus savoir ce qu'il adviendra d'elle."²⁹

It is when children break with their family (The protagonist later cannot believe that she was able to go against her mother's orders³⁰), expressing their independence and ability to choose their own path in life, that they begin to be responsible individuals. Thus it is that there is one specific time in the novel, this crossing of the Mekong River, which can be seen as an initiation into adulthood, her rite of passage. Germaine Brée observes that the river-crossing "seems quasi-symbolic"³¹ while Lucille Becker goes so far as to call it "the decisive event in her life."³² The sexual implications of her decision to enter the car are clear from the start. It is this decision which leads her to the lover's bedroom. And after she is introduced to sexual intercourse, she says to herself, "J'ai vieilli. Je le sais tout à coup."³³

Duras herself points out the symbolism seventy pages after the event takes place. The narrator describes Cholen, the Chinese section of Saigon, as "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."³⁴ Thus, in traversing the river, the young girl comes to discover all the evils of the world. But, of course, Cholen, at the other side of the river, embodies for her as well *la jouissance*.

It is more difficult to single out any particular event in Barrage as the critical point of Suzanne's maturation process. Several instances might be suggested, but there is no explicit reference made to any particular event as the turning point in her life. Rather, the development is constant and unhurried. One typical format of the novel is a gradual rising toward a climactic event. Perhaps in this light, Suzanne's sexual initiation may be seen as the "decisive event" of her life.

Three Lovers and L'amant

The three men in Suzanne's life are M. Jo, John Barner, and Jean Agosti. This is in contrast, of course, to the single man in L'Amant. All three men have a "J" in their names which signifies to me a certain resemblance that I wish to develop by looking at their other similar traits. As the brothers of L'Amant can be seen in the character of Joseph in Barrage, there are similar traits which tie these bachelors to each other and to the lover of L'Amant.

M. Jo and the lover are similar in many ways. Duras even goes so far as to point out these similarities. On the superficial and material level, they have the same car, this "grande auto funèbre."³⁵ M. Jo is wrapped in representations of wealth, being well dressed and immaculately groomed. These indications of his wealth are dwarfed by the importance of one item, however: a diamond ring. It

is the one thing that attracts the attention of everyone around him. Duras states: "Il faut dire que ce diamant-là...valait à lui seul à peu près autant que toutes les concessions de la plaine réunies."³⁶ The lover, as described in L'Amant, is not as rich as M. Jo. The narrator mentions a diamond ring only as a gift to the protagonist, not as a personal article of the lover's jewelry.

M. Jo and the lover also have the same family background. They have only a miserly father who disapproves of their marital aspirations. Both fathers made their money in the business of housing for the natives. And both fathers send their son to Paris to receive an education. M. Jo and the lover fail miserably at the school and must return to Indochina in shame.

In their relations to the respective heroine, M. Jo and the lover also have the same motivations, though one is less manipulative than the other. M. Jo knows that his father will never let him marry Suzanne³⁷ and is only interested in Suzanne for the sexual thrills he can receive from her. He tells her he loves her, but only in the passion of the moment, when he wants her to give in to his propositions.³⁸

The lover also knows that because of his father's disapproval he can never marry the young girl, and in a sense he shares his father's opinion. However, he does not try to manipulate the girl into a deeper relationship than what she desires since their relationship is already based on a mutual level of need and desire. Instead of trying to hold on to her as M. Jo tries to hold on to Suzanne, he knows that it is good for her to leave: "A un moindre degré il commence à entendre que le départ qui le séparera d'elle est la chance de leur histoire."³⁹

One area in which the two characters do not coincide as well is that of their physical attributes. While M. Jo is described as "laid,"⁴⁰ the lover is presented as "très élégant."⁴¹ As Pierrot points out:

Il [l'amant] n'a pas la laideur, la vulgarité et la bêtise caricaturale de M. Jo: il est présenté au contraire comme assez distingué de sa personne, de corps gracile et fragile; sincèrement amoureux, mais faible et incapable de s'opposer à la volonté de son père. Surtout, loin de le dédaigner, l'héroïne s'abandonne à lui, découvre dans ses bras le plaisir physique, et vit avec lui une aventure d'une sensualité intense. [42]

However, the lover has one serious fault in his physical appearance because he is first and foremost in the eyes of the family, Chinese. In Barrage, the family merely finds M. Jo repulsive and is accordingly rude to him. The brothers of L'Amant have a more severe reaction against the lover and exhibit an apparent prejudice against him on numerous occasions, especially when he takes the family to dinner in a Chinese restaurant. The protagonist says, "Mes frères ne lui adresseront jamais la parole. C'est comme s'il n'était pas visible pour eux, comme s'il n'était pas assez dense pour être perçu, vu, entendu par eux."⁴³

John Barner is a comical character who proposes to Suzanne when the family is staying in Saigon. He wants to train a young French virgin girl to be his wife, and Suzanne seems to please him initially. As for Suzanne, she wants nothing to do with him. When she is with him, she is constantly reminded of M. Jo, especially noticing his delicate hands: "Les mains fluettes et soignées rappelaient celles de M. Jo."⁴⁴ Thus, John Barner is more clearly associated to M. Jo than he is to the lover of L'Amant. However, by this association, and by his advances toward Suzanne, one can also liken him to the lover.

The third eligible bachelor is not a stranger who appears from nowhere, but rather the boy next door. Several times in the text, the narrator mentions briefly the existence of Jean Agosti, a young white colonial in many of the same poor circumstances as Suzanne. Suzanne knows of him for some time and dances with him at the bar in Ram. He is also the first person to tell her that she is beautiful and kiss her. Unlike the kiss that Suzanne later receives from M. Jo

"comme une gifle,"⁴⁵ this kiss is something that she remembers favourably for a long time afterwards.

