

**Rehearsals in Bas Relief: *Le Marin de Gibraltar*
of Marguerite Duras**

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**And is that Woman all her crew?
Is that a Death? and are there two?
Is Death that woman's mate?**

**Samuel Taylor Coleridge,
"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"**

When *Le Marin de Gibraltar* first appeared in 1952, a reviewer for *La Revue des Deux Mondes* called it a novel which "if it did not bear the name of the writer, we could believe to be an excellent French translation of an original Hemingway narrative" (Gérard d'Houville, "Lectures romanesques," 15 December 1952). Fifteen years later, when the work had come out in English, an anonymous critic for *Time* wrote (7 July 1967): "Since the publication of *The Sailor from Gibraltar*, author Duras has succeeded Simone de Beauvoir as Paris' first lady of letters." Somewhere between these two extremes stands Alfred Cismaru's introduction of Marguerite Duras to the larger American public via the Twayne World Authors Series in 1971. Though he recognizes in *Le Marin* ripples of the French "New Wave," Cismaru still places it among Duras' "American-type novels," as "the most American of the group," of which he says:

The postwar reputation of the American novel prompted many a writer, including Marguerite Duras, to attempt a type of fiction that betrays, like that of other American novelists, the influence of Hemingway: *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950) and *Le Marin de Gibraltar* (1952) are notable examples. They are, on balance, passable combinations of adventure, brutality, drunkenness, sexual aggressiveness hiding deep frustrations, and artificial gaiety obscuring poorly the most desolate sadness, loneliness, and boredom. (17-18)

Duras' early texts have never recovered, among readers and critics, from this initial summary dismissal. Though some, like Germaine Brée,

perceive in *Le Marin* a first turning-point in Duras' literary production, and a recent article takes seriously *Les Petits Chevaux de Tarquinia* (which followed directly upon *Le Marin*),¹ most readers consider *Moderato cantabile* Duras' first major work, paying little attention to the texts prior to 1958, which they would label, after Cismaru, narratives in a derivative "American"—and, more specifically, Hemingwayan—mode.²

To be sure, *Le Marin de Gibraltar* is, on the surface, a linear narrative inscribed in the tradition of Balzac, Flaubert, and the American tale of adventure.³ The whole first part of the novel establishes the seemingly solid traditional framework of a well-known topos: the work-a-day (French) bureaucrat bored with his bourgeois domesticity sets out on a holiday (with his—unmarried—companion of two years, Jacqueline) in—where else—Italy, which at least from Stendhal to Butor, Goethe to Thomas Mann, and from the English Romantics to Henry James and Ezra Pound has signaled the sensuous and sensual liberation that Hemingway and others of his generation sought in Paris.

The novel's second part, which ends on a transposition to Africa (complete with kudu hunting), may recall Hemingway's *Snows of Kilimanjaro* or the *Green Hills of Africa*. In fact, near the end of *Le Marin de Gibraltar*, Anna herself, concluding the story of her search for the mysterious sailor, suggests we read it within the framework of a traditional travel narrative.⁴

- Oh, I would really like people to take this for a travelogue.
 - They will, since we're traveling.
 - All of them?
 - Perhaps not all. Ten or so perhaps not.
 - And those, what will they think?
 - Whatever they like, anything they like. Really, anything they like.
- (413)

This reader would be one of the ten or so taking *Le Marin de Gibraltar* to be more than the story of sea voyages or African safaris, arguing that the author mimics the "traditional" novel only to subvert it, as it were, from within. Her rich array of intertextual references to works well established on western literary soil is linguistically uprooted if we read Marguerite Duras as she herself asked to be read, i.e., on the level of the word, and, more specifically, the spoken word, which in its phonic ambiguities breaks through the linear constructs and constrictions of grammatological and logical narrative conventions.⁵ Reversing the Lacanian dictum, "There is no spoken word [*parole*] but language [*langage*]" (412), Duras writes, to borrow a Kristevan term, a "pho-

netic" tale (*Desire in Language* 53) in which "there is no language but the spoken word," a *parole* which—while parading as the novel's predominantly chatty dialogues (reminiscent of Hemingway)—screens the unspeakable that must be comprehended in its semantic and phonic uncertainties: its shifting genders and etymologies, sounds, rhythms, echoes, puns and displacements that signal the ironic and parodistic nature of the text, as well as its ultimate (non-)place in nineteenth-century tradition. The resulting fragmentations and ambiguities of time, place, and event, of plot, character, and "message" further situate *Le Marin* in that postmodern "borderland" of the Kristevan "abject" (*Powers of Horror*) where images replace words and meaning collapses.

And yet, by the very fact that, in a novel, they are written, words chart a territory. However circular and circuitous its route, Duras' ship does come to a stop. And that stop, signaled in her title, does have a name: Gibraltar. A place which for the viewer (and the reader of Hemingway) marks the established border between two seas and civilizations, but also signals, to the listener, the holy rock, or altar, around which her text clears the Heideggerian *Lichtung* in which the "sacred indeterminateness" of her *récit* may come to light (*Le Marin* 35, emphasis added), as the boat, at last, stands still, i.e., silent in the contemplation of a journey—and a telling—forever deferred.

In *Le Marin de Gibraltar*, the absence of the sailor—its pre-text—clears the space for the presence of the text which, having tested itself against the shipwreck of other narrative vessels, and her own, arrests the polyphonic circling of Anna's sailors to engage the reader/listener at last in that dialogic confrontation with an (w)hol(l)y other which, while nameless and thus unspeakable, nevertheless presents itself as the "rien" 'rem', thing or no-thing for which the (unnamed) narrator—and all the ship's host—have killed the thing they love. "It's a bit as if I had killed her, for nothing," (127), says the protagonist as he leaves Jacqueline and the first part of his narration. It is this no-thing which *Le Marin*, in the end, lays bare and signifies without naming.

