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The Person Who Tortures Is Me: Violence and the Sacred in the Work of Margurite Duras

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By the time Marguerite Duras died in Paris in 1996 at age 82, she was what the French call a “sacred monster,” a literary monument unto herself with some forty-odd novels, fifteen films and as many plays to her credit. Although she had first been known in the late 60s both in France and in America as a practitioner of the *Nouveau Roman* (New Novel) together with Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute, she didn’t exactly belong there, or anywhere for that matter. Her novels were far more atmospheric and romantic than experimental. Some people in France went as far as denying that she was a writer, outraged by what they considered her cheap lyricism, self-indulgence and unabashed narcissism. Others loved her precisely for that.

All her life, Marguerite Duras was a controversial figure, eliciting strong reactions of adulation and exasperation in her audience. She especially enraged French literati after one of her later novels, probably the most mannered, *The Lover*, published in 1984, became an international bestseller and earned her the prestigious Prix Goncourt. For Duras, it was sweet revenge thirty-five years after she had been turned down by the Goncourt for her first masterpiece, *Sea Wall* (*Barrage contre le Pacifique*), actually a much better novel and truer to the saga of her prewar adolescence among poor Indochinese peasants. That same year, in 1950, she was excluded from the French Communist Party, which she had joined early on during the German occupation, when being a communist in France still meant something. She became militantly anti-Stalinist after that, but still passionately believed in a “communism of the mind,” like her boyfriend, Dionys Mascolo, and her husband, Robert Antelme.

During the war years the three of them, Marguerite, Dionys, and Robert, got involved in a resistance group created by François Mitterrand in 1943. Arrested by the Gestapo and sent

to a German camp, Robert Antelme was eventually recognized by Mitterand in Dachau as he lay dying among piles of corpses. It was Robert's close friend Dionys, Duras's lover, who managed to retrieve him from the quarantined camp and bring him back to Paris where Duras nursed him back to life. Then Duras left her husband to live with her lover. These are some of the episodes Duras chronicled in *The War*: the desperate wait for her husband's return, the attempt to extract some information about him from the Gestapo man who arrested him, her anger and rage at the French collaborators rounded up by their group at the Liberation. These stories also reveal Duras's deep ambiguity and attraction towards those she was supposed to spy on or chastise, her eagerness to play with fire and transgression. Antelme's own account of his harrowing experience in Germany, *The Human Species*, in some ways overlapping hers, was published in 1947 and eventually became a classic of the death camps on a par with Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*. Duras's *The War* was published much later, in 1985, in the wake of *The Lover*.

The War confirmed Duras's reputation as a considerable writer and a powerful witness to the horrors of our time. As the French title, *La Douleur*, more aptly indicated—*douleur* means pain—it was centered on the severe breakdown she herself experienced at the Liberation waiting for Antelme's return from deportation. It was a candid account as well of the violent dissensions that existed among the French themselves at the time, a version widely at variance with the Gaullist myth of a French nation united against the invader and opposed to an illegal and aberrant pro-German Vichy regime. This myth only started crumbling down some thirty years after the war ended, but it was still pretty much accepted as truth when *The War* was published. In 1992, seven years later, President François Mitterand could still deny his own rather muddled past and imperturbably assert that "the French Nation was not involved in that, nor was the Republic." *The War* obviously touched a raw nerve, and not just in France. But what made it so unique in Duras's own work was the unsparing attitude she maintained in this book towards herself and her loaded material. For *Le Monde*'s influential

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columnist, Bertrand Poirot-Delpech, it had “the intolerable ring of truth.”

The material she dealt with was indeed intolerable, but the book’s relation to truth was more problematic. Marguerite Duras always had a problem with truth and often used it freely like a painter’s brush. Although she presented *La Douleur* as the exact transcription of a forgotten war diary, it turned out to have been heavily tampered with. This was even truer for the mythical version she gave of her own upbringing in Indochina during the waning days of the French colonial era, a material she reworked in book after book throughout her life, from her straightforward account in *Sea Wall* (1950) and *The North China Lover* (1991) to the more glamorized treatment she gave it in *The Lover* (1984). Actually, this story of her formative years among a ragged family of impoverished colonial settlers goes a long way to explain the ambiguous status Marguerite Duras, or M.D. as she is popularly known, has enjoyed in contemporary French culture. It may also account for her attitude throughout the events chronicled in *La Douleur*.

Although adopted early on as an exotic pet, Duras never quite belonged among the sophisticated Paris bourgeois intellectual milieu in which she ended up spending most of her life. In many people’s eyes, including her own, M.D. was another Edith Piaf—*La mome Piaf*, the famed singer who came out of the gutter with a voice so raw and ravaged, so radiant in its sadness that it blew everyone off their feet. Like her, Duras had a diminutive frame and hauntingly beautiful features that crumbled down dramatically very early on, an old gamine with a ravaged face and this monstrous clamor of the populace rushing through her as well, coming out of nowhere, tearing her diminutive body away.

Like Piaf, Duras was a natural. But comparisons, of course, only go so far. Duras never had a chance to absorb French popular culture by the root. At most, as a young girl she was fed a diet of trashy French popular romances whose sentimentality permeated her books and her own life. Unlike Piaf, Duras didn’t grow up in the streets, but around the muddy waters and green rice paddies of Indochina. She kept dreaming

about them, but they weren't quite her own either. She couldn't take anything for granted, even herself. In many ways her country was her family, a ragged outfit of impoverished colonial settlers whose shaky tribulations and dubious expedients provided her with both a window to the world and a screen on which to project her personal obsessions. And she remained just that, white trash transplanted from the French colonies, picking up whatever "culture" she could along the way, and then just going from there.

When she finally moved to Paris to finish her studies in 1933, a period of intense political strife with the rise of Hitler in Germany and the ominous threat of fascism in France, Duras wasn't especially interested in politics, not even aware, it seems, of the harsh repression of the indigenous population that had recently happened in the "beautiful colony" of Indochina. Over the years, though, she became increasingly militant about her political ideas, occupied the Odeon theater all by herself in May '68, or so it seems. She experienced the French students' uprising as the dawn of a new world, competing in ultra-leftism with Jean Genet and Michel Foucault, and this even after it had all petered out. She also became a staunch feminist early on, but in her own terms and for her own use. It is at this point that her cult took off, although at first she may have been one of the few to celebrate it. With her new fame she got increasingly idiosyncratic and unmanageable, a blatant egomaniac, a rabid radical, a bleeding-heart, a real embarrassment. She was also drinking too much, and eventually had to clean up big time in a clinic, an episode documented by her last companion, Yann Andrea, in a book called *M.D.* (Editions de Minuit, 1983).

