“Difficile d'écrire sur son propre travail. Que dire? Je parlerai d'elle, de la mère. . . La nôtre. La vôtre. La mienne, aussi bien.”¹

A woman’s cry. A woman has been killed. In the half-shadow of a café, her inert body has become a “spectacle,” riveting the gaze of passersby. Her murderer, a man, lies on top of her, calling out calmly, “Mon amour. Mon amour.” Another woman has heard, watches. What does she want? To know [savoir]. “Pourquoi?” asks Anne Desbaresdes when she returns to the café. Once again, she has returned to the scene of the crime: “—Ce cri était si fort que vraiment il est bien naturel que l’on cherche à savoir. J’aurais pu difficilement éviter de le faire, voyez-vous. [. . .] —Il m’aurait été impossible de ne pas revenir.”² A man has also come back to the café: “—Je suis revenu moi aussi pour la même raison que vous,”³ Chauvin tells Anne. In Moderato cantabile, over a ten-day period, Anne and Chauvin will have five conversations in which they will (re)create, verbally, the original couple and the murder.

During their first meeting, Chauvin subjects Anne to what can only be called verbal seduction. “Si vous reveniez, j’essaierais de savoir


²—That cry was so strong that it is really very natural that one should try to find out. It would have been difficult for me to avoid doing it, you see. [. . .] —It would have been impossible for me not to come back.” Marguerite Duras, Moderato cantabile (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1981), pp. 19, 25. Subsequent references in the text are to this edition. Ellipses within square brackets indicate omitted paragraphs.

³—I also came back for the same reason as you.” Moderato, p. 25.
autre chose et je vous le dirais." She is invited to enact the eternal return to a place where the Word is knowledge. Anne wants to know and Chauvin will tell her. In Moderato cantabile, language [dire] will become the vehicle for the imposition of a certain knowledge [savoir] in a relationship of power between Anne and Chauvin. In “Language as Ritual in Marguerite Duras’s Moderato cantabile,” Evelyn Zepp precisely renders the sexual nature of this relationship by writing that dire is “a verb of active creation” while savoir indicates “receptivity” to this creation.⁵ Language is Chauvin’s power over Anne. Or as Michel Foucault writes: “relations of power cannot . . . be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production . . . and functioning of a discourse.”⁶ At the same time, if we go back to Chauvin’s words of seduction, we find that the relationship between Anne and Chauvin is placed in the conditional mode from the beginning [essaierais, dirais]. For the most part, their conversations will be “conditional” ones. Duras prefaced Le Camion with Grévisse’s definition of the conditional as a hypothetical future tense of the indicative mode, used to indicate “une simple imagination transportant en quelque sorte les événements dans le champ de la fiction.”⁷ Zepp notes that Anne's and Chauvin's relationship is “a creation of words alone.” This “failure” of language will determine their “inability to achieve authentic action.”⁸ To the point, yet far off the mark. Their relationship is an eminently verbal one and should be read as such. Any questions of authenticity or action must be posed in the context of language and fiction. Indeed, the fact that Chauvin’s power over Anne is created within a “field of fiction” suggests that perhaps power itself should be read as fiction.

The Name of the Country: The Name

The production of language in Moderato cantabile is dependent upon the “dialogue” established between Anne and Chauvin. The space

⁴“If you came back, I would try to find out something else and I would tell you.” Moderato, p. 24.
of language, however, quickly reveals its primordial kinship with relations of power. In all but the last conversation, Chauvin is the master of Anne’s displacements. Each time she returns to the café, Chauvin leads her to his table in the back room and seats her where he wants her. Having situated her, Chauvin demands only that she speak to him. His demand is an obsessively repeated one: “—Parlez-moi encore. Bientôt, je ne vous demanderai plus rien.”9 Speaking from a position chosen by the Other, however, Anne cannot but (re)produce his discourse. Indeed, Chauvin will finally speak in Anne’s “place.”10

An examination of the maneuvers that precede the first appearance of Chauvin’s name in the text shows that his existence as a character, hence his very identity, depends on this appropriation of Anne’s verbal space. When he asks Anne to talk to him, she begins to speak of the drunken men who occasionally walk past her house late at night. Chauvin intervenes to describe Anne in the midst of the disorder of her bedroom as she listens to the passing drunks. Anne draws back, her hands trembling from “la peur et . . . l’émoi dans lequel la jetait toute allusion à son existence.”11 It is at this moment that “Sa voix la quitta” (“Her voice left her” [p. 42]). Although Anne may continue to speak, having lost her voice she cannot constitute herself as subject of her discourse. She will try to change the “subject,” but Chauvin will continue to insist: “—Vous y étiez couchée. Personne ne le savait.”12

The conversation becomes a struggle that Anne can only lose. At the same time, this confrontation is a trial [débat: “phase d’un procès”]13 in which Anne is judged guilty with no real possibility of defense. Her replies are punctuated by ellipses; the only efficacious weapon on this battlefield/courtroom floor is language, and Anne has no voice. All that is left in her field—of vision, of language—is Chauvin’s mouth: “Elle ne cessa plus de regarder sa bouche seule desormais dans la lumière restante du jour” (“She didn’t stop looking at his mouth alone now in the waning light of day” [p. 42]). Only Chauvin’s voice is left. He “narrates” Anne’s presence at a reception for the foundry workers given in her home: “Au mois de juin de l’année dernière, il y aura un an dans quelques jours, vous vous teniez face

9“—Speak to me some more. Soon, I won’t ask you for anything more.” 
Moderato, p. 43.

