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**FROM THE SELF À L'AUTRE OR THE QUESTION OF LOST IDENTITIES IN  
MELVILLE AND DURAS**

– Je pleure sans raison que je pourrais vous dire c'est comme une peine qui me traverse [...] c'est comme si c'était moi [...] elle donne le sentiment d'être maintenant prisonnière d'une douleur trop ancienne pour être encore pleurée (198)<sup>1</sup>.

You are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?

«The Negro» (223)<sup>2</sup>

To establish an argued nexus between two dissimilar texts is the main purpose of the following study. I will focus on narratives dealing with contrasting referential worlds, which nevertheless create fusion where cultural, racial, economical, and sexual barriers become so forbidding that only ingenious writerly stratagems can overcome these hurdles. In using them, writers manifest the ability to generate unsuspected bridges while they challenge readers to create other possible ways of linkage.

Melville's short story «Benito Cereno» and Marguerite Duras' novel *Le Vice-Consul* were chosen to be discussed under this briefly sketched premise. I recognize a particular commonality of elements in both fictions, namely the presence of disparate contexts – the lives of whites and non-whites, of masters and slaves, of colonial and colonized – forced to interpenetrate in different ways, notwithstanding the cruel consequences of the osmotic operations that so take place. Life in death, death in life or death *tout court* pervade both narratives and represent, partially at least, how far the cost of loosing one's rigid boundaries can rise, or how one feels the connections that insidiously bind the self to the other.

It should be noted, though, that both texts are not granted equivalent coverage here. My reading of «Benito Cereno» only corroborates another analysis already pre-

sented elsewhere<sup>3</sup>, i.e. I do not bring a new view to this story – which, most of the time, is relegated to the back stage, in spite of being assigned an essential role as a counterpart to *Le Vice-Consul* wherein arguable links with Melville's tale occupy the foreground of the scenery I am engaged to design. However, prior to delving deeper into the clarification of the above assertions, I would rather stress some of the more obvious dissimilarities between the fictions that I am considering here.

*Le Vice-Consul*, being a novel of the 60s and a manifestation of the *nouveau-roman* aesthetics, reveals a *modus operandi* where causation is apparently abolished and the author's authority is on full blast. The reader is not indulged with logical spatio-temporal parameters, or with a logical plot, or a reassuring omniscient narrator, or the closure of the text. One is never granted the illusion of immediate access to reality by dint of verisimilitude in any form. One is, instead, left considerably free to construct all sorts of associations of one's personal experiences and those of the characters – with whom one can hardly, if ever, identify in full.

Contrarily, «Benito Cereno» might appear as a sheer revelatory text, built upon the misconstructions and reconstructions of Delano whose point of view prevails throughout the narrative, wherein seeming and being appear too entangled for «a person of a singularly undistrustful nature» (BC, 144), such as this American Captain (Amasa Delano). At times, though, he is able to catch glimpses of the theatrics around him. During the sequence of Don Benito's shaving, for instance, he could not escape «the vagary that in the black he saw a headsman, and in the white a man at the block» (BC, 187) and «the idea flashed across him that possibly master and man for some unknown purpose, were acting out [...] some juggling play before him» (BC, 189). Scales were only dropped from his eyes when all the other characters also dropped the masks worn along their dangerous playing. But then all of us were able to see clearly, and even to understand the unsuspected omen in the beginning of the story: the symbolical devices «uppermost and central of which was a dark satyr in a mask holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked» (BC, 147). When finally enlightened by a «flash of revelation» (BC, 202) Amasa Delano shares his insights with the reader, the mystery is resolved, the closure seems obvious. Moreover, veracity is paramount and, if any doubt might subsist, the display (in the final pages) of factual knowledge extracted from official documents should be enough to dissipate it. Our way through a maze of causes and effects is truly found: «every enigmatic event of the day [and] the entire past voyage of the *San Dominick*» (BC, 202) lie before our perfectly illuminated eyes – we might as well give credence to our, at this point meta-fictional, narrator when he excuses himself for the «unavoidable intricacies in the beginning», adding that Don Benito's «deposition has served as the key to fit into the lock of the complications which precede it» (BC, 221).

