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The Person Who Is Tortured Is Me: Response to Sylvère Lotringer

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Professor Lotringer sets the interrogation scene in Duras's book *The War* in the framework of the French modernist turn to the sacred. He does so, in part, because Duras called her text itself sacred. Generously, perhaps even gallantly, he tries to make sense of Duras's claim, but to me it's plainly untenable. What *could* be sacred about her secular text? Is it gospel? Does it come from beyond? It does not. Whatever the mystery or mystification surrounding its origin, it reads like what it is, a memoir.

Leaving that aside, does Duras repeat the connections that Artaud and Bataille made between violence and the sacred? Professor Lotringer suggests that her work reveals what the older writers were after. How does it do that? Through development or contrast? I do not find Professor Lotringer's discussion clear on this point. In his interrogation of the interrogation it vacillates between detecting signs of the equation *violence produces the sacred* and deciding (is it with disappointment?) that in this scene there is only cruelty. Powerfully and vividly he traces, in the main, the text's shortcomings with respect to the sacred; he highlights the ugliness and awkwardness of the scene. He correctly notes that Thérèse is rather clinical, and that the main feeling produced in the underground group is merely one of shame.

This conclusion would seem to exclude the sacred, but Professor Lotringer goes on to say that "shame is always the best bond because it is custom-made, and we know that for Bataille the essence of the sacred is an experience of continuity." But surely shame is an anti-bonding agent. Share a shame with me and I will not want to look you in the face. The members of the Resistance band desert Thérèse; they leave the bar without her.

How could anyone have warmed to her? As for Thérèse, she never wants to see the fat and foolish informer again.

Is the torture scene, then, a failed or a successful attempt to evoke the sacred? Perhaps Professor Lotringer has written a critique of it as a failure to transform violence into a communion in not-knowing; I can't tell. In any case, I think that Duras was not intent on the sacred. It will not be news to anyone to peg her, instead, as a writer of despair. The difference is decisive. The sacred is an intolerable arousal of sensibility; despair is a mourning for sensibility itself.

The topic is vexed by the absolute centrality for both Duras and Bataille of the non-discursive knowledge of the unknown. But I think that they understood—and felt—this non-knowledge in different ways. For Bataille, it was the nudity that puts one into ecstasy, albeit a nudity approached in anguish, that is, through the horror of a surrender to a dark incandescence—call it hesitantly, as he did, God. By contrast, Duras was not a mystic. For her, the extreme limit of knowledge was a scream. What was intolerable was that the primal scream of existence, reechoed in historical contexts, should remain unacknowledged and unexpressed, should not be hunted out by dogged sentences like her own, should be buried beneath tier after tier of fat flesh. Why could the informer not give her, at last, the truth of the scream? Ooh ooh is the best he can manage. Ooh ooh.

The war had reduced Duras herself to a held-in scream; a scream of bloody murder. The informer is the accidental and finally insignificant pretext for letting out the scream as violence, for committing justified murder. But little comes of it; Marguerite/Thérèse can't abandon herself in that way. And what good would it do to make the informer utter the scream? Once uttered, it would re-echo, it would not go away. Existence itself is the scream.

The scream may derive from the violence of the elements, but it is increased by identity, by our animal and especially our human separation from the elements. Still, Duras could follow neither Nietzsche nor Bataille in seeking to dissolve the anguish of the separation. Her imagination was not metaphysical. For her, the cosmos was not a dark incandescence. It was just dark.

Anguish is a limit, and not the last stage before joy or before a divine disappearance. Anguish, not ecstasy, is her subject, her obsession.

The war monstrously magnified what was already always there, the suffering that is existence, the murderous hatred it breeds. It was an infernal device for intensifying the scream. So it was that, when Duras saw her skeletal husband coming toward her up the stairs after he was released from a camp, she shrieked “no, that I didn’t want to see. The war emerged in my shrieks. Six years without uttering a cry. I found myself in some neighbor’s apartment. They forced me to drink some rum, they poured it into my mouth. Into the shrieks.” The person who is tortured is me.

Violence begins here, in the fear of being finished off by the shriek, so she said, comes even before life does. The Germans concentrated themselves into a gigantic will aimed at an unanswerable, definitive domination of life, that is, of the self-deluded dead person that the living person already always is. For to be a speaking being is to be dead. The hired mistress in *The Malady of Death* says to the man who finds her so beautifully other that he wants to murder her, “I don’t want to know anything the way you do, with that death-derived certainty, that hopeless monotony.” Subsequently, she’s even more blunt: looking at him, she says she didn’t know death could be lived.

