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Author(s): Marianne Hirsch

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# Gender, Reading, and Desire in *Moderato Cantabile*

MARIANNE HIRSCH

“Maybe that’s what life is all about:  
to get into, to let yourself be carried  
along by this story—this story, well,  
the story of others.”

Marguerite Duras<sup>1</sup>

Duras’s comment might well be a description of the characters in her novels—vacant creatures who exist in a world of ruins and wait for a story that will awaken, or, as the author puts it, “ravish” them. Observation and interpretation of other lives provide Duras’s protagonists with their only content: Lol Stein (*Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*) experiences sex vicariously by crouching in a field outside of the hotel where a friend and her lover meet; the French diplomats (*Le Vice-Consul*) can feel the suffering in Calcutta only through their observation of the vice-consul’s reaction. Existence takes shape in response to others, and, therefore, it has about it much of the unreality and indirectness of fiction. “Perhaps I am an echo chamber,” says Duras when speaking of her method of composition (*Les Parleuses*, p. 218).

I shall examine this structure of mediation and response in *Moderato Cantabile*, arguing that the characters, in their unraveling of a mysterious murder of passion, actually enact a *literary* process, namely that of interpreting an incident by recounting it in narrative form. The resulting imaginative identification with the lives of others leads the characters not to re-create, but to create, out of their own feeling and in their own lives, a version of the murder they have witnessed. Their involvement in this murder constitutes an act of reading; its mode is an

empathetic *imitatio*: the only way to *know* desire is to *reenact* it. The epistemology involved is a feeling rather than a knowing, an erotics rather than a hermeneutics.<sup>2</sup> This reading, moreover, is not a solitary, but a communal process, one which emerges out of and becomes the basis for an evolving relationship of a woman with a man, a child, and another woman.

As the novel's protagonists become more and more involved in the activity of reading, the plot of the novel becomes a metaphor for the reading of the novel. With this metaphoric relationship as a basis, my analysis interrogates the text's implications about reading. The text suggests, for example, that the relationship between text and reader, between character and reader, differs according to the gender of that reader. Those differences, moreover, correspond to male and female developmental patterns as contemporary psychoanalysis outlines them—the male based on separation and dominance, the female on relatedness and receptivity. This essay first examines the novel's inscription of reading as a communal process of creation; by means of the inscribed readers, it then explores differences between male and female involvement in this process. Finally it looks at fiction itself as the locus for possible transformations of stereotypically binding relational patterns. The novel's own unique combination of traditional and innovative narrative strategies forces the external reader to assume both what the text designates as the "male" and the "female" reading stances. In its ultimate valorization of receptivity, fusion, and silence, however, Duras's aesthetic, centered in the reading process, is distinctly female.

My argument emerges out of two heretofore independent theoretical matrices: audience-oriented or reader-response criticism and feminist psychoanalytic analyses of gender difference. Only in very few instances have attempts been made to define gender-based variations in reader response. All of them have been speculative in nature: Annette Kolodny's "A Map for Re-reading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts" demonstrates the inapplicability of Harold Bloom's patriarchal model of literary influence to women, using, as evidence for a female model of "reading," Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's short story, "A Jury of her Peers";<sup>3</sup> Judith Fetterley in *The Resisting Reader* analyzes the female reader's resistance to classic American literature;<sup>4</sup> Norman Holland and Leona Sherman in "Gothic Possibilities" document differences in response by working with an actual group of male and female readers of gothic texts;<sup>5</sup> and Caren Greenberg, using the myth of Echo, postulates a characteristically and

distinctly female reading in her "Reading Reading: Echo's Abduction of Language."<sup>6</sup> My own analysis relies on psychoanalytic theories of gender difference, especially Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering*,<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Dinnerstein's *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*,<sup>8</sup> and Jean Baker Miller's *Toward a New Psychology of Women*.<sup>9</sup>

These writers concentrate on the pre-oedipal period, especially on the infant's separation and individuation, on the formation of the self in relation to the primary parent. In our culture that immensely powerful figure tends to be the mother and, as these writers assert, the mother treats her female infant differently from her male infant. Whereas they encourage boys to become separate and autonomous, mothers see their daughters as extensions of themselves. Ego boundaries between mothers and daughters are more fluid and undefined; therefore, female personality is based on affiliations and relationships. As Nancy Chodorow says, "The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate" (p. 169). The female sense of connection, fluidity, and receptivity becomes here the basis for a distinctive form of reading, "female" in character.