A dream sequence, and the "apparition" of an Angel signal, already in the first part of the *récit*, the impossibility of reading *Le Marin* as a traditional adventure tale. Having escaped from his bourgeois Paris life to a holiday in Italy, the narrator no longer dreams of long Saturday afternoons spent violating his co-worker, Jacqueline, in the office, but of fishing with the Italian chauffeur and stone mason in the Magra, an icy river of a dark and green phosphorescence. This repeated vision, and a visit, on his third day in Florence, to San Marco ("haunted by a thousand plans/projects of a sacred indeterminateness") will change his life. The Magra, he thinks, must run under the garden of this museum, a house

turned away from the sea, and giving onto "nothing but itself" (50). Here Fra Angelico's Angel of the Annunciation is situated in the self-contained space of the cloister, and the narrator's own past. For it reminds him of a holiday spent with his father in Brittany, where a reproduction of that angel had hung over the bed of the twelve-year-old. "Him, I had known him so young that I could no longer know whether I liked him or not," he says of the angel. But of Mary (whom the boy did not recognize and called, simply, "la femme"): "As for her, I knew I'd always disliked her a little. Is he telling her that they will assassinate him?" It remains unclear whether it is the twelve-year-old child who makes the connection between the Angel of the Annunciation and the Angel of Death (if he did not know Mary's identity, how could he know of her son's assassination?), or the adult narrator who has spent his life copying and forging birth and death certificates (and has come here to celebrate his birthday at the age of Christ's death). Is it the projected assassination of Mary's son that attracts him to the angel, or the memory it screens of holidays with a father whom, in his "most delicious" adolescent dream (42), the narrator had dreamt of killing? Is it an omen of birth or death that makes this angel—like Rilke's—"schrecklich"?

The narrator would like to tell Jacqueline that he has known "this bastard, this angel" since early boyhood, adding somewhat defensively that this is a thing he could have told "to anyone, which would have taught her nothing about myself and which wouldn't have committed me to anything with respect to her" (52).⁶ His lips, however, betray him, not by contradictions spoken, but by words withheld: "I couldn't tell her. It was not so much I that couldn't, as my lips. They opened; then, curiously, stiffened and closed like a valve. Nothing came out of them. I'm not well, I thought, a little uneasy" (52).

Speech becomes a physical impossibility resulting from his knowledge of having entered into the angel's ambiguity ("I'd had him," "I'd known him"): an ambiguity of gender ("One couldn't have said if it was a man or a woman," 54) inscribed in the grammatically masculine (*un ange*) but grafted onto a female body whose lips close and stiffen like a valve, lips deprived of both *langue* and *parole*.⁷ Bathed in the same green light as the dreams of fishing with the Italian chauffeur, the Annunciation is both a distant and an immediate memory, bearing an undeciphered message: "I could no longer know whether I liked him or not."

"I was a man who had arranged his life in such a way that not only he didn't have anyone to say such a thing to, but for whom saying such a thing was of an insurmountable difficulty" (52). In an interior monologue, the narrator rehearses various ways of calling up the childhood memory. And yet, it was easy to say: when I was small.

. . . Or else: It's as if I'd found a buddy again because for two months, it was in Brittany, I had him above my bed. That should have posed a problem for a dog or a fish, but I was a man. This wasn't natural" (52). Does the unnaturalness refer to the boy's sleeping with the angel, or to the man's inability to tell of it to a woman? Since the secret could no longer be contained, it has been revealed to us, the reader: "This thing had to be said. Its formulation trembled within me with the indecency of happiness. I was very astonished" (53).

He feels the need to urinate ("I pissed away my imbecility down to the last drop," 53) and decides that his adolescence has now come to an end.⁸ But has it? Or has his fear of the couple represented by the liaison with Jacqueline simply been transferred to an-Other, i.e., the angel? "Once an adult I began again to see the angel. In profile. He was still only a painting. . . . I even thought at a certain point that he was winking at me" (54). He cannot address or touch that angel, seen only in profile, like the stone mason: "What good had it done me to look at the other, in profile also, who was driving his van in such a reckless way, all the while advising me to be happy? The one I used to dream about every night and who was now as glued to his masonry in Pisa as this one here to his painting?" (55). The dual interdiction of artifact and art, the distance in space and time that keep the onlooker from embracing the ambiguity he cannot name, bring about that emptying (of fluid and of sense) first expressed in urination, and now in tears of rage, the struggle with the Angel that shatters the illusion of oneness: "He's the angel, I said to myself, this chauffeur, this traitor. . . . I could neither carry him off, nor burn him, nor embrace him, nor gouge out his eyes, nor kiss him, nor spit in his face, nor speak to him" (55).

Neither Judas nor Christ, traitor or savior, angel or chauffeur—or all of these at once—the ambiguous Fra Angelico bars the narrator from the presumed recognition of an-Other by which his own being would be defined. Thus deprived of identity and of speech, all he can do, for the first time in his life, is cry. Through these tears—through the acknowledged killing of the father and the wink of the angel—will come, he hopes, knowledge of the authentic being he has so long denied: "You have never been honest, you must start right away to be honest, you understand?" he says to himself (56). The dissolution now complete, "la pièce s'emplit d'un gémissement sourd, celui du veau qui veut rentrer à l'étable, qui en a assez de la pâture et qui voudrait bien voir sa vache de mère." "The room was filled with a muffled moan of the calf that wants to go back to the stable, that's fed up with the pasture and would very much like to see its cow of a mother" (56).⁹

The “pâture” ‘food, fodder’ he rejects is, no doubt, the stale pasture of his simulated marriage to Jacqueline and the bourgeois novels dedicated to its telling, but also, perhaps, the *pater* whom the boy of fifteen had dreamt dead, and would now deny.¹⁰ “I had no memory of such childishness” (42), he remarks, having just recalled it for us! The calf that would return to the stable to see “sa vache de mère” is the grown man looking to re-enter the ambiguous space of the womb, the “*mère/mer*” ‘mother/sea’ of a mythical time, prior to the splitting of gender and word (masculine/feminine, signifier/signified); a time and space before birth and death where mother and child exchanged, in the pre-symbolic speech of affect, articulations that were equations, not equivalents. A time before the imposition of the father’s name and the establishment of a symbolic world order. A time of the “muffled moans” of an unnamed narrator caught between pleasure and pain. The night he decides on his separation from Jacqueline, a storm comes up: three hours of thunder and lightning followed by torrential rains. The domestic drama is completed, i.e., both fulfilled and ended. The double time of abjection named by Kristeva—set between oblivion and thunder on the one hand “and the moment where revelation bursts forth” (Powers 9) on the other—has been ushered in.

