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Literary Representation

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## THE POETICS OF ELUSIVE HISTORY: MARGUERITE DURAS, WAR TRAUMAS, AND THE DILEMMAS OF LITERARY REPRESENTATION

Ever since Hayden White's magisterial *Metahistory*, historiography and poetics have become indivisible companions.<sup>1</sup> All history is now recognized as a form of poetics, because describing past events in narrative prose discourse implies emplotment and use of tropes. But the poetics of history does not pertain only to historiography. Other media that relate to the past have their poetics as well. As Ann Rigney has argued, the past is continuously shaped via the interaction of different media that have their own ways of conveying the past and that function as both constructive and performative components of cultural memory.<sup>2</sup> Literature, although it does not present itself as a work of history, is a poetic mediator of historical understanding in its own manner. Both the historical novel, which complements historiography by capturing the past in its sensual detail, and other fiction, which utilizes historical material in a more creative fashion, make the past alive and contemporaneous to the present via the poetic operation. Even as flagrantly experimental a narrative as Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Rigney demonstrates, participates in historical work: by drawing attention to the incongruence between the horrendousness of the narrated events and the technique of understatement and passive observation, Vonnegut's novel shifts from representation to performativity and uses history to engage the reader in contemplation of the nature of war.<sup>3</sup>

While most modern literature shows some degree of both representation and performativity in regard to history, more recent narratives have been increasingly foregrounding their struggle to introduce history and their inability to do so. Already Hayden White proposed that the modernist aesthetic of exposing impediments to representation be seen as a counterpart to the changed understanding of history for which the realist paradigm driven by verisimilitude lost its applicability.<sup>4</sup> The adoption of this aesthetic, however, does not always indicate an attempt to question the very possibility of representing history. More often than not, the preference for ellipsis and fragment has been a result of the essentially traumatic nature of the historical events

<sup>1</sup> *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

<sup>2</sup> 'Divided Pasts: A Premature Memorial and the Dynamics of Cultural Remembrance', *Memory Studies*, 1 (2008), 99–113.

<sup>3</sup> 'All This Happened, More or Less: What a Novelist Made of the Bombing of Dresden', *History and Theory*, 47 (2009), 5–24 (p. 20).

<sup>4</sup> *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 74.

featured in fictional stories. Traumatic events resist direct representation and determine the choice of discursive means, favouring discontinuity, simple sentences, and parataxis over elaborate syntactic structures and linear narrative form. Since the literature of such impoverished devices carries the detail and the intricacy of the related events only inadequately, and is thus vulnerable to contextual flatness, self-absorption, and ahistoricity, it has developed its own performative dimension in order to circumvent this predicament. The technique of evoking a horrifying past while obstructing its portrayal, as Marguerite Duras's *Hiroshima mon amour* shows, can paradoxically stake more than just an intractable history on its feeble representational disposition. What the strategy of saying less rather than more presents us with is a performative aspect of representational minimalism that induces interaction with both the past and the present: in *Hiroshima mon amour* the displayed inability to represent the past stimulates an increased attention to the historical context of the work, the parallels between the past and the present, and the allusions to the continuity of the past in the present.

### *Narrating Trauma*

*Hiroshima mon amour*, a literary text that has been receiving ample attention for almost two decades from scholars of French literature, memory studies, and trauma theory, was written by Marguerite Duras in July 1958 as a script for Alain Resnais's film. The text was revised before the shooting in December 1958 and rewritten after the film was completed in 1959 so as to reflect the changes that the production of the film brought to the original script. The story concerns a two-day love affair in Hiroshima in August 1957 between a French actress and a Japanese architect, both of whom suffer, each in their own way and with different implications for the story, from traumatic pasts. Although the enigma of crime, trauma, and the difficulty of narrating them appeared in Duras's writings before—in *Moderato cantabile*, *Les Viaducs de la Seine-et-Oise*, and *Dix heures et demie du soir en été*, for example<sup>5</sup>—the crime evoked in *Hiroshima mon amour* is presented as incomprehensible and without the aura of fascination it had in the previous works. In the synopsis included at the beginning of the text Duras declares that what she wanted to avoid most of all in *Hiroshima mon amour* were descriptions of horror and that instead of portraying the crime, she tried to 'faire renaître cette horreur de ces cendres' by making it part of a story set at a later date.<sup>6</sup> Echoing Resnais's professed failure to make a documentary about Hiroshima and his

<sup>5</sup> *Moderato cantabile* (Paris: Minuit, 1958); *Les Viaducs de la Seine-et-Oise* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959); *Dix heures et demie du soir en été* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960).

<sup>6</sup> *Hiroshima mon amour* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 11; further references to this edition will be given in the text identified by the abbreviation *HMA*.

subsequent appeal to Duras to help him redraft the project as a literary story, Duras suggests that one can talk about the bombing of Hiroshima only by incorporating it into a fictional story that will not be about Hiroshima.

*Hiroshima mon amour* opens with an anonymous male character telling an unnamed female character that her effort to learn about what happened in Hiroshima can never succeed. ‘Tu n’as rien vu à Hiroshima’, he states, ‘Rien’ (*HMA*, p. 22, emphasis original). The woman insists that she saw Hiroshima, that she visited museums, observed people in hospitals, and watched historical newsreels, but the man rejects her reliance on the visual as deceitful and repeats, ‘impersonnel, insupportable’ (*HMA*, p. 10), that she saw nothing. Although very little happens in the opening scene, the painstakingly repetitious exchange between the characters about the possibility of understanding the past events and each other prefigures what will follow. From the very start, knowledge associated with direct representation, whether visual or verbal, is discredited and what is emphasized, both thematically and stylistically, is telling and listening over showing and narrating. It is clear that this will not be a plot-driven story. Even though the woman increasingly becomes the speaker and the man the listener as the plot advances—not so much through action as through changes of the locale, from the hotel room, via a pavement, the man’s house, a railway station, to a café—the text remains locked into a slow-paced conversation accompanied by patient and fixated listening.