While Melville in this way creates verisimilitude (despite the operatic ambience and melodramatic effects of the story), M. Duras, a writer within «the modernist literary climate» where «the old revelatory text no longer seems credible» (Weinstein, 303), replaces a make-believe technique by another designed rather to emphasize all

artificial ingredients, hence destroying any eventual illusion of reality. In fact, if on the one hand we are supposed to deal with a tale so much based on «true» facts that Don Benito's deposition, registered in legal documents, served as a pre-text, on the other hand we are expected to follow the spectre of fragmented stories as they are being invented, stories conveying the notion that there is no pre-existent reality to which fiction must identify itself. Peter Morgan, the fictional author through whom Duras may be seen as the advocate of «a practice of writing which displaces canonical tenets» (Sherzer, 380)<sup>4</sup>, makes metatextual comments that give visibility to the fabrication of his material, to its lack of causation and to his own intention of appealing to sensibility and sensitivity rather than reason:

*elle marcherait et la phrase avec elle [...] elle avancerait tournée vers le soleil couchant [...] dix ans durant et puis à Calcutta comme un... point au bout d'une longue ligne de faits sans signification différenciée? Il n'y aurait que... sommeils, faims, disparition de sentiments, et aussi du lien entre la cause et l'effet? [...] ... ah, je ne voudrais pas quitter ce niveau-là de sa crasse faite de tout [...] faite de sa peau;... faite de sueur, des restes de sandwiches au foie gras... vous dégoûter, foie gras, poussière, bitume, mangues, écailles de poisson, sang, tout (VC, 182, the italics are mine).*

In this passage P. Morgan is of course referring to the beggar-woman whose life he decided to invent. But the other characters, who belong to another narrative level, are presented in a similar way. This is to say that causation is also avoided in what concerns Anne Marie Stretter's or Jean-Marc de H.'s lives, which are never thoroughly explained. It is as if Duras were not more interested than Peter Morgan in penetrating deeper than the «niveau de la crasse»<sup>5</sup>, while confronting her readers with effect and abandoning them to the task of imagining its cause and sequence. Jean-Marc de H. shoots randomly into lepers, Anne-Marie Stretter sheds unexpected tears and is said to have made a suicidal attempt, but we only hear the echoes of those events never ascribed to any specific reason. We are even warned about a possibility of infinite distance between what happens and why, voiced by A. M. Stretter herself: «parfois... une catastrophe peut éclater en un lieu très lointain de celui où elle aurait pu se produire» (VC, 129).

Naturally, if there is not an explicitly logical relationship between events and characters the latter are hardly plausible – thus hardly representing identification for the reader. This identification with the characters is, it should be noted, one of the major effects obtained in «Benito Cereno» (as in all traditional narratives).

*Le Vice-Consul* is also a multilayered and fragmented text where multiple narrators plus multiplied points of view, and the use of the «mise-en-abîme» technique, deploy a complex network, in contrast to the straightforwardness of Melville's short story. In this sense, one might add that in his text the coordinates of space and time behave according to our expectations, while in Duras' novel those parameters are not less undone than everything else. Flashbacks are mingled with present events and the



space is a strange mix of geographical landmarks and invented places. A mix of water and land – the marshland crisscrossed by a thousand causeways drawing incomprehensible nets – a space conducive to getting lost, as it actually happens to the beggar-woman, and also to the other characters albeit in a more figurative manner<sup>6</sup>. Thus, it is equally difficult for us to find our way through a narrative where the lack of a definite point of view only reverberates the absence of a definitive ending or closure. We are deliberately left in incompleteness and ambiguity which may well represent the impossibility of capturing any kind of unidimensional truth. However, if deprived of familiar landmarks we are compensated by a larger margin of freedom in textual interpretation and granted the right to posit connections of our own devising.