The displacement of the frame begun in the novel’s first part (where the narrator and Jacqueline were set into an Italian hotel room, not into their French apartment) extends here to a space without frame: “Un bateau, c’est un endroit sans papiers, sans registres” ‘A boat is a place without papers, without registers’ (122). And yet, this *bateau* rhymes with the earlier *veau* not only phonically, but structurally. The animal that wanted to see “sa vache de mère” (56) but feared the presence of woman is taken out to *sea* where, no longer bound up in parish rolls or civil registers; he is free to enter into the “indecency of happiness” signaled by the Angel of the Annunciation. Birth and death certificates no longer define relationships and gender. “Carcass drunk with water” (Rimbaud, “Bateau ivre”), the narrator leaves the green van for the boat with green gangways (93) that ploughs “like a blade in a ripe fruit” (178) the calm, warm, maternal sea (that has replaced the earlier virgin river, “free of all trace of woman”).

Those who would now conclude that the narrator has left Jacqueline only to become the lover of Anna, mistress of the yacht that circles the globe in search of the sailor from Gibraltar, have, to risk a bad pun, missed the boat, or been duped by the book’s deceptive back cover inscription, which reads, in part:¹¹

Love is born between the man who wants to change his life and the woman who is looking for the sailor from Gibraltar. Together, they are going to search scrupulously for this missing sailor. If they find him, that will be the end of their love. Strange contradiction.

When Jean Pierrot calls *Le Marin*, Part II, "this passage from realism and the ordinary to the most disorderly and improbable romanesque, from the serious to the grotesque and to parody" (63), he has put his finger on an essential practice (if not the meaning) of the novel, which borrows traditional forms only to subvert them. The first person protagonist of the novel's first part is displaced, in Part II, by multiple narrators without authority attempting an analeptic construct doomed to fail. Duras' narration becomes an equivocation between quoted and reported speech in a carnivalesque narrative (reminiscent of Kundera's *Joke*) that borrows epic, lyric, dramatic, and picaresque voices set in counterpoint, *récit* within *récit*, like a giant fugue.

"Everything happens a little as if the author took up and exaggerated on purpose, in order to contest them better, the conventions of the traditional romanesque," (64) comments Pierrot. "The book also contains . . . a certain number of winks addressed to the reader across literary references," he adds, without naming the latter or linking Duras' *clins d'oeil* to that of the Angel who, for Pierrot, symbolizes only "this purely passive waiting for an external *salut*" (65). Why would such a *salut* (both "greeting" and "salvation") make the narrator say, or write: "The Annunciation threatened my reason"? (56). Seeing in *Le Marin* a moral message (akin to Gide's *disponibilité*, which he doesn't mention), Pierrot re-situates the novel, almost despite himself, in the traditional framework of nineteenth century philosophy and fiction, an easy transumption into which the author herself would overtly tease her reader.¹²

While the sailors aboard Anna's yacht read the complete works of Balzac, and Hegel, Duras writes of the difficult socio-economic situation of the Italian worker; there is chatter about the price of grapes (110-11) and worry about the narrator's reduced pension upon early retirement, all of which has little to do with the plot. In the opening of *Le Marin*, city streets in the summer heat close in like a Proustian sea: "The street closed in on me. The little café suddenly appeared to me, like an ocean" (39), and tourists are described as "endowed with special fibers, which could have recalled, if you like, those of cacti" (36). The sailor bears an uncanny resemblance to Camus' *Stranger* when Anna says of the murder he committed: "At twenty, one does that without any precise reason; he had done it, almost without wanting to. And when one is an assassin, one no longer is anything but that" (167).¹³ The age of the fictitious *Sau-*

murians, discussed in the novel's "African" conclusion, may likewise call to mind, by a phonic inversion, Camus' *Meur-sault*. There may be a swipe at Stendhal (whom Duras admires) in the narrator's totally incongruous remark: "Every time my lips touched his, I swooned away with happiness" (152), which borrows the romanesque language of love called into question by Anna herself when she says, "What was this funny language all about?" (250).

Or is it *Candide* s/he has in mind here? Part I of *Le Marin* opens, we remember, with a scene at an Italian inn where the protagonist meets a girl named *Candida*, which is not a common Italian name and may serve here to hint at the yacht's blinding whiteness, while also sending an ironic cue suggesting *Candide*, the tale of a rather different series of adventures. Near the end of the novel, the kudos eaten and offered up in Anna's honor of course recall the monkeys of Gibraltar, but also the women chased by men that turn into monkeys, and monkeys that chomp away at vital parts of the anatomy of women. It should be noted that throughout *Le Marin*, the narrator's words spoken about Anna and those spoken to her are set in ironic, almost Voltairean, counterpoint. While praising to us her mystery and beauty (which comes down to the whiteness of her yacht and the fabled tradition of mythical ships), he addresses her as "a beautiful whore" (209) who, like the lost sailor, would sleep anywhere, with anyone.¹⁴

Finally, both *le marin* and the narrator live out, in different ways, Sartre's and Roquentin's dilemma of having to choose between "living and telling" (*La Nausée*). The narrator (speaking as himself or Anna) is an empty vessel deprived of life; the sailor, the novel's silent and invisible protagonist deprived of self-presentation: "His silence was extraordinary, a thing I shall never be able to describe . . ." (167, 168). Silent, sleeping, and pushed into the background, he reminds us of the younger of the two brothers the narrator meets near Sète, the child in a stroller pushed aside for the telling of the encounter with the older brother.