And indeed near the end of the book, it is Jean Agosti who comes to look for Suzanne alongside the road. "C'est moi que t'attendais près du pont," he says.⁴⁶ He takes her away in his car and that evening takes away her virginity. Besides the fact that the scene of sexual awakening takes place in a forest in Barrage, and in an apartment in L'Amant, the two scenes are extremely similar.⁴⁷

Suzanne's gift of her virginity to Agosti, after the offers of monetary and relational stability that she has received from M. Jo and Barner, is symbolic in some form or another. In a sense, it is very significant. There is a substitution of a rich man for a man who is constantly impoverished by his drug-addicted father.

There is one other character in the novel with a "J" in his name: Joseph. One aspect which further complicates the story of Barrage is the incestuous tendencies of Suzanne. When objecting to M. Jo and John Barner as possible husbands, she tells her mother on two occasions that she prefers to marry a hunter.⁴⁸ When her mother asks her why this is, Suzanne can only reply, "Je ne sais pas."⁴⁹ But it is obvious that she emulates her big brother. Stalloni says of Joseph: "Il [est] le modèle même de l'homme à qui elle [Suzanne] voudrait se donner."⁵⁰ She is not willing to be convinced of the merits of other men. The narrator is aware of this tendency, for the idea appears in the text: "Suzanne se souvenait parfaitement de cette minute où elle sut qu'elle ne rencontrerait peut-être jamais un homme qui lui plairait autant que Joseph."⁵¹

In this light, then, Agosti is not a substitute for the two other bachelors, but for Joseph himself. When Agosti comes to see Suzanne alongside the road, she watches him very carefully, noticing that "On aurait peut-être pu dire qu'il

ressemblait à Joseph."⁵² After losing her virginity, Suzanne thinks of Joseph, comparing the two men's voices: "Sa voix aussi rappelait celle de Joseph."⁵³

The idea of incest is equally apparent in L'Amant. The four characters in the family are very close. Marc Sporta even describes the family relationship as a

faisceau de sentiments incestueux - celui de Marguerite et de la mère pour cet aîné, qui comble l'absence du père; celui de Marguerite pour le petit frère adoré qui mourra vite (condamné à mort, selon Marguerite, par la faute de l'aîné, de la préférence maternelle, de l'absence). [54]

Not only are the family's relations pictured as incestual, but the lover also seems to view the young girl in the same manner. He calls her "mon enfant."⁵⁵ This pet-name represents the intimacy that he feels between himself and the girl, but the context of their sexual relationship paints this intimacy in a strange light. There are other scenes in which the lover fills the parental capacity of cleaning "his child."⁵⁶

At one point in the novel, as the young girl and her lover have sexual intercourse, she tells him about her younger brother: "je lui parle de son corps et de son sexe aussi, de son ineffable douceur."⁵⁷ She speaks of her brother in very sexual terms, which is similar to the times when Suzanne thinks of Joseph while with another man.

There is a great similarity between Barrage and L'Amant in their sets of characters. I have pointed out ways in which certain characters, namely Joseph and the lover, can be seen as the conglomeration of a set of characters in the other book. Similarly, certain interpretations of the events and characters can be seen as equally applicable to both books.

Notes

1. Borgomano, p. 41.
2. L'Amant, p. 12.
3. Barrage, p. 237.
4. L'Amant, p. 71.
5. L'Amant, p. 99.
6. Barrage, p. 314.
7. Barrage, p. 274.
8. L'Amant, p. 28.
9. L'Amant, p. 75.
10. Barrage, p. 145.
11. Barrage, p. 284.
12. L'Amant, p. 13.
13. Barrage, p. 98.
14. Papin, p. 82.
15. Tison-Braun, p. 12-13.
16. Pierrot, p. 47.
17. Barrage, p. 183.
18. Barrage, p. 184.
19. L'Amant, p. 33.
20. Barrage, ps. 34, 38.
21. Barrage, p. 240.
22. L'Amant, p. 22.
23. L'Amant, p. 40.
24. L'Amant, p. 22.
25. L'Amant, p. 40.
26. *ibid.*
27. Barrage, p. 44.
28. Barrage, p. 21.
29. L'Amant, p. 46.
30. L'Amant, p. 51.
31. Brée, p. 229.

32. Becker, p. 394.
33. L'Amant, p. 59.
34. L'Amant, p. 93.
35. L'Amant, p. 25.
36. Barrage, p. 43.
37. Barrage, p. 95.
38. Barrage, p. 227.
39. L'Amant, p. 119.
40. Barrage, p. 60.
41. L'Amant, p. 25.
42. Pierrot, p. 329.
43. L'Amant, p. 65.
44. Barrage, p. 215.
45. Barrage, p. 227.
46. Barrage, p. 337.
47. Cf. Cismaru, p. 44.
48. Barrage, p. 149.
49. Barrage, p. 218.
50. Stalloni, p. 20.
51. Barrage, p. 311.
52. Barrage, p. 322.
53. Barrage, p. 341.
54. Sporta, p. 20.
55. Cf. L'Amant, ps. 121, 122, 123, 134.
56. See especially L'Amant, p. 50.
57. L'Amant, p. 122.

CHAPTER IV

TWO SCENES

In this chapter, I will analyze two excerpts, one from each novel. In choosing the two excerpts, I had several criteria in mind. My primary concerns were that the scenes correspond fairly closely as far as their plot, and that the primary characters be involved in the scenes so that I might look at the interactions between them. The scenes I have chosen obviously describe a similar episode. To be sure some distinct differences exist and it is these similarities and differences that will make up the bulk of my analysis.

Here is the excerpt from Barrage:

C'avait éclaté lorsque Suzanne était sortie de table. Elle [la mère] s'était enfin levée. Elle s'était jetée sur elle et elle l'avait frappée avec les poings de tout ce qui lui restait de force. De toute la force de son droit, de tout 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 mort. Joseph n'avait pas protesté et l'avait laissée battre Suzanne.