#### *Readers in the Text*

The beginning of *Moderato Cantabile* finds Anne Desbaresdes detached and dispossessed, a spectator at her child's piano lesson.<sup>10</sup> The music teacher's room shuts out the noises of the surrounding town, the brilliance of the sunset, the murmur of the sea. Outer reality remains distant and can only be sensed through the open window. Even the music is experienced indirectly, through language, the translation of the tempo indication "moderato cantabile" that the child stubbornly refuses to remember. The child, whose contact with reality is immediate and total, provides the only link to all that the room has shut out. He is "the only one to remember that dusk has just exploded . . . the motorboat passed through his blood" (*MC*, pp. 75, 76).<sup>11</sup>

The music lesson is interrupted by an inhuman scream which shatters all the sounds of the afternoon: the noises of the town, the women's conversation, the murmur of the sea, the child's rendition of the Diabelli sonatina. The scream jolts Anne out of her passivity; it moves her directly, viscerally. She runs to a nearby café: when she reaches the café and sees the murderer's blood-stained face as he kisses his dead lover and moans over her corpse, when she sees his expressionless state, absent and alien from his surroundings, Anne, more immediately involved than the other spectators, is almost at the point of

screaming herself. The unknown woman's dying scream of passion becomes the text to be interpreted and the moment to be re-created; it is the generating pre-text of the novel.

Anne's obsessive interest in the scream and the murder can be explained primarily by the absences in her life, by the novel's ellipses. Just as the music teacher's room separates Anne from the vitality of the town and the ocean, so her entire life is subject to the constraints of routine and the bourgeois social roles she is forced to play. The scream with its echoes of madness, passion, and violence lures Anne out of her sterile and solitary existence. Only with her child has she been able to experience other modes of being—immediate, unlimited, connected—first at the moment of birth, when she also screamed, and then, day by day, by watching his openness to the brilliant sunset, by communicating with him silently and harmoniously, by understanding him without reason and without words. Anne's closeness to her child has made her particularly attuned to the scream, which communicates both the fulfillment of the dying woman and the fusion of the woman and her lover: at the moment of death the barriers of separate identity are abolished. Destruction, madness, murder provide, for Anne, the possibility of escaping from the sterile order of her life, of getting through to her "witch's loins" (*MC*, p. 132), of moving from separateness to connection. To destroy the social structures that have estranged people from their natural inner power, to break through to the other inside herself, the other that she has had to suppress, but that, in Xavière Gauthier's words, emerges like the grass that grows between the stones of the pavement, becomes an obsessive need for Anne, a need unconscious and inexpressible, awakened by the dying scream of the murdered woman. Gauthier's comment about the discourse of women—repetitive, disconnected, disordered, unharmonious—and its source in repression and oppression gives us a clue to Anne's obsession with the scream which, similarly, emerges with "the power of that which has been long contained" (*Les Parleuses*, pp. 8, 12).

Anne's repeated visits to the lower-class café, her erotic interest in Chauvin, the factory worker she meets there, and her increasingly heavy and debilitating drinking are steps in the gradual annihilation of her individuated and civilized adult self. Anne and Chauvin meet through the common fascination with the murder of passion they almost witnessed. The relationship is nourished by their effort to understand how love between two individuals might lead to murder, and what such a culmination might mean to the two lovers. In the absence of facts, however, their dialogues are purely speculative:

“Perhaps no one knows”; “I’m not really sure of anything”; “who knows?” they are forced to repeat. Anne and Chauvin’s initial interpretation arises out of the passion they both sensed in the woman’s scream and the man’s cries, a passion they begin to re-create, or, to be more accurate, to create, within themselves. Their only authority rests on their own feelings which, as they grow, give their investigation its obsessive inevitability. As Anne says, “The scream was so loud it’s really only natural for people to try and find out what happened. I would have found it difficult not to, you know” (*MC*, p. 85).

Anne’s perception of the couple’s union is doubly indirect: only Chauvin can help Anne comprehend the murdered woman’s scream; only through the victim can Anne relate to Chauvin. Paradoxically, their only access to the couple’s experience is also the greatest barrier to a reenactment of the murder and the fulfillment of their common desire—the literary activity in which they are engaged, their verbal speculations about the couple and about each other. Yet a genuine understanding of the love-murder can only take place outside of language and reason. The story must be created out of feeling; it cannot be re-created out of language because in this novel the mediating force of language is presented as antithetical to the immediacy of desire and death.<sup>12</sup>