Not only the fairy tale, the traditional novel, and the romantic tales of Hollywood,¹⁵ but poetry, history and myth as well are offered up by *Le Marin*, as we move from the tales of chivalry to the trivialized Percevalian quest (not an innocent knight, but a woman described as a prostitute goes in search not of the grail, but of a romantic rebel turned petty thief and pimp); from Tristan and Isolde's love potion to good American whiskey; from Valéry's "Cimetière marin" to Anna's ship anchoring at Sète where Valéry places his cemetery, and where Duras has her would-be sailor pump gas; from the Fisher King to the Italian chauffeur fishing in the Magra; from the apples of paradise to those left to rot so that Adam might discover calvados (96); from the valiant

exploits of Epaminondas the Greek general to the false reports of Epaminondas the idle sailor; from Lord Nelson the British admiral of Trafalgar to Nelson Nelson, "the king of assholes" (253).

There are reminiscences (without acknowledgment) of Rimbaud's "Bateau ivre" in eery, phosphorescent waters, and the persistent killings of the poetic corpus in the flattest of prose. "All dawns are heartbreaking," for example, becomes, in *Le Marin*, "One is always sad when one wakes up" (157). The children to whom, in "Bateau ivre," Rimbaud would show singing fish and flowering spume are turned into two boys playing in a squalid neighborhood on the outskirts of the city (near the garbage dump full of scrap metal) where the narrator waits for Anna (gone to the gas station in hopes of meeting the lost sailor). As the older boy watches, the narrator picks a flowering nettle, pricks himself, and is mocked by the child dressed in a girl's blouse. "You didn't know that they prick?" asks the child. "I had forgotten," answers the narrator (294). As he leaves, his last glimpse is of the boy trying to fly: "He had completely forgotten me. He turned, making wide circles, his arms stretched out in front of him like wings, he was playing at being an airplane."¹⁶ "Ils étaient les choses les plus oubliées du monde qui se pouvaient penser," he says of the children "They were the things most forgotten by/in the world one could imagine" (291-92), hinting by the collapse of the masculine *ils* into the feminine *choses* at that ambiguity—and interdiction—always associated in Duras with children and, in particular, young boys. An ambiguity relegated to the things most forgotten by thought,¹⁷ but remembered by those whose reason has been threatened by an Angel.¹⁸

One of the most obvious of Duras' poetic borrowings and subversions comes from Lamartine's "Lac," signaled in Part I of *Le Marin* by the parodistic hymn to the Italian waiter: "Un seul être me convenait, c'était le garçon du café où j'allais" "The only person I could bear was the waiter of the café where I kept going" (36) and cited textually, in Part II, without quotation marks, when Anna says: "On dit: un seul être vous manque et tout est dépeuplé, mais ce n'est pas vrai" "They say a single being is absent and all is empty, but that's not true" (167). These are the intertexts that add to the ambiguity of a language *se*—like much of Duras—between poetry and prose, high seriousness and parody, in that borderland where "pure signifiers" abolish meaning. As the narrator copies and recopies certificates of birth and death, Duras copies and recopies old texts, those of her literary fathers, and her own.

For when all the sacred cows have been offered up and the calf has returned to its mother, she too, will be sacrificed. The writer-scriptor-narrator will accomplish the act of autophagy, i.e., eat up his/her own text

in the elaborate African monkey chase that parallels and parodies the quest for the sailor, and in the burning of the white yacht that ends a tale without conclusion. Like the African earth of *Le Marin*, Duras' tale "has been eating itself in a perpetual starting over, since the beginning of the world . . ." (406), scratching away at her story (and the opacity of absence) as the sharks in Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea* tear at Santiago's catch until nothing but the carcass, the bare skeleton, is left.¹⁹ "Absolute hydra, drunk with your blue flesh / Who bite again your shining tail / In a tumult resembling silence" ("Le cimetière marin"). Anna, having devoured her tale, and drunk all the waters from the European Mediterranean to the African Atlantic, will set sail in a new, smaller boat for the Caribbean (and Hemingway's Cuba and Columbus' America) without hope of arriving anywhere or speaking anything but the tumult of silence, the apocalypse rooted on the fragile borders where identities do not exist, or only barely so, as Valéry's "future fumée" or D.H. Lawrence's "tremulations on the ether."

"This thing had to be said. Its formulation trembled within me with the indecency of happiness. I was very astonished" (53). Who is *Le Marin de Gibraltar*? Known to us only through various jumbled, contradictory accounts by third parties and never speaking on his own behalf, the *marin*'s is a borderline discourse of the type Kristeva ascribes to an effect of abjection, "an absence . . . of the boundaries that structure the subject" (Powers 295). As difficult to name as Plato's love (and told in that same mixture of irony and approximation, commentary and citation illustrated in the "basso relievo" rehearsals of the *Symposium*), Duras' sailor is the absence displaced by the presence of the text. Like the narrator (and Anna, and her yacht, "which possessed the calm and the arrogance of a solitary rock" 81), he is the transcription of a place onto the page, the discourse upon a word: *Gibraltar* "aux anciens remparts" (Queneau) that stands in metonymically for "l'Europe aux anciens parapets" (Rimbaud), and, symbolically, for the place of abjection, a place both ancient and doubly foreign—by its Arabic name and British dominion, set onto Spanish soil—and foreign to the narrator/scriptor born in the colonies. Gibraltar: a symbol that disturbs the unity of time and place, questioning identity, system, order, by not respecting "borders, positions, rules" (Powers 4).²⁰