In her newspaper articles and public statements Duras kept taking extreme political positions. She debunked the privileged, rhapsodized the Jews, defended Algerian workers and denounced Communists and trade-union bureaucrats, speaking up for prisoners, castigating the stupidity called justice. She also found innocence in crime, absolving all the ravages of passion. "I believe that we should kill (since one kills) the criminals from Choisy," she bluntly commented on a well-known crime of passion, "but that once and for all one we should renounce

interpreting the darkness they're coming from..." (*Outside* 144). She would make a fool of herself on every occasion, telling the "truth of darkness" as she saw it, regardless of any boundary or decency, excessive, imperious, and often intolerably right. For the wonder of it all is that she would often hit the mark, hanging on to her vision like a dog to a bone until she knocked down far more rational arguments. She would uncover a compelling truth buried in the mud, making the reader look at reality as if for the first time:

We thought we knew what a factory was. We didn't know anything. We think we know what a woman is, a child, being Black, a worker from Mali working at the Citroen factories. We don't know. We're so glued in, buried in such a rhetoric that by ourselves we don't know anything anymore...The international scene of human work, from now on, is that of an unending, hemorrhagic flow of a parallel workforce ready to put up with everything, a flow of hunger. Factory gates open, it rushes through; they close, it stops dead. In a continuous movement, national proletariats leave the factories and are replaced by this malleable, exploitable work force, which knows no other morality than scare, hunger....The factory brings out as well something like a new *malheur* of the working class. It reveals as well the atrocious noxiousness of man as well as his martyrdom....For the knowledge of horror also has something fresh about it. A kind of despair which is so fabulously concrete that it put off any theory. (*Outside* 226-8)

M.D. was always at her best as an anthropologist of *malheur*. Although fabled, and fabulous, her own fiction wasn't always concrete, or her knowledge of horror so fresh. She had the rare capacity, though, to throw herself in the middle of the

worst predicaments—the extermination of the Jews, Hiroshima, the immigrants' plight—and feed on their flesh like a vampire.

For years I couldn't walk in the Jewish district in Paris without crying. It was totally...sick. It was a serious condition, an abominable trauma I suffered from...The story of the Jews, it is my own story. Since I experienced it in this horror, I know it is my own history. Then I dared write about the Jews. (*Montreal* 73)

Not everyone liked the magic of her verb or her inflated persona. Like her work she could be unbearable, well over the top, but she would rarely leave people indifferent. It may not be so surprising either that all through her life she would keep marveling aloud at her own achievements as if they belonged to someone else, someone she got into the habit of calling herself: "La Duras." For all we know, talking about herself in the third person may have been an attempt at modesty. She never quite believed that she really was the one who deserved all the credit. "It's strange," she would confide, "how there is a *savoir-faire* which is in me, yet escapes me."

Surprisingly, the claim that she had transcribed *The War* from an old diary found in her country-house—a worn-out literary device—was true, although it wasn't entirely warranted, as I happened to verify on the manuscript entrusted to the IMEC, a writers' archive in Paris. A good deal of it was added "from memory" just before publication. It was more of a "memoir" then, as the American version published by the New Press in 1986 rightly called it. It is a fact that Duras's memory was often selective, and imaginative. A monumental biography written by historian Laure Adler and published two years after her death amply confirmed this. (*Marguerite Duras*. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1998)

Adler's biography raised serious questions about Duras's own war-time activities prior to the time when she joined the

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French resistance. In 1940 the young M.D., Donnadiou (her maiden name) was hired by the Publisher's Guild, a commission created to allocate paper to French publishers on behalf of the *Propaganda-Staffel*, the German agency which closely watched cultural activities in occupied France. Among other things, I discovered, it was this agency which covered the Paris walls and metro with huge anti-Semitic posters and financed the French Institute for the Study of Jewish Affairs, piloted by the Gestapo, which Céline and other notorious anti-Semites assiduously attended. It was the same Institute that organized the infamous exhibit on "The Jew and France" at the Berlitz palace in Paris in June 1941, with huge plaster casts of stereotyped heads meant to help the population identify the Jews. An intense campaign of advertisement in the newspapers, on the radio, and in the cinema paid by the *Propaganda-Staffel* managed to attract some 200,000 visitors. This makes Duras's subsequent claim that she was unaware of what was happening to the Jews at the time a little hard to believe.

Contrary to what she alleged later, her position at the Publisher's Guild wasn't such a minor one either. She was in charge of supervising a team of readers whose job was to select manuscripts for publication according to the occupants' criteria. It is in this capacity that, in the summer of 1942, while still married to Robert Antelme, she met the dashing Dionys Mascolo and fell madly in love with him. Dionys was a reader at Editions Gallimard, the major French publisher, then acrobatically poised on the edge of collaboration. It was Gallimard who published Duras's first co-publication, *The French Empire*, a book of pre-WWII government propaganda glorifying French colonial possessions as a bulwark against the German onslaught. Gallimard eventually brought out the first two novels she wrote, *The Impudents*, 1943 and *The Quiet Life*, 1944. In retrospect the war years had been, for the most part, a quiet time for her.

The biography also projected a rather crude light on a troubling episode evoked in a story of *The War*, "Monsieur X, Here Called Pierre Rabier" and already disclosed in another biography of Mitterrand's formative years (Pierre Pean, *Une Jeunesse française*. Paris: Fayard, 1994). Both accounts strongly

suggest that, playing with the limits, the young Duras ended up having an affair with Charles Delval, *alias* Rabier, the French Gestapist who had arrested her husband. This didn't prevent her later on from charging the same Delval in a French court and making sure, although his case wasn't entirely conclusive, that he was sent to the firing squad. What shocked the contemporary French audience further was the disclosure that her lover, Dionys Mascolo, did exactly the same thing, but in reverse, getting secretly involved with Delval's wife at the time of her husband's trial and fathering her a child barely six months after her husband's execution. Duras and Dionys: one playing Judith and Holofernes, the other seducing the widow over her husband's warm body, like Richard III.