Il y avait bien deux heures que ça durait. Elle se levait, se jetait sur Suzanne et ensuite elle s'affalait dans son fauteuil, hébétée de fatigue, calmée. Puis elle se levait encore et se jetait encore sur Suzanne.

- Dis-le-moi et je te laisserai.

- Je n'ai pas couché avec lui, il me l'a donnée comme ça, je lui ai même pas demandé, il me l'a montrée et il me l'a donnée comme ça, pour rien.

Elle frappait encore, comme sous la poussée d'une nécessité qui ne la lâchait pas. Suzanne à ses pieds, à demi nue dans sa robe déchirée, pleurait. Lorsqu'elle tentait de se lever, la mère la renversait du pied et elle criait:

- Mais dis-le-moi donc, bon Dieu, et je te laisserai.

Ce qu'elle ne pouvait pas supporter, semblait-il, c'était de la voir se relever. Dès que Suzanne faisait un geste, elle frappait. Alors, la

tête enfouie dans ses bras, Suzanne ne faisait plus que se protéger patiemment. 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. C'était lorsque la mère retombait dans son fauteuil qu'elle lui faisait peur à nouveau, à cause de son visage hébété par l'effort.

- Dis-le-moi, répétait-elle, et quelquefois d'une voix presque tranquille.

Suzanne ne répondait plus. La mère se lassait, oubliait. Parfois elle bâillait et d'un seul coup ses paupières se fermaient, sa tête chavirait. Mais au moindre mouvement de Suzanne ou simplement lorsqu'elle ouvrait les yeux, réveillée par le chavirement de sa tête, et qu'elle l'apercevait à ses pieds, elle se levait et frappait encore. Joseph feuilletait Hollywood-Cinéma, le seul livre, vieux de six ans, qu'il y ait eu dans la famille et dont il ne s'était jamais lassé. Quand la mère frappait, il s'arrêtait de feuilleter l'album. A un moment donné, tout d'un coup, il dit:

- Merde, tu le sais bien qu'elle a pas couché avec lui, je comprends pas pourquoi tu insistes.

- Et si je veux la tuer? si ça me plaît de la tuer?

Joseph restait parce qu'il ne voulait pas la laisser seule avec la mère dans cet état, c'était sûr. Peut-être même n'était-il pas tout à fait rassuré. Après qu'il ait crié, elle avait encore frappé mais moins fort et chaque fois moins longtemps. Alors Joseph, chaque fois, avait recommencé à l'engueuler.

- Et puis même si elle a couché avec lui, tu t'en fous pas complètement?

Oui, elle frappait avec moins d'assurance. Il y avait bien deux ans qu'elle ne frappait plus Joseph. Dans le temps elle l'avait beaucoup frappé lui aussi, jusqu'au jour où il l'avait prise par le bras et l'avait doucement immobilisée. D'abord stupéfaite, elle avait fini par se marrer avec lui, heureuse au fond de le voir devenu si fort. Depuis elle ne l'avait plus frappé, non sans doute parce qu'elle le craignait mais aussi parce que Joseph lui avait dit qu'il ne le supporterait plus. Joseph trouvait qu'il fallait battre les enfants, surtout les filles, mais sans exagération et seulement en dernier recours. Mais depuis l'écroulement des barrages et depuis qu'elle ne battait plus Joseph, la mère battait Suzanne bien plus souvent qu'autrefois: "Quand elle aura plus personne à qui foutre des gnons, disait Joseph, elle s'en foutra sur sa gueule à elle."

Joseph resterait tant que la mère ne se serait pas couchée, c'était sûr. Suzanne était tranquille.

- Et même si elle avait couchée pour la bague, dit-il, tu parles d'une affaire!

Très profondément satisfaite et tranquille. La mère avait beau faire. La bague était là, dans la maison. Il y avait vingt mille francs dans la maison. C'était ce qui comptait. Elle devait déjà savoir ce

qu'elle allait en faire. Ce n'était pas possible de lui demander ce soir mais dès demain ils pourraient sans doute en parler librement. La rendre était déjà impossible. D'habitude Suzanne supportait mal qu'elle la batte, mais ce soir, elle trouvait que c'était mieux que si la mère, après avoir pris la bague, s'était mise à table tranquillement, comme d'habitude.

- Une bague, qu'est-ce que c'est au fond? On a le devoir de garder une bague dans certains cas.

- Et comment qu'on l'a! dit Joseph.

Qui aurait pu être de l'avis contraire? Peut-être qu'ils allaient pouvoir acheter une nouvelle auto et recommencer une partie des barrages. Et peut-être qu'à partir de cette bague, ils deviendraient riches d'une richesse qui n'aurait rien à voir avec celle de M. Jo. Elle avait beau gueuler.

Ce soir était un grand soir. De M. Jo, on avait pu soutirer cette bague et maintenant elle était là, quelque part dans la maison et aucune force au monde ne pouvait déjà plus l'en faire sortir. Ce soir-là avait tardé à venir mais ça y était, il était arrivé. Depuis des années que les projets échouaient les uns après les autres ce n'était pas trop tôt. Leur première réussite. Non pas une chance mais une réussite. Car depuis des années qu'ils attendaient, ils avaient bien gagné, rien qu'à attendre, cette bague-là. Ç'avait été pour pouvoir l'approcher, simplement l'approcher encore à l'ombre du pont, que l'autre l'avait lâchée. Mais cette victoire-là, qui résistait à tous les coups, elle ne pouvait la partager avec personne, même pas avec Joseph.

- Une bague, c'est rien. La refuser dans mon cas serait un crime.

Qui aurait pu être de l'avis contraire? N'en pas vouloir alors qu'elle vous était offerte était simplement inimaginable. Il y en avait assez qui reposaient stériles dans de beaux coffrets, de ces pierres, alors que le monde en avait tant besoin. Celle qu'ils tenaient commençait son chemin, délivrée, féconde désormais. Et, pour la première fois depuis que les mains ensanglantées d'un noir l'avait extraite du lit pierreux d'une de ces rivières de cauchemar du Katanga, elle s'élançait, enfin délivrée, hors des mains concupiscentes et inhumaines de ses geôliers.

