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**“Misty Water-Colored Memories . . .”
The Fictional Nature of
Autobiography
in Marguerite Duras’ *The Lover***

Anne N. Barker

Anything that is expressed through language must have a certain bias to it. It is in the nature of human beings to take things on a subjective level and whether intentional or not, add their own opinions to the story in the retelling. The new genre of autobiographical fiction takes this concept and expands upon it, allowing the authors to effectively rewrite the self as they believe it should be. In her text *The Lover*, Marguerite Duras uses autobiography to reconstruct herself, thus calling into question all autobiographies and histories, as well as to incorporate the idea of the feminine writing of the self.

When the reader looks to the back of the cover of the book, the word “fiction” is used to describe the genre of this text. However, Duras herself admits that this is an autobiographical book that talks about “the hidden stretches of that same youth [that she had written about in previous books], of certain facts, feelings, events that I buried . . .” (King, 154). How can this book exist as both fiction and autobiography? Because while it takes the situation that Duras found herself in as a young girl, it also allows her the opportunity to rewrite many of the details present in that overall history.

One example of this process exists in the discussion of the photograph that should have been taken, but wasn’t, as she crossed the river on the ferry. Because this picture was never taken, it was never separated from the surroundings. And because it was never detached, it is to “this failure to have been created, that the image owes its virtue: the virtue of representing, of being the creator of, an absolute” (10). If this picture had been taken, it would reveal everything that was not there; her image would have been permanent and unchangeable. As Cohen states, “a non-existent photograph becomes an agent of literature, the ‘absolute’ of a memory not confined to a single, adequate representation” (58-9). Instead,

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this image can have multiple possibilities. The basic image in her head becomes an archetype of, and allows her to create, a consummate idea of who she is at that moment in time. And as her attitudes change in the present, this idea from the past is also at liberty to change.

Within this non-existent photograph, there lies another, more concrete, image of this changeability: the gold lamé shoes that the girl wears. As she describes the image, Duras says that she "can't remember the shoes [she] used to wear in those days, only certain dresses. . . . This day I must be wearing the famous pair of gold lamé high heels. I can't see any others I could have been wearing, so I'm wearing them" (11). There is no memory within her that she was actually wearing those shoes, but because this is the perfect image in her mind, and those are the shoes that she would have been wearing, those become the shoes she had on. There is no photograph to prove otherwise, so she has, on a physical level, managed to recreate how she looked on the day she met the man from Cholon. As Morgan points out, "it is precisely because their content was never expressed, never acknowledged or fixed in either image or words that both the absent photograph and the silent nights in Cholon have come to hold—much later in the author's life—an inexhaustible richness" (278). Without a concrete reality of what was not there, Duras can make her memories embody more meaningful images, images that change with her.

Duras' concept of the absolute image affects much more than simply the readers' perceptions of this book. In fact, it calls into question all autobiographies and histories. Cohen believes that "this work of memory and imagination and of imaginary memory . . . throws into relief processes at work in autobiography in general. In literature, of which autobiography is a part, the selected, imagined

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past is the past” (60). All the images that float around inside a person’s head are susceptible to change. Although the events that occur within another biography, as with *The Lover*, are based in reality, the details may be slightly skewed and change some important aspect of the story.

This phenomena can be seen when the reader considers the difference between a British text covering the American Revolution and an American text on the same topic. While the facts remain the same, the subjective undertones leave an entirely different impression on the mind of the reader. The question becomes: is anyone ever given a truly accurate account of the facts without human opinions obscuring the truth? Instead, “Duras would not have us view [*The Lover*] as an endpoint or conclusion to the past but rather as another possible point of departure and rediscovery of that past” (Morgan, 278). All stories can be told many different ways. The trick lies in finding the various realities and discovering that they are all, in fact, true.

Perhaps more important than this view of general history is the idea that a woman reconstructs herself to fit into this world. In *The Lover*, Duras has rewritten her history in terms of desire. Cohen supports this idea when she states that “the non-being of the ‘absolute image’ allows Duras to write memory in terms of desire, when she steps back to ‘look’ at her young self. What she remembers of her appearance combines with her preferred imaginary vision of herself to compose the image” (60). She sees herself on the ferry as a desirable figure and becomes very aware of the power she gains from this quality.

Even her relationship with her Chinese lover is one based entirely on a physical desire as, on their first sexual encounter, she tells him “she doesn’t want him to talk, what she wants is for him to do

Barker '96: "Misty Water-Colored Memories..." The Fictional Nature of Autobiography as he usually does with the women he brings to his flat" (38). The girl never allows the idea into her mind that she may love the man until she is going away. When she is on the boat to France, leaving her lover behind, she weeps

because she thought of the man from Cholon and suddenly she wasn't sure she hadn't loved him with a love she hadn't seen because it had lost itself in the affair like water in sand and she rediscovered it only now, through this moment of music flung across the sea. (114)

It is only after the danger that the emotion could cause is no longer present that she can face even the possibility of a deep emotional attachment to a relationship that can never succeed.

Duras has written her self into an object of desire, enjoying this position as she uses it to exist in a male dominated world. Selous expands this concept to others of Duras' novels, saying that

Duras' women figures have a power constructed for them by their function in the structure of the story and the way in which the texts portray them as always objects of desire, combined with the pre-existing power of the archetypal woman-as-objects-of-desire, whose place in our and other cultures is well entrenched. (89)

Must women then recreate themselves to fit in best with the sexual roles that dominate society? As Duras comments on the man from Cholon watching the young girl on the boat, this older self is looking back, watching herself being watched and she is enjoying the process. According to King, "the need to be seen is also essentially feminine: the construction of the self as an object of desire for the gaze of the masculine other . . . becomes a way of both asserting a kind of identity and of merging that identity with the gaze of the other" (161). In order to attain an identity, then, a woman

must become an object to the male stare, which, in turn, produces a certain power within the object, that can be used to her benefit.

At the same time she is becoming an object of desire, Duras is also distancing the young girl from the desire that she is feeling. Morgan notes that her "affair is characterized, from the first night they are together, by an unabridged solitude" (274). After she and the Chinese business man have sex and are lying together, the girl focuses on the outside world. She comments that "the noise of the city is very loud . . . On the blinds you can see the shadows of people going by in the sunlight on the sidewalks" (40). Instead of turning her thoughts inward, the older woman is remembering through the girl the images of the city that surround her. She is distancing herself from any feelings and emotions that may prove too personal. Morgan believes that "a writer will . . . tend to camouflage or in some way distance herself from intimacy in the projection of [her] self image" (272). In this society, it sometimes becomes easier for a woman to hide from her emotions than to face them, or expose them to the public eye. Thus, Duras rewrites the young girl to not have those thoughts in the first place.

When *The Lover* is read with connections to Duras' earlier novels, it is also clear that "what exists is not history, but a recreation. *The Lover* is the past of Duras as she can recreate it only after having explored the essential emotions in her other works" (King, 154). Before she could write about certain aspects of her life, Duras had to work through them and come to terms with them on a more fictional level.

Within her autobiographical fiction, *The Lover*, Marguerite Duras recreates her female self in this new genre of memory. Her personal memories of how things were and how things should have been have combined to display a new version of her early life that

Barker '96: "Misty Water-Colored Memories..." The Fictional Nature of Autobiography forces the reader to re-examine the ways in which all non-fictional texts are compiled, while also reflecting the feminist process of rewriting the self to fit the contexts of society. Morgan describes this new genre well when she states that the "goal of the writer, then, is to create a style that does not attempt to directly express its ever-elusive content but only to suggest the contours, the dimension, or the shadow of that content" (278).

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