This episode with Rabier, with its twisted flirtation and deep moral ambiguities, could have come straight out of a novel by Dostoievski, and maybe it did, crime and retribution hovering over them both in some kind of morbid embrace. M.D. always liked dancing on a tight-rope, pushing passions to the edge until they revealed their disturbing undersides. It isn't surprising that two other texts collected in *The War*, "Albert of the Capitals" and "Ter of the Militia" drew us even closer to this zone of darkness inhabited by violence, torture, and treason.

Duras once admitted to being a "domesticated wild animal" and there is no doubt that it was the wild animal in her that was attracted to the young Ter of the Militia. Ter was a fast liver, a man "with a body made for pleasure," but "without a thought in his head, only desires." At some level she must have felt very much like him. And yet there was another side to him, as to her, fascinating for its utter immorality. The young collaborator was a chauffeur with the infamous Bony-Lafont gang, a group of con men known during the Occupation for raiding Jewish quarters, ransacking businesses, extorting money and gold, stealing, cheating, blackmailing and even killing their victims in total impunity. The gang often shared its spoils with the German authorities and spied on their behalf. Yet Duras couldn't help feeling strongly drawn to Ter's child-like immorality. The young militiaman had no sense of guilt and even less of his own impending death. He was a real pagan, one

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of these blond beasts wryly celebrated by Nietzsche as the “noble race,” doing evil without any plan or afterthought, just because it felt good exercising one’s energy or experiencing pleasure in the moment. Only in her conclusion did Duras feel obliged to introduce some kind of disclaimer, asserting that like many of his kind Ter was ready to embrace “the mystique of the leader” which always serves as an excuse for any crime. Crime, in her book, didn’t need any excuse. It was even something she was apparently eager to claim for herself.

In her brief foreword to *The War*, M.D. brushed away the thin veil of fiction and bluntly acknowledged that the main character, Madame Thérèse, *c’est moi*: “Thérèse is me. The person who tortures the informer is me. So is also the one who feels like making love to Ter, the member of the Militia. Me. I give you the torturer along with the rest of the texts.” It was a brave gesture, of course, owning up publicly to her own dark deeds. Telling the entire truth. But can the truth of darkness ever be told in broad daylight? It may be that disclosing everything, or attempting to, makes it even more slippery, and this is what Duras expected from her disclosure. Isn’t it the nature of secrets—of secrets that can be told—to cast a long shadow, whatever their content? Georges Bataille was the first one to point this out, defending the Marquis de Sade against the accusation of sadism, that violence doesn’t speak—only victims talk. Ordinarily torturers remain silent. Was Duras really the person who tortured the informer? Or was there a deeper kind of silence covered by this blatant confession?

No doubt there was some kind of *hubris* involved in Duras’s scandalous admission—*I, Phaedra*, a truly tragic character pushed into incest and crime, braving fate under a jealous sky. Was this M.D. flaunting her guilt and courting the limelight? Dionys Mascolo estimated later, sheepishly deflating her loud claims, that what Duras called “torture” was just a heavy roughing up—if these kinds of distinctions hold. The informer was just punched by two toughs and broke down, big deal.

Many people saw it quite differently, and continue to do so today. They objected that it was an awkward time to come up

with this kind of story. Le Pen's neo-fascist *Front National* was on the rise in France, eager to defame the Resistance and resurrect Vichy's racist legacy. It's never a good time, obviously, to come up with embarrassing disclosures. The major issue at the time, though, wasn't Duras's acknowledgment—that she feared for her husband was a sufficient excuse for her cruelty. The real embarrassment was the active part that the Vichy regime played in the deportation of French Jews. Her own disinterest for what had happened to them until it was too late may also have played its part. "I had Jewish friends, I have had a Jewish lover, two of my best friends were Jews, they had Jewish children, I had a very close friend who was a Jewish writer...and I didn't think about it." But why this sorry list? Why be so insistent about a guilt that was, after all, so widely shared? It took the sudden revelation of the "Jewish martyrdom" for Duras and her friends Antelme, Mascolo and the whole group of rue Saint-Benoit, to see the signs on the wall, or sown on people's chests. This is how myths are born—by turning tentative signs into powerful symbols.

Destiny always proceeds backwards, Duras conceded, "by putting events in the future perfect...in such a way that the present partakes of the end, of death, that it is stamped by it" (*Montreal* 186). This is how she conceived of her films, but of history as well. The yellow star will have to have been overlooked, and Duras will have to have been blind to the ominous signs for them to become both an individual symbol of shame and a collective symbol of the massive horror that was in the offing. Duras's innocence was of the kind that only guilt can bring about, *a guilt meant to repair a crime that she had not committed*. Only at that price could everyone be made responsible for everything that has happened—Holocaust, Hiroshima: becoming aware of it *after the fact*, too late to do anything about it except implicating oneself in retrospect. Then writing becomes a writing of the disaster, endlessly mourning the missed opportunity to have been one of the ideal victims.

During their "infernal and fabulous voyage" with Antelme from Dachau to Paris, the three men stopped in a brasserie in Verdun holding between them Robert's tall, collapsed frame

floating in civilian clothes. What followed became over time, in Mascolo's memory, prophetic, even mythical. The sense of awe experienced at once by everyone present was the prelude to a kind of deference, or reverence Antelme's friends themselves came to feel toward Robert:

"As we walk in," Mascolo wrote in his own memoir, published one year after *The War*,

the conversations nearby stop, and the wave of silence soon spreads throughout the entire room. From table to table people get up as we come near them. Complete silence and immobility will prevail until we find a table. Scene of speechless messianism. Nothing said on either side. Such a spontaneous manifestation of collective emotion, with an intensity that can only be found in some metaphysical dreams, I don't know of a purer example. (62)

Antelme, Mascolo went on to explain, radiated a "simple majesty," suggested some sort of "superior accomplishment." Instantly the banal brasserie turned into a sacred theater, a temple, the audience cast into "the silent chorus of an action whose only hero, witness and oracle would be Antelme." Everyone present at the scene was seized by "a passion of the mind" powerful enough to turn the audience into its own spectacle: people looking at each other, looking at the image that was offered to all as the projection of one's own image, and "seeing themselves the same as him and as everybody." It was so "innocently religious," Mascolo concluded.