Elle avait cessé de frapper. Distraite, toute à ses pensées, elle réfléchissait sans doute à ce qu'elle allait en faire.

- Peut-être qu'on pourra changer l'auto, dit doucement Suzanne.

Joseph abandonna Hollywood-Cinéma et le posa sur la table. Lui aussi réfléchissait. Mais la mère jeta un coup d'œil à sa fille et recommença à gueuler.

- On ne changera pas l'auto, on paiera la banque, le Crédit Foncier, et peut-être on changera la toiture. On fera ce que je voudrai.

Ce n'était donc pas fini comme on aurait pu le croire. Il fallait attendre encore.

- On paiera le Crédit Foncier, dit Suzanne, et on fera remettre une

toiture.

Pourquoi, de la voir sourire fit qu'elle recommença de frapper? Elle se leva, se jeta sur elle et la renversa.

- Je n'en peux plus, je devrais être au lit...[The ellipsis is Duras's.]

Suzanne releva la tête et la regarda.

- J'ai couché avec lui, dit-elle, et il me l'a donnée.

La mère s'affala dans son fauteuil. "Elle va me tuer, pensa Suzanne, et même Joseph pourra pas l'empêcher." Mais la mère fixa Suzanne, les deux bras levés, comme prête à bondir, puis, elle laissa retomber ses bras et calmement, elle dit:

- C'est pas vrai. Tu es une menteuse.

Joseph s'était levé et s'était approché de la mère.

- Si tu y touches encore, lui dit-il doucement, une seule fois encore, je fous le camp avec elle à Ram. Tu es une vieille cinglée. Maintenant j'en suis tout à fait sûr.

La mère regarda Joseph. Peut-être que s'il avait ri elle aurait ri avec lui. Mais il ne riait pas. Alors, elle resta dans son fauteuil, hébétée, méconnaissable de tristesse. Suzanne, allongée de tout son long à côté du fauteuil de Joseph, pleurait. Pourquoi avait-elle recommencé? Peut-être qu'elle était folle. La vie était terrible et la mère était aussi terrible que la vie. Joseph s'était rassis et c'était elle, Suzanne, qu'il regardait maintenant. La seule douceur de la vie c'était lui, Joseph. Ayant découvert cette douceur-là, si réservée, enfouie sous tant de dureté, Suzanne découvrit du même coup, tout ce qu'il avait fallu de coups et de patience, tout ce qu'il en faudrait encore sans doute pour la forcer à se montrer. Et alors elle pleura.

Bientôt la mère s'endormit tout à fait. Et tout d'un coup, la tête ballante, la bouche entrouverte, complètement en allé dans le lait du sommeil, elle flotta, légère, dans la pleine innocence. On ne pouvait plus lui en vouloir. Elle avait aimé démesurément la vie et c'était son espérance infatigable, incurable, qui en avait fait ce qu'elle était devenue, une désespérée de l'espoir même. Cet espoir l'avait usée, détruite, nudifiée à ce point, que son sommeil qui l'en reposait, même la mort, semblait-il, ne pouvait plus le dépasser.

Suzanne rampa jusqu'à la porte de la chambre de Joseph et elle attendit de voir ce qu'il allait faire.

Il resta un long moment à regarder la mère endormie, les mains crispées sur les bras de son fauteuil, les sourcils froncés. Puis il se leva et alla vers elle.

- Va te coucher, tu sera mieux dans ton lit.

La mère se réveilla en sursaut et chercha dans la pièce.

- Où est-elle?

- Va te coucher... Elle a pas couché avec lui.

Il l'embrassa sur le front. Suzanne ne l'avait vu l'embrasser que lorsqu'elle était dans le coma qui suivait ses crises et qu'il croyait qu'elle allait mourir.

- Hélas! dit la mère en pleurant, hélas! je le sais bien.

- Faut plus t'en faire pour la bague, on va la vendre.
La tête dans ses mains, elle pleurait.
- Hélas! je suis une vieille cinglée...[This ellipsis is Duras'.] [1]

The following excerpt is one entire section of L'Amant. It is clear that it recounts the same episode as the previous passage in Barrage, but the differences in presentation and content are equally noticeable:

A cette époque-là, de Cholen, de l'image, de l'amant, ma mère a un sursaut de folie. Elle ne sait rien de ce qui est arrivé à Cholen. Mais je vois qu'elle m'observe, qu'elle se doute de quelque chose. Elle connaît sa fille, cette enfant, il flotte autour de cette enfant, depuis quelque temps, un air d'étrangeté, une réserve, dirait-on, récente, qui retient l'attention, sa parole est plus lente encore que d'habitude, et elle si curieuse de tout elle est distraite, son regard a changé, elle est devenue spectatrice de sa mère même, du malheur de sa mère, on dirait qu'elle assiste à son événement. L'épouvante soudaine dans la vie de ma mère. Sa fille court le plus grand danger, celui de ne jamais se marier, de ne jamais s'établir dans la société, d'être démunie devant celle-ci, perdue, solitaire. 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 linge, 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 linge et elle hurle, la ville à l'entendre, que sa fille est une prostituée, qu'elle va la jeter dehors, qu'elle désire la voir crever et que personne ne voudra plus d'elle, qu'elle est déshonorée, une chien vaut davantage. Et elle pleure en demandant ce qu'elle peut faire avec ça, sinon la sortir de la maison pour qu'elle n'empuantisse plus les lieux.

Derrière les murs de la chambre fermée, le frère.