It now seems appropriate to focus our attention on those features of «Benito Cereno» that, being less conventional than the aforementioned aspects of this narrative, may suggest a parallel with *Le Vice-Consul*. So far I have pointed out the closure of this short story, the logic of its plot, and the degree of verisimilitude in the way its characters, as well as the categories of time and space, are presented to the reader. Purposely, very important textual elements have been left aside until this moment. Weinstein upholds the notion that «Melville's pyrotechnics would be of little interest if his goal were merely to mock and expose Delano», advancing forth that only «at the very end of the narrative, we begin to glimpse the depths of the story, those reaches of life and death which have nothing to do with [...] naïveté or guessing games» (Weinstein, 176-77). The text had in fact been adequately revelatory, as much as apparently unquestionable had been its narrator's claims of enlightenment: «*The San Dominick's* hull lies open», «as a vault whose door has been flung back» (BC, 221). Nevertheless, this image of openness also fits Melville's tale insofar as not all the answers to the questions raised within and by means of the text have after all been satisfactorily given. All realist devices notwithstanding, there still remained an unnarrated story, the one that Cereno refused to tell while enclosing himself in muteness upon certain topics, «on which, indeed, all his old reserves were piled» (BC, 223). Of those Babo was the most unspeakable; Don Benito, unable to even bear the sight of him, had refused to identify the black leader before the tribunal and fainted when pressed to do so by the judges. Moreover, his death, several months after he had shown regained «health with free-will» (BC, 206), was never explained to the reader, at least not any more than to the «astounded and pained» American Captain – who had asked what was casting such a shadow upon him when he was only expected to feel joy for having been saved. To this question he/we are merely offered an hermetic answer – «The Negro» (BC, 223) – wherein lies the key for opening the door to a «muffled narrative of displacement and metamorphosis», the «underside of Melville's story» (Weinstein, 174)<sup>7</sup>. To Delano's question the possible answer is that Don Benito became the tragic and fatal victim of his irreversibly lost identity – an imagined identity based on the conception of an unchangeable world built upon universal laws and absolute essences. Playing the Captain, when he had become no more than the slave of his former slave, killed Cereno's spirit before his body was borne on a bier, since it gave him the awareness of how much power «is invested on imagery itself» (Weinstein, 181). Once, when still too far from revelation,

the guileless Delano had suspected Don Benito of being «some low born adventurer, masquerading as an oceanic grandee», but a mere glance into his profile, «whose clearness of cut was refined [...] as well as enobled about the chin by the beard», had been enough for him to regain his previous certitude that he was dealing with «a true offshoot of a true *hidalgo* Cereno» (BC, 164-65). This *hidalgo* identity was obviously the only one known to Don Benito until he was forced to undo it himself through play, simultaneously realizing that his *noblesse de sang* could after all be reduced to the same emptiness of his artificially stiffened scabbard. Around his neck had hung the key to the padlock carried by Atufal, «significant symbols» (or so pronounced by Delano, p. 163) of Cereno's authority over his slaves. But key and padlock had become false signs, analogous to the «silver-mounted sword, apparent symbol of despotic command, [which] was not, indeed, a sword, but a ghost of one» (BC, 223). His identity as a Master, he could hardly fail to perceive it now, was likewise a ghost of one, since it had been constructed as a fiction, a work of art carefully elaborated by the mutinous slaves aboard the Spanish vessel. Enslaved through imagination, and watching his former prisoners enjoying freedom through equal means, Benito Cereno could certainly see how their supposed essences were bare roles, permutable and reciprocally connected<sup>8</sup>. An implicit concept of a Captain as being «all authority» and a slave «all bondage» was thus destroyed as was «the illusion that either of these terms could exist by itself – the myth that Melville wants to explode and expose» (Weinstein, 182). All this does not of course belong to the level of the narrative we are so tempted to view as a simple «who-dunit». It is rather a «subtext», an implicit source of energy that drives Benito Cereno's story and serves, in the comparative analysis I am offering here, as a bridge connecting it to what in *Le Vice-Consul* is not made explicit either. For if the Melvillean's world is filled with shadows, meaning that the hegemony of self is proven a myth, the same can surely be said about Duras's fictional universe where linkage is everywhere pervasive. Furthermore if the state of death in life experienced by Don Benito may be ascribed to the division of his self, a psychological and cultural displacement that turned him into a zombie before actually killing him, a surprisingly similar situation is present in *Le Vice-Consul*, as I intend to demonstrate.

At first it must be said that, albeit the novel's aforementioned features, namely its performance of the «triumph of *l'écriture* at the expense of plot» (Weinstein, 296), we are not dealing with a purely autonomous and self-referential text. Like «Benito Cereno», *Le Vice-Consul* narrates a drama of cultural and psychological dissociation generating the loss of imagined identities and the movement of self to other. All its characters are separated from their origins, they all live an experience of exile that bind them together in different ways, even if it leads them to madness and figurative death.