Georges Bataille conceived of a sacrifice not in terms of religions, but producing social cohesion. Ritual violence serves as a ferment for a sacred community—an organic community created by the participation to a sacrifice. The horrific sight of Antelme similarly triggered among everyone present, and especially Mascolo, a *sacrificial reaction*, their common identification to humanity crucified in the person of Antelme allowing for a new bond to be forged between all the

participants. This scene was a prelude to the mental “maelstrom,” or communal fusion, even mystical fervor, in which Robert’s friends were precipitated in the wake of Antelme’s return from Dachau. As long as Antelme retained what he later called his “original indetermination,” the “sweet sickness of his identity” acted like a black hole engulfing all those who approached him. His friends, in turn, felt “displaced, dislocated” in their minds and in their senses, undetermined just like him. Finally, “imitating what he himself had lived”—words like *imitation* and *passion* aren’t entirely innocent—they realized that they had reached the point where they were capable as well of “looking at themselves from the outside” and become other than they were. Of this death to oneself, Mascolo wrote, “Robert, that night, announced the news.”

He also put it in another way: “By returning among us, he deported us with him, and as a result we became forever Judeized.” And he added as eagerly: “We found ourselves similarly communized in our soul.” (*Autour d’un effort de memoire* 22).

Becoming Jewish, as Mascolo put it, exposed them to another tradition, more communal and nomadic, far less exposed than their own to the risk and stupidity of “the general simplification of being” that comes with sedentariness. And to make sure that they would remain immune from it and also free from any segregative impulse, Duras and Mascolo gave form to this new consciousness by raising their son, “naively, stupidly maybe,” in the belief that they were Jewish themselves. And Mascolo candidly added that no one in their entourage found the idea “objectionable.”

In their avocation of the Jews, Duras and Mascolo didn’t realize that they already partook of a long tradition. What they loved about the Jews turned to be exactly what many of their compatriots hated most about them, or held the most in suspicion. Invoking the Jews as a rampart against the stupidity of sedentariness simply reversed Céline’s allegations that the Jews were feeding on the dumbness and credulity of the native population. Besides, how different was it from Maurice Blanchot condemning at the time the passivity of “abject France”?

“Of the word ‘Jew,’ Mascolo remarked, “there’s rigorously no definition that would apply to all those who claim to have their identity.” And he added enviously: “Isn’t there already in this fact a deep source of attraction?” That was exactly, in Céline, a source of fear and repulsion that the common people would know nothing about the Jews and couldn’t even identify them in the crowd. “They’re all camouflaged, costumed, cameleons, the Jews, changing names as quickly as they change borders...” Some of the arguments that members of their little circle, which included Blanchot, used to justify their philo-Semitism, in fact, would probably have been found in the anti-Semitic exhibition organized by the Propaganda-Staeffel. After all, wasn’t the difficulty of identifying the Jews one of the reasons for imposing on them the yellow star? In 1937, Céline had already come up with a promising idea to single out “Jews, masons and Jewifieds of all kinds...I wonder if introducing numbers in each profession wouldn’t have taken care of that?...Then no more ambiguity, fake noses, pseudo-names...Numbers” (*Bagatelles* 135).

Envyng the Jews’ communal sense doesn’t mean that one should envy their fate. What Mascolo and Duras liked about them is that they made suffering so attractive. “Actually, in my recollection,” he wrote, “this was not a movement of generosity on our part, nothing that would smack of compassion. It was made rather egotistically, almost enviously, out of the intense regret of having been deprived of the privilege that the misfortune (*malheur*) of being Jewish is.” And he superbly concluded: they were “ideal victims.”

“There was the war,” Duras wrote, “then the Liberation and, suddenly, I woke up and there was Auschwitz” (*War* 47, 50). As if nothing had happened in between, all the measures of exclusion, big and small, the objective chain of events blindly leading to the extermination, as if yellow stars, segregation in the metro, interdiction from public offices and public places, police round-ups, deportations, etc. had all been erased by the immensity of the event. Duras recalled first hearing about the crematoria while waiting at the railway station in Paris for the survivors to return—she suddenly fainted standing up, then little

by little returned to her senses: "I wasn't weeping, outwardly I was the same as ever except that I could no longer talk at all...I had clearly become another person" (*Green* 28). The same apparently occurred to her near Annecy on August 6, 1945 when she read the newspaper headlines on the Hiroshima bomb, the magnitude of the event wiping out anything that could have preceded it. Memory, for Duras, is always a failure. It is "a kind of attempt, of temptation to escape the horror of forgetfulness... What I deal with is always the memory of forgetfulness..." (*Montreal* 41). One can only remember what one never had a chance to memorize, only know what one has forgotten. Memory is a failure because the person who experienced it as present in the past now has become another.

In a sense, though, Duras had covered all the bases, "informing" not only on the informer, but also on herself. "I give you the torturer..." And by the same token giving herself license to inform on everyone else in her book, whether they liked it or not. There was some dark humor as well in her blunt statement of guilt—squaring the circle, and then bouncing back with a bold disclaimer masquerading as a superior admonition: "Learn to read them properly," she decreed of these texts. "They are sacred." Exposing herself to public opprobrium she deftly turned the table on her readers, forbidding them to pass judgment on her. Was invoking the "sacred" just a clever device for evading censure? It wasn't the first time in *The War* that M.D. told her readers to read the book in a different way. She had no recollection, she said, of having ever written these pages. They couldn't be called "writing." She couldn't even put a name to "this thing...that appalls me when I reread it." As if it hadn't been willed, at least not by her. It just happened, an accident of nature, and all she did was channeling it as best she could to the reader. This thing that got written had nothing to do with "literature," it was the stuff of myth. *It literally wrote itself*:

I found myself looking at pages regularly filled with small, calm, extraordinarily even handwriting. I found myself confronted with a tremendous chaos of thought and feeling that I

couldn't bring myself to tamper with, and beside which literature was something of which I felt ashamed. (*The War* 4)

Any experience of the sacred involves some kind of mental dispossession. But this can never be done recklessly. There are propitiatory rites, codified gestures and actions meant to prepare the ground. Individual control has to be removed. This, of course, involves some kind of violence, but this violence has to be strictly controlled, the removal performed with an implacable rigor. The surgeon's hand has to be calm, extraordinarily even too, just like Duras's handwriting. This is what Antonin Artaud called *cruelty*, using the word in a very special sense. In these perilous situations, of which sacrifice is the most extreme—it is the infliction of death for a collective purpose—cruelty is never involved for its own sake. The sadism must remain latent, only recognizable in its clinical aspect. This is the feature Artaud celebrated in his essay on the Balinese dance, an algebra of movements choreographed with such harrowing precision by human automatons that “hardly a gesture separates us from chaos.” One slip of the hand and the surgeon's knife cuts through the organ.