Le frère répond à la mère qu'elle a raison de battre l'enfant, sa voix est feutrée, intime, caressante, il lui dit qu'il leur faut savoir la vérité, à n'importe quel prix, il leur faut savoir pour empêcher que cette petite fille ne se perde, pour empêcher que la mère en soit désespérée. La mère frappe de toutes ses forces. Le petit frère crie à la mère de la laisser tranquille. Il va dans le jardin, il se cache, il a peur que je sois tuée, il a peur, il a toujours peur de cet inconnu, notre frère aîné. La peur du petit frère calme ma mère. Elle pleure sur le désastre de sa vie, de son enfant déshonorée. Je pleure avec elle. Je mens. Je jure sur ma vie que rien ne m'est arrivé, rien même pas un baiser. Comment veux-tu, je dis, avec un Chinois, comment veux-tu que je fasse ça avec un Chinois, si laid, si malingre? Je sais que le frère aîné est rivé à la porte, il écoute, il sait ce que fait ma mère, il sait que la

petite est nue, et frappée, il voudrait que ça dure encore et encore jusqu'au danger. Ma mère n'ignore pas ce dessein de mon frère aîné, obscur, terrifiant. [2]

The first aspect of these excerpts that one may notice is the comparative lengths of the two texts. The Barrage episode is quite a bit longer than its counterpart in L'Amant. This is due primarily to the characteristic reduction that is involved in going from Barrage to L'Amant. The length of each text can also represent the length of the two books in general, as the former is more than twice as long as the later book.

Time and Place

From the beginning of these excerpts, there are certain elements which are dealt with in different fashions. These differences relate to the essential differences of the texts at large: one text is a traditional novel while the other is trying to break this mold.

One difference between these two sections is their relation to time and space. At the beginning of the Barrage scene, there is a distinct specification of a particular time and place. "Ç'avait éclaté lorsque Suzanne était sortie de table." A few lines later, the narrator summarizes the entire scene before giving the details and in so doing gives another indication of time: "Il y avait bien deux heures que ça durait."

There are no such specific time markers in the section from L'Amant. In fact, the references to time are vague at best: "A cette époque-là, de Cholen, de l'image, de l'amant, ma mère a un sursaut de folie." From this sentence, the only valid deduction is that the scene takes place when the protagonist is somewhere between the age of fifteen and a half and seventeen years, during the time period of her sexual liaison with her lover. Three sentences later, one realizes that this liaison, and the resulting change in the girl's attitude, has

started some time before the beginning of this scene. This realization is due to the insertion of another time marker: "il flotte autour de cette enfant, depuis quelque temps, un air d'étrangeté...." But again this is a vague reference to an unknown amount of time.

Nor is there a reference to place at the beginning of the L'Amant section. The reader must wait until later for an indication of scene setting: "elle m'enferme dans la chambre." This setting is interesting, for it differs from the setting of the scene in Barrage. In Barrage, the entire scene is played out in the dining room, as indicated by Suzanne's raising up from the table and the fact that Joseph, at the end of the scene, must convince his mother to go to her bedroom.

In L'Amant, on the other hand, the mother takes her daughter into the bedroom to beat her. Thus, although both scenes occur within a house, there is more privacy in the latter story. Mieke Bal, in his Introduction to Narratology, states in his discussion of location:

A contrast between *inside* and *outside* is often relevant, where inside may carry the suggestion of protection, and outside that of danger. These meanings are not indissolubly tied to these oppositions; it is equally possible that *inside* suggests close confinement, and *outside* freedom, or that we see a combination of these meanings... [3]

Normally, the bedroom is a place of comfort and repose, but in L'Amant, it becomes one of fear and violence. The idea of imprisonment is also present in the text. "Ma mère se jette sur moi, elle m'enferme dans la chambre," says the narrator. And a little later: "Derrière les murs de la chambre fermée, le frère." This last quote introduces another argument, for the contrast between interior and exterior settings becomes significant when one considers as well the presence of the brother(s) in the scene.

In Barrage, Joseph acts as a passive bystander. Eventually he exerts his

control over the situation, but this is only through verbal manipulation of his mother. The older brother of L'Amant, on the other hand, is obviously violent and ill-willed, and the locked door is the only thing that keeps him from participating in the scene even more so. In this light, the daughter is in somewhat of a safe haven while inside the room. Also, propriety may necessitate an interior location in L'Amant because the mother disrobes her daughter, whereas Suzanne in Barrage is only "demi nue dans sa robe déchirée."

There is also a distinct difference between the way in which Duras describes time in these two books. This may now be seen on the atomic scale in these two excerpts. The scene in Barrage is a larger and more developed scene, due largely to the inclusion of several retroversions within the text. The first real retroversion begins with: "Il y avait bien deux ans qu'elle ne frappait plus Joseph." From here, the narrator relates the first time when Joseph restrained his mother from hitting him.

The shortness of the sections in L'Amant limits the number of retroversions. If Duras wishes to introduce a retroversion, or an anticipation for that matter, she usually starts a new section. In this episode, there is a brief brush with the past as the narrator gives a little history in setting the scene. It is this same sentence quoted earlier: "il flotte autour de cette enfant, depuis quelques temps, un air d'étrangeté..."⁴

This is not reported in the past, however. More symptoms of her "strange air" follow: "sa parole est plus lente encore que d'habitude, et elle si curieuse de tout elle est ditraite, son regard a changé." These verbs are all in the present tense, except the final one where there is an abrupt switch at the end to the *passé composé*. What is confusing about this sentence, then, is that even though there is a predominance of the present tense, there is a constant contrast

between the present and the past, signaled by the presence of "habitude" in the sentence. There is a break with the norms, or habits, of the past. This is implied as well in the phrase, "elle si curieuse de tout elle est distraite," which could be rewritten: "elle qui était normalement si curieuse, maintenant elle est distraite."⁴ There is an inherent separation between what was and what is.

Thus, the descriptions of time and place in these novels hold when applied to specific scenes. The scene from L'Amant is more ambiguous than the scene from Barrage. There are few indicators of time and, though the place is specified, it does not reach the level of description which is accomplished in Barrage.