Immediately after the discussion about the impossibility of understanding Hiroshima, the man asks the woman what the end of the war meant for her, thus shifting the conversation suddenly, unexpectedly, and more or less permanently, from Hiroshima to the French town of Nevers. The woman dismisses the question with a quick answer, but the man presses the issue. She tries to evade the topic again, then pleads deficient memory, only to start to recount a story slowly and in increasingly longer segments of the death of her German lover, who was killed by the Nevers townsmen as the occupying army retreated. Her speech is epigrammatic, abrupt, and laborious, revealing her difficulty in telling the story as well as the difficulty of *Hiroshima mon amour* in proceeding with its own story. The woman often does not register the man’s questions, or answers those that he does not pose. When asked, for example, ‘Il était français, l’homme que tu as aimé pendant la guerre?’ (*HMA*, p. 78), she answers, ‘Non . . . il n’était pas français. Oui, c’était à Nevers’ (*ibid.*). The man never asks the woman to clarify her sketchiness, abrupt shifts, and to fill in the gaps in her account. If anything, his questions encourage them. When at one point he suddenly inserts himself into the woman’s story, assuming the place of the German lover with the question ‘Quand tu es dans la cave, je suis mort?’ (*HMA*, p. 87), she accepts the substitution and continues with her story, simply replacing ‘il’ with ‘tu’.

From very early on in *Hiroshima mon amour*, the man's position in his conversation with the woman is that of the facilitator of her story. And yet, despite this fact, Hiroshima in Duras's text is not just a vehicle and an excuse for articulating other, merely personal traumatic events. The juxtaposition of the events of Hiroshima and Nevers, in which Nevers gets disproportionately more space than Hiroshima, is not a result of the woman's imposition of her story onto the man and of the man offering himself selflessly to it. It is a result of the man's refusal to tell his own story. Although the female character often likens her experience to his—'comme toi, je connais l'oubli [. . .] comme toi, je suis douée de mémoire' (*HMA*, p. 31)—while he emphasizes their incompatibility—for him Hiroshima was a catastrophe in which he lost his family, while for her, as she admits, it was a symbol of the long-awaited end of the war—the transference nature of their verbal exchange works in both directions. Her interest in Hiroshima and his in Nevers are complementary and their symmetry broken only because the man actively resists telling his story, a resistance that *Hiroshima mon amour* is eager to reveal. Although the woman is as reluctant to speak about Nevers as the man is to speak about Hiroshima, he successfully insists that she continue, while her attempts to hear about Hiroshima and make him talk about it end in reiterations that she cannot understand it and that she saw nothing. It is because of this refusal that the woman will not be able to play the same role in the man's reconciliation with his past as he does in hers. Rather than the story shifting inexplicably from Hiroshima to Nevers, and controversially because Hiroshima is obviously a disaster on a different scale from Nevers, it is therefore the man's determination to talk only about Nevers and not Hiroshima that precipitates the change of focus in *Hiroshima mon amour* from Hiroshima to Nevers—a shift to which the text persistently draws attention and which is crucial in its challenge of literary representation of history.

### *The Dilemmas of Remembering and Narrating*

With the female protagonist marked from the outset as an outsider who is denied understanding, *Hiroshima mon amour* displays its resistance to representation and tells about Hiroshima only metonymically by telling about Nevers. From the beginning, Nevers is a *terra incognita* that is open to scrutiny and knowledge, while Hiroshima is posited beyond understanding. On the narrative level, the medium of this metonymic displacement is the woman's recognition of the man's plea to tell her story of Nevers. Unlike the man, who decides a priori that whereas he believes he can understand her trauma she will not be able to understand his, the woman is willing to face her past and, moreover, allows for his understanding of it. After confessing that she cannot

go to Nevers any more, she affirms ‘c’est vrai que ça aussi tu dois le comprendre’ (*HMA*, p. 59), an admission that is in sharp contrast to his insistence on her understanding *nothing*. The man evidently underestimates the woman when he assumes that she wants to know what happened in Hiroshima in a simple empiricist way because, as Michael S. Roth pointed out, her actions demonstrate that she knows very well that returning to the past ‘is about the confrontation with absence and forgetting’, and not a straightforward recollection.<sup>7</sup> While facilitating the metonymic displacement in the text, from a psychological perspective the male character’s scepticism about the woman’s understanding is a defence mechanism against his own trauma and an excuse for his refusal to return to the past—even if, arguably, some of it manages to resurface as he listens to the woman’s story.

