

Reading the Borders in Marguerite Duras's *The Lover*

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ABSTRACT

Taking Marguerite Duras's descriptions of "places" in *The Lover* as models of "place," I will inquire into the entanglement between the essential simplicity of image of place in Duras's writing and the special narrative mode that creates these images. I shall examine how Duras's mode of narration and the images floating between attachment (inside) and detachment (outside) of positions constantly reshape the narrator's problematic "identity" throughout her experience of "places."

This study intends to incorporate semiotic models of place into phenomenological-hermeneutic research. Place, here, is considered not as the architectural "space-object" defined only by its visual properties, but as "cognitive space," which consists in investing with spatial properties (cf. "seeing," "hearing," "saying," "touching," etc.) the cognitive relations between subjects, as between subjects and objects. While examining the idea that semiotic models of places are products of cultural, political or economic "experiences," I shall argue that the range of place extending beyond its role as strict container or simple locator is more than site-specific. As the site of resistance, or of difference, the lived body constantly generates organic heterotopic places.

KEY WORDS

Marguerite Duras

Body/place

identity

semiotic model

Julia Kristeva

alterity

transgression

experience of the limit



That order, that glance, that voice, that gesture, which enact the law for my frightened body, constitute and bring about an effect and not yet a sign, I speak to it in vain in order to exclude it from what will no longer be, for myself, a world that can be assimilated.

—Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*

In *The Lover*, Duras's descriptions of places often translate a choice, a position, a perceptual profile that embodies not only the perceiver's cultural interests (sometimes those of the 15-year-old French girl, sometimes those of the narrating "I"), but also her affective and social status. But these images of place, or the configurations of the perceiver's "choice," "position," or "perceptual profile" are often fuzzy, incoherent, sometimes even chaotic. Duras's mode of narration and the images floating between attachment (inside) and detachment (outside) of positions constantly reshape the narrator's problematic "identity" throughout her bodily experience of "places."

What comes into play is the narrator's postulation of the Chinese lover and the place where he lives (room, city, Asia) as "alterity." The alterity is the horrible object to be negated in order to assure the coherent identity of the perceiver; it marks thus the border between the known and the unknown, the self and the other. To what extent do the interactions (within the sphere of cultural and social interests) between subjects, and between subjects and objects affect our construction of place just as they do our "identity"? I would argue that images of place translate not only the positions of cultural or social interests,

but often the gray area or the borders between the so-called “positions.” That is, if we take into account the lived dimension of bodily experience in the formation of identity, we would inevitably come to question the integrity of the social, cultural models-Ideals. This is the moment when we have to confront the abjected side of our lived experiences—the site of indeterminacy, of the horror of the absolute Alterity that resists the symbolic formulation.

I. From Outside to Inside— The Negation of Alterity in the Name of “Identity”

After her first sexual experience with a Chinese man, the 15-year-old French girl, lying in bed, observes the room. Duras writes in (*L'Amant*) *The Lover*:

The noise of the city is very loud, in recollection it is like the sound track of a film turned up too high, deafening. I remember clearly, the room is dark, we don't speak, it is surrounded by the continuous din of the city, caught up in the city swept along with it. There are no panes in the window, just shutters and blinds. On the blinds you can see the shadows of people going by in the sunlight on the side walks. (40)

This description concentrating mainly on the sound (the deafening noise of the city, the sound track of a film, the continuous din of the city) and light (dark, shadows, the sunlight) in the room seems to convey a natural and direct impression of this place, but this natural and direct impression actually reflects the cultural and social interests of the perceiver—a white European girl in colonized Asia:

Great crowds of them always. The shadows are divided into strips by the slats of the shutters. The clatter of wooden clogs is earsplitting, the voices strident, Chinese is a language that is shouted the way I always imagine desert

languages are, it is a language that is incredibly foreign.
(40)

“Earsplitting,” “the voices strident,” “shouted,” “incredibly foreign,” the ear of the European girl “naturally” differentiates the East and the West and schematizes her impression wherever she goes:

We go to one of those Chinese restaurants on several floors, they occupy whole buildings, they are as big as department stores, or barracks, they look out over the city from balconies and terraces. The noise that comes from these buildings is inconceivable in Europe, the noise of orders yelled out by the waiters, then taken up and yelled out by the kitchens. No one ever merely speaks. On the terraces there are Chinese orchestras. We go up to the quietest floor, the Europeans' floor, the menus are the same but there is less yelling. There are fans, and heavy draperies to deaden the noise. (47)

Again, the “noise is inconceivable in Europe,” writes Duras. From a European point of view, the noise here obviously implies the inferiority of Chinese culture. The noise splits the Chinese and the European into two hierarchical categories in the same restaurant, and we see that the rich Chinese man educated in Paris takes the poor European girl “up” to the quietest floor, the European's floor where there is less yelling.

