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## Classical Structure and Style in *Moderato Cantabile*

by Lloyd Bishop

«**C**ET ART DU CREUX (de l'empreinte pourrait-on dire), où les silences et les vides sont plus éloquents que ce qui est dit, est un art d'une grande rigueur: tout y est exactement calculé apprêté, rien n'est laissé au hasard. C'est le triomphe de la litote, de la concision et du dépouillement. En ce sens, c'est un récit parfaitement classique... l'un des plus beaux récits classiques qu'on ait lus depuis longtemps.»<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this essay is to elaborate on Henri Hell's brief remarks by examining Marguerite Duras' novel from this neo-classical perspective with the hope of adding some new insights and of demonstrating that the curious charm and strength that this very brief novel holds for so many critics and ordinary readers derive not merely from its obvious modernistic features but from principles of composition that, indeed, can only be called neo-classical. The very title of the novel suggests a union of contemporary and classical qualities: «cantabile» is suggestive of the innovative and daring techniques of contemporary fiction: «moderato» is suggestive of classical control, measure and restraint. And we will show that these two tendencies work, not at cross-purposes, but in harmony to give the subject treated its inevitable form.

Critics who prefer a more traditional novel have complained of an absence of real narrative in *Moderato Cantabile*, of «do-it-yourself-fiction.» The «plot» is reduced to five brief encounters between two strangers, a man and a woman, whose relationship is no deeper or more meaningful at the end of the novel than at the beginning. We simply witness, as in *Le Square*, two solitudes greeting each other, encouraging each other, and separating. One leaves the novel with a feeling of the impossibility of possessing the Other.<sup>2</sup> The «characterization» is limited

<sup>1</sup> Henri Hell, «L'Univers romanesque de Marguerite Duras,» prefatory article in *Moderato Cantabile* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1962), pp. 132-133. All references to the text of the novel are based on this useful edition which contains not only the Henri Hell article but also a «dossier de la presse» including an excellent article by Gaëtan Picon.

<sup>2</sup> See Jacques Guicharnaud, «Woman's Fate: Marguerite Duras,» *Yale French Studies*, 27 (1961), 106-113.

to the few psychological traits that must be divined from the stylized and ambiguous dialogue. There is no attempt at individualization, not even any vital statistics other than the heroine's marital status. Except for Anne, Chauvin and the piano teacher, the characters, including the heroine's own child and husband, remain anonymous from beginning to end. (In *Le Square*, a novel whose theme and structure anticipate *Moderato Cantabile*, even the man and the woman remain anonymous.) Emotions are not revealed but merely conjectured with a *peut-être* or a *sans doute*. This limited point of view is sustained throughout the novel. The characters are not lighted from within by an omniscient narrator or privileged observer; rather, the initiative is yielded to things, which are seen with the innocent eye of the camera lens.

Despite all these modern techniques, which can be subsumed under the single, although crucial, heading of «point of view», the novel's over-all structure and basic style reflect, once again, classical principles of composition. First of all, the novel develops within a closed space rather than an open space, i.e., within the «classical» space of, say, a Vermeer roomscape rather than the «romantic» space of a Ruysdael landscape. The heroine is *enfermée* as Barthes says of the Racinian hero, and her dream of escape is symbolized by the sea and ships as Barthes says of the Racinian habitat: «L'habitat racinien ne connaît qu'un seul rêve de fuite: la mer, les vaisseaux. . . »<sup>3</sup> The main «action» is simply the conversation between Anne and Chauvin in a proletarian café. The time-span is limited to ten days. The setting is limited to a few blocks of an anonymous port city. In short, the novel, presenting a brief moment of crisis in a woman's life, tends toward the classical unities (which are strictly observed in *Le Square* whose action covers only a few hours and whose *scène unique* is a single park bench). And since the novel is not localized in time or space, there is a deliberate stress on the universal rather than the particular — a stress that is also effected by the *nouveau roman* emphasis on anonymity. Here is an initial example of classical and contemporary devices working in concert. The emphasis in the new fiction on collective psychology rather than individual psychology cannot be considered a new direction for French Literature: it is one of the profound tendencies of French Classicism, as Karl Vossler reminds us: «Considéré du point de vue social, l'homme est dépouillé de tout caractère exceptionnel: sa silhouette devient moyenne et courante. Tout ce qui est particulier, dans le sens de la grandeur ou de la petitesse, est considéré avec scepticisme et jugé tantôt comme invraisemblable, tantôt comme grotesque. Bref, la psychologie