Narration

The narration of these two sections is in keeping with the overall trends of narration of the two texts at large. The narrative in this section of Barrage is strictly in the third-person, without any of the anomalies discussed earlier. On the other hand, the instances of narrative variation in the L'Amant section, the oscillations between first- and third-person narratives, are unusually high. There are six swings of this type within the short text.

The first three sentences of the text are in the first-person, ending with: "Mais je vois qu'elle m'observe, qu'elle se doute de quelque chose."⁵ The next sentence, though referring to the same character as the *je* in the previous sentence, is in the third-person: "Elle connaît sa fille, cette enfant..."⁶ Here is a good example of Capitanio's interpretation of the shifting narrative voice. It is easy to see that the voice changes once the perspective is switched to the mother. The narrator then expresses the mother's thoughts and views of her young daughter. Thus the girl is no longer a character in her own right, the *je*, but rather a character formed by her mother's opinion, represented by the

change to *elle*. At one point, the protagonist ceases even to be a human being in the eyes of her mother. This is indicated by a switch to the impersonal pronoun "ça" : "Elle [la mère] pleure en demandant ce qu'elle peut faire avec ça, sinon la sortir de la maison." Her value is diminished to the level of an object.

The representation of her character is not only limited to her mother's view, but there is also a certain presence of the general society in the scene. By using the impersonal pronoun "on," the narrator refers to a separate world of nondescript persons who watch the protagonist. When this is the case, the same switch to the third-person narrative occurs in the text.

Dialogue

These two episodes do not differ from the patterns established in the two texts at large. Barrage has a much higher incidence of direct speech and in this scene, dialogue is recounted in the conventional manner with a paragraph break and a hyphen introducing spoken speech. The scene from L'Amant, however, is not only devoid of quotation marks and hyphenation, but colons as well. Thus Duras makes no attempt to signal dialogue by use of punctuation. All speech must therefore be termed as free verse, not direct speech and yet not exactly indirect speech either. Again we see the influence of the *nouveau roman* which was introduced between the publication of Duras' two texts.

Moving away from the technical aspect of the presentation of dialogue, let us examine the content of the dialogue in the two scenes. One easily notices the repetition of the mother's supplication to Suzanne: "Dis-le-moi!" The insistence on this point shows how much she wants to know about her daughter's activities. Each time that this phrase is repeated, however, it is in a new context.

The first instance it is followed by a promise of relief: "Dis-le-moi et je te

laisserai." Suzanne's immediate response is to deny any wrong-doing. The next time is introduced by the phrase, "elle criait: - Mais dis-le-moi donc, bon Dieu, et je te laisserai." It is clear by the addition of "bon Dieu" that the mother does not want to keep hitting her daughter. It goes against her maternal instincts. This is hinted at earlier in the text: "Elle l'avait frappé avec les poings de tout ce qui lui restait de force. De toute la force de son droit, de toute celle, égale, de son doute." It is her "right" to hit Suzanne, but she "doubts" whether Suzanne really deserves this punishment. The final repetition is an entreaty, shown by the description of the mother's tone of voice at the same time: "- Dis-le-moi, répétait-elle, et quelquefois d'une voix presque tranquille." Again, the mother just wants her daughter to confess to the sin so that she can put an end to the beating.

There is no account of the exact words of the mother in the L'Amant section. Instead, the narrator paraphrases the insults of the mother. Here, the mother does not limit herself to quiet or "tranquil" supplications, but screams for "la ville à l'entendre." Her verbal abuse of the child is extremely severe, saying that "sa fille est une prostituée, qu'elle va la jeter dehors, qu'elle désire la voir crever."

The Mother's Insanity

With all this yelling, it is difficult to see the love of the mother for her children in these two excerpts. It is even more difficult to see the mother as an archetypal mother figure; physical abuse of children does not coincide with the typical views of good parenthood. In fact, these two scenes support Pierrot's interpretation of the mother as selfish and wicked. In this section, I will develop the idea of the mother's insanity by looking at the motivating factors involved in the two scenes.

Because the Barrage section takes place within the context of a continually evolving story line, there is a sense of cause and effect. The immediate cause of the situation is that M. Jo has given Suzanne a diamond ring. She in turn gives the ring to her mother and this sparks the confrontation. Such a valuable gift could only mean, in the mother's eyes, that Suzanne payed for it with her virginity. This idea drives the mother into a frenzy.

The link between cause and effect is not as developed in the L'Amant section. There is no surrounding context to the section, other than the fact that the young girl has indeed had sexual intercourse with her lover. More importantly, the diamond ring is not the motivating factor for the incident. A diamond ring is mentioned twice in the novel, however. Once, it is treated as a validation of the relationship between the young girl and her Chinese lover.⁷ And, instead of causing a fit of rage when the girl shows it to her mother, the mother just laughs as she remembers her own engagement ring.⁸

Thus the motivation for the scene in L'Amant lies elsewhere. The mother believes that her daughter is having sexual relations with the Chinese man because of changes in the girl's posture and attitudes. It is interesting that the mother knows her daughter so well that she views these changes very seriously. In fact, even though the mother has no physical proof such as the diamond ring, the description of her physical abuse and search of the girl in this latter book is much more explicit and intense. However, these causes are nothing more than the immediate causes of the situation. In both scenes, there is an underlying cause which extends deeper below the surface of the immediate cause.

In Barrage, one can see the strife of the mother as she begins to hit her daughter. The reader is presented with all the disappointments of her life: "...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 mort." Of course, leading the list are the failed dikes against the rising tide which annually destroys her crops. The parallel sentence in L'Amant is entirely devoid of detail in comparison: "Elle pleure sur le désastre de sa vie, de son enfant déshonoré." There is no enumeration of all her failures, no lengthy discourse; yet her desperation is brought out in one word: "désastre."