But it is not only because of the asymmetry in sharing painful memories that the encounter in Hiroshima is something more than a mere exchange of histories in which Nevers gets more space than Hiroshima. Both characters have to cope with the impossibility of knowing—not only the man, with his uncertain prospects of understanding the woman through her story and with his refusal to return to his own past, but also the woman. Like him, she is not in possession of her past. To her too, the past is lost and accessible only via sharing it with him. It is only by trying to recall her memory in order to narrate it that her lost past enters her conscious mind and gets inscribed in it—inscribed, as Shoshana Felman emphasizes is the case with all traumatic experiences, for the first time.<sup>8</sup>

Even though it becomes clear as soon as *Hiroshima mon amour* opens that it is not going to provide a direct representation of the disturbing events—immediately, as Martin Crowley writes, ‘tearing a hole within synecdochic representation’ by making parts stand for the inaccessible whole in a blatantly insufficient way<sup>9</sup>—it becomes clear as well, even if less overtly, that it will not try to establish a firm line to the repressed past, however agonizing and difficult to follow. As the woman continues with her story, the text concentrates more on the ambivalence in her attempt to integrate her traumatic past into the present. At a crucial moment, and in spite of the man’s joy about being the only person who has heard the Nevers story, she begins to doubt whether she should have told him. Since her trauma concerns the death of her lover, and thus the disappearance of something irreplaceable, in her interior monologue she wonders if she did not betray the past by turning it into the

<sup>7</sup> ‘*Hiroshima mon amour: You Must Remember This*’, in *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past*, ed. by Robert A. Rosenstone (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 91–101 (p. 93).

<sup>8</sup> *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 57.

<sup>9</sup> *Duras, Writing, and the Ethical: Making the Broken Whole* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 153.

present: 'J'ai raconté notre histoire. Je t'ai trompé ce soir avec cet inconnu. J'ai raconté notre histoire' (*HMA*, p. 110). Telling, she suggests, transforms the past, which, regardless of its misery, has become part of her and her fidelity to her lover. Suddenly she remembers her madness after her lover was killed and her refusal to overcome it. Already, then, pain was a sign of faithfulness to the past. Locked in the cellar by her parents, she inflicted on herself both physical pain by hurting her fingers and mental pain by recalling her lover in order not to forget the past. But her memory weakened all the same. Just as her hair, shaved by the Nevers people to stigmatize her as a collaborator, imperceptibly grew back, her memory started to fade. 'C'est horrible,' she says while placing herself in the past and addressing her dead lover, 'je commence à moins bien me souvenir de toi' (*HMA*, p. 99). Her lover's death, which she now becomes aware of as something she knew already in the Nevers cellar but did not want to accept, became memory and as such was susceptible to the pain of forgetting. Then, as well as now, both forgetting and holding onto memory entailed pain. In the end, even this pain disappeared, and so did 'l'horreur de ne plus comprendre du tout le pourquoi de se souvenir' (*HMA*, p. 32), and all that was left, as she notes, was 'une seule mémoire, celle de ton nom' (*HMA*, p. 90).

In Hiroshima the woman faces her original dilemma of memory and forgetting again. Although the Japanese man allows her to remember the German lover, she is afraid that the act of remembrance will again lead to forgetting. Only this time forgetting is more threatening: she is afraid that she will forget the German lover altogether by narrating and, hence, externalizing her loss. On the one hand, the transference relationship with the Japanese man revives her memory and makes her enthusiastic about visiting Nevers again in order to heal her pain, arrive at closure, and bequeath 'petite tondu de Nevers à l'oubli' (*HMA*, p. 118), while, as she addresses her German lover, her 'corps s'incendie déjà à [s]on souvenir' (*HMA*, p. 118). On the other hand, however, the therapeutic transference takes place through another impossible love that she knows she will eventually forget as well. In similar fashion to her emergence from the cellar, she realizes the necessity of both forgetting and stubbornly clinging to memory because she knows that she will forget the Japanese lover, and with him the German lover, but, as her exclamation 'Je t'oublierai! Je t'oublie déjà!' (*HMA*, p. 124) underscores, she is horrified by the prospect.

In *Hiroshima mon amour* the faithfulness to the past implies two incompatible demands: a return to the past in an attempt to understand it because forgetting it and giving up on understanding it means relinquishing it; and a refusal to return and understand it in order not to secure, domesticate, and overcome it. This ambivalent demand becomes evident in the characters'

relations both to their own past and to each other's pasts. Strangely enough, it is not in spite of but because of their status as outsiders to their own and to each other's pasts that the characters in this story can relate to one another and try to understand each other. Although not yielding full comprehension, the personal tragedy of Hiroshima helps the male character to relate to the woman's story, and her Nevers past in turn allows her to relate to Hiroshima and the man's past (or whatever she imagines about it). The interaction between the two characters suggests that one's trauma is a condition of possibility of understanding someone else's trauma, however partial and incomplete, as *Hiroshima mon amour* insists, such an understanding will necessarily remain.

### *Displacement and Commitment*

With the paradoxical nature of preventing those who undergo them from recording them while at the same time enforcing the unconscious compulsion to return to them, traumatic events challenge literary narratives into preserving the duality of the missed encounter that keeps returning. Literature that depicts traumatic events, as Shoshana Felman urges, must incorporate this missed encounter with reality, but must do so only 'in so far as it is *not experienced*, in so far as it is literally *missed*'.<sup>10</sup> In *Hiroshima mon amour* the missed encounter, indeed, appears as missed. And yet, it is not only a refusal of representation or a display of how representation fails that is at stake here. Although the characters' fragmented discussion of Nevers mirrors *Hiroshima mon amour*'s obstructed representation of Hiroshima, announced at the beginning by the warning that 'tout ce qu'on peut faire c'est de parler de l'impossibilité de parler de Hiroshima' (*HMA*, p. 10), the woman's story of Nevers tries to 'work-through' the traumatic past rather than mindlessly circling around its imperviousness.<sup>11</sup> The female character is increasingly capable of returning to the past, and while she cannot reclaim it completely, some of the less elliptical and more descriptive accounts of Nevers in *Hiroshima mon amour*'s appendices indicate that the struggle with representation in the main part of the text should not be too quickly accepted as a plain refusal. Such a refusal, the appendices suggest, would posit a sublime image of the past that is paralysing in its unrepresentability and that, as Dominick LaCapra cautions,

<sup>10</sup> *Testimony*, p. 168 (emphasis original).