Duras juxtaposes two drastically opposed worlds – Asia and Europe – in that way underscoring both their dissimilarities and merged boundaries. Duras' characters (along with the readers) are confronted with extreme hunger, leprosy, plight for survival on one side, and abundance, wealth, leisure and tedium on the other. But fatigue, monotony, emptiness, madness and death, (as well as humidity, heat and a certain kind of



light) are common to both extremes of what we gradually perceive as two faces of the same very complex cultural and material reality. This impression of overlapped spheres is only confirmed in the way the characters, despite their apparent isolation from each other, walk on intersected paths. It is not as if they were forced to suffer an imposed metamorphosis for they are not made to travesty themselves, like Don Benito, and to recognize through a swapping of 'persona' the vulnerability and the fictional dimension of their imagined selves. Neither of them becomes the other through a self-inflicted undoing, like the one that killed the Spaniard. However, not less condemned to connection than were Cereno and the Negro, they just blend in a natural and inexorable way, as do the worlds to which each of them relate. In the realm of Indian misery, contamination proves inescapable; poverty and death cross every frontier in a place where the number of starving people is countless, where the fences of tall iron railings cannot always keep the wealthy away from the indigent (although built to be a barricade against the beggars, in the same way that the fences on the edge of the sea are a barricade against the sharks). Even if not directly attained, the Europeans can hardly be immune to the calamities around them: «Les suicides d'Européens pendant la famine qui jamais ne les touche, pourtant, c'est curieux» (VC, 161). Likewise, the weariness of the overworked Indian people in the rice paddies of the Delta is ironically assigned to the idle Europeans who travel in their luxurious black Lancia. Fatigue is the word ambiguously placed in the text, fitting both the passengers in the car and the workers in the marshland:

Elle a posé sa tête contre l'épaule de Charles Rossett.

– Ça va?

Mille sur les talus, ils transportent, posent, repartent les mains vides, gens autour de l'eau vide des rizières, rizières aux arêtes droites, dix mille, partout, cent mille, partout, en grains serrés sur les talus ils marchent, procession continue sans fin. De chaque côté d'eux pendent leurs outils de chair nue.

*Fatigue.*

Ils ne parlent pas pour ne pas la réveiller [...] (VC, 176, my italic).

The best evidence of linkage between disparate worlds is however to be found in the ways the characters of the novel (especially the three main ones) relate to each other and to those tangential, or apparently so but in fact intersected, contexts where they exist. The first to whom we get acquainted is the nameless beggar-woman whose individuality is gradually eroded in each step of the narrative's progression. Thirty pages from the end she became a symbol of all outcasts like herself, or perhaps of an even larger reality: «Quand tu parles d'elle je la vois parmi des jeunes filles, je les vois vieilles entre le Siam et la forêt et jeunes à leur arrivée à Calcutta [...] Mais tu peux choisir de ne parler que d'elle au fond» (VC, 180). Having lost all references, both the memory of her past and the consciousness of her *self* are forever deleted. «La mort dans une vie en cours mais qui ne vous rejoindrait jamais» (VC, 174) might be what best describes her half-living in a state also experienced in different ways by other charac-

ters, but which is especially embodied by the lepers, the epitome of India's horror and misery<sup>9</sup>. Her periplus from Savannakket to Calcutta, an odyssey that is tantamount to ten years of endless travail, has also been seen by critics as allegorical: «une géographie magique et symbolique des 'Indes souffrantes'» (Borgomano, 482). Finally stationary in Calcutta, the summit of Indian poverty and sickness, she has come very close to an abstraction:

C'est quoi pour toi la mendiante?

Un état ilimité de l'individu. Le lieu de l'écrit sans fond, sans fin. Aussi bien, elle n'existe pas – elle est un maillon dans la chaîne de la misère... Elle est sans connaissance... Elle est sans passé, sans avenir, sans bêtise, sans intelligence. Sans repères. Sans identité. C'est l'instant... Ni tristesse ni joie... C'est comme... Un état animal de l'humain... Donc, elle est au plus près de l'idée<sup>10</sup>.