Unlike the section in Barrage, the "disaster" of the mother's life is not only her own, but it is shared by her child. The disaster in her daughter's life, of course, is that she is dishonored. The word *déshonorée* appears twice in the text, once when the mother says her child is dishonored and once again as she cries over the disaster "de son enfant déshonorée." The importance of one's honor in the stratified culture of colonial Indochina is stressed at several points in the novel. It is important to the mother to guard the honor of her children, especially the young girl.

I interpret the mother's anger as primarily a result of her fear for her child. Her severe verbal insults are intended, I believe, to frighten her daughter into proper channels of conduct. She presents the stark consequences of her present course: branding as a prostitute and abandonment by the family unit.⁹ The actions of her child also carry with them certain economic ramifications, i.e. the possibility that she will never get married and thus be continually dependent on her mother. The mother is left to express her despair and utter confusion as to what she can do with her daughter. Of course, she thinks it is too late to change the situation and wonders if dissociation from the family would not be the best plan.

This interpretation does not leave much room for the possibility of a mother entirely engrossed in her own needs: rather, it appears that she may be looking out for Suzanne more than for herself. The extent of her illness is by

no means qualifiable. It is possible to calm her, as the little brother finds out, and she is conscious of the people around her, as well as their wishes. The latter fact is evident near the end of the section when the narrator says, "Ma mère n'ignore pas ce dessein de mon frère aîné."

The insanity of the mother is more evident in the Barrage section. Returning to the diamond ring, the instigator of the episode in Barrage, one can see that the narrator gives it more than just a passing interest. The ring represents their new hope; it is a chance for survival. But there is a moral dilemma involved in taking it from M. Jo. It seems that the mother's fundamental sense of work ethic is challenged by this ring and the enormous sum of money it represents. She has had to work and struggle for every franc that has come their way to this point, and suddenly a ring appears, supposedly valuing twenty thousand francs, suddenly given to her with no strings attached. So this gift causes an internal dilemma.

There is a dichotomy raging inside of her as she wants to keep the ring, and yet realizes that she has done nothing to deserve it. Near the beginning of the Barrage text, the narrator explains that the mother is as if under "la poussée d'une nécessité qui ne la lâchait pas." The mother is experiencing a deep internal anguish which drives her to release it on her daughter. In the entire section, there is the repetition of individual words as well as the more obvious sentences, like "Dis-le-moi." The most repeated word in the text is "encore." It appears no less than nine times throughout, with a certain emphasis on the phrase: "Elle frappait encore." This phrase, with variations, occurs six times. The constant repetition of the word in the text stresses a continuity, and the mother's *nécessité*, in the scene. Here is a mother who hits and hits her daughter.

In the heat of the moment, neither mother is free from murderous

thoughts. The mother in Barrage goes so far as to consider it her right to kill her daughter: "- Et si je veux la tuer? si ça me plaît de la tuer?" she demands when her son objects to her treatment of Suzanne. With the presence of the conditional voice in "si," and the question form of the sentence, we see that this is only a threat and that the mother does not really want to kill her daughter. Neither Joseph nor Suzanne believes that she will go that far. In L'Amant, there is more actual intent involved in her language. The mother says "qu'elle désire la voir crever." Again, Duras uses a slang word, interestingly in L'Amant this time. Her use of "crever" emphasizes the mother's view of Suzanne as a sub-human. Neither mother may actually want to kill the daughter herself, but the mother of L'Amant harbors, at least at that particular moment, a wish for her death.

So we see that Suzanne is right in posing herself the question: "Peut-être qu'elle [la mère] était folle." Suzanne, as well as Joseph, must begin to doubt the mother's ability to think logically. Joseph exclaims near the end of the scene, and the mother agrees: "Tu es une vieille cinglée."

The Brothers

The addition of a brother to the plot of the story inevitably changes the relational dynamics of the family unit, and, in this section, we see in what way this is carried out in this particular scene. I have said that I see Joseph as a combination of the two brothers of L'Amant, so I will test this idea in this scene.

Let us start with the reactions of the two brothers and see how they mesh with the reactions of Joseph. In the L'Amant text, the older brother is introduced in a very mysterious and menacing fashion: "Derrière les murs de la chambre fermée, le frère." This phrase, not even a complete sentence, set apart as a separate entity between two long paragraphs, is dark and foreboding. The

menace continues as the narrator describes the brother's voice ("feutrée, intime, caressante"). He wants his mother to beat his sister until they find out the truth, and he probably receives some form of sexual gratification from the scene.

In contrast, the younger brother's reaction in the face of such a dangerous intent is to appeal to his mother for the sake of his sister. He is afraid for her sake, afraid of his brother. The repetition of *peur* four times in the space of two sentences serves to impress upon the reader the gravity of the situation as well as the intensity of the younger brother's emotion.

In Barrage, Joseph's reaction is a combination of the previous two. He lets the mother beat Suzanne and even advocates beatings as necessary to a child's development. This attitude seems cold and indifferent, a milder form of the older brother's innate violence. At the same time, however, it is he who eventually convinces the mother that his sister did not sleep with M. Jo and stops her from beating Suzanne. Later, his own uncertainty on the subject is revealed in a question that he poses to Suzanne: "T'as couché avec lui ou t'as pas couché avec lui?"¹⁰ She again answers in the negative and he lets the subject rest. Despite his hesitation to believe his sister's story, the fact remains that he was concerned enough about her to intervene in the situation.

Also, Duras repeats a certain sentence about Joseph which enlightens his character. "Joseph restait parce qu'il ne voulait pas la laisser seule avec la mère dans cet état, c'était sûr." And then: "Joseph resterait tant que la mère ne se serait pas couchée, c'était sûr." The first example in the imperfect tense, "Joseph restait...," only gives Joseph's status in the scene. He is stationary, watching his mother and waiting to see what will happen, only occasionally offering his seemingly disinterested opinion. In the repetition of the sentence, it becomes, "Joseph resterait..," indicating a state that will persist into the future until the mother goes to bed. This change in verb tenses is important because it indicates

a commitment to his sister.