The collaborative storytelling in which Anne and Chauvin are engaged thus has to go beyond the intellectual and the verbal to become erotic and sexual. They act out the couple’s story *physically*: Anne drinks, becomes physically disoriented, cries, trembles, her lips turn gray, her ice-cold hands shake and an uncontrollable moan breaks from her as she approaches the moment of surrender. Anne’s metamorphosis, her abandonment of her social role, is a concrete physical act—she vomits the food and wine, no longer able to control her body with an act of will. “It wasn’t any longer a question of wanting or not wanting to,” she says. Still, Anne and Chauvin’s own adulterous union is not concentrated in the icy touch of their hands, nor does it take place at the moment of their mortuary kiss. These gestures are perfunctory; they are performed “so that it should be accomplished” (*MC*, p. 139). The real eroticism, the real sexuality of the novel is *literary* in nature; it is their common act of exploring the other couple’s story. Filling the mystery of the scream with their own meaning, creating the story together, is, as Gauthier suggests in *Les Parleuses*, in itself an erotic act: “This whiteness, this emptiness is also sexual” (*MC*, p. 19). The activity of “reading” is precariously tensed between talk and action, control and abandonment.

*Gender and Reading*

These two plots—the other couple's unknown story and Anne and Chauvin's reconstruction/creation of that story—rest on multiple meditations both within each plot level and across plot levels. An analysis of the interaction between Anne and Chauvin, of the parallel interaction of the other couple, and of Anne and Chauvin's relationship to that other couple, reveals gender differences as profound as Chauvin's name would seem to suggest. The unusual meeting between Anne and Chauvin is as much colored by deep differences of gender and class as it is by their shared fascination: Anne is the wife of the factory owner; Chauvin has recently quit his job at that factory. Their encounters are viewed with skepticism and hostility by the other customers in the café. It could be argued that Chauvin's motive for the involvement is revenge, that he desires to reverse class categorization by making Anne into his slave. The story he tells about the other couple is about dominance and submission; the means by which he tells it—making Anne the victim—actually duplicates this master/slave relationship to the point where, when Chauvin says, "I wish you were dead," Anne responds as one does to the order of a monarch: "C'est fait" ("I am").<sup>13</sup>

Anne and Chauvin's ritualistic storytelling duplicates the lovers' relationship. While Anne is fascinated by the murder and begs Chauvin to tell her about the couple, even if he has to invent the details of their story, Chauvin seems initially much more interested in talking about Anne, in provoking her, through questions and comments, to reveal herself, in telling her, with great certainty, things about her own life. These two parallel processes of fiction-making, these two stories that emerge, end up nourishing each other. Only by means of Anne's own transformation and re-creation of the victim's role can the background of the murder be filled in and understood. As the dialogue moves from Anne to the murdered woman and back to Anne, we get closer and closer to the moment of death, and closer to the point where Anne and the murdered woman become one.

Chauvin describes the life Anne has led until she met him: "You go to the railings, then you go away and walk around the house, then you come back again to the railings. The child is sleeping upstairs. You have never screamed. Never" (*MC*, p. 108). Her suppressed needs gradually come to the foreground as Chauvin tells Anne about her nude breasts under the dress she wore to the reception for the workers. He gets her to admit to her erotic interest in the men who pass her house every morning. As Anne gradually surrenders to Chauvin's pres-

sure, as she becomes the person he constructs, the story of the murder grows.

In Chauvin's version, the woman loses more and more of her individuality. First she becomes her lover's object, obeying his every command. Eventually she relinquishes all humanity, descending to an unconscious animal-like existence: "Then came the time when he looked at her and no longer saw her as he had seen her before. She ceased to be beautiful or ugly, young or old, similar to anyone else, even to herself" (*MC*, pp. 123, 124). The man prepares the scene for the inevitable murder by breaking down all of the woman's resistance, all her sense of herself. The process of working toward the murder is a common one between the two lovers; yet, even while they share the desire for destruction, emptiness, death, the only way to meet it is through aggression and dominance. The unspoken understanding between them puzzles and fascinates Anne most of all. The couple lives what most of us have been taught to suppress. Together they gradually return to a preverbal existence of silence and power, where they gain a knowledge of themselves and of each other that a novel by definition cannot express. As they turn away from society, reason, and eventually humanity, they transcend language in favor of silent understanding.

At one point, Chauvin speculates, the man simply knew that the woman wished to die, to be killed by him:

"I'd like you to tell me now how they came not to speak to each other any more." . . . "One night they pace back and forth in their rooms, like caged animals, not knowing what's happening to them. They begin to suspect what it is and are afraid." . . . "Nothing can satisfy them any longer." . . . "They're overwhelmed by what's happening, they can't talk about it yet. Perhaps it will take months, months for them to know." (*MC*, pp. 102, 103)

Yet even beyond language, these two individuals are trapped in the structures of domination and submission that divide them.