It is interesting to note that when referring to Anne-Marie Stretter Duras uses the same expression, «le lieu de l'écrit», meaning they both cannot exist outside the text where they belong. In fact the author, as well as her critics, underlines several links between the two of them, in spite of the obvious differences that apparently keep them apart from each other. In *Le Vice-Consul* they are juxtaposed in a way that enhances those similarities vs. dissimilarities, and mirrors the bonds that unite, as well as the contrasts that separate, the Eastern and Western worlds to which they respectively belong<sup>11</sup>. Their material conditions of living could not be more disparate but, even if one is surrounded by luxury while the other is deprived of the essential, they are both victims of a physical and psychological displacement that blends them in a continuum of spiritual emptiness. «Ni tristesse ni joie», says Duras regarding the beggar-woman, and Anne-Marie Stretter uses similar words about herself or about her life in India: «[...] ce n'est ni pénible ni agréable de vivre. C'est autre chose [...] ce n'est ni facile ni difficile, ce n'est rien» (VC, 109). She thus expresses an absence of feeling that seems to exceed human capacities; one would need to learn how to lose entirely one's boundaries and landmarks before attaining that sort of emotional nothing. Perhaps this is what George Crown (one of her friends) means when he is saying about Anne-Marie's nameless counterpart: «elle a trouvé comment se perdre [...], elle a oublié, ne sait plus qu'elle est la fille de X ou Y, plus d'ennui pour elle». Crown adds another statement that shows how desirable such a state of mind is to Anne-Marie and her friends: «nous sommes là pour ça en principe. Jamais, jamais le moindre soupçon d'ennui» (VC, 181). Both women left behind their native countries and travelled through Asia for years, before stopping in Calcutta. One has lost the memory of her origins, the other (said to be from Venice) chose to obliterate even that sign of individuation: «C'est à dire c'est un peu simple de croire que l'on vient de Venise seulement, on peut venir d'autres endroits qu'on a traversés en cours de route, il me semble» (VC, 111)<sup>12</sup>. Both are outcasts and yet both are the object of obsessive fascination. They might be seen as the replica of each other in their present emptiness and prostration. Furthermore, a vivid image of these two characters' merging is given in the final movement of the novel where they are seen immersed in



the ocean that surrounds the islands of the Delta (or, to put it more accurately, the beggar-woman is seen diving in the sea where Anne-Marie is imagined swimming). They are ultimately linked by the fluid element that has been said to be both the originator of individual shapes and the medium of their dissolution; and which, one should not forget, happens to be in this particular case the ocean that connects Europe to India.

Those two only apparently discrete worlds are also allowed to intermingle in another central character, Jean-Marc de H., i.e. the vice-consul himself. He is also a stylized representation with many affinities to Anne-Marie and the beggar-woman, the three of them being joined in their non-lives. «La mort dans une vie en cours... mais qui ne vous rejoindrait jamais» are the already cited vice-consul's words concerning the beggar-woman but simultaneously being the synthesis of his own existence (or of Anne-Marie's equivalent death in life). The three of them are ostracized, although they become the focus of attention in the European community, and the three of them are separated from their origins. Jean Marc's identity is no less fragmentary than those of the two women. Incidentally, it is worth evoking here his memories of firing into mirrors or, in other words, his act of symbolically breaking into pieces his own reflected image – a figurative suicide after all. He is associated with death in more, and more explicit, ways than Anne-Marie and the beggar-woman<sup>13</sup>. In his recent past his violence found another target; he used to shoot lepers in the gardens of his house at Lahore, a crime he could never find the adequate words to explain:

Les mots pour vous dire, à vous, les mots... de moi... pour vous dire, à vous, ils n'existent pas [...]

– Sur vous ou sur Lahore? [...]

– Sur Lahore (VC, 125).

But in the same sequence he adds with no further elucidation: «Lahore, c'était encore une forme de l'espoir» (VC, 126). Maybe this last statement, despite its ambiguity, authorizes the interpretation of his act as an extreme way of terminating the everlasting misery of others, thus being the manifestation of the vice-consul's (now lost) hope that this would be possible<sup>14</sup>. In any event, it is a crime that can hardly be ascribed to mere repulsion of the lepers since Jean-Marc is the only white character who dares to walk beside them. It is he who cries out his non-fear of leprosy, insisting in his desire to possess it («Je désire la lèpre»). This «longing for contamination or contact with the material realities of life that the colonials keep at a respectable distance» (McNeece, 431) may also be seen as a death wish or as a longing for a state of oblivion comparable to the physical and emotional indifference attained by the beggar-woman and desired by the others.

Questioned about who is the Vice-Consul of Lahore, Anne-Marie does not hesitate in her laconic answer: «– Oh! un homme mort...» (VC, 128), which cannot fail to remind us of all the times that she too is associated with death, the latent theme that permeates the novel on a sub-textual level<sup>15</sup>. When, for instance, Charles Rossett fantasizes her as a corpse in Venice («avec les trous de ses yeux dans son cadavre au milieu de Venise», VC, 191), this vision of her suddenly brings the Vice-Consul to his thoughts

and later, when the same Rossett asks himself «à quoi ressemble-t-il le vice-consul de Lahore», «A moi» is the answer his own mind gives him, exactly as if it were voiced by Anne-Marie herself («A moi, dit Anne-Marie Stretter», VC, 204).