<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud defines 'working-through' (*Durcharbeiten*) as a way of actively dealing with the repressed past by engaging in the process of understanding one's symptoms and remembering the past, and differentiates it from 'acting out' (*Agieren*), a passive repetition of the unconscious compulsion to reproduce the repressed psychic material. See e.g. 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), XII (1958), 147-56.



runs the risk of confining the attachment to the past to a mere alternation between ‘melancholic repetition and superficial manic agitation’.<sup>12</sup>

What we see in *Hiroshima mon amour* is neither a denial of representation nor a conviction that one can come to terms with traumatic events simply by narrating them. Although by marking Hiroshima as impossible to talk about and redirecting the discussion to Nevers the text highlights the centrality of its device of displacement, the Nevers trauma is treated in an equally ambivalent manner as the trauma of Hiroshima. The displacement of Hiroshima onto Nevers leads neither to a hiatus in bringing out the woman’s past—in which case it would demonstrate the general unrepresentability of trauma—nor to a definite recuperation of her past—in which case it would point to the heuristic value of this narrative shift. To be sure, *Hiroshima mon amour* talks about the past. But it does so only by exposing the failure to represent it conclusively. By staging the Second World War traumas while simultaneously impeding their portrayal, the text abstracts from the specificities of different traumas and raises the issue of war trauma as such, thereby calling attention to other war traumas and to the parallels between the past and the present.

*Hiroshima mon amour* was written at a time of escalating violence in the Algerian war (1954–62), a time when the ferocity with which the growing contingent of French soldiers clashed with the FLN (the liberation army fighting for Algerian independence) stirred passionate debates about colonialism, oppression, and violence, debates that were further intensified by reports of torture and rumours of the imminent right-wing coup d’état. Duras was deeply involved in these discussions. The statement of the female character in *Hiroshima mon amour* about ‘inégalité posée en principe par certains peuples contre d’autres peuples, [. . .] certaines races contre d’autres races, [. . .] certaines classes contre d’autres classes’ (*HMA*, p. 31) clearly indicates which side she took, and the readers in 1960 would certainly get the innuendo. Duras was committed to opposing the war nearly from its outset, writing journalistic pieces about Algeria, torture, and mass murder in 1956 and 1957, and proposing to make a documentary about Algerians living in France as early as November 1955.<sup>13</sup> In that same year she participated in founding the committee of intellectuals opposed to the war, and in 1960 she joined the controversial ‘Manifesto of the 121’ that encouraged French soldiers sent to Algeria to disobey orders. Her decision to leave Gallimard and publish *Moderato cantabile* with Minuit can also be seen as a political move and a declaration of support for a more distinctly anti-Gaullist publisher. Alain Resnais was engaged in these debates as well. Soon after completing the film version of *Hiroshima mon amour* in 1959 he embarked on a new project that

<sup>12</sup> *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 182.

<sup>13</sup> No such film was made, but the plan is documented in Laure Adler, *Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), p. 307.

was directly about Algeria, *Muriel ou le temps d'un retour*, but already in his previous film, a 1955 documentary about the Holocaust, *Nuit et brouillard*, he wanted to offer an indirect commentary on the issue of the Algerian war. When later asked about his motivation for making *Nuit et brouillard*, Resnais responded that 'the whole point was Algeria'.<sup>14</sup> The political convictions that Duras and Resnais brought to *Hiroshima mon amour* were not left unnoticed. When the film was inaugurated at festivals, it was thought it would cause a major controversy, not so much because of its account of the bombing of Hiroshima or the mention of French collaboration: the problem was Algeria. In the ongoing war it was feared that the film would question the sense of national identity, in which Algeria was still deemed by many to be an irreplaceable component.<sup>15</sup>

There were many literary works in France in the second half of the 1950s—Albert Camus's *La Chute* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Séquestrés d'Altona*, for example—that offered a more tangible repositioning of the Algerian conflict onto the subject-matter of the Second World War than *Hiroshima mon amour*. *Hiroshima mon amour* contains no direct references to the French colonies in Northern Africa. Nor did Duras, unlike Resnais, make any such reference in her interviews or other meta-narratives in which she often suggested how to read her texts, as she mostly avoided being didactic in her literary works. Besides the textual devices that in *Hiroshima mon amour* drew attention to the issue of war trauma in general—the emphasis on displacement (the shift of focus from the story about Hiroshima to the story about a love affair in Hiroshima, to a partial and inconclusive story about the death of the German lover in Nevers) and the general denunciation of colonial oppression—Duras stressed the continuity of war traumas from the past to the present more explicitly in her journalistic pieces from that period.