Antonin Artaud, the author of *Theater and its Double*, the great modernist manifesto for a sacred theater, dealt with this question in his famous “Letters on Cruelty” (1932). Cruelty, he wrote, doesn't rely on blood or Sadism, although looking at the reader straight in the eye, he added, “at least not exclusively.” Philosophically speaking, this involves some kind of superior determinism, a stern mental discipline characterized by application, implacable decision, submission to necessity, absolute consciousness, all of which are meant to “give any act in life its color of blood, its cruel element.”

The function of such inhuman discipline is not to stifle the action, but the reverse: it concentrates it like a magnifying glass until it burns right through. It is at this point, when every contingent element has strictly been eliminated, the mind blank from any thought, the body open to an impersonal flow of energy, that violence rushes through in an irrepressible fury.

Then it simultaneously erupts everywhere, like a natural cataclysm, earthquake, plague, riot, fire, flood, sweeping everything in its wake, releasing in all the participants “a tremendous chaos of thought and feeling.” What Marguerite Duras called the “truth of darkness,” which compels people into insane actions and passions could best be grasped in cosmic terms, “in the Gnostic sense of whirls of life devouring the darkness, in a sense of this implacable pain without which life couldn’t unfold.” Cruelty was another name for Ter’s monstrous innocence. It was the reintroduction of a principle of evil at the source of life, some kind of “vicious impulse given to things that bring them ineluctably to their conclusion, whatever the cost” (Antonin Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double*, OC IV 97-100).

This conclusion is often couched in psychological terms. Wasn’t tragedy, for Aristotle, a means of purging the audience of all fear and pity? But psychology, nowadays, has become a mere symptom of collective impotence. It testifies for this separation of the spirit from its force, of culture from life, which has turned the world into a mere spectacle. Losing its shadow, every action is subjected to endless interpretation and exegeses. The world, having lost its traditional bearings, slackening and caving under an array of whimsical forces, has become all the more urgent to fashion another realm where everything would be inexorably determined. Artaud realized that this could only be achieved through a collective transfiguration of which the shared experience of death would be the trigger since it is understood, he asserted, “that life always requires someone’s death.” This was the essence of sacrifice.

Brought up a devout Catholic, Artaud even thought at one point of becoming a priest. Even after he renounced God, or tried to, Artaud’s mind remained haunted with images of bodily violence, bloodshed, burning on the stakes, tearing of the flesh, nailing on the cross, the entire paraphernalia of Christian martyrdom. By then, though, these had become almost kitsch symbols of a religion in decline. It was in dire need of new blood and this is what Artaud set out to provide by tapping into the powerful Pagan tradition. In the process he had to take the sacred

away from any faith and recast it as *the product of a collective sacrifice*.

These concerns were widely shared among modernist writers and philosophers of the 30s and 40s. In a brilliant essay on William Faulkner, Jean-Paul Sartre represented the American writer strapped at the back of a fast car *but facing backward*. This pretty much describes the attitude of writers during this period, looking back for help and holding on to loaned tools as they were being rushed into a threatening future. There was a sense of urgency to these investigations that went much beyond their own personal predicament and concerned the entire culture. Their problem was to provide new bonds and collective safeguards against a general collapse, which they felt was imminent. For Artaud, the only place where new communal codes could still be elaborated was the theater: "The only question worth being addressed at this point is whether, in this world that's slipping away and committing suicide unaware, it is possible to find a core of men capable of imposing this superior notion of the theater, bringing up the natural and magical equivalent of dogmas we can't believe in anymore" (O.C., IV, 31). Artaud put his faith in ritual performances; writer Georges Bataille in secret sects; philosopher Simone Weil, in an implacable God. But other, less rigorous "thinkers" were far more successful at the time experimenting with these ideas on a much wider stage, and with devastating results.

The War participates in the same modernist spirit. Mostly written in 1944, though, as the news of the death camps was beginning to circulate and the first A-bomb was just about to explode in Hiroshima, it already has a different ring about it. For the most part, cruelty had outlived its function—the worst had already happened. And then these pages, when she published them in 1985, adding to them or editing them to suit her later perceptions, were already history. This is also what her reference to the "sacred" was about: at that point, it already belonged to a mythical past.

Although Marguerite Duras wrote several novels during the war, none of them compared even remotely in breadth and intensity with the essays and meditations Artaud, Bataille and

Simone Weil, just to name a few, wrote themselves during the '30s and '40s. For one, none of them ever wrote fiction as such. Their writings were too close to the chest and too directly affected by the disarray of the times to fit any prescribed form. And then Duras was one or two generations younger. She belonged to another world, actually took it exactly where theirs left off. This made her work even more revealing of what they themselves had been after.

Duras's outlook radically changed with the experience of the Resistance and of the Occupation. This was also true of many of her friends who belonged to the same bourgeois intellectual milieu. Most were conservative, even reactionary before the war, and strongly attracted by the sirens of nationalism. And yet they all ended up in the ranks of the Communist Party, which had been reborn out of the war and at that point, came to embody the national resistance to the Nazis in everyone's eyes. *The War* stands astride the two worlds, the pre-war preoccupations of the modernists and the new era that was rapidly taking shape, in which collective values would be mass-produced and no longer tied down to any symbolic internalization. Reading the book in this light, it becomes clear that many of the impulses that Duras herself attributed to her new Communist affiliation—her hatred for the bourgeoisie, her concern for the workers, her compassion for the victims—reached much further back. Her fascination with evil, which could be interpreted as some kind of perversion, and maybe was, in fact originated in the same crisis of Christian sensibility as the one exhibited by her predecessors. It is on these grounds that the comparison she affords could prove to be the most fruitful.