What interests me here is that “the menus are the same” in spite of all the differences in hearing. I believe that Duras deliberately amplifies the “noise” so that a greater silence can be invoked. When the “noise” is schematized as a “sign” of the Chinese culture, something as silent as a shared menu becomes really intriguing.

The fact that “I” and the Chinese man are lying in the same bed reveals perhaps their cultural and social interests (the girl is white, and the man is rich), but the sharing of the same space can also be seen as a metaphor: the crossing of the border between the outside

and the inside, the self and the other. A shared menu or bed could be that “other” space where a fresh pleasure can be revealed. Duras describes the pleasure of the girl’s love-making with the Chinese man:

Suddenly I have a pain. Very slight, almost imperceptible. It is my heartbeat, shifted into the fresh, keen wound he made in me, he, the one who was talking to me, the one who also made the afternoon’s pleasure. I don’t hear what he is saying, I’ve stopped listening. He sees, stops. I tell him to go on. He does. (48-9)

Hearing is still the main source of perception in the above description. Pleasure comes only when “I am not listening,” when “I” am not listening in the same way I used to listen. The unknown pleasure brings the pain, and the pain in pleasure evokes the silence, another mode of communication that finds no place in language, beyond any meaning. It is the vanishing point of the girl’s identity as a “poor French girl” as well as the man’s identity as a “rich Asian man.” It is a point of absence, a point of “la petite mort,” a total forgetfulness of the negation of alterity. The pain in pleasure is almost “imperceptible,” it is “as futile as heartbeat, shifted in the fresh, keen wound he made in me”

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“Pain,” “wound,” the unknown pleasure can be seen as a metaphor of the experience of the limit. It is an “experience” of the “unknown” that challenges the girl’s self-identity. “Pain,” “wound,” paradoxically associated with “formless pleasure” reveals the strong sensation at its extreme point, an ecstasy beyond any possibility of naming. It is a moment where the subjective power is rendered futile and the language paralyzed—a moment of disaster, “place of distress, shipwrecked.” To save herself from the edge of the unknown and the uncertainty of her identity, the girl unconsciously rejects the encoding of the pleasure moment into the realm of significance. In the name of identity, bodily pleasure with the Chinese Lover are abjected from the norm—“the primers of my cultures” and the room where the love

affair took place are rejected together with the girl's self image. Nevertheless, this dark room denied of sunlight by social convention opens another way of seeing: to see what one is forbidden to see, the abjected body of herself that is excluded from her identity in the white society. The room of the horrible pleasure turns out to be the place to know the unknown, "I know this room is what I was expecting" (45).

When "I" hear, think, or see within the realm of "identity," the gaze of the white girl has always been adopting the white male's perspective, not only on colonized Asia, but also on the Chinese lover. The lover, along with Asia, is feminized under the girl's speculation (1):

The skin is sumptuously soft. The body. The body is thin, lacking in strength, in muscle, he may have been ill, may be convalescent, he is weak, probably a helpless prey to insult, vulnerable. She doesn't look him in the face. Doesn't look at him at all. She touches him. Touches the softness of his sex, his skin, caresses his goldenness, the strange novelty. He moans, weeps. In dreadful love. (38)

"She doesn't look him in the face. Doesn't look at him at all. She touches him." Here the "look" implies a certain position, be it ideological or social-economical. The "look" conveys an attitude which presumes a "meaning" (even an "insignificant" one) of the gazed upon object. (*The Lover* is dedicated to Bruno Nuytten, yet the lover in the story never has a name.) We can also say that the "look" implies a power of interpretation, determining the "place" of the gazed object. She does not look the lover in the face, just as the way her brothers look at the Chinese: "my brothers never will say a word to him, it is as if he were invisible to them, as if for them he weren't solid enough to be perceived, seen or heard" (51).