In a short text, 'Racisme à Paris', written several months before *Hiroshima mon amour* when Duras was writing journal articles on colonialism, racism, and immigration for *France-Observateur*, she reported the case of police harassment and arrest of a French woman and an Algerian man who, although presented by Duras as similar—she a waitress, he a bartender—were considered by the police to be an unacceptable couple because Algerians were at that time marked as enemies.<sup>16</sup> In another article, 'Paris, six d'août', from August 1958 Duras brought together the same three themes of the atomic threat, the Second World War, and colonization that just a few weeks earlier

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Alan Williams, *Republic of Images: A History of French Filmmaking* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 369.

<sup>15</sup> For the details of the controversy that the film excited at the 1959 Cannes Film Festival and subsequently in the French press see Geneviève Sellier, *La Nouvelle Vague: un cinéma au masculin singulier* (Paris: CNRS, 2005), pp. 46–50.

<sup>16</sup> 'Racisme à Paris', in *Outside, papiers d'un jour* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1981), pp. 77–78.

had appeared in *Hiroshima mon amour*. Opening with the statement that on the preceding Friday radioactive rain had apparently fallen on the capital but that the news was suppressed because for the past two months French routines had been sufficiently disrupted—hinting at the landing of the military in Corsica, the threat of a coup d'état in metropolitan France, and the takeover of power by de Gaulle—the article describes a police raid on a group of FLN rebels in Paris the day before, and ends with a reference to the German occupation of Paris.<sup>17</sup> Lastly, in 'Les Deux Ghettos' a few years later, Duras interviewed an Algerian man and a Parisian survivor of the Warsaw ghetto. After the Algerian had likened his life in Paris to Jews living under the German occupation, Duras asked the ghetto survivor whether his experience in Warsaw was comparable to other situations. Describing his fear during the SS raids on the Warsaw ghetto and using words that uncannily resembled the Algerian's depiction of his fear of being killed by the French police who raided his hotel every night, the ghetto survivor mentioned Algerians and spoke about the infamous event of a few days earlier, when a large group of Algerians drowned after being forced by the police into the Seine.<sup>18</sup>

The themes of fear, hatred of the enemy, and positing the enemy as different, as well as the historical parallels between the past and the present with respect to these issues, that appeared in Duras's journalism at the time of writing *Hiroshima mon amour*, appeared in *Hiroshima mon amour* as well. As in 'Racisme à Paris', *Hiroshima mon amour* speaks of the stupidity of punishing the female protagonist by shaving her head for loving 'un ennemi officiel de son pays' (*HMA*, p. 15). Provocatively choosing an enemy and a former enemy as the two lovers of the French woman, the text also emphasizes the similarity between the characters. Duras insists that the difference in type between the two protagonists has to be minimized, and, as she argues in the appendix, that for the film one would need to select a Western-looking Japanese man in order to evade 'le racismisme involontaire inhérent nécessairement à tout exotisme' and underscore 'la fonction égalitaire du monde moderne, et même tricher pour en rendre compte' (*HMA*, p. 151). But even more importantly, there is a significant thematic overlap between *Hiroshima mon amour* and Duras's journalism. This overlap pertains, as 'Paris, six d'août' and 'Les Deux Ghettos' demonstrate, to the joint reference to nuclear disaster, colonization, and the German occupation of France. Appearing both in *Hiroshima mon amour* and in the journal articles from the same period, these three themes, their intersections across the two genres, and the fact that the newspaper articles clearly link them to both the past and the present, bring to the fore

<sup>17</sup> 'Paris, six d'août', in *Outside*, pp. 92–95.

<sup>18</sup> 'Les Deux Ghettos', in *Outside*, pp. 150–61.

the performative dimension of *Hiroshima mon amour* and the interaction of this story with both the past and the present.

Addressing the question of how to represent contentious events from the past and the present, *Hiroshima mon amour* was an important contribution to the revived debate on committed literature in France in the 1950s. As Jean-Paul Sartre emphasized with increasing persistence throughout that decade, literature, even the most committed, takes us away from real events and, by turning them into images, runs the risk of becoming a mere source of aesthetic pleasure. Sartre believed that all literature, including literature of the terrifying power of pure form by which some post-war writers tried to capture the intensity of distress, had to accept the fact that it lacks legitimacy to exist in the world of brutality and injustice. Duras proposed, against Sartre, that however illegitimate literature was, it had to accept a duty to persist in the world of injustice. Appealing in *Hiroshima mon amour* to the political potential of literary experimentation with storytelling and representation of reality, Duras insisted that literature had to embrace the dilemma of duty without legitimacy and resist cynicism and forgetting, a stance echoed by Theodor Adorno, who in his own reply to Sartre in 1962 argued that it was 'now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it'.<sup>19</sup> As an answer to the predicament of art's legitimacy vis-à-vis history and politics, the form and the themes of *Hiroshima mon amour* were devised to maintain the work's relevance as a socially, historically, and politically engaged type of writing, while at the same time endowing it with a resistance to being turned into a positive artefact.

### *Literary Language and Ethics*

The technique of inhibiting storytelling that Duras presented in *Hiroshima mon amour* went against the dominant view of committed literature in 1950s France, and in particular against Sartre's emphasis on the obligation of literature to represent reality and communicate a politically engaged message. During the Algerian war Sartre further radicalized his views on engagement, arguing no longer for committed literature but for unmitigated action, for which literature was no longer a catalyst but an obstacle. In the preface to Frantz Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* Sartre supported his call to action with an invocation of history, which he presented as a process with an inevitable goal of emancipation that one had to accept and act in accordance with, embracing, if necessary, even violence.<sup>20</sup> Sartre was convinced that this ideal of action justified small injustices in the present in the name of an all-embracing

<sup>19</sup> 'Commitment', *New Left Review*, 87–88 (1974), 75–89 (p. 85).