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *Sur Racine* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1963), p. 15.

individuelle est soumise aux critères et aux étalons de la psychologie collective.»<sup>4</sup>

One can even speak of a neo-classical *séparation des genres* in connection with *Moderato Cantabile* since a grave and tense atmosphere is sustained from beginning to end with the exception of a few brief touches of very subdued humor employed, moreover, in the service of serious irony, as we shall see. The novel possesses a focused structure reminiscent of classical tragedy. The cast is as limited in number as Racine's *Bérénice*. The stringent economy of means is also worthy of Racine in that Duras has made a novel out of practically nothing. There are no panoramic scenes, no *scènes à faire*, no melodramatics, no biographical flashbacks, no physical portraits, no psychological analyses. And no surprises: Chauvin constantly reminds Anne that their meetings will soon be over, thus foreshadowing the inevitable dénouement.

Then there is the classical principle of decorum. Boileau's dictum, «Ce qu'on ne doit point voir, qu'un récit nous l'expose,» is scrupulously followed, all violent action being banished from scenic presentation. The murder that initiates the plot, for example, takes place «off stage.» Anne's vomiting at the end of the banquet scene is also handled by exposition rather than scenic presentation by means of a sudden transition to the future tense which abruptly takes over as narrative mode and which, by distancing the action, removes it from the stage:

*Alors que les invités se disperseront en ordre irrégulier dans le grand salon attenant à la salle à manger, Anne Desbaresdes s'éclipsera, montera au premier étage. Elle regardera le boulevard par la baie du grand couloir de sa vie... Elle ira dans la chambre de son enfant, s'allongera par terre, au pied de son lit, sans égard pour ce magnolia qu'elle écrasera entre ses seins, il n'en restera rien. Et entre les temps sacrés de la respiration de son enfant, elle vomira là, longuement, la nourriture étrangère que ce soir elle fut forcée de prendre. (pp. 102-103)*

The confrontation scene between Anne and her scandalized husband also takes place in the wings thanks to a continuation of the same device:

*Une ombre apparaîtra dans l'encadrement de la porte restée ouverte sur le couloir, obscurcira plus avant la pénombre de la chambre. Anne Desbaresdes passera légèrement la main dans le désordre réel et blond de ses cheveux. Cette fois, elle prononcera une excuse.  
On ne lui répondra pas. (p. 103)*

<sup>4</sup> Karl Vossler, «Le bon goût,» *French Classicism — a Critical Miscellany*, ed. Jules Brody (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 61. Hereafter cited as FCCM.

Note again how nicely classical decorum and modern anonymity work together to avoid melodrama and bathos.

Albert Thibaudet used to divide novels structurally into two polar categories: the «passive» novel, developing at a leisurely pace within the framework of a large block of time, and the «active» novel, presenting a moment of crisis within the trim structural lines, almost, of a classical play. *Moderato Cantabile* clearly falls into the latter classification and would serve as well as any novel since *La Princesse de Clèves* as an example of Jean Rousset's description of classical structure:

*... on peut dire que l'œuvre classique exclut certains caractères essentiels au baroque, en premier lieu la métamorphose; au lieu de se présenter comme l'unité mouvante d'un ensemble multiforme, l'œuvre classique réalise son unité en immobilisant toutes ses parties en fonction d'un centre fixe; au lieu d'être animée par un mouvement qui se propage au delà d'elle-même, elle se contient à l'intérieur de ses propres limites; au lieu de faire éclater ou vaciller ses structures, elle les stabilise et les renforce ...*<sup>5</sup>

In fact, Duras' novel, barely a hundred pages in length (fifty-six pages in one edition), comes closer to the classical ideal of concision and compression than does Madame de La Fayette's. The latter, having already well established the atmosphere of intrigue and *galanterie* which her virtuous Princesse must breath and reject, is not averse to digressing no less than four times to make the same point. One can rationalize the digressions as functional (especially as much-needed preparation for the surprise ending), but surely not as classical, if the term is to retain any usefulness in literary history and criticism, especially as a trans-historical concept. The French classical «period» or «movement» is shot through with baroque interferences, but «classicism» is a coherent cluster of esthetic attitudes and principles that can and have surfaced at many points in literary history. Madame de La Fayette did put the final nail in the coffin of the ten-volume novel à la Calprenède and Scudéry but still managed to satisfy the basically baroque appetite of her contemporaries for a meandering plot. When Mme de Chartres says to the Princesse at the end of the first digression: «Je ne sais, ma fille, si vous ne trouverez point que je vous ai plus appris de choses que vous n'aviez envie d'en savoir,» the modern reader's answer would have to be a tactful assent.<sup>6</sup> Camus was correct in