Any attempt at reconstructing the sequential story of *Le Marin*, Part II, from the scattered contradictory fragments provided by disparate narrators and false reports will come up against the discursive chaos that lies beneath the over-arching metaphor of that rock against which all things are thrown and shattered. "False stories? —No, if you wish, endless stories. On again" (322). *Le Marin*'s is a narrative that certifies

without authenticating. The Name of the Father (keystone, according to Lacan, to all sign, meaning and discourse) is abandoned in favor of the ambiguity of place: Gibraltar, around which all things circle; Gibraltar, the rock that separates (Europe from Africa, the Mediterranean from the Atlantic) and thereby divides political and linguistic systems and ideologies, the “straits” through which all things must pass, like the ships on the sea. Where a common linguistic denominator is missing, words become images, collected like the snapshots of the sea prepared by one of Anna’s sailors. Snapshots or, rather, their negatives, for Anna travels according to “the atlas of an upside down universe, a negative of the earth” which she knows “by heart” (201). Visual hallucinations replace the unnamed and speechless invisible object/subject designated only by appellations which are interchangeable and therefore meaningless, like the successive names of Anna’s yacht, and of the sailor variously called Pierrot (from the word *pierre*, the stone or rock of Gibraltar), Gégé (an instance of infantile echolalia, like Nelson Nelson?), or simply nameless.²¹

Whose is the sailor’s story? Extra- and intra-diagetic narrators are engaged in painting deliberately false sketches which no one wants to hear and which never correspond to any extra-textual reality, because “in the eyes of men, all kudas are the same” (308). The *récit* moves between “testimony and citation, between the voice and the book” (*Desire* 47). No one takes responsibility; no one acts; all are acted upon by the narration of others. Even the criminal act in which *Le Marin* (the novel and the character) takes its origin, is witnessed not as action by the sailor who commits it, but as polyphonic narration. It is Anna who informs the narrator that she told the *marin* whom he killed. The story of Nelson Nelson’s strangling is revealed near the middle of the novel by a friend of Anna’s husband who got it from someone else. It is related by Anna to the narrator who tells it to us, lost like the sailor at sea in what David Lodge has called a “Chinese box” structure (148) constantly closing in (from the hotel room to the truck to the cabin of a ship). Each character and each scene swallows up another, an image used by Duras herself, when Anna says of her sailor (after the death of her husband): “Then we looked at each other close up, and we understood that there was no cruelty in this. That even of this dead man that was now between us we would make nothing but a mouth, that things were still the same, that we would swallow him up easily into our story/history” (250-51). And this swallowing up of differences into sameness leads to an endless metaphor without matter, engulfed in the mother-spring of autarkic love in which “there is no other but nothingness” (*Tales of Love* 113), the blank sheet

(and the yacht) upon which we write and ride. "Actually, I like your being this way, a wall" (314), says Anna to her silent "wedding guest."²²

A host of narrators, all entangled in first, second, and third person narration, would tell of the sailor variously imagined as Pierrot the gas station attendant in Sète, as the dairyman in Dijon, the hairdresser in Port Said, the pimp in Constantinople, as Gégé, who, like Rimbaud before him, may be engaging in slave trade, or, like Hemingway, hunting kudus in Africa, no longer just a biological specimen, but one phonically concretized into the *coup doux* (soft blow) of lovemaking, an intentional pun signaled by the comment, "ce coup-ci, c'est bon" (309) 'a kudu made man (and woman).' When the search for the mythical love of a sailor yields no results, the *coups doux* of ordinary lovemaking—like the prick of the nettle in the absence of the mystical rose—will help to kill time and thereby save it.

But the trysts that critics construct for Anna and her male companions are almost always silent encounters during which the man watches the woman sleep. Any contact between the two results in pain, as Anna reveals in her first reported words to the sailor: "He took my hand and he hurt me. I told him so: You're hurting me. [*Tu me fais mal.*] Those were the first words I said to him I think they could not have been more appropriate" (250). This conversation is rehearsed first in indirect, then in direct discourse, and reported to us by a presumed male listener. What, then, does she mean by, "*Tu me fais mal,*" which might echo the *mâle* of the narrator? The paucity of punctuation in *Le Marin* further underscores the ambiguity: "I said to him I think. . . ." Has Anna (who earlier expressed her preference for the Italian innkeeper's daughter and near the end of the novel enters into a special relationship with an African woman) known, like the narrator, the ambiguity of the angel and his/her lack of identity? Her very name, a perfect palindrome, circles forever back onto itself (like Nelson Nelson's and Gégé's) and phonically suggests to the Western ear the Greek alpha privative (more immediately than its Hebrew etymology of "graciousness"): a *pré-nom* before the constitution of the name.²³

Nothing, in the story, is what it seems. The sailor is no sailor and not from Gibraltar; Anna is no American. Nelson, son of Nelson, manufactures ball bearings (instead of fighting battles at Trafalgar, in geographic proximity to the sailor's Gibraltar). Epaminondas, no longer the Greek general, sports a tattoo beginning with the letter "A" which teases the reader into taking him for one of Anna's lovers, until s/he discovers, some 50 pages later, that it spells the name of "Athena" (the goddess who healed Dionysus, seduced by Hera by means of a mirror). It is by this process of infinite regression and referral that all names, and all tales, are

destroyed in Duras' narrative. "What's more relative than names, proper or otherwise?" (276) asks Epaminondas, who in three years has made two false reports of the sailor's whereabouts and identity.²⁴

All of the major characters in the novel are collapsed into one that is neither "subject nor object, neither inside nor outside, neither here nor there" (*Powers* 8), straying in search of an identity conceived not as essential: being, but accidental: place. The place of the "in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." The place of "the traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience" (*Powers* 4), the sailor from Gibraltar, the angel in profile, and the chauffeur. Everyone is everyone else and no one. Anna, Epaminondas, the narrator, all resemble the sailor who, described only as blue-eyed, dark-haired and *maigre* (skinny, 221), in turn recalls the river *Magra* of the narrator's early dreams. Is he, then, that ambiguous river running under the sea that no search can recover? The birth-canal of Anna's—and the narrator's—story, or its Acheron?