10“So he spoke for her [à sa place].” Moderato, p. 44.
11the fear and . . . the agitation into which she was thrown by any allusion to her existence.” 
Moderato, p. 44.

12“You were lying there. No one knew it.” Moderato, p. 42.

13Trial proceedings.” All definitions in this article are taken from the Micro-
Robert, Dictionnaire du français primordial.
à lui [le jardin], sur le perron, prête à nous accueillir, nous, le personnel des Fonderies. Au-dessus de vos seins à moitié nus, il y avait une fleur blanche de magnolia. Je m'appelle Chauvin.”14 Anne is literally objec-
tified in/by Chauvin’s language: she stands facing the garden, ready
to greet the workers, but not yet moving. The use of the reflexive verb
se tenir reinforces her immobility. Although he does not speak about
himself, the true subject of this narrative is Chauvin. It is Anne’s objec-
tification, her disappearance as subject — she is literally devoured by
this mouth that hypnotizes her — that allows Chauvin to name himself.
The struggle is over: “Elle reprit sa pose coutumière, face à lui,”15 there
where she exists only as his reflection.

This scene of the reception for the foundry workers at which Anne
would have been wearing a low-cut black dress with a magnolia
blossom pinned between her breasts is one of the few continuing nar-
ratives in Moderato cantabile. Its elaboration in four parts clearly illus-
trates the logistics of the verbal warfare by which Chauvin attempts
to reduce Anne to his language. It is during the second conversa-
tion that Chauvin first speaks of the annual event: “— Au rez-de-chausée
il y a des salons où vers fin mai, chaque année, on donne des récep-
tions au personnel des fonderies. [. . .] — Vous aviez une robe noire
très décolletée. Vous nous regardiez avec amabilité et indifférence.”16
I have shown how the second version constitutes Chauvin, not Anne,
as its subject. Chauvin’s accession to the status of subject permits a
marked progression in the third version; it is the most detailed one
and clearly demonstrates Chauvin’s mastery of his material. He has
become, despite his own protestations of ignorance, a quasi-omnipotent
narrator:

— Vous étiez accoudée à ce grand piano. Entre vos seins nus sous votre
robe, il y a cette fleur de magnolia.
Anne Desbarestes, très attentivement, écouta cette histoire.
— Oui.
— Quand vous vous penchez, cette fleur frôle le contour extérieur de
vos seins. Vous l’avez négligemment épinglée, trop haut. C’est une fleur

14“In June of last year, in a few days it will have been a year, you were standing
across from it [the garden], on the steps, ready to greet us, we, the employees
of the Foundry. Above your half-naked breasts, there was a white magnolia blossom.
My name is Chauvin.” Moderato, p. 42.
15“She resumed her usual posture, across from him.” Moderato, p. 43.
16“— There are rooms on the ground floor where near the end of May, every
year, receptions are given for the foundry workers. [. . .] — You had on a very low-
cut black dress. You were looking at us in a polite and indifferent way.” Moderato,
p. 34.
énorme, vous l'avez choisie au hasard, trop grande pour vous. Ses pétales sont encore durs, elle a justement atteint la nuit dernière sa pleine floraison.

— Je regarde dehors?
— Buvez encore un peu de vin. L'enfant joue dans le jardin. Vous regardez dehors, oui.

Anne Desbaresdes but comme il le lui demandait, chercha à se souvenir, revint d'un profond étonnement.

— Je ne me souviens pas d'avoir cueilli cette fleur. Ni de l'avoir portée.
— Je ne vous regardais qu'à peine, mais j'ai eu le temps de la voir aussi. . .
— Comme j'aime le vin, je ne savais pas.
— Maintenant, parlez-moi.
— Ah, laissez-moi, supplia Anne Desbaresdes.¹⁷

Although Chauvin begins in a past tense ("You were leaning"), he quickly shifts to the present. He is no longer describing a past event, but rather creating a fiction ("this story") in the present. Anne has become a character in Chauvin's fiction, to the point that she asks him whether she is (was, will be) looking outside. She tries to bring the narration back into a remembered past by observing that she has no recollection of having worn the flower. The truth or falsity of the detail and Anne's memory of the reception as a lived experience, however, are entirely secondary to the vision of the narrator, final arbiter of the "truth" of his fiction: "—I hardly looked at you, but I had the time to see it too." Anne is/was/will be as she is reflected in Chauvin's eyes, as she is spoken by his mouth. Only now will he order her to speak. That same evening Anne will "live out" Chauvin's

¹⁷—You were leaning on that large piano. Between your naked breasts under your dress, there is that magnolia blossom.

Anne Desbaresdes very attentively listened to this story.

— Yes.
— When you lean over, this flower brushes against the edge of your breasts. You pinned it carelessly, too high. It is an enormous flower, you chose it without thinking, too large for you. Its petals are still hard, it reached full-blossom only last night.
— Am I looking outside?
— Drink a little more wine. The child is playing in the garden. You are looking outside, yes.