<sup>5</sup> Jean Rousset, «Le Baroque et le Classique,» *ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>6</sup> Madame de La Fayette, *La Princesse de Clèves* (Paris: Nilsson, n. d.), p. 40.

asserting that Benjamin Constant, and not Madame de la Fayette, was the real inventor of the unilinear structure in fiction.<sup>7</sup> In terms of a prototype of classical structure, then, *Moderato Cantabile* more than holds its own with *La Princesse de Clèves* or, for that matter, with any major French novel written since the seventeenth century, including *Adolphe*, *La Porte étroite*, and *Génitrix*.

Exterior action in *Moderato Cantabile* is reduced to the role it plays in Racinian tragedy: it is significant, not for itself, but for its emotional repercussions or for its symbolic value. This psychological conception of action, even though the «psychology» is presented with a modern phenomenological bias, is eminently classical. The main effect achieved by Duras in this novel could be described as a «passionate monotony» as Camus has described classical structure, or as a «vibrant stillness» as Francis Fergusson has described Racinian dramaturgy, or as «moderato cantabile,» as the author has so aptly described her own novel.

Stylistically as well as structurally, *Moderato Cantabile*, exhibits a clearly classical orientation. Henri Hell has alluded, in connection with this novel, to Gide's famous identification of classicism with understatement: «Le classicisme — et par là j'entends: le classicisme français — tend tout entier vers la litote. C'est l'art d'exprimer le plus en disant le moins. C'est un art de pudeur et de modestie. Chacun de nos classiques est plus ému qu'il ne laisse paraître d'abord . . . L'auteur romantique reste toujours en deçà de ses paroles; il faut toujours chercher l'auteur classique par delà.»<sup>8</sup> Understatement in *Moderato Cantabile* takes three forms: a deliberate playing down of the melodramatic and even of the dramatic, as we have seen; recourse to symbolism rather than direct psychological analysis or explicit theme; and, especially, evasive dialogue. We will now turn to a brief analysis of the main symbols operating in the novel and then examine in some detail the understated dialogue.

The title of the novel is a sort of discreet oxymoron symbolizing the heroine's ambivalence toward her controlled, conventional life.<sup>9</sup> In the music-lesson scene that opens the novel the speedboat seen passing through the frame of the window is the first statement of the «cantabile» theme, serving as effective counterpoint to the tedious «moderato» of

<sup>7</sup> See Stirling Haig, *Madame de La Fayette* (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1970), p. 141.

<sup>8</sup> André Gide, *Incidences*, reprinted in FCCM, p. 67.

<sup>9</sup> See John W. Kneller, «Elective Empathies and Musical Affinities,» *Yale French Studies*, 27 (1961), 114-120.

the piano lesson.<sup>10</sup> The speedboat is reinforced by more traditional symbols of freedom: the open window and, of course, the sea. The speedboat is replaced by a tugboat in chapter two and, in chapter three, by a toy motor boat that Anne promises to give her little boy. Her mansion is significantly located on Boulevard de la Mer, and the vacation she is planning with her son will be on some tropical shore. This symbolic leitmotif, replacing an explicit statement of Anne's longing for freedom and a new life, is of course why the story is situated in a port city.

The brilliantly written banquet scene in chapter seven symbolizes a moral and psychological asphyxiation of which Anne never explicitly complains, partly because of her nature (as far as we can tell), partly because up to now she has had only a dim realization of the source of her frustration, and principally because of the author's deliberately muted style. The vomiting, given the whole context of what has preceded and what will follow, is symbolic of several things at once. Her body's rejection of this «nourriture étrangère que ce soir elle fut forcée de prendre» is an explicit symbol of Anne's rejection of the concomitant life style. But the vomiting was provoked mainly by the excess of wine taken in the café with Chauvin, suggesting that to live entirely on a bohemian level would not be true to her real self either. In the final analysis, the vomiting may well represent a new awareness of the duality of her nature and of the need to establish a new equilibrium: an escape from the stultifying rigidity and conformity of her life up to now but within the context of her present marital situation and responsibilities. Fully as much as a rejection of upper-bourgeois values, the vomiting (as does the magnolia crushed in her bosom as she vomits) foreshadows the rejection of Chauvin in the next and final chapter. Her little boy, who constantly bursts into the café to interrupt her conversations with Chauvin, serves as a constant symbolic reminder of Anne's responsibilities and of the «moderato» side of her nature as well: she cannot imagine, she says, *not* accompanying her boy.