The girl seems to assure her own identity through the negating gaze of her elder brother who "does not look her in the face," and in the name of "identity," she assimilates her brother's way of looking to

assure her “place” in the family as well as in European society:

In my elder brother's presence he ceases to be my lover. He doesn't cease to exist, but he is no longer anything to me. He becomes a burned-out shell. My desire obeys my elder brother, rejects my lover. Every time I see them together I think I can never bear the sight again. My lover is denied in just that weak body, just that weakness which transports me with pleasure. In my brother's presence he becomes an unmentionable outrage, a cause of shame who ought to be kept out of sight. (52)

In the passage quoted above, let us underline this phrase: “my lover is denied in just that weak body, just that weakness which transports me with pleasure.” The body pleasure transgresses the prohibition and opens a new horizon of perception. Under the gaze of her brother, the girl's sense of “place” in the family finds another expression in the lover's weak body. By looking the way her elder brother looks at the lover, the girl sees her own image in the reflection of the lover's eyes. She herself is also the one who does not have a “name” at home, as she says “I believe it was only her eldest that my mother called my child. She sometimes called him that. The other two she called the younger ones” (60). As a matter of fact, by denying the place of the Chinese lover as her lover, she actually identifies herself with the lover in the image of weakness under the gaze of the “authority” and can only express [their] feelings through parody (49). The denied lover assures, on one side the girl's place in the family, and provides, on the other side, a “room” for her to break free, a possibility to subvert the established image of herself. As a pleasure abjected by the norm, “The Lover” as an alterity in the social, cultural context becomes further the configuration of the “absolute Alterity.”

When the unknown is considered as something or someone “not solid enough to be perceived, seen or heard,” this object of alterity is not posited as an “absolute Alterity” but radically negated as the “already known” (be it not worthy of knowing, entirely assimilated or

simply exotic). By “absolute Alterity,” we are thinking the unthinkable or “impossible” in Blanchot’s terms. The unknown as unthinkable, or “impossible” stands for the limit of the subject’s understanding, the “Alterity” that always escapes the subject power of determination, (the negation) and thus intrigues the subject’s endless desire to know (2).

Judith Butler points out in *The Psychic Life of Power* that the formation of subject depends on a reflective self-relation; that is, by virtue of its own formation, the subject is vulnerable to the subjugation of law, and as a consequence of conscience, self-knowing follows from self-punishment. Following Butler’s line, self-punishment reinstates the prohibition while the desire exceeds the norm. We can say that perhaps the attachment to the law preconditions the construction of a coherent image of the self. Nevertheless, what needs to be clarified is that the so-called “coherent” image does not depend only on the efficiency of prohibitions, but also on the failure of conscience to negate the absolute Alterity. The “void” that the girl has experienced in her love-making with the Chinese man is that radical Alterity that resists her self-knowing and self-punishment. It is “another order of prohibition”; “one falls outside the circuit of self-reflection” (Butler 60), that can only be named as “imperceptible” and “formless.”

II. From Inside to Outside— The Impossible Negation of the Absolute Alterity

The perception of sound and light configures the white girl’s cultural profile and postulates the “outside” as “alterity”—unknown and uncomfortable, because different from “me,” from what “I” identifies as “my European culture.” The perception of the alterity in this context remains in the closure of identity, the alterity is thus considered as an “outside” opposed to the “inside” of the subject. Nevertheless, in Duras’s various descriptions of the same place (the Chinese man’s room), not only the “outside” is strange and enigmatic, the “inside” is no less perplexing.

The room perceived as an intimate space for the lovers is the site

where the narrating “I” confronts her own desire as well as her identity. The “lover” is a stranger, a Chinese, one from the “outside,” but by sharing the pleasure in the same bed, the lover becomes the “other” not in terms of an object that is inconceivable, but as another subject whose “presence” unveils the invisible side of “my” gaze, or even the impossibility of invisibility—the impossibility of not looking, of negating. The lovers come to recognize the “otherness” within themselves via the other’s body. The Chinese man becomes the image of the girl’s alienated self, and the place—the Chinese man’s room is thus altered and transformed into a vast space where “identity” does not hold any solid position:

The sound of the city is so near, so close, you can hear it brushing against the wood of the shutters. It sounds as if they are all going through the room. I caress his body amid the sound, the passers-by. The sea, the immensity, gathering, receding, returning. (43)

Now the noise of the outside is not earsplitting anymore, it sounds “as if they are all going through the room,” the noise becomes even a part of the girl’s corporeal sensation, “I caress his body amid the sound, the passers-by.” Amid the sound emerges the sea, the immensity, the metaphor of pleasure, of “non-place” where the outside converges with the inside.