Marguerite Duras's claim that *The War* didn't belong to literature but to "the sacred" offers a chance to evaluate the nature, scope, and function of literary modernism in their own time, and her own position in relation to it. Affirming that these texts were beyond shame, beyond "literature" was another way of saying that they couldn't be an object of knowledge, but of what Georges Bataille called an "un-knowledge." They couldn't be known or nailed down with a rational interpretation. They belonged to another sphere altogether and were only tributary to

the inexorable logic of the “accursed share,” a sacrificial impulse that extends beyond any boundary or decency. This is what attracted Duras to criminal cases. “Consciousness should accept being lost at times,” she wrote, “instead of rushing to take refuge in the current duplicitous morality” (*Outside* 145). Current morality, like current literature, doesn’t even go near this infernal area where “the world suddenly flips over. We’re out of our depth.”

Some things, actions or passions, are beyond good and evil. Some writings are beyond writing. And nothing of the kind can ever be shameful. Crimes of passion remain unaccountable to justice, and the same holds true for the forms of sexuality it often describes as “monstrous perversions,” or the desire for “extraordinary sensations.” A trial in front of a packed audience offers “a situation which is entirely functional,” but one in which the defendant cannot find anything to say. “The judicial apparatus forces her to speak to us in a language that belongs to itself only. Then she will refer to the ‘atrocities’ of what she did and apply to herself the moral judgment of the president...there is injustice, as far as I see,” Duras superbly concluded, “when a criminal can’t manage anymore to tell us what she knows about herself, as is the case here.” (*Outside* 147, 149)

Duras should know. She was confronted with a situation of the kind in 1944 when she was assigned to interrogate an informer captured by her underground group, an event she chronicled in “Albert of the Capitals,” another chapter of *The War*. It was she who was the “judge” then, applying her own moral judgment to a helpless defendant. Well, it wasn’t exactly a trial, and she wasn’t exactly a judge, nor was the defendant so helpless, but her fellow resisters present in the room did serve as an audience. Actually, they were major participants in the action.

Unlike a judge, Duras wasn’t expected to examine the man’s motives or weigh the circumstances mitigating his actions—all elements routinely invoked in a trial nowadays. She didn’t have to ask the informer to explain himself and he didn’t pretend he had to. This was an interrogation, not a trial, and it required from the “audience” another kind of attention as well.

The man was standing in front of them with his own history and psychology, his twisted soul. He wasn't there really, only his body was, ready for whatever pain they needed to exert on it to force him to acknowledge his deeds. It was what he did that was in question, not who he was.

Trials, with their antics, the rustling of black sleeves and expensive oratory, are a recent phenomenon in the culture, two or three centuries at most. They belong to a special genre, a "humanist theater" whose main function is as much to determine the nature of the guilt as to assuage everybody's conscience. When Marguerite Duras said that a criminal's motives should be understood for what they were, and not for what justice wanted them to be, she didn't question the desire to understand that is part of it, she merely meant that there wasn't anything *personal* about their deeds. People who are compelled to perform certain acts against their better judgment shouldn't be held personally responsible for them. These acts belong to another sphere altogether and the defendants weren't free to refrain from doing them. This is the essence of emotions in general.

The informer's interrogation was more akin to ancient symbolic justice (King's law) or even older savage ceremonies. Traditional societies used to mark the body through cruel practices or punishments, torture or scarifications, and this is what Duras would have to inflict practically on this man if he resisted their queries. Cruelty always involves some degree of pleasure, although few people, especially today, are comfortable with the idea. Actually most people would be pretty upset if they were told that some degree of pleasure was involved and would meet the idea with revulsion. The deep ambivalence that people experience when confronted with these kinds of situations, the powerful mix of fascination and repulsion it unleashes in them, is the major element involved in the *production* of the "sacred." It is also the most explicit sign of its presence.

Interrogations are an intrinsic part of the legal apparatus, but it is rare that the violence involved is publicly acknowledged or exhibited. Only in times of turmoil and lawlessness does it surface as such, or is it being given some kind of codification. This briefly happened, for instance, in the '60s and '70s when

Maoists and terrorist groups set up their own alternative justice, which they called “People’s Courts,” collectives of militants in front of which the defendants were made to appear. Innocence there was hardly an option. All that was expected from the defendant was an acknowledgement of guilt that could eventually be made public through the media and used for their own political purposes. This is what happened to President Aldo Moro in Italy, whose “confession” was meant to embarrass his own camp. To complete the message, his dead body was dumped in a car parked exactly halfway between the seat of the Christian Democracy and the headquarters of the Communist Party, symbolically denouncing their collusion. Murder spreading over the entire political landscape and the cartography of the city was another way of extracting powerful signs from the body, like an urban palimpsest.

Regular justice assumes that a defendant is innocent until proven guilty, but the informer’s interrogation didn’t exactly take place in regular times. While the informer was being questioned in the headquarters of the resistance group, a vengeful crowd was still summarily shaving women’s heads in public places, and collaborators were executed in the streets. The battle to liberate Paris from the German occupants was now raging in the suburbs. For a time, the French Resistance was administering its own justice and settling its own accounts. The group had been savagely dismantled by the Gestapo not too long before that; they were some traitors among them. Robert Antelme, Duras’s husband, and his sister had been arrested and deported, François Mitterand barely managed to escape the Gestapo.

The informer had been informed on in turn and all Duras had to do was extract the truth from his mouth like a rotten tooth. The resisters weren’t very particular about the means they would use, but there were limits—and Duras had none. She said she wanted all the German prisoners killed. The comrades strongly disagreed, started looking at her with suspicion. Especially Roger, who headed another group, and was frankly hostile. They thought she was being weird and irresponsible. Dionys, her lover, the other one in charge, explained her angry behavior by

her husband's arrest. He was the one who had given her the informer, and had also picked two toughs workers in the group to give her a hand. They had been tortured themselves, they'd go for it.