One hesitates to speak of a sense of duty as a specific theme of the novel, but at least a vague, perhaps unconscious, feeling of duty is certainly operative. Just like the Princesse de Clèves, just like all the wealthy women at the banquet, Anne has been indoctrinated with a concern for her reputation and *repos*. We read of these women in chapter seven:

<sup>10</sup> Kneller (*ibid.* p. 115) claims that the first presentation of this theme does not occur until later in the chapter with the shriek of the woman being murdered.

*Leurs épaules nues ont la luisance et la fermeté d'une société fondée, dans ses assises, sur la certitude de son droit, et elles furent choisies à la convenance de celle-ci. La rigueur de leur éducation exige que leurs excès soient tempérés par le souci majeur de leur entretien. De celui-ci on leur en inculqua, jadis, la conscience.* (p. 95)

And a few pages later: «D'autres femmes boivent à leur tour, elles lèvent de même leurs bras nus, délectables, irréprochables, mais d'épouses» (p. 98). The tension between propriety and instinct is obvious, and the parallel between the motives of the Princesse in rejecting Nemours and those of Anne in rejecting Chauvin is far from tenuous, especially since Anne has a child and also a husband who is still very much alive. And both novels make the reader wonder whether the heroine really believes in love, whether it is worth the try.

The main source of understatement in *Moderato Cantabile*, however, is not the symbolism but the dialogue. Although Anne never states the source of her frustration to Chauvin or to herself, and although the non-omniscient narrator never directly informs the reader, there is an accumulation of subtle hints in the form of overtones and undertones, innuendoes, Freudian slips, as well as frequent projections of the heroine's feelings onto her son.

At the end of the first chapter, Anne rushes down to the café to see what has happened. She sees the man who has killed his mistress lying on top of her and calling to her gently: «Mon amour. Mon amour.»

—*Pauvre femme, dit quelqu'un.*

—*Pourquoi? demanda Anne Desbaresdes.*

—*On ne sait pas.* (p. 19)

Anne's question is not an innocent one inspired simply by idle curiosity. She is not asking so much about the motive of the crime as she is wondering whether the «poor» woman is really to be pitied. Anne is instinctively comparing her own uneventful, passionless life to this wild love affair with its romantic dénouement.

During her next meeting with Chauvin Anne says to him: «Je voudrais que vous me disiez le commencement même, comment ils ont commencé à se parler. C'est dans un café disiez-vous...» (p. 44). Chauvin has said nothing of the kind. This is simply another slip: Anne is unconsciously setting up a parallel between her new relationship with Chauvin and the dead woman's love affair which she will re-live vicariously and perhaps even actually if this relationship with Chauvin develops further.

That Anne's emotional relationship to Chauvin is indeed developing with alarming rapidity is indicated by another slip in chapter six. This



is her next to last meeting with Chauvin. As usual she is very nervous and drinks her wine quickly to calm her nerves and to summon up the courage to continue these irregular meetings.

*Le verre tremblait encore dans sa main.*

—*Il y a maintenant sept jours, dit Chauvin.*

—*Sept nuits, dit-elle comme au hasard. Comme c'est bon, le vin.*

—*Sept nuits, répéta Chauvin.* (p. 78)

«Sept nuits» is obviously not said «au hasard» but instinctively, revealing the psychosexual importance of this new phase in her life.

Anne's increasing detachment from her role as dutiful mother is indicated by discreet notations such as the fact that she pays no attention while her little boy runs in rapid circles dangerously near the end of the pier, or when she says to him: «Tu grandis, toi, comme tu grandis. Comme c'est bien.» (p. 50) As the child matures, the mother as well as the child will become more independent. Anne feels her own need to grow as well: she has let ten years of marriage make her increasingly dependent and passive, she has not asserted herself, as is indicated by subtle hints such as the following: «En été, ce hêtre me cache la mer. J'ai demandé qu'un jour on l'enlève de là, qu'on l'abatte. Je n'ai pas dû assez insister.» (p. 55)