Jean-Marc de H. and Anne-Marie Stretter seem to be aware of their co-identity:

– Je sais qui vous êtes, dit-elle. Nous n'avons pas besoin de nous connaître davantage. Ne vous trompez pas.

– Je ne me trompe pas (VC, 143).

Moreover, their paradoxical relationship is recognized in a way that leaves no room for doubt: «Je suis avec vous ici complètement comme avec personne d'autre, ici ce soir, aux Indes» (VC, 144)<sup>16</sup>.

The three main characters are then correlatives of each other. But they may also be seen as the objective correlatives of their surrounding atmosphere of physical and spiritual torpor («La chaleur [...] cette monotonie, cette lumière, il n'y a aucune couleur» VC, 101). In its vastness and «cosmic desolation» India generates a mood of its own. Furthermore, India is the unresolved ambiguity, the paradox, the continuum of each and every duality. Poverty/Wealth, East/West, Male/Female, Age/Youth, Master/Servant, Colonial/Colonized, Horror/Beauty, Animal/Human, are all interdependent, reciprocally determined double facets of a multifaceted reality. Ambiguity and continuity are key words in a fictional web where nothing stands by itself as an independent and intact identity. Boundaries are permeable, pierced through as easily as the «grillage contre la mendicité» which the beggar-woman is not hindered to trespass in the island of the Delta. It is a world of lights and shadows: «Que dissimule cette ombre qui accompagne la lumière dans laquelle apparaît toujours Anne-Marie Stretter?» (VC, 109). Anne-Marie's eery tears, shed for no apparent reason, might be an effect of those inescapable shadows as well as the Vice-Consul's shots, aimed at the lepers of Lahore, could possibly signify his inability to dissociate himself from the other's unspeakable misery.

It has been said that in «Benito Cereno» Melville explodes the myth of independence and that he does so by illuminating the fact «that we are connected all the more powerfully, all the more powerful we think we are» (Weinstein, 182-83). These very same words are applicable to *Le Vice-Consul* where the self is consistently presented as part of a larger world. Both texts relate to the common theme of pervasive connection, a theme that is never articulated and yet energizes them as a source of power that drives people and narratives.

We saw in rebuttal how much these two works differ in their strategies. In «Benito Cereno» we witness the Spanish Captain's metamorphosis that eventually brings about his death. Don Benito, the master, comes to know Babo, the slave, by seeing himself transformed into the other. He is granted that knowledge and it kills him. This metamorphosis happens under our unenlightened eyes, while we wait for a mystery to be solved. In *Le Vice-Consul*, there is no need for such a spectacular scenery, nor is there any hidden truth to be revealed at the right moment to its innocent characters and read-



ers. All this is superfluous when the *other* has all along been shown as part of the self, i. e., when the traumatic experience of being aware of the other by becoming the other is replaced by the daily handling of not being able to hinder the presence of the other's reality in one's own. Besides, the prevailing rhetorical mode in the novel is the erosion of forms which, for that matter, matches the merging of characters much better than radical metamorphosis. As far as death is concerned, we saw how it has been figuratively present throughout Marguerite Duras' novel, and yet it is not offered as a solution for its enigmas. In fact, death could hardly be an end where there is no ending, where the absence of boundaries goes to the extreme of leaving us in the ambiguity of an endless, and half-alive cosmos.

<sup>1</sup> Marguerite Duras, *Le Vice-Consul*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966. All quotations cited are from this edition of the text.

<sup>2</sup> Herman Melville, *Billy Budd and Other Tales*, New York, Penguin Books USA, 1979. All further quotations of the text are extracted from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> I am referring to the chapter four (pp. 174-83), of *The Fiction of Relationship*, by Arnold Weinstein, whose overall commentary on this story was very influential in my own interpretation.

<sup>4</sup> Still quoting Sherzer: «Through Peter Morgan's remarks Duras performs two tasks: she comments about fiction and fiction writing and she points out what she is doing in the novel» (p. 378).

<sup>5</sup> Sometimes we have the impression that a camera's eye is following the character's movements and their voices are simply being tape-recorded. But their souls cannot be that easily scrutinized, even their states of mind are only conjectured upon, or suggested as possible never as certain. This also applies to the protagonists of secondary roles; frequently we feel as if we were reading a movie's script instead of a novel:

«L'ambassadeur paraît étonné.