Anne Desbaresdes drank as he asked her to, tried to remember, came to from a deep astonishment.
— I don't remember having picked that flower. Nor having worn it.
— I hardly looked at you, but I had the time to see it too. . .
— I really do like wine, I didn't know.
— Now, speak to me.
— Oh, leave me alone, Anne Desbaresdes implored." Moderato, p. 59.
fiction at the dinner party: she wears a black dress with a magnolia flower pinned between her breasts as she leans against the piano.

From Plato’s Cave to The Thing

"Why?" is Anne’s question. If we are to believe him, Chauvin has returned to ask the same question. Marcelle Marini writes that, up to a certain point, this scene is one of "communication . . . lieu où s'échangent deux imaginaires complices." In what manner could we view Anne’s involvement in it as “positive”? We do have the impression in the first conversation that Anne is speaking (of) herself for the first time since her marriage ten years before. In that other house, someone has always spoken for her. Now she herself is speaking and someone is also speaking to her about herself. A liberation? Chauvin’s narrative control would hardly seem to support such an idea. Each textual element that seems to hold the promise of liberation is charged with an inverse, negative sign that finally predominates. Chauvin begins by asking Anne to speak to him and finishes with a brutal command: “Taisez-vous” ("Shut up" [p. 63]). Chauvin’s desire for Anne’s silence, we realize, is already contained in his request that she speak. What begins as a scene of communication between two accomplices who are there for the same reason becomes a struggle to the (second, duplicate) death.

It is the cry of the murdered woman that brings Chauvin and Anne to this scene. In a movement that seems to reverse the one I described above, the “negative” cry of death evokes at the same time a “positive” one: the cry of the mother giving birth. “—Une fois,” Anne tells Chauvin, “j’ai dû crier un peu de cette façon, . . . quand j’ai eu cet enfant.” However, at the moment the child comes into the world, the mother’s cry of life will be replaced by what Duras considers the child’s cry of death. The irreparable loss of the mother, of the state of perfect union, is simultaneous with birth itself; birth is a sort of death into life. The cry of the murdered woman, identified in Anne’s

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19See Marini, Territoires, pp. 22, 32.
20—Once I must have screamed somewhat in that way, . . . when I had this child.” Moderato, p. 30.
mind with the cry of birth, is described as “un cri très haut, qui s’est arrêté net alors qu’il était au plus fort de lui-même.”22 The body of the mother falls silent (or is silenced) at the most critical moment of rupture (life, death, murder?).

At least initially, Anne and Chauvin return to the same place to question this silence, their origin. Accomplices. The spatial disposition of their meeting place seems to reflect this common ground: “Le mur du fond de la salle s’illumina du soleil couchant. En son milieu, le trou noir de leurs ombres conjuguées se dessina.”23 A partially dark space, shadows projected on a wall by light coming from behind: Anne and Chauvin meet in a place that closely resembles the cave of Plato’s allegory.24 There is little need to insist on the traditional maternal symbolism of this cave: it would be the mother’s womb. The often double trajectory of the text I discussed above should, however, give us pause. The disposition of the scene is perhaps not what it may appear. Indeed, Anne and Chauvin have come back to a place that, as it joins them together in desire, becomes the scene of the crime.

Even before the murder, Chauvin’s fascination for Anne is a visual one; he is her spectator. The object of his “speculation” is not Anne alone, but Anne and her son together. The first time that there is an explicit textual reference to Chauvin’s looking at Anne, she is literally attached to her son. Chauvin “projects” on Anne and the child what he has definitively lost and yet still seeks: union with the mother. In the “cinema” of Chauvin’s imagination, the scene of childbirth is run in reverse: “L’enfant surgit de dehors et se colla contre sa mère dans un mouvement d’abandon heureux. Elle lui caressa distraitement les cheveux. L’homme regarda plus attentivement. — Ils s’aimaient, dit-il.”25 The child, rather than “appearing suddenly” from inside, comes from the outside to give himself to (to rejoin) the mother. This (re)pre-

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22“a very long, very loud cry that stopped suddenly at its strongest point.” Moderato, p. 30.

23“The back wall of the room was lit up by the setting sun. In its center, the black hole of their combined shadows was outlined.” Moderato, p. 33.

24In “La caverne de Platon,” first published in La Nouvelle Revue Française in 1958 and consequently included in the series of review articles that follow the text of Moderato (“‘Moderato cantabile’ et la presse française,” pp. 91–93), Dominique Aury notes this similarity. The comparison is made, however, in the context of a general commentary on the “images of destiny” that would be reflected in both the cave and the text.

25“The child came in from outside and snuggled up against his mother in a movement of happy abandon. She stroked his hair absentmindedly. The man watched attentively. — They loved one another, he said.” Moderato, p. 20.
sentation of his origin elicits Chauvin's only direct response to Anne's question: "They loved one another." The configuration of this scene is identical to the one following the murder: "L'homme s'assit près de la femme morte, lui caressa les cheveux et lui sourit." Now, however, it is the mother who caresses the hair of the child and who will repeatedly call him "mon amour." In the beginning there was not the Word — of the Father — but the body of the mother, source of life and death. This Chauvin wishes to deny, in creating himself as narrator, as unique subject of his own fiction, as primary and autonomous. And not of woman born.