Removed from the actual context of the novel, especially its regular but light and swift tempo (precisely the tempo suggested by the title), the passages quoted above seem quite banal. And in a superficial sense they are. But the banality is an intentional and ironical form of understatement which is an integral part of the esthetics of the *nouveau roman* just as it is for that other diffuse literary movement called French Classicism. One is reminded of Butor condemning Breton for condemning the banal, the «moments nuls» in literature: «. . . cette banalité qui est la continuité même du roman avec la vie «courante,» se révélant à mesure que l'on pénètre dans l'œuvre comme douée de sens, c'est toute la banalité des choses autour de nous qui va en quelque sorte se renverser, se transfigurer.»<sup>11</sup> Butor's transfiguration of the trivial is as good a definition of understatement as Gide's (*dire le moins pour exprimer le plus*), and should warn us, as Gide has done for classical writers, that the apparent simplicity and banality of contemporary novelists are only apparent. Here is Gide on classical banality:

*Il n'est pas une des qualités du style classique qui ne s'achète par le sacrifice d'une complaisance. Les peintres et les littérateurs que nous*

<sup>11</sup> Michel Butor, *Répertoire II* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1964), p. 26.

*louangeons le plus aujourd'hui ont une manière; le grand artiste classique travaille à n'avoir pas de manière; il s'efforce vers la banalité. S'il parvient à cette banalité sans effort, c'est qu'il n'est pas un grand artiste, parbleu! L'œuvre classique ne sera forte et belle qu'en raison de son romantisme dompté. «Un grand artiste n'a qu'un souci: devenir le plus humain possible» — dissons mieux: banal — écrivais-je il y a vingt ans.<sup>12</sup>*

The point we are trying to make here is that understatement (i. e., the transformation of the trivial) in *Moderato Cantabile* is the product of both contemporary and classical concerns. That such a convergence is possible is shown — slyly and in reverse — by Roland Barthes when speaking of Racinian banality: «... la trivialité est la forme propre du sous-langage, de ce *logos* qui naît sans cesse et ne s'accomplit jamais.»<sup>13</sup> Understatement in *Moderato Cantabile*, then, is the product of a literary cross-fertilization: although not a card-carrying member of either «movement» or either «school,» Duras has certainly learned from both. She has combined modern «point of view» with classical «simplicity» to create an ironic tension between the surface and the substratum of her narrative. The economy of the novel is such that the slightest gesture or remark take on significant overtones. This is the secret of the novel's peculiar resonance, its vibrant stillness.

When Anne talks about her son's piano lessons in chapter five, to take another example, her remarks, out of context, seem devoid of any particular density: «Mais un jour il saura ses gammes aussi... il les saura aussi parfaitement que sa mesure, c'est inévitable, il en sera même fatigué à force de les savoir» (p. 69). But the sensitive reader is aware of the overtones, especially since this is a reiteration of the same theme expressed just two pages earlier in almost the same terms: «Un jour, dit la mère, un jour il le saura, il le dira, sans hésitation, c'est inévitable. Même s'il ne le veut pas, il le saura» (p. 67). Socially, Anne, too, has had to learn her scales to the point of tedium. She is obliquely alluding here to the repetitive respectability of the conventional, upper-bourgeois life she has led not just since her marriage but since her own childhood. Her son will continue the tradition just as Anne has succeeded all the women who have lived in her mansion before her. They are all notes on the same scale.

Anne and Chauvin don't meet in this fifth chapter, but their growing emotional involvement is indicated indirectly by Duras' use of a cinematographic technique: the simultaneous scene. While the child plays

<sup>12</sup> André Gide, FCCM, p. 65.

<sup>13</sup> Barthes, op. cit., p. 65.

the sonatina on the sixth floor of Mademoiselle Giraud's flat, Chauvin listens below and hums the tune. Then the direction is reversed: the voices of workers (of whom Chauvin is simply the most available because currently unemployed) are mingled with that other symbol of instinctual freedom — the sound of the sea: «Le bruit de la mer mêlé aux voix des hommes qui arrivaient sur le quai monta jusqu'à la chambre» (p. 75). The simultaneous scene is a new device for achieving an old goal — understatement — and provides still another example of the happy marriage in this novel of contemporary and classical strategies. The device will be repeated throughout the climactic seventh chapter to which we will now turn our attention.