III. Between the Borders of the Assimilated and the Abjected

Many studies have shown that Duras constantly shifts the narrative point of view from the first person “I” to the third person “the girl.” “The shift between first and third person in *The Lover* doesn’t necessarily take place between paragraphs, it can happen from one sentence to another” (Brooks 268). I suggest that we take the narration itself as the constructing process of the very altered subject “I” who posits herself (the girl) as an alterity. In this process, the “object” of desire is

that always already “altered” part of the self, the “alterity” in me that pushes me to re-cognize myself as the “same” that is never exactly the same.

In *Body Work*, Peter Brooks makes a very important comment on the transgression of the body in *The Lover*. In light of Bataille's notion of transgression, Brooks writes:

The act of erotic transgression is a moment of heightened consciousness beyond the normal limits and conventions. The transgression of writing—another form of communication—is fundamentally similar: it assumes the impossible, as place and as state of being, a condition akin to mortal sin where pleasure derived from the knowledge of mal, of one's wrongdoing, and knowledge itself is that pleasure. (Brooks 278)

Via the perception of the body, the girl confronts the otherness of her self. The Asian man as object of alterity intrigues the alterity within the self of the girl, and this alterity within the Same is the very source of desire. What Brooks suggests in his book is that the epistemological urge corresponds exactly to the sexual desire: the girl's erotic transgression translates her desire to control the unknown, and the pleasure in the sexual transgression as well as in writing derives precisely from the knowledge of her “wrongdoing.”

According to Peter Brooks, if the alterity can be controlled in form of knowledge, if the moment of transgression is the moment of “heightened consciousness beyond the normal limits and conventions,” the pleasure derived from this power of consciousness must be the pleasure of knowledge; that is, the pleasure of the known, of self-control. This is how the painful prohibition becomes the very site of satisfaction and pleasure. As Judith Butler explains, the return to the norm/power of the subject, the return to the knowledge of one's “wrongdoing” derives from the fundamental fear of “void,” of “death,” of “losing control.” The submission actually guarantees the existence of the subject (Butler 7), we are subject to the law, since we

are afraid of “falling outside of the circuit of consciousness,” of “falling outside to the void.”

What needs to be carefully examined is that Peter Brooks associates the sexual desire for love with the desire for knowledge, and that in the context of representation, writing becomes a conscious power operation that gains an active position by eliminating alterity. The desire to negate the object of alterity is the desire to take control of the unknown, to assure the position as a master of oneself.

The pleasure of reading Duras’s writing for me does not reside in the representation of the known, but in experiencing the failure of the representation. After all, we may have learned about the story of the Chinese Lover, but the body pleasure that altered significantly the girl’s image of herself remains as enigmatic as the “formless sea”. When the ferry takes the girl back to her fatherland, thus back to the symbolic realm, it appears as though the girl finally returns to the norm, by denying the abject side of her corporeal love, by leaving behind the Chinese man’s room, “a place of distress, shipwrecked” (44) as well as that image of the fifteen-and-half-year old girl, wearing a man’s hat, “this hat that all by itself makes me whore” (13). Nevertheless, what is really left behind is the experience of “void,” of pleasure that resists her self-control, as Duras writes, “suddenly she wasn’t sure she hadn’t loved him with a love she hadn’t seen because it had lost itself in the affair like water in sand and she rediscovered it only now, through this moment of music flung across the sea” (114).

In this essay, the Chinese lover provides a necessary self-division and self-estrangement image for the girl’s self specular identity, but in this image-constructing process what is left out is precisely the pleasure of the body which arouses the desire of alterity, the body that refuses to be symbolized in a totally coherent image. Body marks the borders between the symbolic meaning and the absolute Alterity, between the assimilated and the abjected. Reading the borders would question any reinforced side of “meaning,” and this is why I would like to propose a slight revision of a passage quoted from Peter Brooks before concluding this essay. While acknowledging the otherness of the body, Peter Brooks ends up with the subjugation of this

otherness under the construction of meaning:

The body appears alien to the very constructs derived from it. However much it may belong to the process of socialization, and preside at the birth of intellectual curiosity, it nonetheless often appears to be on the far side of the divide between nature and culture, where culture ultimately has no control. It is perhaps most of all this sense of the body's otherness that leads to the endeavor to bring the body into language, to represent it, so that it becomes part of the human semiotic and semantic project, a body endowed with meaning. (Brooks 8)

It is true that the body is endowed with meaning, but it cannot be ignored that the body is never fully endowed with "meaning"—the body is endowed with meaning while always pointing to its reality beyond semiotics.