Chauvin is following Plato's route out of the cave; Plato exhorts the aspiring (male) philosopher to turn away "avec l'âme toute entière de ce qui naît, jusqu'à ce qu'il devienne capable de supporter la vue de l'être et de ce qu'il y a de plus lumineux dans l'être." Luce Irigaray restates the philosopher's advice in the following way: "oublier pour se souvenir du plus vrai." In Speculum de l'autre femme, she examines the "phallogocentrism" of Western philosophy in an attempt to uncover what she later defined as "ce qui fait la puissance de . . . sa position de maitrise." Central to this project is her rereading of Platonic metaphors that have served as models for Western philosophical discourse. She argues that the feminine is excluded from the production of this discourse — and from presence in it — by being subjected to the principle of Identity or masculine Sameness. Irigaray deconstructs the logic of binary (dichotomous) oppositions which has dominated philosophical discourse in order to show that it in fact conceals a hierarchical division into positive (male) and negative (female) poles. This strategy is "designed" to assure the repression of the negative and the mastery — and unique valorization — of the positive. Difference is thus effectively denied. To take the "prisoner" out of the shadowy (maternal) cave is to liberate him "de cette conception, de cette naissance, par trop 'naturelles,' pour le renvoyer à une origine plus éloignée, plus élevée, plus noble. A un . . . Principe, un Auteur, par

26"The man sat down near the dead woman, stroked her hair and smiled at her." Moderato, p. 14.

27"with all his soul from what is born, until he is capable of withstanding the sight of being and of what is most luminous in being." La République (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), p. 277.


rapport auquel il aurait à se re-connaître.” Maternal origin will be denied in/by this masculine self-identity, the logos of the Father, He who is eternal and not of woman born. Only in this way can Man become his own author: “Le Père, lui, est éternel, d’avoir à jamais refusé de naître. Son être, de ce fait, se perpétue de tout temps identique à lui-même.” Women serve only as a mirror to reinforce this masculine specularization, as feminine difference is negated in the endless reflection of the Same.

When Anne remembers having screamed during childbirth, Chauvin asks her if she suffered great pain. His question elicits an unexpected response: Anne smiles, remembering. Pleasure? Anne, always so immobile, rigid [raide] before his gaze, moves and is freed by this movement. Now it is Chauvin who stiffens, ordering her “sèchement” to speak. The adverb sèchement (“avec froideur, dureté”) is of course derived from the adjective sec (“Qui n’est pas ou peu imprégné de liquide”). Faced with Anne’s freedom—of movement, from fear—Chauvin becomes hard and dry, posing himself as the inverse of the mobility and fluidity of the sea about which Anne will speak and which her movement reflects, if only for a moment: “—J’habite la dernière maison du boulevard de la Mer, la dernière quand on quitte la ville. Juste avant les dunes. . . . Ma chambre est au premier étage à gauche, en regardant la mer.” Immediately prior to the passage in which Chauvin names himself, Anne speaks of a beech tree that blocks the view of the sea from her room, and that she unsuccessfully asked to have removed. Chauvin’s reply will not surprise us: “A votre place, je le laisserai grandir avec son ombre chaque année plus épaisse sur les murs de cette chambre.” The tree’s growth, like Chauvin’s “dry” command, functions to block Anne’s contact with the movement of the sea. Anne’s physical displacement in response to Chauvin’s statement makes it clear that this contact would permit her to escape his verbal hold: “Elle s’adossa de tout son buste à la
When Anne is “looking” at the sea, she is no longer face to face with Chauvin. Her turning away, her absence, would cause his verbal kingdom to fall. “—Mais, parfois,” she complains, “son ombre est comme de l’encre noire.” It is with this “black ink” that Chauvin, author, will write his fiction on the inert and silent maternal body.

For Anne, as for Chauvin, the cry of the murdered woman elicits the memory of childbirth. Their desire to know about their origins brings them back to the café which I have compared to Plato's cave. The disposition of this scene, however, has been predetermined by Chauvin to suit the needs of his own (re)presentation: Anne sits facing Chauvin, who entirely occupies her field of vision, blocking her view of the sea. Dichotomous opposition, Chauvin-positive/Anne-negative, assures his unique valorization. Anne’s immobility and her elimination as subject permit Chauvin to (re)produce himself in language. Plato’s cave and its “maternal” symbolism have a curiously masculine architecture. Anne, however, is in touch with another scene that predates Chauvin’s mise en scène—the sea. “Tu sais comment j’appelle la mer? je l’appelle: the thing,” Duras tells the interviewer for Gai Pied. Desire could also be called “The Thing”: “Ce dont nous venons de parler [le désir], cette notion vacillante, divagante, je pourrais l’appeler aussi: the thing. Ton sexe. Le mien. Notre différence. Et ce troisième terme, cette triangulation incessante, par laquelle nous nous rejoignons The Thing.” For Duras, the perpetual movement of desire seeks always to redress “l’absence définitive de cette présence capitale et jamais remplacée par la suite, celle de ma [la] mère.” The divagations of love and desire all have the same origin and the same object—the mother. The movement of the sea is the image of this displacement and the circulation of desire: la mer rises and falls, moves without end in the (lost) love of la mère. “Regarder la mer, c’est regarder

35“She spread herself back on her chair, moving her whole body in an almost vulgar way, turned away from him.” Moderato, p. 41.

36“— But, sometimes, its shadow is like black ink.” Moderato, p. 74.


38“What we’ve just talked about [desire], this vacillating, wandering notion, I could also call it: the thing. Your sex. Mine. Our difference. And this third term, this unceasing triangulation by which we are united The Thing.” Thélù interview, p. 16.