<sup>20</sup> 'Préface', in Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris: Maspero, 1961), pp. 9–26.

future justice. According to Sartre's scenario in the late 1950s, one becomes part of history not by writing, but only by political action.<sup>21</sup>

Even though Duras was in agreement with Sartre's political position on the Algerian war from its very beginning, she was sceptical about the self-righteousness of his rhetoric and the force of its theoretical justification. The exclusive place of history in Sartre's political philosophy meant that actions were valued on the basis of their purported advancement of historical progress, the goal which Sartre was confident of identifying. It was this strength and confidence that Duras found problematic. In this regard she shared much with Robert Antelme and Dionys Mascolo, and many of the political and ethical aspects of *Hiroshima mon amour*'s narrative fragmentation, absence, and displacement resonate with Antelme's *L'Espèce humaine* and Mascolo's *Le Communisme*.<sup>22</sup> What Duras found striking in Antelme's poignant analysis of his experience in the Dachau concentration camp was not so much the revelation of the unspeakable horror of the Holocaust, however under-represented it still was when his text was published, but rather Antelme's emphasis on the humanity that he encountered in the camp, and on the act of talking and listening that this encounter elicited. The prominence of dialogue in *Hiroshima mon amour* and its slowness and austerity echo Antelme's description of how the camp stripped one of everything but how, by the same stroke, it brought this impoverished self into contact with other, equally expropriated selves. As in Antelme's text, in *Hiroshima mon amour* the slow and measured dialogues that are frequently interrupted with prolonged moments of silence were intended to expose the characters to one another, open them to each other in their otherness, and enable a genuine conversation. A similar emphasis on the link between a particular kind of language—slow and exhausted—and the task of undermining the position of confident action appears in Mascolo's work as well. In his book on communism, Mascolo opposes Sartre's voluntarism and argues that language should not be a utilitarian tool used by intellectuals to enlighten the masses. Language, according to Mascolo, should most of all try to establish unhindered communication.<sup>23</sup> In Mascolo's theory of communism, unobstructed communication and its concomitant practices, personal weakness and destruction of interpersonal

<sup>21</sup> That such eagerness was meant well but sometimes had negative consequences has been argued, most recently, by James D. Le Sueur, who demonstrated how Sartre contributed to Algeria's post-independence problems by influencing its leaders with his political categories, without realizing their incompatibility with Islamic history and the dispersed agrarian character of Algeria. See Le Sueur, *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics during the Decolonization of Algeria* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), p. 284.

<sup>22</sup> Antelme, *L'Espèce humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947); Mascolo, *Le Communisme: révolution et communication ou la dialectique des valeurs et des besoins* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953). Since Duras was at that time in a close personal and intellectual relationship with both Antelme and Mascolo, influences are hard to establish, but one can assume that they did not flow in one direction only.

<sup>23</sup> *Le Communisme*, pp. 418–35.

boundaries, are preconditions for an unbridled sharing and a just satisfaction of needs.<sup>24</sup> In *Hiroshima mon amour* we see a similar ethical and political plea for a specific type of language and its correlates in subjective weakness and interpersonal openness. *Hiroshima mon amour* creates a language that valorizes emptiness, slowness, and silence, and that is ethical and political because of its fundamental openness to the other person.

The oblique and elliptic representation of history and reality in *Hiroshima mon amour* in the name of formulating an ethical response to them runs not only against Sartre's views but also against the dominant position in contemporary literary theory, which claims that such a response is possible only in stories of great descriptive detail. A curious product of Sartre, this position, represented most notably by Martha Nussbaum and Wayne Booth, insists on the priority of the genre of the novel in forming our ethical sensibilities. Only the novel, these critics argue, can record the historical detail, emotional richness, and dilemmas of human action. The fullness of description and the complexity of situations that novels provide—Nussbaum's examples are the delicate ethical conflicts depicted by Charles Dickens, Henry James, Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, and Vladimir Nabokov—allow readers to follow the 'relevant activities of searching and feeling, especially feeling concerning their own possibilities as well as those of the characters'.<sup>25</sup> By offering full and direct accounts, novels, Nussbaum argues, make us 'reflect and feel about what might otherwise be too distant for feeling', thereby extending our experience and forming our ethical principles by implying specific norms of behaviour.<sup>26</sup> The holding back of information and withdrawing from direct representation that *Hiroshima mon amour* so conspicuously displays could not be further from this novelistic positivism and profusion of expression. And yet it is exactly the minimalist sparseness, blankness, and indirectness that in *Hiroshima mon amour* introduce ethical, as well as political, concerns. The ethical dimension here resides not in the descriptive detail that aims to reveal the characters' motivation, but in expressive plainness, suspension of deixis, and the characters that emerge only in their exposure to the other. What is ethical about this style of 'maladroite et balbutiante patience', to borrow Paul Thibaud's phrase, is the attention it gives to speech and the speaker.<sup>27</sup> With no solidity of their own, the characters in *Hiroshima mon amour* are inextricable from dialogue and their dialogue inextricable from an address—'an address "listen to me"'.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 475–76.

<sup>25</sup> Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 46.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>27</sup> 'Marguerite Duras: les ambiguïtés de la compassion', *Esprit*, 7 (July 1986), 75–77 (p. 77).

<sup>28</sup> Cathy Caruth, 'Literature and the Enactment of Memory (Duras, Resnais, *Hiroshima mon amour*)', in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 25–56 (p. 34).