Everyone in *Le Marin*, man or woman, kills not only the thing s/he loves, but anything which would give a stable and recognizable identity to each. All are, in a sense, fugitives. Having no permanent home, they live in hotel rooms, trucks, trains, and ships. All are dispossessed. All are strangers to themselves and others. All are held prisoner by a scopic erotization, the visual absorption that substitutes for love. As the sailor kills Nelson Nelson, Anna, symbolically, kills her (unnamed) American husband (a narrative doubling of the dead man, he committed suicide after she left him) as she would, finally, kill the lost sailor she pretends to seek: "Very quickly, I wished that he'd die. . . . One morning he said to me that he was going to Marseille. . . . He asked me to accompany him. I refused. I no longer wanted to have anything to do with him, I wanted him to die. To be left in peace" (248). Her search for *le marin de Gibraltar* is an elaborate fiction built on a falsehood. It is not he who left her, but she who refused to follow.

As the angel of Fra Angelico announces not only the birth, but also the death of Christ, the narrator, at fifteen, dreams the death of his father, and symbolically kills Jacqueline who has been the controlling influence in his life and the only named partner in the couple. He has also killed her, of course, by getting rid of the character at the end of Part I, as Duras, for all practical purposes, kills him when the narration of Part II is largely given over to Anna and her crew of unreliable reporters. How ironic, then, his remark, "I had not died for love of the woman/wife of the sailor from Gibraltar" (326). Although, unlike Jacqueline, Anna is not removed from the scene, the narrator at least hypothesizes her murder when he says: "Her hair was held back by a green scarf, between this scarf and her black pull-over one would have had space enough to kill her" (285),

a phantasized murder that points to the actual death by strangulation of Nelson Nelson. He kills her also by a (momentary) forgetting (262), and by his association of the "sleeping beauty" with all the whores of his past (328), a fact she knows and accepts in her remark, "I would have preferred you to go to the brothel" (331). In the end, he sacrifices Anna in the burning of the yacht that bore her name.

Always an exile, Duras' *je spéculaire* never accomplishes the reflection into a *je social* (Lacan 93), but moves in the circular space of being seen in a refraction of mirrors. All of *Le Marin*'s cohorts are sleepwalkers and watchers, and all sleep alone. In a network of intertextuality without text, the speakers engage in an apocalyptic discourse "rooted . . . on the fragile border . . . where identities . . . do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject" (Powers 206).

The women of *Le Marin* reduplicate each other. During the five weeks she spent with her sailor in Paris, Anna replayed the role of Jacqueline, i.e., "cooked and cleaned and shopped" (247), while he went off to the bars. "She's a *femme romanesque*," says the narrator (213); the archetypal woman of *le roman*, the traditional romantic heroine, Emma Bovary, an empty vessel that would fill herself with the worn-out fragments of a romantic quest transported here to the open seas: "That useless one, that idle woman, that chatterbox" (246), in search of an assassin.²⁵

The novel's men are, likewise, interchangeable, mere objects ("their work consists of scrupulously looking for that *object*, the sailor from Gibraltar" 6) collected for the amusement of women: jettisoned objects, thrown overboard when no longer needed by Anna or her story, and destined to draw us, the reader, "toward the place where meaning collapses" (Powers 2). Abandoned, yet, like the ancient mariner, forever condemned to tell their story. The *marin* peddles a "saloperie" that recalls the narrator's characterization of the truck driver and the angel as "ce salaud," a term Jacqueline in turn applies to the narrator. His fascination with the angel's glance and Anna's "blinking . . . eyelids" (405) is mirrored in her preoccupation with the *regard* of the sailor, a common criminal, who twice comes up against an unknown American who offers him money: Nelson Nelson, the king of ball bearings, and Anna's husband, the iron magnate, who may be nothing more than Nelson's double. Like the sailor, the narrator, too, is nearly run over by a car in the novel's second part (341-42), as is Anna; the separate identity of *le marin* and the persons (male or female) narrating his disappearance becomes ever more suspect. None of the characters has a patronymic (which the name Nelson Nelson mocks). The major male figures lack

even the *pré-nom*, and all may be suspected of being foreign, including the narrator born in the colonies who, already having destroyed it through mimicry and mockery, promises to rewrite Anna's story à la Hemingway.

- One day, I said, I shall write an American novel about you.
- Why American?
- Because of the whiskeys. Whiskey is an American drink. (204)
- In your American novel, she said, . . . you must say that we ate this kudu.
- That one or another, I said. What a frightful existence ours would have been if. . . (428)

And the whole story ends like the aposiopesis of that exclamation. "You don't want to hunt the kudu as in the books of Hemingway?" asks the narrator (307), having just performed his own monkey chase of the Hemingwayan tale. The novel kills its ancestor by posing as its potential progenitor. "During our absence, in effect, the yacht burnt" (428) says the narrator. "That will lighten up your American novel," replies the listener. Ours will be an American novel, says the narrator/scriptor, because we drink whiskey, and whiskey is an American drink.²⁶ But, says Anna, written as an American novel, our story will be incomprehensible. And so it has been, for those who have read *Le Marin* as a French translation of Hemingway, a "passable combination of adventure, brutality, drunkenness, sexual aggressiveness hiding deep frustrations, and artificial gaiety obscuring the most desolate sadness, loneliness, and boredom" (Cismaru 17-18).