I often feel that shifting points of view in Duras's writing perform a similar movement of body pleasure ("the sea, the immensity, gathering, receding, returning"), and that the narrative itself is comparable to that photograph never taken of the girl on the ferry. The narrative as well as the photograph are only a "parody," a fictive imitation that never comes close to the Real that Duras was searching for, knowing perfectly that the Real is impossible to find. Searching for the impossible is what renders noble and charming the task of writing. As for the room, it is not only a space which links the Imaginary and the Symbolic by separating the two, it is where the light is weak and the eyes can only see shadows on the blinds. What is a room? What is the room that the girl entered? A definition of the word "chambre" in French may perhaps serve as a conclusion for my essay:

Chambre: (fin XI; latin. Camera <voûte>; gr. Kamara) Pièce D'habitation

(1414 armement) Cavité, vide.

Chambre noire: enceinte fermée où une petite ouverture (avec ou sans lentille) fait pénétrer les rayons lumineux et où l'image des objets extérieurs se forme sur un écran.

The body is the room and the room is the body. As an object in the world, the body/room not only stands for a “place of habitation”—a closure that secures the coherent identity/image of the Self, but also for a “void, dark cavity” which recalls, may we say, the mother’s uterus (enceinte fermée). This forgotten emptiness is always left out in favor of the “penetrating lights,” so that the originally indifferent M/other and “I” can start splitting/establishing their relationship by images. The body is subject to “identity,” and thus actively involved in the negation/objection (becoming object) of its perceptions/senses/corporeality. Nevertheless, the body always escapes its own mapping/representation, bearing within it the memory of a lost plenitude of emptiness.

If it is the fear of the “dark, void cavity” that pushes the girl to leave her mother’s house, we can say that it is this very “dark, void cavity” that she finally returns to after her long pursuit of a “place of habitation” in the father’s society. While trying to negate the Chinese man/his room/his body as alterity, the girl comes to confront the transgression of the bodily pleasure that strangely evokes the absolute Alterity—the memory of a lost “emptiness,” an emptiness that originally fulfilled

Finally, the body/room is, at the same time, “home,” “destination,” and “road” in the pursuit of subjectivity. We actually travel in this “room” that lives in us—the corporeal “room” that we are subject to negate/forget in favor of a more “spiritual” life. We can also say that, just like a camera, the body is that materiality which supports the exclusion of objects, so that the image of the objects from the outside can emerge on an empty screen inside. The body is the “void” which

sustains its own negation, and thus, can never be negated. In the process of self-negation, in the transformation of desire to knowledge, the confrontation of the eternal fear of "absence," the limit of the subject's negating power marks the border of the subject's possible freedom: To forget the forgetfulness of the body.

As the site of resistance, or of difference, the lived body constantly generates organic heterotopic places. As a conglomerate of arenas of resistance, the lived body, while confronting the border, the limit of differences, recognizes itself as never either completely inside or completely outside. "The menus are the same" for the European girl as well as for the Chinese man; the construction of subjectivity is a journey between a "place of habitation" and a "void, dark cavity." "I" is always in-between, out of place. The gap between the outside and the inside actually opens up a passage, and the transgressive body is the very gap and the passage, where an "always already" identity is "always yet to come."

NOTES

¹ "In *The Lover*, Duras establishes a female subjectivity through the appropriation of the masculine position of the observer, through the construction of an active relationship to desire, and by recourse to a variety of Orientalist topoi—the eroticization of the exotic, the feminization of the Asian lover, and the representation of an unchanging Oriental essence." Suzanne Chester, "Writing the Subject: Exoticism/Eroticism in Marguerite Duras's *The Lover* and *The Sea Wall*" *De/colonizing the Subject*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, P, 1992) 436.

² Blanchot shared the same idea with Bataille, affirming that we can only maintain the relationship with the unknown in fiction; however, if this is true, it is not because that the unknown (such as Death, God, or Truth) can be "represented" in the fiction, but that its "absence" can only "appear" in form of fiction. The artistic or literary representation "give us the very invisibility" of what is invisible. It is not about "*montrer*," showing the unknown or the forbidden by the

movement of transgression as Bataille had suggested, the “truth” resides in the fact of never being able to transgress the limit of unknown (in form of fiction), since it is radically out of our control.

³ Gail Weiss has pointed out in her book *Body Images* that while Lacan devotes much attention to the (alienation) identity that arises out of the child’s identification with her/his specular image, both Butler and Kristeva concentrate on what fails to be subsumed within that identity, on what is left out of the totalizing process that transforms momentary and diverse bodily sensations into a unified body image. For Kristeva, that which is “lost” or which resists incorporation into the body image is also precisely what makes the coherent body image possible because it marks the boundary between the body image and what it is not (89).

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