When Anne, having projected *herself* into the story, speaks of the murdered woman in the future tense, it is clear that she is actually speaking of herself: "She will never speak again, she said." Chauvin's answer reinforces Anne's identification even while changing the story's outcome: "Of course she will. Suddenly one day, one beautiful morning, she'll meet someone she knows and won't be able to avoid saying good morning. Or she'll hear a child singing, it will be a lovely day and she'll remark how lovely it is. It will begin again" (*MC*, p. 138). While

Anne has been able to accept silence and death, Chauvin pulls back. The images he uses—beautiful weather, morning, music, the child—mean life to him; for Anne they have come to represent a form of death. At this point only Anne is capable of coping with the fear of passion and destruction; Chauvin cannot even succeed in comforting her: “Anne Desbaresdes doubled over, her forehead almost touching the table, and accepted her fear” (*MC*, p. 139). Chauvin, in contrast, stops short of his identification with the murderer. He is more and more impotent before Anne’s moans and laments; he is incapable of soothing her fear.

Just as the other couple are ultimately divided—the woman’s knowledge is direct and immediate while the man’s can never be more than vicarious—so Anne and Chauvin relate differently to the story they are interpreting—Anne identifies and merges with the victim, Chauvin remains separate and dominant. The difference in their modes of “reading” the story is a basic precondition of their access to it: for the murder to take place, for the other couple to reach that point of fusion between language and silence, between life and death, one must play the murderer and the other the victim; to understand it, Anne and Chauvin must duplicate this role division. Thus, Chauvin’s entrance into the story through an understanding of the murderer’s motives, of his need for dominance, differs strongly from Anne’s entrance through her experience of the woman’s desire to surrender and be killed. Where Chauvin needs to establish distance, Anne needs to let go of boundaries, absorb and become the other. Her identification with the murdered woman depends on her vacancy and ultimate receptivity. Where Chauvin needs to maintain control and to hold on to language (hence, his denial of Anne’s “She will never speak again”), Anne must embrace silence, must learn to refuse all structure in a readiness to merge her identity with another.

The key to Anne’s identification with the other woman lies in her privileged ability to hear the scream which takes her back to her child’s birth. The novel equates the moments of birth and death, both situated between fusion and separation, separation and fusion. In her interaction with her child, Anne in fact lives through the process of separation and individuation as a parent; in bringing Anne back to a childhood state, her obsessive involvement in the story of the murder is meant to reverse this process. As the child moves toward individuation, civilization, language, so Anne regresses toward the fused, the preverbal, the precivilized. Anne can become the murder victim only at the moment

when she has let go of her child, handed him over to his father and the paternal order. The intensity of the mother-child bond is both painful to sustain and devastating to break; purely nonverbal, it translates only with difficulty into the level of reason and language:

“Perhaps it would be better if we were separate from each other once in a while. I can’t seem to understand this child.” (*MC*, p. 89)

“Sometimes I think I must have invented you—that you don’t really exist, you know.” (*MC*, p. 90)

“You’re growing up, oh, you’re getting so big, and I think it’s wonderful.” (*MC*, p. 100)

“My child,” Anne Desbaresdes said, “I didn’t have time to tell you. . . .” . . . “Sometimes,” she said, “I think I must have invented him.” (*MC*, p. 137)

Anne’s symbiotic closeness to the child is ruptured in Chapter 6, when the crying Anne elliptically announces to him, “It’s all over, darling, I think it’s all over” (*MC*, p. 125), and when, in Chapter 7, she vomits food and wine on the floor of his room, ridding herself both of maternal responsibility and of maternal power. Having done so, she is free to assume the role of child herself. In the novel’s last chapter, the child is absent; Anne has agreed to let someone else take him to the piano lessons.

The powerful and complicated bond between mother and child, Anne’s own double identity, at once the mother who perceives the distance between them and the would-be child who denies difference, suggests the range of relational possibilities in the novel as a whole. The novel outlines two patterns: the male movement from pre-oedipal symbiosis to oedipal desire and fear of engulfment to separation which often takes the form of dominance; and the female lifelong vacillation between pre-oedipal fusion and oedipal separation. Jessica Benjamin, in “The Bonds of Love: Rational Violence and Erotic Domination,”<sup>14</sup> defines the long-range effects of the asymmetry all mother-raised children face in the pre-oedipal period. Male and female children separate from the mother in different ways: “Male children achieve their distinct identity by (more or less violently) repudiating the mother” (p. 147); this male experience is the basis of a fatal polarity in which the female posture is one of “merging at the expense of individuality . . . the sacrifice of independent subjectivity or selfhood” (p. 148). According to Benjamin, this splitting between male and female postures creates relationships of domination and submission between men and women.