"As idle as a painted ship / Upon a painted ocean" ("The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"), indifferently reading *Hegel* or fishing for *herring*, the sailors on Anna's yacht—and all the book's crew—seem, indeed, captives of boredom and oblivion. Nelson Nelson dies, finally, not from being strangled by *le marin*, but "for lack of imagination." Death by lack of imagination on whose part? His own, the narrator's, the author's, or the reader's? Of Anna, whom his gaze held captive in her cabin, the narrator said: "She was sleeping in her cabin and I could not imagine anything but her sleep. The cities which paraded by us had no other meaning than that of the things in front of which her sleep was stretched out" (270). From Rocca to Sète to Tangier, to Abidjan and Léopoldville, he has thus sailed on a white yacht, a canvas against which the observer—narrator, scriptor, reader—has projected nothing but the sleep of a negation, the anaphora of nothing signaled in the very beginning of his tale when he said of Jacqueline: "I had killed her, for nothing." He repeats the scene on Anna's yacht:

- What's happening to us? she asked very softly.
- Nothing.
- But there is.
- Nothing, I said. I slept too much. (262)

Beyond the Pillars of Hercules, there are for *Le Marin de Gibraltar*, no golden apples of the Hesperides snatched by Heracles, the conqueror of death, from the dragon-guarded tree at the end of the world. He will not dwell in the fields of the blessed.

And yet, the sailor's *Gibraltar* is also a hieroglyph that marks a clearing, a space and time for the homely and the hieratic, an *altar* for "the unnamable otherness—the solid rock of jouissance and writing as well" (Powers 59). Duras can burn the yacht, but not the book, nor the Angel of the Annunciation: "I could neither carry him off, nor burn him, . . . nor speak to him," said the narrator(55), yet both he and the angel have spoken to us, the listeners.

Like the singer of the *Song of Solomon*, Duras' narrators are in love with an-other's absence, but create through song a double presence: their own, and that of the beloved. In trace, and gesture, and voice they break the spell of the mirror, create time and space without falling beyond—into "The Nightmare Life-in-Death" of the ancient mariner. From the poisoned air of an overheated landscape they move into the "air . . . so pure it cried out like a crystal" (419). The moan and the cry, the laughter and the tears of their story are embedded in the genotext, in the maternal language which, haunted by a sacred uncertainty, impelled the narrator and Anna to "try once more to have, whether with him [the sailor], or without him, what people call an existence" (257). Like the wink of the angel, their cry gestures toward meaning, a meaning unnamable and deferred in the "unfathomable mysteries of human identity" (301), as is the sublime beneath the sublimated: the gap marked by the straits of Gibraltar, the gash cut into the body (and the text), *le fer* and *le faire* driven into the head of the sailor by the auto-mobile (the cutting of the umbilical cord that forced him to move on, into being), the scar and the letter that divides trains and trucks from ships and yachts, the land from the sea. "If you take a map . . . and if you see this rock at the entrance to the Mediterranean, then you believe in the devil . . . or in God, depending on your mood" (279), concludes one of Anna's sailors.

"To be or not to be," however incongruously placed by Louis, Duras' last narrator, into the heart of Africa, is the final literary borrowing and the ultimate question of *Le Marin*, whom we have come to identify as a *superman* (Desire 124-47). "I was pregnant to the teeth with

all the words of love and couldn't deliver a single one," says Anna (171). Duras' *Marin* both effects and witnesses her delivery, so that the narrator and the reader, having acquired both history and *histoires*, may yet celebrate—rather than merely copy and certify—life and death, the narrator's birthday, and the completion of Anna's tale.

"The mature writer will find in a *process* of eternal return, and not in the *object* that it names or produces, the hollowing out of anguish in the face of nothing," wrote Kristeva (*Powers* 43). A no-thing carved by the young Duras, already certain of her non-belonging, against the rock of Gibraltar; a leaf (if not yet a flower) sprung from the death of Narcissus and the quagmire of nettles; wings grown from the arms of a child; *récits* written upon the blank page of a white yacht; rehearsals in bas relief of a text asking to be *saved* for a future telling which, like the wink of the Angel, beckons and calls: "The sea was very beautiful towards the Caribbean. But of that I cannot speak as yet" (430).

Notes

1. Mechthild Cranston, "*Les Petits chevaux de Tarquinia*. Marguerite Duras: *Infans*."
2. In a recent call for papers for a special MLA session on Marguerite Duras, only one of 27 proposals received dealt with a work prior to *Le Square*, 1955.
3. And is interpreted as such by even the most recent critics. See Sharon Willis: "*Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950). . . , *Le Marin de Gibraltar* (1952), and *Moderato cantabile* (1958), all present a linear narrative development, even though they bear the traces of the later textual obsession with memory and desire" (3).
4. All translations from the French are my own. Page references are to the French edition indicated among the works cited. The original French will be given only as word or sound analysis requires.
5. Speaking of her novel *Détruire dit-elle*, Duras will say: "I don't think that *Détruire* . . . is a novel at all. . . . It is a poem in words. The word playing all roles" (Quoted by Pierrot 276).
6. And in the conditional perfect mode characteristic of Duras.
7. Suggesting, in Freudian terms, the mother's genitals, and perhaps a stillborn child.

8. An act that Cismaru interprets as a "dubiously obscene and retaliatory response" (49), but which, given what follows, may more readily evoke the frequent oneiric screening of semen by urine and the mythical birth of Orion from the urine of the gods. In addition, *pissais* in French may recall *Pise*, the city—and the lifestyle—the narrator would forever forget in Florence, and Rocca, and on the open seas. "Je pissais" may likewise remind us of Jacqueline's words, "passe-moi le sel s'il te plaît," words whose "dizzying meaning" had dazzled him like the appearance of the angel. Salt preserves that which he would see perish, retains the water he would expel, obstructs the catharsis he would effect, negates the separation (outside/inside) he would affirm. "Such wastes drop," writes Kristeva, "so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit" (*Powers* 3). This first purification—later repeated by fire—also signifies, perhaps, a first transgression of the boundaries of the clean and proper.