39“the definitive absence of this fundamental presence and never since replaced, that of my [the] mother.” Thélù interview, p. 16.
le tout,” Duras has written.\textsuperscript{40} Or as Michelle Porte observed in an interview with her, “Pour vous, le paysage de la fin du monde ou du début du monde, peu importe, c’est la mer.”\textsuperscript{41} It is clear that totality and integral movement are foreign to the fixed \textit{mise en scènes} necessary for Chauvin’s specularization.

\textit{The Dinner Party: A Syntagmatic Life}

Movement: Anne must move. The cry of the murdered woman revives a sense of mobility associated with the birth of her child. Both childbirth and the murder take Anne outside of the ordinary, the habitual pattern of her life. I will now examine the structure of Anne’s life prior to the murder. When we understand where she has been, we can better understand where she is going.

It is an understatement to refer to the habitual pattern of Anne’s life. Her life is organized so meticulously as to find its faithful reflection in the “ritual” of the dinner party in chapter 7: “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. [. . .] Lentement, la digestion commence de ce qui fut un saumon. Son osmose à cette espèce qui le mangea fut rituellement parfaite.”\textsuperscript{42} Ritual is associated with prescribed ceremonial forms, normally religious ones. In a broader sense, as Zepp points out, “any action, particularly one which is \textit{repeated} in the same form and which is performed in order to \textit{control} the human environment . . . may be considered ritualistic. . . . Anything cast into the \textit{image of man} becomes ‘ordered’ for the mind of man.”\textsuperscript{43} Repetition, control and reflection—of Man—define the limits of Anne’s existence. They work together to immobilize her in a predetermined order.

Repetition: “les journées sont à heure fixe. Je ne peux pas continuer. . . . —Les repas, toujours, reviennent. Et les soirs.”\textsuperscript{44} The same adjective \textit{fixe} will be used to describe the smile on Anne’s face during the dinner party: “Un sourire fixe rend son visage acceptable. [. . .]

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{40}“To look at the sea is to look at totality.” \textit{Les Lieux}, p. 86.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{41}“For you, the landscape of the end of the world or of the beginning of the world, it makes no difference, is the sea.” \textit{Le Camion (“Entretien”)}, p. 129.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{42}The salmon passes from one to the other following a ritual that nothing disturbs, if not each one’s hidden fear that so much perfection might be shattered or stained by a too evident absurdity. [. . .] Slowly, the digestion began of what had been a salmon. Its osmosis into this species that ate it was ritually perfect.” \textit{Moderato}, pp. 67, 69.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{43}Zepp, “Language as Ritual,” pp. 241–42. My emphasis.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{44}“the days are regulated at set times. I can’t go on. . . . —Meals are always repeated. And the evenings.” \textit{Moderato}, p. 60.}

38 | \textsc{contemporary literature}
Elle, elle retourne à la fixité de son sourire."45 Her every action is regulated in a precise manner to ensure that she remain fixed in temporal and physical immobility. Control: Anne lives within a certain perimeter “authorized to her ten years ago,” in this house surrounded by a “parc correctement clos” (“properly enclosed garden” [p. 70]). Her son's piano lessons seem to be an attempt to move outside of this control: “—J'ai eu l'idée de ces leçons de piano . . . à l'autre bout de la ville, pour mon amour, et maintenant je ne peux plus les éviter. Comme c'est difficile.”46 Repetition and order are also the principal traits of the piano lessons, which are thus assimilated into the same system of control. Anne falls unavoidably from one trap into another. There is no real movement; each activity has its set time within which it is enclosed. Like the scales that the child is forced to practice, these “measures” are repeated in an organized and inalterable pattern. Moderato cantabile. The essential function of the measures is to close out any element foreign to the predetermined activity. Like the gates of Anne’s house, they set the limits beyond which she is not allowed to move. In addition to the disposition of Anne’s house, we might also think of the room in which the piano lessons take place. In both cases, an opposition is established between inside and outside, immobility and movement. The high window in Mlle Giraud’s apartment does not permit one to see the movement of the outside world, only to hear it. The child must remain immobile in front of his music. From the window of her room, Anne can see the ocean and from the gates she watches the couples and the workers who walk past her house. She remains immobile, never moving toward them.

Anne’s “osmosis” into this pattern has been so “ritually perfect” that the bar lines between measures have been interiorized. Before the dinner party, Anne had always succeeded in conforming to the ritual: “Depuis dix ans, elle n'a pas fait parler d'elle.”47 Tonight, however, the fixed smile keeps slipping: her assimilation/reflection of this “shimmering universe” is no longer so perfect. Her husband will not recognize her: “Un homme, face à une femme, regarde cette inconnue.”48

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45“A fixed smile makes her appearance acceptable. [. . .] She returns to the fixity of her smile.” *Moderato*, pp. 68–69.

46“I had the idea for these piano lessons . . . on the other end of town, for my love, and now I can no longer avoid them. How difficult it is.” *Moderato*, p. 61.

47“For ten years, she has never given anyone reason to talk about her.” *Moderato*, p. 68.