Anne and Chauvin's relationship to the "text" of the murder is also defined by these two stances. Just as the child stands in a triangular oedipal relationship to the "parental" couple, Anne and Chauvin, or Anne and Chauvin themselves, can be said to stand in a triangular relationship to the other couple who become "parents" engaged in the consummation of their passion. "Reading," for both Anne and Chauvin, thus becomes an interrogation of an original moment of fusion and symbiosis between mother and father, between mother and child. Anne's (female) and Chauvin's (male) relation to the original "parent" couple suggest different, male and female, modes of reading: the male, based on distance and understanding, on the assertion of boundaries, responds to a fear of immersion in the text; the female, based on openness, vacancy, receptivity, has as its goal the continuity, the fusion, between reader and text. Fiction itself, as this novel's own ambivalent structure demonstrates, supports both of these forms of reading. By valorizing one over the other, however, it provides a way out of any simple binarism.

*Readers of the Text*

Anne and Chauvin are readers inscribed in the text. Their difficulties are reflected on the text's surface and the external reader, duplicating their experience, responds according to their model. In following Anne and Chauvin's process of interpretation, invention, and imitation, the external reader becomes implicated in the novel's structure of mediation. Not only are we twice removed from the immediacy of passion and murder, but we are also, at every step, conscious of the distorting filter of verbal narration. The novel underscores the unreality and mediation of fiction, even while using the structure of fiction and language to express something immediate which is by nature inexpressible, silent, beyond the confines of these structures. Through the novel's ambivalence, the reader comes not to understand, but to experience, to enact, that "something." Ultimately she/he may be led to relinquish the boundaries of separate selfhood and to accept a basic continuity and relatedness.

*Moderato Cantabile*, published in 1958 by Minuit, is a transitional work for Duras and embodies a strange mixture of traditional and modernist techniques.<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, it is told in the third person by an omniscient narrator whose straightforward and detached tone suggests that expression is unproblematic. The novel's linear temporal progression and the use of the *passé simple*, the predominance of dialogue, the unquestionable reality of the crime itself, the traditional

and simple syntax are all indications of a straightforward narrative. On the other hand, everything beyond the actual crime is hopelessly irretrievable; there is no truth to be uncovered and the bulk of the novel rests on conjecture and speculation. The narrator's report does reflect the strain Anne and Chauvin suffer in their interpretative process. The insecurities it produces in the reader are all the more unsettling for the apparent security of the novel's traditional forms. Just as Anne hovers between life and death, so Duras's fiction is tenuously poised between life and death, between affirming the capacities of language (fiction) and destroying them. The novel's success depends on their at least partial destruction.

The text's ambivalence emerges most forcefully in its penultimate and climactic scene, the dinner at the Desbaresdes home. This scene represents a crucial transition in the child's development from the pre-oedipal to the oedipal, the maternal to the paternal order. The opposing forces between which Anne is hopelessly caught, defined by the terms *moderato* and *cantabile*, interact most brutally during the dinner, making Anne's predicament unbearable. The mansion (inside) is opposed to the beach (outside); the formal dinner guests to Chauvin, who roams on the beach. Anne wears a magnolia between her breasts as a reminder of the vital and potentially destructive forces that the civilized bourgeois society suppresses and displaces. Similarly, the elegant food is opposed to the primitive wine which alone satisfies Anne's "other hunger." As these forces coexist and alternate in the chapter's counterpoint structure, without reaching any resolution (Anne vomits both food and wine; she neither joins the party inside, nor Chauvin outside), the reader vacillates hopelessly between two extremes, unable even to imagine how a resolution might be achieved.

The reader is drawn into the scene through ellipsis and absence. Names are mentioned only rarely; invariably, the characters, including those who have names, are evoked as "a man," "a woman," "this child," "the other." When Anne vomits, "a shadow" appears at the door of the room; it is the reader who invests this shadow with the identity of a husband and imagines the explanations that ensue. Equally elliptical are the transitions: Chauvin does not proceed from the beach to the garden to the town, he merely appears in each of these three places. The dinner conversation is similarly disjointed; no comment is followed up, no question answered.<sup>16</sup> Here the story of Anne and Chauvin is almost as cryptic as that of the other couple.