«[...]

«paraît vouloir s'éloigner du vice-consul. Non, il se ravise. [...] Insolence, doit penser l'ambassadeur, est le mot qui convient» (VC, 117-18, italics are mine).

<sup>6</sup> I am borrowing Madeleine Borgomano's view in this matter: «dans le Vice-Consul ce seront les terres du Delta toutes mélangées d'océan, et les plaines de rizières et de marécages [...] 'nous vivons sur un milieu vague, toujours incertain et mouvant' écrit Pascal: tel est bien l'espace durassien.

«Espace propice à l'égarément: la mendiante s'y perd... elle y 'perd le nord' [...] Mais tous les personnages durassiens même quand ils n'arrivent pas à ces extrémités se trouvent égarés dans de semblables incertitudes» (486).

<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Weinstein refers to the unarticulated story of Don Benito as a «silenced agony existing on the far side of language, a story of psychic displacement, of being flayed alive precisely through play» (177).

<sup>8</sup> We are in this way obliged to face the connection between servants and served (blacks and whites in this case), totally unperceived by Captain Delano who used to see them as independent realities. Once, while descending *The San Dominick's* poop and making his way

through the blacks, the Captain could only see the white faces as «stray white pawns venturously involved in the ranks of the chessmen opposed.» In this very sequence he also chanced to observe a white sailor «engaged in tarring the strap of a large block», whose hand was black «with continually thrusting it into the tarpot» - and, as it might have been expected, to Delano this hand «seemed not naturally allied to his face» (BC, 172).

<sup>9</sup> Significantly enough the lepers are never individualized, never distinguished by name, age, gender, or any other category of identification. Always referred to as a group of bodies which have lost their human features («est-ce tuer que de tuer des lépreux ou des chiens?», VC, 94) they embody a most definite image of hollowness when compared to an army of straw men, heads stuffed with straw, or when said to be unable of feeling any pain while exploding like a bag of sawdust if someone strikes them.

<sup>10</sup> *Marguerite Duras Tourne un Film*, quoted by Madeleine Borgomano, p. 482.

<sup>11</sup> «À certains moments Duras réussit à confondre le personnage d'Anne-Marie Stretter et celui de la mendiante indienne par l'usage ambivalent du pronom 'elle'. Rapprochement paradoxal de deux personnages qui semblent si opposés. Au niveau thématique, l'effet d'une simple manipulation grammaticale est puissant: le lecteur dérouté voit ses certitudes chanceler, il est forcé d'interroger les valeurs reçues, de reconsidérer les Blancs de Calcutta, leur idéologie. C'est un état d'inconfort, conséquence d'une narration incertaine, qui s'installe dans l'esprit du lecteur: à certains moments, il devient impossible de distinguer entre les deux femmes, et cette folie perturbatrice dont est saisie la mendiante pourrait bien décrire Anne-Marie Stretter» (Fitzgerald, 67-68).

<sup>12</sup> Madeleine Borgomano, who views the beggar-woman as a generator cell («cellule génératrice») in Duras' work as a whole, refers in the following terms to her characters in general: «Les personnages ont perdu leurs repères: loin de chercher à s'orienter, et malgré leur nostalgie du Nord perdu, ils s'installent dans leur existence désorientée: le mouvement de la mendiante préfigure et entraîne à sa suite tous les autres» (Borgomano, 487).

<sup>13</sup> According to McNeece he is the elected one to expose «the degree to which death is built into the entire edifice of colonial ruling» since he is «the delegated emissary (*le bouc-emmissaire*) to guarantee the death of the French colonial presence - and the larger society it represents» (444). In *Les Parleuses* Marguerite Duras calls him «un engin de mort».

<sup>14</sup> His criminal act has been defined as a «liberation from the sterility of abstraction» (McNeece, 432) and as «an action against the social indifference of the white community» (Struebig, 78).

<sup>15</sup> «In Western literature and myth, a state of living-death is often ascribed to experiences of psychic illness or division, a diagnosis appropriate to all three main characters» (McNeece, 443).

<sup>16</sup> Patricia Struebig, after analysing both the resemblances and the contrasts between those two characters, makes the following statement: «The final terms of the opposition show the resolution of the apparent conflict: Anne-Marie Stretter is Anima to the Vice-consul and he is Animus to her [...] They are 'One' [...]» (85).

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