There is a hidden tenderness in Joseph, under the callous exterior. One can see his compassion for his mother when he kisses her before sending her to bed. This is an act that no one would expect from the older brother in L'Amant. In fact, in this section of Barrage, Joseph's character resembles much more closely that of the younger brother.

Thus, the inclusion of another brother in L'Amant changes the dynamics of the family unit in this particular instance. Instead of one character who represents both the aggressive and passive side of the situation (Joseph), the two sides are represented by the different personalities of two brothers.

The Resolution

It is interesting that the section in L'Amant offers no resolution of the conflict, as there is in the Barrage section. The reader is left without any indication of the final outcome of the conflict. Of course, one may assume that the girl is not killed, and because of later indications in the text, one may equally assume that the mother believes her daughter's story. However, this is not stated explicitly in the text, as it is in Barrage.

Near the conclusion of the scene in Barrage, Suzanne does make the confession that her mother wants to hear: "- J'ai couché avec lui..." But the mother, perhaps convinced by the duration of Suzanne's previous perseverance in refusing to confess, perhaps at last realizing her own doubt from the beginning of the scene, rejects this confession: "- C'est pas vrai. Tu es une menteuse." Suzanne thus lies about her liaison with M. Jo, which is innocent for the most part, in order to appease her mother.

This is the opposite of the story in L'Amant. There, the protagonist is guilty of sexual relations with her Chinese lover, but lies about the relationship

to her mother. The reader never finds out if she eventually tells the truth or not. One important element of the scene is that even she, the very lover of the Chinese man, uses his race as the justification for her lies about their relationship. She appeals to her mother's common sense by asking how she thinks that her own daughter could stoop so low as to engage in sexual relations with a Chinese man. She is aware of her family's prejudice and takes advantage of it.

Thus, in the fact that there is no conclusion to the scene in L'Amant, one can see further the destruction of the written text. Traditional novels do not leave the reader hanging in suspense like this. So, once again, Duras has reduced the written text, this time to the point of an incomplete story.

Notes

1. Barrage, ps. 136-42.
2. L'Amant, ps. 72-4.
3. Bal, p. 44.
4. Emphasis added.
5. Emphasis added.
6. Emphasis added.
7. L'Amant, p. 88.
8. L'Amant, p. 113.
9. This is exactly what happens to another young girl in Duras' Le Vice-consul.
10. Barrage, p. 145.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Marguerite Duras, returning in L'Amant to the same story of thirty plus years before, concentrates her attention on a small portion of the plot in Barrage: she expands on the love affair and rewrites many events. However, at the same time as there is a reduction in the amount of plot that is considered in L'Amant, going from quite a long story to writing about only this love affair, there is also an expansion to the rest of the narrator's life as she tells of events that occurred much later.

In my analysis of one specific scene, it was easy to see changes in plot elements and things of this nature. More important than the changes in plot, however, is a change in writing style, such as the absence of names, the use of different narrative techniques, and the ways in which dialogues are imparted. It is on this level that the text becomes more alive. The form of the text gives its own meaning to the text. This is certainly evident in the chaotic nature of the many sections in L'Amant.

In reading and analyzing these texts by Marguerite Duras, especially L'Amant, I have been constantly faced with new thoughts and ideas about the meaning of the texts. There is much ambiguity and uncertainty of meaning in the novels and, because this ambiguous nature of the texts renders them difficult to comprehend at times, I was first tempted to look at these ambiguities in a negative light.

I soon realized that though Duras' style of writing may seem "confusing," it

also has its advantages. The themes and style of Duras' work are open to criticism and interpretation, and I have ventured to add my own interpretations of numerous subjects to those already in existence. The aspects which lend themselves to an uncertainty in the text are thus a strength. That they allow many different ways of reading is significant.

For a text that can be easily put into a box must trade its easy reading style for a certain literary interest. This is plain to see in the popular pulp novels of the day. They are popular because they do not require much attention from the reader. They do not challenge the accepted norms of chronological progression, narration, or character development. Duras and many other leading novelists of this century are bold enough to push the reader in these areas. They do not permit a passive reading of their novels.

Critics show by their wide opinions on the book that there is the added benefit of numerous possible interpretations in a book which does not hold so strictly to the norms of literature. This is probably why Barrage excited such little literary debate, since it follows a fairly standard progression of ideas.

The movement of the *nouveau roman* is often seen as an attempt to destroy the conventions of the traditional novel. Though this may be disconcerting for the average reader, and it certainly was for me when I first came in contact with a *nouveau roman*, I believe that the goal of this shake-up in the literary world is not solely destructive, but also constructive. In efforts to destroy what was, there is an implied construction of something new. Concerned contemporary authors are trying to broaden the scope of the novel by asking fundamental questions such as: How can the author most effectively communicate the experience of life to his/her readers? or even Is it possible to communicate at all?

As this concerns Duras and the two books I have looked at in this thesis, we

must be satisfied to remain in the dark as to the meaning of such texts. Though it may not be possible to find any concrete answers to these questions, the pleasure of great literature is in the search not the conclusion. In Barrage, as we have seen, there are a few evidences of the coming revolution in the modern approach to the novel. Duras hints at some of the changes her own writing will undergo. These changes in narrative technique reach a certain point of maturation in her later novel L'Amant.

In fact, one may ask if L'Amant may be considered a "novel" at all, but rather a "narrative," like those of Breton or Gide. Duras is able to escape from the constraints of the novel and write without the typical adherence to form and structure. A strict analysis of her style of writing would show the music in her sentences. For her writing does come very close to poetry. There is a rhythm in the repetition of words and length of phrases, as well as a rhyme in her choice of words.

An important study of her entire collection would be to trace the evolution of her push away from the traditional confines of a novel. Her efforts in the areas of intertextuality, narrative points of view, and many others, come alive when one has a grasp of her novels, plays, and film scenarios. Even L'Amant, though hailed by many as her greatest creation, will surely not be the last stage in Duras' literary development.

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