The chapter begins with an abrupt change of style and tense (the present now takes over as narrative mode) and another form of understatement: irony. The stilted language of the first paragraph reflects the stiff *collet monté* atmosphere of the banquet and contrasts with the stylistic simplicity of the second paragraph which switches the scene to Chauvin prowling outside:

*Sur un plat d'argent à l'achat duquel trois générations ont contribué, le saumon arrive, glacé dans sa forme native. Habillé de noir, ganté de blanc, un homme le porte, tel un enfant de roi, et le présente à chacun dans le silence du dîner commençant. Il est bien-séant de ne pas en parler.*

*De l'extrémité nord du parc, les magnolias versent leur odeur qui va de dune en dune jusqu'à rien. Le vent, ce soir, est du sud. Un homme rôde, boulevard de la Mer. Une femme le sait. (p. 91)*

The understatement created by the verbs of the last two sentences is reinforced by the anonymity of their subjects, a device that is sustained throughout the chapter and that provides still another instance of a new strategy offering effective support to a classical one. The simplicity of the second paragraph and the emotional depths that are suggested by understatement contrast sharply with the superficial «ritual» of the banquet inside:

*Le saumon passe de l'un à l'autre suivant un rituel que rien ne trouble, sinon la peur cachée de chacun que tant de perfection tout à coup ne se brise ou ne s'entache d'une trop évidente absurdité. (pp. 91-92)*

Then the artificial is once again contrasted with the natural:

*Dehors, dans le parc, les magnolias élaborent leur floraison funèbre dans la nuit noire du printemps naissant.*

*Avec le ressac du vent qui va, vient, se cogne aux obstacles de la ville, et repart, le parfum atteint l'homme et le lâche, alternativement.* (p. 92)

The magnolia has special significance for Chauvin: he once saw Anne, who likes to wear low-cut gowns, wearing a magnolia blossom in her bosom. She is also wearing one now. Rhythmically, the scene switches back again to the ceremonious banquet, and the style once more becomes ironically precious:

*Des femmes, à la cuisine, achèvent de parfaire la suite, la sueur au front, l'honneur à vif, elles écorchent un canard mort dans son linceul d'oranges. Cependant que rose, mielleux, mais déjà déformé par le temps très court qui vient de se passer, le saumon des eaux libres de l'océan continue sa marche inéluctable vers sa totale disparition et que la crainte d'un manquement quelconque au cérémonial qui accompagne celle-ci se dissipe peu à peu.* (p. 92)

The scene proceeds with *nouveau roman* anonymity, understating a husband's rage, a woman's disarray and an incipient social scandal:

*Un homme, face à une femme, regarde cette inconnue. Ses seins sont de nouveau à moitié nus. Elle ajusta hâtivement sa robe. Entre eux, se fane une fleur. Dans ses yeux élargis, immodérés, des lueurs de lucidité passent encore, suffisantes, pour qu'elle arrive à se servir à son tour du saumon des autres gens.*

*A la cuisine, on ose enfin le dire, le canard étant prêt, et au chaud, dans le répit qui s'ensuit, qu'elle exagère. Elle arriva ce soir plus tard encore qu'hier, bien après ses invités.* (p. 92-93)

The wine helping, the strained cordiality becomes relaxed, innocuous good humor, except for a woman dazed by her drunkenness and an anonymous host swallowing his rage:

*On rit. Quelque part autour de la table, une femme. Le cœur des conversations augmente peu à peu de volume et, dans une surenchère d'efforts et d'inventivités progressive émerge une société quelconque. Des repères sont trouvés, des failles s'ouvrent où s'essayent des familiarités. Et on débouche peu à peu sur une conversation généralement partisane et particulièrement neutre. La soirée réussira. Les femmes sont au plus sûr de leur éclat. Les hommes les couvrirent de bijoux au prorata de leurs bilans. L'un d'eux doute qu'il eut (sic) raison.* (pp. 94-95)

Stendhal has described a similar banquet with similar irony:

*Tel est encore, même dans ce siècle ennuyé, l'empire de la nécessité de s'amuser que même les jours de dîners, à peine le marquis avait-il quitté le salon, que tout le monde s'enfuyait. Pourvu qu'on ne plaisantât ni de Dieu, ni des prêtres, ni du roi, ni des gens en place, ni des artistes protégés par la cour, ni de tout ce qui est établi, pourvu qu'on ne dit du bien ni de Béranger, ni des journaux de l'opposition, ni de Voltaire, ni de Rousseau, ni de tout ce qui se permet un peu de franc-parler; pourvu surtout qu'on ne parlât jamais politique, on pouvait librement raisonner de tout.*<sup>14</sup>

The strict propriety, the apparent taming of the instincts of this social class provides the background of Anne's emotional problem:

*Le saumon repasse dans une forme encore amoindrie. Les femmes le dévorent jusqu'au bout. Leurs épaules nues ont la luisance et la fermeté d'une société fondée, dans ses assises, sur la certitude de son droit, et elles furent choisies à la convenance de celle-ci. La rigueur de leur éducation exige que leurs excès soient tempérés par le souci majeur de leur entretien. De celui-ci on leur en inculqua, jadis, la conscience. Elle se pourlèchent de mayonnaise verte, comme il se doit, s'y retrouvent, y trouvent leur compte. (p. 95)*