With its ethical and political ambitions and complex approach to historical representation, *Hiroshima mon amour* is clearly not a self-involved experiment with style. The annihilation of Hiroshima enters the story only briefly, and is quickly dropped because it represents a destructive act that was intended to end the war only by escalating its horror. In much the same way as the bombing of Hiroshima repeated the violence of the war it wished to end, the text refuses to portray it—as well as the ongoing war in Algeria—so as not to reproduce its violence. In *Hiroshima mon amour* the slow and exhausted language and the technique of displacement are designed to evoke historical events while at the same time resisting replicating the violent logic that these events and their direct representation entail. Rooted in the conviction that direct descriptions perpetuate violence in the name of the belief that, as Danielle Marx-Scouras argued in her analysis of a similar refusal in narratives by the Algerian writers Assia Djebar, Yamina Mechakra, and Mohammed Dib, ‘it will be eliminated once it is understood better’, the form, the style, and the language of *Hiroshima mon amour* accentuate the text’s illocutionary force and a performance directed towards readers.<sup>29</sup> Upholding the fundamental difference between political responsibility and literary responsibility, *Hiroshima mon amour* suggests that the role of literature is not to describe and explain, but to interrupt—to interrupt normative structures of literary representation and social being, and offer radically different perceptual forms and alternative narrative, ethical, and political models.

### *History and its Erasures*

Despite the fact that withholding historical details in literary narratives is not without difficulties, and that the minimalist method is not a solution applicable universally to all literary dealings with traumatic reality, *Hiroshima mon amour* shows that the practice of withholding is not always apolitical. Sure enough, dehistoricized modes of writing in 1950s France were all too common companions to painful historical events. So much so that even the advocate of the *degré zéro de l’écriture*, Roland Barthes, felt the need to moderate his penchant for ascetic narratives in favour of concreteness and detail, coming to criticize—with a curious eight-year delay and thus, indeed, as an outcome of his engagement in debates about the Algerian war—the allegorical nature of Albert Camus’s *La Peste* as inadequate in identifying historical evil, and later even curbing his enthusiasm for Alain Robbe-Grillet’s novels, whose contentlessness he had previously extolled.<sup>30</sup> For politically committed critics, stories cleansed of history assisted in augmenting the effort of mainstream

<sup>29</sup> ‘Muffled Screams/Stifled Voices’, *Yale French Studies*, 82 (1993), 172–82 (p. 180).

<sup>30</sup> ‘*La Peste*: annales d’une épidémie ou roman de la solitude?’, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 3 vols (Paris: Seuil, 1993–95), I, 452–56; ‘Le Point sur Robbe-Grillet?’ (1962), in *Œuvres*

French culture to erase realities of the Algerian conflict, and as such were unacceptable because they showed no critical distance from state-induced modernization and its discourse of cleanliness and an ahistorical future, so vividly described by Kristin Ross.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the resemblance between *Hiroshima mon amour* and some of the stylistic experiments of the *nouveaux romanciers*, however, the indirect technique of relating to reality in Duras's text was not a symptom of an apolitical turn to stylistic formalism. It is true, as Leo Bersani noted, that in Duras's works it is sometimes difficult to ignore the milieu of bourgeois love with its delusions and luxurious masochisms, but this setting does not automatically make these works politically conservative. As we saw, *Hiroshima* in *Hiroshima mon amour* is certainly more than a backdrop for mulling over a self-tortured bourgeois love that, as Bersani argued, is only accidentally and on a second plane embellished with a 'pseudo-political intensity about the horrors of Hiroshima and the Nazi occupation of France'.<sup>32</sup> Far from expressing bourgeois elitism and upholding the dominant cultural trend of untroubled erasures—enacting the eradication of historical reality, thereby apolitically endorsing whatever was happening in the present and merely hiding behind a secondary repoliticization of the story—*Hiroshima mon amour* denounces both the past and the present and refuses to move to a history-free future. Where Robbe-Grillet's new novels of immobile surveillance and looking without being seen, as Kristin Ross pointed out, reproduced the colonial gaze, *Hiroshima mon amour* rejects it, challenging this gaze and what it politically stands for, with a brazen distrust of the measuring eye, the timeless present, and the language of naming, categorizing, and comprehending.<sup>33</sup>

Together with the discipline of trauma studies, the recent revival of interest in *Hiroshima mon amour* owes something to today's overabundance of memory of the Second World War. This excess, in many respects a 'delayed result of decades of willful amnesia', as Hue-Tam Ho Tai has proclaimed, is a way of compensating for the erasures that enveloped certain issues in post-war France (e.g. the Holocaust, collective guilt, and *épurations*).<sup>34</sup> *Hiroshima mon amour* has a very peculiar place among these returns. Written and published at the time that Henry Rousso identified as the peak of stubborn amnesia in

*complètes*, I, 1317–22. For Barthes's earlier tribute to literature of austerity and vacuity see *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris: Seuil, 1953); 'Littérature littérale', in *Œuvres complètes*, I, 1212–17; and 'Littérature objective', in *Œuvres complètes*, I, 1185–93.

<sup>31</sup> *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995), p. 12.

<sup>32</sup> Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 189.

<sup>33</sup> *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, p. 76.

<sup>34</sup> 'Remembered Realms: Pierre Nora and French National Memory', *American Historical Review*, 106 (2001), 906–22 (p. 919).