The informer wasn't at all like the criminal Duras defended later on. He had no passion to speak of, unless fear could pass for one. He didn't even have a name of his own—the story's title, "Albert of the Capitals" doesn't refer to him, was just a suspicious-looking entry in his agenda. This Albert turned out to be a waiter at "the Capitals," a café near the Gare de l'Est, whom he often met for reasons unknown. And Albert had disappeared. There was nothing glorious about the informer, no redeeming feature, even in terms of evil. He didn't seem to nurse any special hatred for the Jews or for the Communists, just snooped on them, on prisoners of war and other political suspects for money. He seemed like a small-time hustler, although people died from these tips. He may also have been an agent of the German Secret Police.

It took the informer a long time to undress, and they had to strip him of his underpants. He fell on a corner with a thud. He was fat, sort of repulsive: myopic eyes, shriveled testicles and unwashed flesh. "It's the first time in her life that she's been with a naked man for any other purpose than making love." There's a virginity to torture as well. But he was hardly a man, nothing desirable about him. And he was begging for mercy, an abject sight. "Even lice cling to life," Thérèse dropped like a guillotine. She pressed him for the color of the card he showed entering the Gestapo. German agents had special cards. But he played dumb, only admitted he went to the Gestapo. There were shouts from behind: "Traitor. Bastard. Scum." And the two torturers started pounding at his naked body. Thérèse couldn't help feeling self-conscious, realizing other women were watching too.

Theater of Cruelty. "He's standing, leaning on the chair, his eyes lowered. Waiting." The man is exhibiting signs of submission, but he isn't playing the game. He's denying everything. But maybe he's doing what is expected of him: playing innocent. Can you *play* guilty if you really are? They all

have to get the action right, find what the rules are. It all has to make sense.

The man plays dumb until the very end. They grow impatient and it gets messy. But none of this can be improvised. Their blows are calm, even extraordinarily so, and yet they create a tremendous chaos of feelings in them all, just like Duras's handwriting. Some comrades shout, others protest, the group splits in two. But all it means is that violence is catching. Violence is always contagious. It "crushes all those who are exposed to it," victims and executioners alike, "victors and vanquished brothers in the same misery." This is the essence of the sacred, according to philosopher Simone Weil. (Simone Weil, "The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force." *O.C., II...* Paris: Gallimard, 1989 (240)). One can't unleash violence on someone without being invaded by it in the same degree. In Artaud's own words, "there is, in the cruelty that one exerts, some kind of superior determinism to which the executioner himself has to be subjected, and must be, in any case, *determined* to experience." They all stay around the victim, mesmerized.

Every so often the two toughs pause. But Thérèse wants more. They resume the demolition work. They punch the man's chest, break the skin, and methodically damage an eye. They bloody his face, go for his stomach, and genitals. The group is horrified, but what they do to this man brings them closer together. The revulsion they feel towards him, towards themselves, towards *it*. They feel smeared by *his* blood. This is what the protests are about. And the sacrifice: they don't identify to the victim, they become like a wound themselves.

The two men keep hitting the informer, but Thérèse's mind is wandering. She thinks of Robert, shot against a wall. She also thinks of her afternoon with Dionys, when he kissed her and she realized that she wanted to live with him. But they haven't slept together since Robert's arrest. Now she's at a loss. She asked the men to hit harder, but she wonders what makes them do it: "Where does it come from, man's ability to strike, to get used to it, to do it as if it were a job, a duty?" She's moving on higher grounds, or at least her writing does. Reflecting on human nature, etc. She dissociates herself from the action. What makes

an experience “sacred” is when violence gets “unloaded on the sensibility of those who watch it with the force of an epidemic,” bringing out dark forces, unraveling conflicts, collectively emptying huge moral boils, ultimately revealing to the group “its dark power, its hidden strength” (*O.C. IV* 31). But Thérèse isn’t part of the group. For her this is a mental drama—what’s happening to *her* mind. When what only matters for the sacred is losing it.

It all keeps wavering, though. One moment Thérèse feels that none of it is for real: “I am at the cinema,” she thinks, pinching herself. She panics at the thought of not doing enough. At other times she is full of rage at the parody of justice, at the “bourgeoisie” taking over outside, but also inside this very room—the women protesting. Then fury takes over and she can’t wait to give it to him, “beat him till he ejaculates the truth, his shame, his fear, the secret of what made him only yesterday all-powerful” (*The War* 135). For Bataille, the sacred is a moment of “convulsive communication of what is ordinarily stifled,” a striving toward some “impersonal reality.” It is the world of lovers, who commune even in the most profound silence, shadows pursued to the point of an embrace, each movement having the power to convey ecstasy. “It is only when things are already settled,” he added, “and night has fallen that the ‘Owl of Minerva’ can give the goddess an account of the events that have taken place and can decide upon their hidden meaning” (Georges Bataille, “The Sacred.” *Visions of Excess*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985 (241-2)). Minerva is never far away in Thérèse’s mind, fluttering her wings, taking her flight, making sense of what is happening.

The informer yells “Ooh, ooh,” in long wails. He’s still holding out under torture. Thérèse, in the meantime, reflects on the mystery of the human body. She looks at the fists falling, “hears the gong of the blows, realizes for the first time that in a man’s body there are layers almost impossible to pierce; tier upon tier of deep truths difficult to reach. She remembers she’d vaguely realized this during the tireless questioning of a couple, earlier, but not as strongly. Now it’s exhausting, almost impossible. It’s demolition work, “You have to hold out, stick it

out. And then, soon, it will emerge, quite small, hard as a seed, the truth" (*The War* 135). The participants are all beside themselves, overwhelmed by the brutality of the action—Thérèse's looking down in her flight. God contemplates his creation. Out of the chaos comes the light. Torture must be good after all, it tells something about human nature—the truth they share with this miserable specimen they keep beating to a pulp. It certainly isn't a moment of "convulsive communication": there's memory and reflection, comparison, deliberation, decision, revelation. Her thinking is impersonal, not the reality of her mind.