48“A man, opposite a woman, watches this stranger.” *Moderato*, p. 68. Accomplices in the beginning, Anne and Chauvin also become “strangers” to one another during the encounter that precedes the dinner party.
Indeed, even Anne will not recognize herself: “Si son incongruité la dévore, elle ne peut s’imaginer.” Throughout the dinner, a violent interior movement is opposed to the frozen, rigid exterior that she attempts to present to her guests: “Le feu nourrit son ventre de sorcière contrairement aux autres. [...] Elle retourne à l’éclatement silencieux de ses reins, à leur brulante douleur, à son repaire.” The mordant irony with which her milieu is presented leaves no doubt in the reader’s mind that Anne’s interior movement and disorder are more real than the “too evident absurdity” of the ritual. (I would note, for example, the reference to the “real disorder” [désordre réel] of Anne’s hair.) It is also apparent that this other Anne, the real one, is absent from the dinner party: “—Anne n’a pas entendi” (“—Anne did not hear” [p. 75]).

If Anne is absent, who is sitting in her place? Reflection, the third element of ritual, will help us to answer this question. Anne’s “presence” at the dinner party is first indicated in the text by her husband’s gaze: “A man, opposite a woman, watches this stranger.” His position in relation to Anne is identical to Chauvin’s. Tonight, he does not see what he normally sees, a perfect reflection of himself—his values, his territory. This identity is necessary for the success of the dinner party ritual, clearly a metaphor for the male social order in general: “La soirée réussira. Les femmes sont au plus sûr de leur éclat. Les hommes les couvrirent de bijoux au prorata de leurs bilans. [...] Leurs épaules nues ont la luissance 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. [...] Des hommes les regardent et se rappellent qu’elles font leur bonheur.” Like so many votive statues, highly polished and covered with offerings, these women exist only as a creation of the men who gaze upon them in order to see themselves. Their immobility guarantees the solidity of the social order. There is a smiling, silent statue occupying Anne’s place at the table under the glaring chandeliers. The other Anne is barred from this ritual of identity. Where every-

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49. If her incongruity consumes her, she cannot imagine herself.” Moderato, p. 68.
50. “Fire nourishes her witch’s womb unlike the others. [...] She returns to the silent explosion of her loins, to their searing pain, to her den.” Moderato, p. 74. Duras is fascinated by Michelet’s recounting of the origins of witches in the Middle Ages in La Sorcière.
51. The evening will be a success. The men have never been more radiant. The men covered them with jewels in proportion to their fortunes. [...] Their uncovered shoulders reflect the brilliance and the solidity of a society whose foundations rest on the certainty of its law, and they were chosen for their suitability to it. [...] Some men watch them and remember that they make them happy.” Moderato, p. 70.
thing is brilliant light, darkness cannot be permitted to destabilize the universe. All that is foreign must be driven out of the light of day. Like a hunted animal in the forest, Anne is driven underground, into her den. The bar is lowered over this other Anne to ensure that she stay in her place. Within each measure of her life, Anne is subjected to the same ritual of identity and suffers the same elimination in favor of her husband's image. Anne's name is still not her own: Desbaresdes, des barres raides. These inflexible bar lines close out her difference to permit the eternal repetition of the same.

Language is the foundation on which this linear order is built: "Le choeur des conversations augmenta peu à peu de volume et, dans une surenchère d'efforts... émerge une société quelconque... Et on débouche peu à peu sur une conversation généralement partisane et particulièrement neutre. La soirée réussira." Only Madame Desbaresdes "n'a pas de conversation" ("has nothing to say" [p. 69]). Here we should return to Irigaray's analysis of the principle of Identity as the basis of Western philosophical discourse. For Irigaray, "La logique de tout discours" is grounded in "l'indifférence sexuelle." That is to say, the feminine is reduced to a reflection of the masculine by/in language. Man uses woman as a means for reinforcing his own specularity. She permits him to (re)produce his desire, his sexuality, his representation, in sum, himself, ad infinitum. Irigaray uses the mirror as a metaphor for this self(male)-reflective function of discourse: "A lui seul masculin, féminin, et leurs rapports. Dérision de la génération... qui emprunte... sa force au même modèle, au modèle (du) même: le sujet. Au regard duquel tout dehors reste toujours condition de possibilité de l'image et de la reproduction de soi. Miroir fidèle, poli et vacant de réflexions altérantes." If Anne is absent, it is quite simply because she does not exist on this chain of discourse. The ritual of language at the dinner party and in her marriage is rigorously identical to the cérémonial of the meetings between Anne and Chauvin. When Anne comes into the café for their third conversation, she

52. The chorus of conversations slowly grows louder and, in a concentration of effort... a nondescript society is born... And they all gradually end up in a conversation that is generally partisan and particularly neutral. The evening will be a success." Moderato, pp. 69-70.


54. "For him alone masculine, feminine, and their relationships. Derision of generation... that derives... its strength from the same model, from the model (of the) same: the subject. In whose eyes every outside is always the condition of possibility for the image and the reproduction of himself. Faithful mirror, polished and empty of all distorting reflections." Irigaray, Speculum, p. 168.
remains at the counter even though Chauvin is already seated at the table, "ne pouvant sans doute échapper encore au cérémonial de leurs premières rencontres." The self-reflective functioning of discourse permits Chauvin to name himself by "barring" Anne. His position of subject is dependent on her elimination. Decidedly, Anne's movement from her house to the café has not taken her far.