France, a time of a cultural strategy of focusing on private life and the future, *Hiroshima mon amour* demonstrates that there were instances of resistance to this compulsion to forget and, what is more, that these instances went beyond current attempts to transpose the negativity of the ignored events into the positivity of memory.<sup>35</sup> Together with attesting to the fact that not all erasures were in the service of historical forgetting, the indeterminateness of memory and referentiality in *Hiroshima mon amour* suggests that the present-day effort to remedy historical forgetting by providing exhaustive information corrects the memory of the distorted, disregarded, or erased historical events, but does not necessarily respond to the ethical and political demands these events have raised.

Setting the rapport with the past by undermining transparently intelligible language and form, *Hiroshima mon amour* draws attention to the resistance of the past to be captured in a positively given content and finished form. In this particular type of minimalist aesthetic saying less is not a case of the proverbial 'less is more', as in Hemingway's legendary metaphor of the literary story as an iceberg in which a few sentences offer a peek into the hidden mass floating under the surface. Even less is it a variation on Vonnegut's nonchalant understatements. Although understatements and litotes have often been utilized as narrative devices intended to display the unrepresentability of certain events, or to disclose the more in the less, thereby stimulating readers' effort and, as Luisa Passerini adds,<sup>36</sup> decision and responsibility, in *Hiroshima mon amour* lessness is a paradigm in which what is left unarticulated is absent not only because it cannot be represented or because one has to decide upon it. It is absent because leaving it out and making it present only in its absence both offer and incite an ethically and politically engaged answer to history and reality. *Hiroshima mon amour*'s minimalist technique demands from readers that they recognize it as a literary form chosen in response to the specific historical condition of war, violence, and exploitation. This technique of blanks, displacements, repetitions, and slow and fragmented dialogue will remain a constant in many of Duras's subsequent narratives, and although extended well beyond the telling of traumatic events, it will try to retain its ethical and political charge from *Hiroshima mon amour*.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *Le Syndrome de Vichy de 1944 à nos jours* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), p. 109.

<sup>36</sup> 'Memories between Silence and Oblivion', in *Memory, History, Nation: Contested Pasts*, ed. by Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 238–54 (p. 249).

<sup>37</sup> For an analysis of Duras's later narrative style and its political foundation see my 'Aesthetics of Blankness: Political Imagination in Marguerite Duras's Hybrid Narratives', *Romanic Review*, 101 (2010), 359–76.

*The Poetics of Elusive History*

'Every historical narrative', Hayden White declares in his celebrated essay, 'has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to *moralize* the events of which it treats': to moralize reality and to 'identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine'.<sup>38</sup> Although White admits that this tendency might not be entirely avoidable in any telling of history as story, he insists that modern historians, faithful to their Hegelian heritage, exacerbate it by putting too much emphasis on the plot and by writing histories in which the story elements exist as mere manifestations of the plot structure. The result is a story that not only exudes such a high level of coherence that it leaves no room for human agency, but whose demand for closure begets a demand for moral meaning. Indeed, fictional stories are not stories of historiography. But even though literary narratives adhere to a different set of standards from scientific consistency and historical objectivity, their growing refusal of a single morality shows an increasing resistance to the tendency they share with historical narratives. The ethical and political considerations that gradually made their way into modern fiction have instigated a return to historical events but also an effort to avoid the group-forming morality that accompanies the narrative propensity to verisimilitude and closure. The minimalist mode of storytelling, in particular, as *Hiroshima mon amour* demonstrates, answered the call to reintroduce history and reality without reinforcing a collective identity by conceiving the audience as a group united by a common perspective on the true nature of events.

In *Hiroshima mon amour* the themes—the irreconcilable perspectives that the French woman and the Japanese man have on the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945, and their revised but still mismatched views of the event in 1958—and the form—the elliptical conversation, inhibited narration, and multiple displacements—serve to oppose the nation-cementing role played by the traditional type of storytelling in creating a shared memory. Instead of evoking memory as either a hegemonic force—following Ernest Renan's definition of nation as a construct based on the legacy of memories<sup>39</sup>—or a counter-hegemonic force—questioning such a definition as homogenizing and ignoring both local memories and the extent to which colonization has shaped nations' memory formations—*Hiroshima mon amour* undermines the link between collective memory and a narrative foundation of the nation by refusing to offer a positively given description of both memory and counter-memory. With all of its characters and sites epitomizing expansive powers

<sup>38</sup> 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality', *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980), 5–27 (p. 18, emphasis original).

<sup>39</sup> 'What is a Nation?' (1882), in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 8–22 (p. 19).

(German, American, Japanese, and French), *Hiroshima mon amour* does not offer a positive counter-memory, since that, in its axiological design, would reproduce historical violence. Instead, the story's minimalist technique and critique of the measuring eye lay bare the violent consequences of the position of strength, identity, and concreteness. With its critique of representation and closure, *Hiroshima mon amour* envisages a mode of storytelling that abandons representation as ethically and politically inadmissible because of its tendency to reduce difference to sameness, and history of this difference to either an ahistorical present or a particular perspective on difference. Challenging all appeals to a distinct and positively defined identity, whether personal or national, founded on a unifying memory and common history, *Hiroshima mon amour* promotes a purely negative unity and commonality based on difference. In *Hiroshima mon amour* the openness to the fragments of the past that resist being incorporated into memory is ethical and political because, by challenging both personal identity and a collective identity of uniform groups defined by their history, it introduces a less exclusive and antagonistic type of cohabitation.

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