The reader's insecurity is exacerbated by the text's mixture of levels of discourse. The food is personified, the people are reified:

"The salmon arrives" (literal translation), "the other waits." "Their bare shoulders have the gloss and the solidity of a society founded and built on the certainty of its rights, and they were chosen to fit this society" (*MC*, p. 128). The syntax, although it adheres to grammatical rules, is often ambiguous as we proceed from one sentence to the next: "The salmon arrives, chilled in its original form. Dressed in black, and with white gloves, a man carries it . . ." (*MC*, p. 127; literal translation).

The narrative tone seems equally incongruous. The power of emotion in the novel derives from its displacement: the narrator as well as the characters are detached, almost uninvolved in the discussions. Except for the woman's scream and Anne's moans, the only direct expressions of emotion, the reader can extrapolate violence, passion, sadness, fear, only through indirection. It is as if emotion had abandoned individuals,<sup>17</sup> had left even the province of human beings, and had spread all over the surrounding scene. Throughout the novel, the modulations of the brilliant sunset, the smell of magnolia blossoms, the sounds of the beech trees in the wind, and the murmurs of the ocean contain the passion that seems to have left the characters. Instead of telling Chauvin about herself, Anne describes her house, the trees and the flowers in her garden: "Lots of women have already lived in that same house and listened to the hedges, at night, in place of their hearts" (*MC*, p. 105).

At the dinner, the salmon and duck function similarly as objective correlatives for Anne's condition. Originally free, they are now victims of a social ritual, killed and refashioned into their natural appearance, before being consumed and digested: "Meanwhile the pink, succulent, deep-sea salmon, already disfigured by the brief moments just past, continues its ineluctable advance towards total annihilation" (*MC*, pp. 126, 127). Death is in the magnolias' "funereal flowering" and in the appearance of "a duck in its orange-shrouded coffin." Disturbed by these incongruities, the novel's reader is freed to make connections between totally detached characters and an atmosphere laden with passion and death.

Not only have emotions removed themselves from the human beings who usually house them, but parts of the human body have also become autonomous and separate. The child is the only complete person in the novel; his body is integrated and contained. In contrast, Anne and Chauvin do not control their movements; their hands act independently of their volition. Each movement is a surprise: "the fingers crumple it [the magnolia], pierce the petals, then stop, paralyzed, lie on the table, wait, affecting an attitude of nonchalance,

but in vain" (*MC*, p. 130). Ultimately, human fragmentation actually reaches the point of mutation: "He looks at his empty hands, distorted by the strain. There at the end of his arm, a destiny grew" (*MC*, p. 132; literal translation). The impersonal structure of this sentence suggests Chauvin's distance from his body and his fate.

The novel's most disturbing element is its confusing temporal structure. Time appears, at first, as a steady force which proceeds independently of the characters. Anne is always late; their meetings are always cut short by the factory siren. Chauvin needs to free himself from the constraints of time by passing it idly. Initially, the reader is deceived by the linear narrative: such details as the knitting of a sweater, the flowering and wilting of magnolias, the use of *passé simple*, reinforce temporal progression. Yet the *passé simple* seems as inappropriate to Anne and Chauvin's conjectural dialogues as it is ill-suited to the account of Anne's progressive degeneration. As John Kneller pointed out, the *passé simple* actually disguises the present tense which emerges in the dinner scene.<sup>18</sup> By obscuring the hypothetical realm in which the entire action takes place, the *passé simple* creates a disquieting incongruity at the center of the text. Even more disturbing is the sudden switch to the present and then to the future in the course of the dinner scene and in the narration of the other couple's story. How are these events related to each other? Suddenly we are forced out of the security of temporal progression into a vague duration that exists outside of known temporality.

Repetition, one of the novel's main structural principles, undermines even further the novel's apparent chronology. The scenes in the café are so similar as to appear like variations of the same scene. There are, furthermore, two piano lessons, two parties at which Anne wears a wilted flower between her breasts. The novel's regular rituals, such as the Friday piano lesson and the evening siren and the afternoon walks, are offset by the uncertainty of its tenses. When, for example, did the reception for the factory workers take place? Did Chauvin witness it, invent it, or did he anticipate the events of Chapter 7 as the conflation of the two scenes' imagery seems to suggest? Anne's moment of identification with the murdered woman is based on the anticipation of a future ("She will never speak again"), as is her regurgitation of the alien food she had been forced to eat. The ritual murder, on the other hand, is evoked as an event that had already happened at the point of the last meeting at the café ("c'est fait"). Even at the level of the fiction, the novel's main events are represented as hypothetical rather than actual, absent rather than present.