La donna è mobile

The murdered woman is a symbol of the violence done to women in a culture that depends for its existence (as subject) on their "elimination," their relegation to the status of object. This inert body, however, silent, passive, exactly as Man wants her to be, moves, escapes his grasp. Duras suggests that it is women's silence and passivity that make this movement possible. She speaks of a certain primal energy that was common to both men and women, "une énergie à venir, blanche, neutre." Men, by their "activité théorisante . . . réductrice, castratrice," have lost this energy. Women have preserved it by their silence: "ce que j'appelle leur silence, leur marginalité. C'est-à-dire qu'elles ont accumulé des masses fabuleuses de cette énergie, qui est à l'instar de celle de la mer encore enfouie mais intacte, entière." Denied the status of subject, excluded from discourse, women have never been fixed in an "identity," Chauvin's hard-won name, that would block this energy. Like the sea, women's "identity" will circulate in Moderato cantabile.

The murdered woman's cry "breaks" [brisser] the sound of the sea. Almost immediately after, "Le bruit de la mer ressuscita de nouveau." Likewise, "la mère"—Anne, the murdered woman—will be resuscitated. The transitive definition of ressusciter is "faire revivre en esprit, par le souvenir." Anne will resuscitate the murdered woman in precisely this sense and "assume" her identity. This identity, however, will not be the one Chauvin expects. For years Anne has "lived" with an "identity" imposed from outside. She is already "dead" when she goes to the café for the first time. As Chauvin closes Anne ever more

55"undoubtedly not yet able to escape the ceremonial of their first encounters." Moderato, p. 38.
57"What I call their silence, their marginality. That is to say that they have accumulated fabulous masses of this energy, resembling that of the sea still buried but intact, whole." Montréal, p. 69.
58"The sound of the sea rose again." Moderato, p. 10.
59"to resurrect in the mind, by one's memory."
tightly into his discourse, she seems to resemble more and more closely the other woman’s “inert” body. She seems to become the product of Chauvin’s fiction, to the point of living it during the dinner party. She seems to be headed for a repetition of the murder. Chauvin seems to be in complete control of his fiction. Anne, however, never learned her scales (p. 56). She may “know her place,” but that does not necessarily mean that she occupies it. One is struck by the recurring references to what I would call Anne’s absence from her conversations with Chauvin: “Elle le regarde, perplexe, revenue à elle”; “Elle revint de loin à ses questions”; “Anne Desbaresdes n’écoutait pas.”60 This is not to deny that at the same time she is also demanding that Chauvin tell her what happened. But as a critic complained at the moment of the book’s publication, “Nous avons l’impression que l’homme n’en sait pas plus long qu’Anne et que d’ailleurs elle n’écoute guère ce qu’il lui raconte.”61

Where is Anne? She is involved in a process of identification with the murdered woman. Although this process throws Anne into a struggle to the death with Chauvin, its continuation entirely escapes his control. What we might call the essential of Anne’s identification with the other woman takes place “elsewhere,” on a scene that Chauvin cannot know, of which he is ignorant. Anne will take the “place” of that other woman and move into a circulation that Chauvin can neither touch nor control.

Anne’s absence during the ritual of the dinner party is an example of how this movement elsewhere precipitated by the cry could permit her to escape the grasp both of her husband and of Chauvin. While Anne’s place at the table is occupied by a smiling statue, the other Anne is following the movement outside the gates: “Un homme rôde, boulevard de la Mer. Une femme le sait. [. . .] Il passera. Elle, le sait encore.”62 The scent of the magnolia blossoms in the garden, resumed in the one that Anne is wearing, serves as the link between her “interior” and the exterior movement:

60“She looked at him, confused, conscious again.” Moderato, p. 24; “She came back from far away to her questions,” p. 32; “Anne Desbaresdes was not listening,” p. 44.

61“We have the impression that the man does not know any more than Anne and that moreover she is hardly listening to what he is telling her.” Jean Mistler, “Un essai non une oeuvre achevée,” included in “‘Moderato cantabile’ et la presse,” following Moderato, pp. 102–3.

62“A man lurks about, Boulevard of the Sea. A woman knows it. [. . .] He will pass by. She still knows it.” Moderato, pp. 67, 75.
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. [. . .] L'encens des magnolias arrive toujours sur lui, au gré du vent, et le surprend et le harcèle autant que celui d'une seule fleur.63

As with all other aspects of Anne's relationship with Chauvin, the positive accompanies the negative. The flowering of the magnolias is funereal—the night is black—although the season is "nascent springtime." The odor of the magnolias becomes their "incense," associating the movement between Anne and Chauvin with the ritual immobility of the dinner party. Anne's wearing of the magnolia blossom is itself "narrated" by Chauvin. On the other hand, the scent is carried by the "sea wind" [vent de la mer] which is not impeded by the "obstacles" of the city. The wind and the scent reach Chauvin, then leave him, continuing on their way "de dune en dune jusqu'à rien" ("from dune to dune until nothingness" [p. 67]). This nothingness is simultaneously the totality of the sea: "l'odeur franchit le parc et va jusqu'à la mer."64 Chauvin circles around the house, ritualistically pronouncing Anne's name, in effect conjuring her presence in his territory. It is, however, impossible to seize and hold the wind: "Sur les paupières fermées de l'homme, rien ne se pose que le vent et, par vagues impalpables et puissantes, l'odeur du magnolia, suivant les fluctuations de ce vent."65 The scent of the magnolias moves on the wind like impalpable and powerful waves, coming to rest where and when it wishes, then moving on. Neither the wind nor the sea can be fixed in his territory, by his language.