And then there's the flip side to this hard-won wisdom—the wallowing in the mud, the complacency of pain, the ecstasy of blood. Among the unpublished manuscripts left in the Paris archive (IMEC), there are passages Duras scribbled during the same period, on August 24, 1944: "The men shout. They lick their chops at the thought of the blood shed. During this night of August 23, the men were rummaging through the night like newborn babies. Looking for the breast. The blood. It feels good...." There's another passage, also unpublished, which she must have scribbled down at the time mouth half-open in advance: "Flowers of blood. Flower offering. Wide open. Right now. The accused filled with blood that has not yet been shed. But already the adorable lips open up on its passage. Loving lips...disorder. Fulfillment of fulfillment" (Adler 201). The voyeuristic element here is unmistakable—the ghoulish expectation, the exploitative gaze, the lyricism of blood, the sublimation. This is personal expression of a special kind, not cruelty in Artaud's sense. There's nothing sacred about it.

Céline once coined "impersonal lyricism" the state of heightened perception, the pitch of visionary intensity in which subjectivity is abolished, letting the world directly speak. The delirious consciousness becomes one with its object. But it is the object that one sees, not the person. The *I* only remains, when it does, as an index for the action, a way of flagging the affect, of authenticating the experience: "I saw ..." (Antonin Artaud, "The Mountain of Signs"). The writer becomes an eye wide open, a disorbited *I* through which the event can be grasped in its

impersonal singularity. Duras here does just the reverse: she isn't explicitly present in the scene, but her subjectivity infects everything. "Adorable lips:" this describes not the wound, but her own relation to it. Duras isn't beside herself, a hyena smeared with blood, a hideous harpy, the sacred priestess of a horrific ritual—she's just relishing the sight, sightseeing the grounds. She's glued to the action, thrilled by her own daring. *Me*, Duras.

She's warming up to the job, taking notes for Thérèse. Tempting evil. Flirting with transgression. Dracula's teeth, not the surgeon's knife. "All writing is pigshit," Artaud wrote. And Duras agreed: "literature was something of which I felt ashamed." Neither Artaud nor Simone Weil would ever have written something of the sort, although they dealt with the same heavy material. Even in a manuscript form. They were horrified by blood, not just attracted to it. For them, there was no flowers of blood or flowers of rhetoric. They knew that there was a price to pay, and they were getting ready for it. There's no sacred without a sacrifice *of which one becomes a part*.

M.D. was right, obviously, not to include any of this heady stuff in *The War*. The more precise and non-lyrical the description of the beatings, the more intolerable it becomes to the reader, to the comrades attending to the scene. It is the deed that counts, what is being done to the informer. When the man emits an obscene gurgle, it just makes the two torturers want to hit him harder. Let's kill him, one voice prompts from behind, "get it over with." Makes the informer scared too. He's nothing, and yet there's still something is lodged in him unaware, like a shard in the flesh. It has to be retrieved with a forceps. This is what torture, ultimately, is for. The kind of torture that pertains to the sacred, not to a messy interrogation: removing consciousness. Cruelty doesn't set anyone free, or disclose a secret: it *delivers*.

Thérèse may be conflicted, but M.D. has been calmly taking notes, jotting down the jagged line of her emotional states, the jumps in intensity, the highs and lows, her rage snowballing, then suddenly dropping, like a fever chart. She may share this woman's occasional fury, her helpless resentment, her empty

rants, but this is primarily her material. She looks at it with a clinical eye. The two men keep hitting and hitting the informer until he chokes. What he feels is “not even suffering. It’s just terror.” Everyone has been “waiting with bated breath for this delivery, not only Thérèse.” But when it finally arrives—“‘Green...’ he shouts, collapsing on the floor,”—it has ceased to matter. The color of his card now is beside the point. The man squeals “ejaculating his truth” without even remembering what they want from him, even that he ever had told them anything. It was like a mutual orgasm after all this rage and frustration. Release, displaced satisfaction, a therapeutic experience.

The game is over. The patient remains petrified. The others shuffle around, uneasy, feeling bad about the whole thing. All the elements of the drama have been played out, coming together and coming apart. At times it got pretty close to a sacrifice. It became ruthless, inexorable. The meaning of it all escaped, the horror took a turn of its own, the group opening and constricting like an eyeball. But everything is beginning to fall apart again. Actually it was falling apart all along, just gathering steam at times, roller coasting, then stopped and started. Cruelty didn’t quite achieve its goal, nor did the interrogation fulfill its function. Everybody’s now getting back to normal with a lingering sense of shame. And the further one has been to inflict violence, the more inclined to experience it. Shame is always the best bond because it is custom-made. Every man for himself. Separation and resentment resurface along with bad consciousness and guilt. Self-inflicted torture. Western wear.

Something happened, something intense, disturbing, not quite accountable in rational terms, an event of sorts. Things got out of hand. Now it has to be rolled back, erased, forgotten, suppressed. It didn’t quite manage to crystallize a sense of community, forge a new cohesion. We’re back to square one: the psychological theater with the original cast—the nagging woman, the evasive lover, the squeamish women, the resisting resister.

Time to wrap up. Roger put his arms around Thérèse. The two toughs help the informer to get dressed. Dionys offers Thérèse a cigarette. No one seems interested in the traitor

anymore, or in “Albert of the Capitals” for that matter. Or even in “Thérèse,” who achieved this incredible feat. “He confessed,” Thérèse keeps telling the women afterwards in the bar, asking for some kind of recognition. But they don’t want to have any part in it. Dionys doesn’t offer to take her home. “Thérèse starts to cry.”



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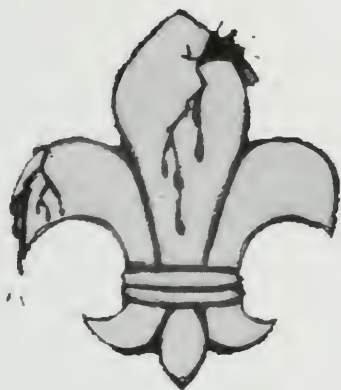
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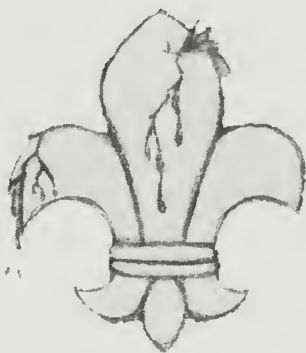
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*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais,
Le Quart Livre

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