For the external reader, just as for Anne and Chauvin, the act of reading is an activity of filling gaps, responding to mystery and ambivalence, coping with contradiction and discomfort. It is both a state of reception and an act of production. The mystery-story structure is used not to involve the reader in the game of uncovering a crime, but in the game of creating it; it is not an intellectual puzzle, but an emotional gamble. This process of reading/narration—the boundaries are no longer fixed—has as its goal a transformation similar to Anne's: the destruction of the reader's own civilized self, tied to and bolstered by traditional literary structures. It is meant to create in the reader a receptivity to other modes of being, even while demonstrating the deathly dangers of that openness.

*Female Reading/Female Writing*

The responses that the novel, in its ambivalence, elicits from its readers form the basis for what could be called a female aesthetic, an aesthetic based on pre-oedipal desire, on boundless and continuous identity, and on the destruction of the unified self. Structured on a series of oppositions—*moderato/cantabile*, male/female, language/silence, oedipal/pre-oedipal—the novel first forces the reader to assume contrary stances and then releases her/him from duality by clearly breaking out of the first into the second terms. Both by dealing with contradiction and by choosing the female, the reader engages in the novel's female aesthetic.

In the novel, language is equated with reason and safety, with *moderato*. The first couple reach the point where words have become cumbersome, unnecessary. Their understanding is total only at the moment when, having gone through language, they have reached silence. Anne and Chauvin, afraid of the silences that begin to ensue between them, talk obsessively. "Talk to me," Chauvin commands again and again, and Anne responds by reciting parts of her life in automatic and detached fashion. Her meaningless words have become independent of feeling, independent even of truth. Both characters admit to lying; there is no truth to which they are compelled to be responsible. It is precisely this freedom of fictional language that gives it the flexibility, the creative power which allows Anne and Chauvin to *know* what the other couple have experienced. Words have become detached from their semantic content, have moved beyond denotation to self-referentiality.

Although verbal exchange provides a form of safety for the two

protagonists, a distance from the immediacy of murder, it also embodies the only means by which they can project themselves into the story's affective power. From description and rational analysis they proceed to the freedom of invention which, transcending the limits of truth, makes it possible for them to relive imaginatively the couple's experience. The annihilation of self Anne experiences takes place in the *literary* process of identification with the other woman, of entering the couple's story. The freedom of fiction leads Anne and Chauvin beyond language to silence and death. Only at the moment of silence can identification take place: "She will never speak again." The woman's scream is the death of language and literature. Hence Anne's fear and hesitation. Anne's desire threatens not only her life and the very foundation of her society, but also the basis on which the novel of which she is the heroine rests. Oscillating between the conservative forces of society and language, and the destructive forces of passion, silence, and death, the novel constantly attempts to transcend its own limitations, to "consume" itself. It attempts to maintain, at all moments, the ambivalence of the murdered woman's scream which, on the threshold between chaos and civilization, expresses both plenitude (of sound) and emptiness (of speech). The process of fiction-making (interpreting reality, narrating it, then reading that narration, and so on) is precariously tensed between the two poles indicated by the terms of *moderato* and *cantabile*. This process depends on the constraints of form, yet is able, at the same time, to point beyond them, to suggest much that it does not say.

Anne's response to the Diabelli sonatina best indicates the kind of response that could lead to a fusion such as Anne experiences with the murdered woman:

She listened to the sonatina. It came from the depths of the ages, borne to her by her son. Often, as she listened to it, she felt she was on the verge of fainting. . . . The sonatina still resounded, borne like a feather by this your barbarian, whether he liked it or not, and showered again on his mother, sentencing her anew to the damnation of her love. The gates of hell banged shut. (MC, p. 115)

In order to feel, as Anne does, the forces of death and damnation when experiencing a musical or literary text, we must, like Anne, come to the point of almost fainting. That is, we must relinquish the boundaries of self that tie us to our existence as civilized human beings. To enter a work we must, in one sense, stop being ourselves, only to become, as does Anne, more truly ourselves in another. This is the

involvement Chauvin resists; in showing us both modes, the novel seems to uphold difference, yet in privileging Anne's response it comes to transcend any neat dualism.