9. Or "its bitch of a mother," an interesting pun.

10. And perhaps Valéry, the literary father, as well, who joined *pâtre* and *ange* in "Le cimetière marin": "Chienne splendide, écarte l'idolâtre! / Quand solitaire au sourire de pâtre, / Je pais longtemps . . . / Eloignes-en . . . / Les anges curieux! . . . / La vie est vaste, étant ivre d'absence . . ."

11. See, for example, Yvonne Guers-Villate, *Continuité discontinuité de l'oeuvre durassienne*: "But the dénouement of *Marin* will be the opposite of that of *Moderato*; Anne Desbaresdes and Chauvin, in managing to coincide by their imagination with the tragic lovers of the café, are reduced thereby to a phantom couple, while, in *Marin*, the love of the narrator and of Anna has finally acquired citizenship" (29). Jean Pierrot placed the novel in his chapter on "Les Problèmes du couple." Trista Selous disposes of *Le Marin* as a narrative "in the first person by a man who becomes the lover of Anna" (161) and sees the latter as one of "the central woman figures who express quite clearly their sexual desire for a man or men" (203). An assertion contradicted by Anna herself when she says, "It's curious . . . I never ask myself the question of kowing what I would do if I found him again" (259). It is made quite clear in the novel that it is the quest, not the sailor, that matters.

12. The Italian chauffeur and stone mason could well be Gide's Ménalque.

13. The resemblance to Meursault may be shared by the narrator in his lethargy and indifference to life, as noted by Carole Murphy: "Reminiscent of Meursault, he spends lazy afternoons in a café trying to forget his worries and enduring the unbearable heat of the *canicule*" (41).

14. Carla and Candida may also be narrative doublings of Anna who, like them, worked as a barmaid at 19, and whose father also ran a café.

15. In this marvelously funny portrait of Jacqueline: "She entered without knocking . . . and, bent in two—like those women in the movies who, with a bullet in their bellies and a secret in their hearts take their last steps towards the police station, to clear their conscience there—she reached the fireplace and leaned against it" (116).

16. The only other mention of flowers in *Le Marin* relates to the sailor's peddling of postcards and obscene photographs in Marseille, where Anna and her husband, coming out of a cabaret, happen upon him: "It's only flowers one gives that way, together, and in bouquets," she says (230). It is a curious coincidence that the sailor hands her ten envelopes with ten photos each, and that the older of the two boys met by the narrator as Anna waits to meet her purported sailor is about ten years old. A holy number, and perhaps appropriate to these mysterious and unexpected encounters which may represent that Rimboldian epiphany (though placed among garbage dumps and nettles) where "ineffable winds have sometimes given me wings" ("Bateau ivre").

17. In Part I of *Le Marin* the narrator/scriptor had indeed not remembered, or had repressed them, when s/he wrote: "And not one child could have been conceived during these days. And not one line could have been written" (32).

18. There is one other reference to children in *Le Marin*. When the sailor leaves Anna, having lived with him for five weeks, she goes back to a town near her native village, on the Spanish border, where she suddenly remembers her younger brothers. Both appearances of the children are directly linked to the loss or expected return of *le marin*, who is often likened to a child in the innocence of his *regard* and the peacefulness of his sleep. The cross references to flowers and children may hint at something of his identity that cannot be overtly expressed. It is particularly interesting, in this regard, that the male narrator dresses the older of the two boys in a girl's blouse, as if to make the inferred transgression (via the prick of the nettle) more acceptable. The scene ends with the child's desire for an airplane, the mechanical transcription of Rimbaud's boat, "frail as a butterfly in May" ("Bateau ivre"). We note in passing that *Le Marin* is dedicated to Dionys Mascolo, father of Duras' son.

19. An exact contemporary of *Le Marin*.

20. On the notion of borderline discourse, see Barzilai, "Borders of Language. . . ."

21. In his native village, Epaminondas is known as Herakles, a name which links him to Gibraltar by the Pillars of Hercules. The imaginary town where the narrator is introduced to Anna is called *Rocca*, the Italian word for rock: a new Gibraltar for a nameless sailor newly embarked on the vessel that possesses "the calm and the arrogance of a solitary rock" sailing or standing still in the place of "abjection" where "no current flows . . . a pure

and simple splitting, an abyss without any possible means of conveyance between its two edges. No subject, no object: petrification on one side, falsehood on the other" (Powers 47).

22. The most curious example of slippage between voices occurs when Anna, telling the narrator of a meeting with her sailor in Paris (during which she tries to explain her marriage to him), speaks of herself in both the first and the third person: "I said: And yet, I don't see what else I could have done besides marrying him. But he continued to speak to *her* of other things when I came back the Cypris had left half an hour ago. What with the war, since Marseille, he must have thought of me just the same. You had lost everything? He said: I was winning . . ." (251-2). Who is talking to/about whom? Are these voices with separate identities? What accounts for the *vous/tu* shifts in other dialogues between Anna and the sailor who are rarely shown to get beyond a scopic erotization?

23. Like Jacqueline, she has no "family name," yet everyone addresses her in the familiar "tu." As Duras' readers know, Anna, or Anne, will become the author's favorite feminine *pré-nom*, from Anne Desbaresdes to Anne-Marie Stretter. It is interesting to remember in this connection that "Anne," in medieval and Renaissance times, was also a masculine *pré-nom*.

24. After the completion of this essay, an article in *French Review* (December 1991) dealing with *Le Marin* incorrectly identified Fra Angelico's angel as *le tableau de Giotto*, but also made some interesting observations regarding the mythic aspects of Duras' work.

25. A younger sister of both Jacqueline and Anna would be Duras' recent *Pute de la Côte Normande*, 1986.

26. It is astonishing that so few critics have picked up on Duras' humor, one of her many screens for the "unspeakable."

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