Beneath their veneer of propriety these women barely disguise their sensuality. Anne and Chauvin, by contrast, let their real hunger show:

*L'une d'entre elles contrevient ce soir à l'appétit général. Elle vient de l'autre bout de la ville, de derrière les môles et les entrepôts à huile, à l'opposé de ce boulevard de la Mer, de ce périmètre qui lui fut il y a dix ans autorisé, où un homme lui a offert du vin jusqu'à la déraison. Nourrie de ce vin, exceptée de la règle, manger l'exténuerait. Au-delà des stores blancs, la nuit, et, dans la nuit, encore, car il a du temps devant lui, un homme seul regarde tantôt la mer, tantôt le parc. Puis la mer, le parc, ses mains. Il ne mange pas. Il ne pourrait pas, lui non plus, nourrir son corps tourmenté par d'autre faim. (p. 95-96)*

Thus, without romantic bombast or sentimentality, the author masterfully reveals two people yearning for each other and, in a larger and indeed more real sense, for completeness and self-realization.

The final chapter opens with an ironically irrelevant description of the unseasonably hot weather ending, even, on a very unusual note of levity:

<sup>14</sup> Stendhal, *Le Rouge et le Noir* (New York: Dell, 1963), p. 287.

*Certains prétendirent que ce jour avait été chaud. La plupart nièrent —non sa beauté— mais que celle-ci avait été telle que ce jour avait été chaud. Certains n'eurent pas d'avis. (p. 106)*

The chapter and novel end on a similar note:

*Après son départ, la patronne augmenta le volume de la radio. Quelques hommes se plainquirent qu'elle fût trop forte à leur gré. (p. 115)*

Between these two passages something significant has happened: Anne and Chauvin have said farewell. By framing the farewell scene with ironic detachment, Duras has once again deliberately avoided pathos in favor of understatement.

Even the farewell itself is handled periphrastically, with Anne and Chauvin re-enacting the roles of the other couple. The «y arriver» below refers not only to their own farewell but also to the ending of the other affair as invented by Anne and Chauvin's romantic imagination: the woman wants to die at the hands of her lover:

*— Peut-être que je ne vais pas y arriver, murmura-t-elle. Peut-être n'entendit-il plus. Elle ramena sa veste sur elle-même, la ferma, l'étriqua sur elle, fut reprise du même gémissement sauvage.*

*— C'est impossible, dit-elle.*

*Chauvin entendit.*

*— Une minute, dit-il, et nous y arriverons.*

*Anne Desbaresdes attendit cette minute, puis elle essaya de se relever de sa chaise . . .*

*— Je voudrais que vous soyez morte, dit Chauvin.*

*— C'est fait, dit Anne Desbaresdes. (p. 114)*

This is of course the way the other couple's affair ended. In her preface to the novel Marguerite Duras has stated:

*La femme qui a été assassinée dans le café, raconte Chauvin, a imploré son amant de la tuer. Anne Desbaresdes qui l'écoute est confirmée dans l'intuition qu'elle avait d'une possibilité de fulguration de l'amour ou, si on veut, d'un stade de l'amour où plus rien ne peut la nourrir que la mort . . .*

*Ce que veut Anne Desbaresdes de Chauvin, c'est ce qu'elle n'a jamais vécu mais c'est ce qu'elle aurait pu vivre avec et à travers d'autres hommes: son anéantissement dans l'amour même.<sup>15</sup>*

<sup>15</sup> Marguerite Duras, *Moderato Cantabile*, ed. Thomas Bishop (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1968), p. 9-10.

The idea of a love so complete that only death can nourish it is a heady romantic theme that needs, and is given, the chastening effect of understatement. Gide's remark, quoted earlier, about true classicism being a «romantisme dompté,» seems particularly apposite here. And thanks to its deliberate ambiguity the novel does not have to be read in quite the same way as the author intended. To this reader at least, *Moderato Cantabile* is concerned with a quest for completeness and identity, with death symbolizing the impossible dream rather than the consummation of love. In any event, the two interpretations do not necessarily exclude each other, and still other readings are undoubtedly possible.