I would like to argue that this process of reading/narration, dependent on openness and receptivity, is, for Duras, the basis for a female aesthetic.<sup>19</sup> Here, the characters and the reader enact the progressive destruction of the monolithic traditions of our culture, in favor of endless repetition, mediation, indirection, reproduction. As one result of the process Anne undergoes, she discovers/creates within herself something totally unknown and unsuspected. As she leaves the café, she has been able to transcend the opposition of *moderato/cantabile* and to accept an existence of *moderato cantabile*: she will neither continue her bourgeois life, nor has she succumbed to the deadly lure of passion. In her identification with the other woman, she has discovered the relational base of her own identity and has been able to transcend the separation imposed by the social roles of adult, of wife and mother. Anne's gradual detachment from her child is parallel to her attachment to the dead woman whose life she interprets/invents. Structured on a number of relationships—male/female, mother/child—the novel thus ultimately relies on the relationship between Anne and the murder victim, on a female bond that precedes and supersedes the other bonds.<sup>20</sup>

Literature and music emerge in this novel as subversive, even destructive forces. The mediated experience of literature is, in some ways, conservative and safe; in others it can effect profound changes. Anne is transformed by her involvement with the woman's story, even though she does not die. Instead, we can imagine her going through the same process again, condemned, like Lol Stein, to endless repetition, trying to re-create in the future the moment of her symbolic murder in the café. As Chauvin says, "It will begin again."

Female aesthetic, for Duras, is here, in the endless repetition and deconstruction, in the repeated transformation of the individual subject through the fusion with others. It lies in the affirmation of death and destruction, not as an end of life, but as a means to other lives which emerge after silence and emptiness have been reached, which emerge through emptiness and silence, through fiction and beyond it.\*

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- <sup>1</sup> Marguerite Duras, *Les Parleuses* (Paris: Minuit, 1974), p. 6.
- <sup>2</sup> I use here the terms of Susan Sontag's famous essay, "Against Interpretation," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell, 1961).
- <sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, "A Jury of Her Peers," *New Literary History*, 11, 3 (Spring 1980), 451–67.
- <sup>4</sup> Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978).
- <sup>5</sup> Norman Holland and Leona Sherman, "Gothic Possibilities," *New Literary History*, 8, 2 (Winter 1977), 279–94.
- <sup>6</sup> Caren Greenberg, "Reading Reading: Echo's Abduction of Language," in *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, eds. Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, Nelly Furman (New York: Praeger, 1980), pp. 309–30.
- <sup>7</sup> Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978).
- <sup>8</sup> Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).
- <sup>9</sup> Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976). For a fuller review of this literature and its relation to French feminist theory, esp. Kristeva and Irigaray, see my review essay, "Mothers and Daughters," *Signs*, 7, 1 (Autumn 1981), 200–22.
- <sup>10</sup> In "Crime and Detection in the Novels of Marguerite Duras," *Contemporary Literature*, 15 (1974), 508, Erica Eisinger points out that Duras uses virtually no possessive adjectives in relation to Anne; her house is "this house" and even her child is referred to as "this child."
- <sup>11</sup> Parenthetical citations (MC, with page number) refer to *Moderato Cantabile*, trans. Richard Seaver, in *Four Novels* (New York: Grove Press, 1965).
- <sup>12</sup> See Evelyn Zepp, "Language as Ritual in Marguerite Duras' *Moderato Cantabile*," Symposium (Fall 1976), for an excellent exposition of the distancing and mediating properties of language in this novel.
- <sup>13</sup> I am grateful to Thomas Vargish for suggesting this interpretation.
- <sup>14</sup> Jessica Benjamin, "The Bonds of Love: Rational Violence and Erotic Domination," *Feminist Studies*, 6, 1 (Spring 1980), 144–74.
- <sup>15</sup> In *Les Parleuses*, p. 59, Duras speaks of *Moderato Cantabile* as a transitional work in her career: "This woman who wants to be killed, I lived that . . . and from then on the book changes. . . . I believe that the turn toward . . . sincerity happened there."
- <sup>16</sup> See Roland Champagne, "An Incantation of the Sirens: The Structure of *Moderato Cantabile*," *French Review*, 48, 6, pp. 981–89, for an analysis of the fragmentation in Duras's narrative.
- <sup>17</sup> See Gauthier's comment on *Hiroshima, mon amour* in *Les Parleuses*, p. 83: ". . . desire circulated from person to person, not indifferently, but still it could pass from one to another."
- <sup>18</sup> John Kneller, "Elective Empathies and Musical Affinities," *Yale French Studies*, 26 (1961), 114–20.
- <sup>19</sup> See *Les Parleuses*, pp. 146–49, for Duras's comments on passivity as the foundation of feminist politics.
- <sup>20</sup> On female friendship from a psychoanalytic perspective, see Elizabeth Abel's "(E)Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women," *Signs*, 6, 3 (Spring 1981), 413–35.