In the torture scene, Thérèse herself resembles a Nazi. She bullies the informer to prove that he, the type of the betrayer of good men like her deported husband, is weaker than she is; his evil is weaker than hers, less strong with hate. Did he think he could hide his monstrous betrayals? The enemy must be brought to light; the enemy had probably better be killed. One must protect oneself. The world’s edge is already sharp enough without adding human jaggedness to it. What is justice? It isn’t what humanism supposes. It’s the acknowledgement of the silent scream of existence. What is unforgivable in the informer is that he appears to be immune to anguish, deaf to it. He had conducted himself as if it didn’t exist.

Thérèse eggs on the beating of the informer in the interests of doing justice to anguish. She is justice at this moment—

“justice,” Duras writes, “such as there hasn’t been on this soil for a hundred and fifty years”—she means, of course, since the French Revolution. Justice makes those who were indifferent to the anguish they caused feel anguish, or at least pain. The informer is compelled to brand himself a traitor. Look at the fear on his face. Listen to his cries of pain. Thérèse feels triumphant. A nude despair rises out of the triumph, like the head of a condor. But the moment has been merely symbolic. Confession is moral theater. Not all the lights in the world could check even the darkness in this pathetic enemy of his people.

Duras felt herself to be a nothing of the darkness, but sexually she was drawn to those who embody the virility of the darkness, who come out of it as intact as stallions. She does not condemn Ter of the Militia for his criminal acts against Jews and collaboration with the Germans, because her passive despair finds relief in the presence of so spectacular an embodiment of the unthinking force of the world. But she is sexually cruel to the informer, manipulating the old man into a painful “ejaculation” and then lighting a cigarette. There is too much of her own weakness in him to make him bearable. In the mirror he holds up to her, she’s old, fat, impotent; she’s as good as dead.

Writing is her only strength. Duras is famous for her attention to desire, but desire is for her an accomplice in the world’s darkness. Desire would relieve the I of its memory, its anguish. You destroy me, you are good for me, says the heroine to her Japanese lover in *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*. But desire is just what the world wants of one; it is the world in the I, a going from oneself into the world. The dark world. The world whose edge is violence. Hiroshima looms in the background of the lovers like a gothic shadow-play of desire’s inevitable participation in destruction.

So writing is the only strength. Unhappiness sucks the substance out of things, but writing disciplines despair, turning it into a discovery of the truth. Writing also disciplines desire. It’s a project, as Bataille says, that annuls desire, if only to rekindle it in harmony, in measure. Duras is classical, a writer of measure, even severely so. Julia Kristeva’s description of her as following “ill-being step by step, almost in clinical fashion, without ever

getting the better of it,” may underestimate the sheer element of creativity that lies in giving measure to the scream. “All I know how to do,” Duras said, “is create.” For her, to do justice to the power of the silent scream, thus turning aside “the ordinariness of life,” which she called “the greatest injustice of all,” was an attainment, and not a clinical result of melancholy.

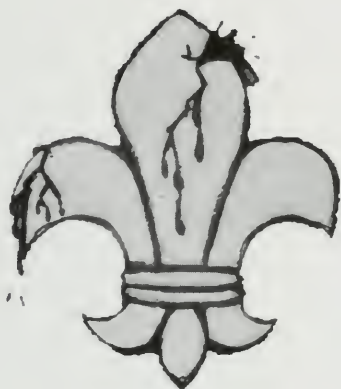
Writing is an avoidance of violence. Take a writer from her work, Duras said, and she becomes “as vicious as the dogs used by [the] police.” Enter Thérèse. Writing listens for the howls of night, of animals, of you and me, the echoes of Marguerite’s own mother’s “opera of shrieks” in the desert of her life, the echoes of the birth-scream. But writing is, at the same time, a non-violent field of accomplishment, if also wild, a return, in her words, to “a savage state from before life itself,” and therefore dangerous, “the price one pays for having dared go out and scream.” “I am in contact with myself in a freedom which coincides with myself,” Duras wrote in *No More*, as she lay dying further into the dark. But that statement needs to be balanced by another: “An open book is also night”—words, she said, that make her cry.

Calvin Bedient, UCLA.



Murder, Massacre, Mayhem:

The Poetics of Violence in French Literature and Society



Paroles Gelées

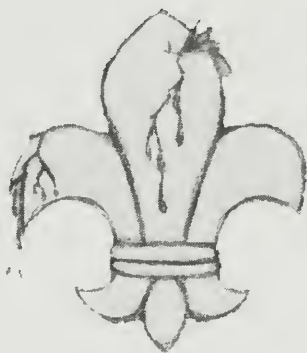
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*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais,
Le Quart Livre

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