\* \* \*

Several critics have been somewhat *déroutés* by the lack of incident and «psychology» in *Moderato Cantabile*:

*Il y a une sorte d'outrance qui fait que le lecteur ne peut, derrière ce comportement qu'on nous dit, imaginer qu'un monde superficiel dans lequel vit un être superficiel.*<sup>16</sup>

*Marguerite Duras n'a pas tort de croire que le même fait peut prendre diverses couleurs et produire des émotions différentes, selon la manière dont il est narré. Encore faut-il qu'il soit narré. En l'occurrence, nous voyons une dame qui revient sans cesse au même endroit poser sans cesse les mêmes questions; et, peu à peu, ce manège assez hagar nous permet de deviner à moitié les événements et les sentiments qui furent à sa source. Hélas, une telle recherche ne s'accorde absolument pas avec le phénomène mental par l'effet duquel la fable littéraire nous séduit et nous égare. En définitive, qu'il soit arrivé telle ou telle chose à Chauvin, à Mlle Giraud, au petit garçon d'Anne, cela nous est bien égal, ces fantômes étant restés pour nous des fantômes, auxquels nulle sympathie ne nous attache.*<sup>17</sup>

Even such a perceptive critic as Gaëtan Picon, summing up his opinion of the novel as an «admirable structure d'un récit absent,» has his doubts about Duras' technique:

*Le récit dessine des contours que n'emplit aucune forme réelle; il ne suggère pas, au moyen d'un silence concerté, un vrai récit tenu secret: plein de son vide, sourd de son silence, il semble vouloir se dépasser vers un événement, une signification, une parole; mais l'objet*

<sup>16</sup> Anne Villelaur, «Une noix creuse,» *Moderato Cantabile* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1962), p. 143.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Poulet, «La Règle du jeu transgressée,» *ibid.*, pp. 153-154.

vers lequel il est tendu lui fait défaut. S'il y a ici un art de la suggestion, il s'agit d'une suggestion sans objet . . .

Je crois qu'il faut que, d'une certaine manière, l'auteur intervienne plus directement. . . .<sup>18</sup>

*Moderato Cantabile* will disappoint critics looking for a «definite» story or even a well-defined emotion behind the allusive dialogue. But Marguerite Duras has chosen something subtler than a precise *état d'âme* as the subject of her novel. We are not dealing with easily-labeled emotions or drives, not even with those fluid impulses, those *vellétés* and *tropismes* à la Nathalie Sarraute, whose novels do invite comparison with this one. Both authors reject the analysis of static psychological types or essences; we do not know what these people are nor where they are going: they are «existences» in the sense that Sartre has described the characters in *Portrait d'un inconnu*. Both authors deal with *sous-conversation*, those subterranean tremors that go on below the surface of the «inauthentic» dialogue. But Sarraute locates the source of the tremors and measures the gravitational pull of surrounding bodies and of alien planetary systems; the tremors evoked by Duras remain of mysterious origin. In Sarraute's novels, those swiftly-shifting molecular movements of the psyche that continually recombine to form new kaleidoscopic patterns, although unnamed and unavowed, remain precise. Sarraute's goal is clarity: she shows us — more vividly than the phenomenologists — the intentional structure of consciousness; Duras presents us with half-conscious and pre-conscious impulses, dimly realized urges toward self-actualization arising from what Jung calls the shadow side of the Self. To talk of *bovarisme* as so many critics feel impelled to do in discussing *Moderato Cantabile*, is to invite misunderstanding: if Anne is to be compared with Emma Bovary, then the emotional parallel would have to be with that very brief stage in Emma's life just before she is fully aware of her discontent. Not until the vomiting, which occurs in the next to last chapter, is Anne Desbaresdes really aware of her unhappiness.

As composer, Duras has accurately noted her score: moderato cantabile. If one can grant that such a delicate theme, this discreet incantation of a soul timidly but impatiently yearning for completeness, is a legitimate subject for a novel, then one must allow that the technique employed is not only impressively appropriate but inevitable. The only other possible approach would be a surrealist one: a stream

<sup>18</sup> Gaëton Picon, «*Moderato Cantabile* dans l'œuvre de Marguerite Duras,» *ibid.*, p. 170 and 179.



of unconsciousness. To many contemporary practitioners of fiction, such an approach would smack of omniscience. Until it is again permitted for a novelist to show us the dreams of his heroine, as Flaubert did so brilliantly with Emma, then Duras must be praised for presenting a theme of concern to our age with the limited means at our disposal. To appreciate Duras requires a talent that, as Gide reminds us, is required to appreciate any essentially classical writer: *entendre à demi-mot*.

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