Finally, the only thing that this language can seize is language itself, that is to say, the very barriers with which it constitutes and

63 "Outside, in the garden, the magnolias develop their funereal flowering in the obscurity of the nascent springtime.

"On the backwash of the wind that comes and goes, runs up against the obstacles of the city, then goes off again, the perfume reaches the man and abandons him, in turn. [. . .] The incense of the magnolias comes over him, drifting wherever the wind carries it and surprises and plagues him as much as would that of one single flower." *Moderato*, pp. 67, 70. The identity of the wind and the sea is established by the use of *ressac* ("backwash") to describe the wind's movement.

64 "the odor crosses the park and continues to the sea." *Moderato*, p. 73.

65 "Nothing touches the man's closed eyelids except the wind and, by impalpable and powerful waves, the odor of magnolia, following the fluctuations of the wind." *Moderato*, pp. 72-73.
propagates itself: “L’homme . . . s’est approché des grilles . . . prend les grilles dans ses mains, et serre. Comment n’est-ce pas encore arrivé? [ . . . ] L’homme a lâché les grilles du parc. Il regarde ses mains vides et déformées par l’effort.”66 As he walks back to the city, the scent of the magnolias—a product of his fiction—is replaced by that of the sea. After the dinner, Anne will vomit both the “foreign food” [la nourriture étrangère] she has just forced herself to eat and the wine she drank earlier with Chauvin. Both are fictions of Anne Desbaredes that she has still been unable to refuse definitively. At the end of the dinner party she is back in her husband’s shadow: “Une ombre apparaîtra dans l’encadrement de la porte . . . obscurcira plus avant la pénombre de la chambre.”67 And the beech tree’s shadow surely still blocks her view of the sea.

Mimesis: The Death of (a) Fiction

In the passages discussed above, we begin to see the suggestion of a movement that would take Anne outside of the order that has been imposed on her. At the same time, somewhat paradoxically, Chauvin appears to function as an obstacle in some sense necessary to the final realization of Anne’s movement elsewhere. (In the dinner party scene, he seems to serve as a sort of relay beyond himself.) Duras has described Anne as “cette femme qui veut être tuée.”68 I would propose that in order to resurrect the murdered woman, Anne must first “voluntarily” imitate her death. Here again, memory will play an important role. I have likened her married life to death; after ten years, however, Anne has lived this fiction for so long that she has forgotten why she is so restless. She no longer remembers what happened to the other Anne, the one who never learned her scales and who screamed one day. The cry wrests her violently out of her stupor. Her meetings with Chauvin allow her to replay her own repression, to mimic her own murder, in sum, to conjure the very obstacles that deny her existence. This self-imposed submission permits her to remember what happened and puts her back in contact with the “elsewhere” she has forgotten.

64“The man . . . comes up to the gates . . . takes the bars in his hands, and squeezes. How has it not happened yet? [ . . . ] The man has let go of the garden gates. He looks at his hands, empty and deformed by his efforts.” Moderato, p. 74.

64“A shadow will appear in the doorway . . . will darken even more the half-shadow of the room.” Moderato, p. 76.

64“this woman who wants to be killed.” Les Parleuses, p. 59.
Irigaray has given a “theoretical” expression to this process; she calls it *mimétisme*. Women would replay the scene of their repression “pour se souvenir de ce que celle-ci [la mise en scène masculine] aura si bien métabolisé qu’elle l’a oublié: son sexe.” 69 For Irigaray, this *mimétisme* is a subversive activity, the first step toward a feminine displacement of language: “Jouer de la mimésis, c’est donc, pour une femme, tenter de retrouver le lieu de son exploitation par le discours, sans s’y laisser simplement réduire. C’est se resoumettre . . . à des ‘idées’, notamment d’elle, élaborées dans/par une logique masculine, mais pour faire ‘apparaître,’ par un effet de répétition ludique, ce qui devait rester occulté: le recouvrement d’une possible opération du féminin dans le langage.” 70 It is by their position outside the constituted order that women survive this mimesis: “Si elle peut si bien jouer ce rôle, si elle n’en meurt pas tout à fait, c’est qu’elle . . . subsiste encore, autrement et ailleurs que là où elle mime si bien ce qu’on lui demande. . . . Hétérogène à toute cette économie de la représentation, mais qui, d’être restée ainsi ‘en dehors,’ peut justement l’interpréter.” 71 By this distance, women are “l’éternelle ironie de la communauté—des hommes.” 72

Mimetic irony, then, cannot operate from an interior position. In their third conversation, for example, Anne tells Chauvin that what he has told her about the other women who have died in her house is false. Chauvin admits that it is false, but adds that “on peut tout supposer” (“one can imagine everything” [p. 43]). Her assertion of untruth only places Anne squarely inside a discourse that produces and mirrors truth/untruth to preserve its own position of mastery. As long as Anne unconsciously operates within this system of representation, she risks having anything she says reappropriated by it. This

69“in order to remember what this [masculine representation] has metabolized so well that she has forgotten it: her sex.” *Ce sexe*, p. 148.

70“To play at mimesis, is therefore, for a woman, the attempt to find [again] the place of her exploitation by discourse, without letting herself simply be reduced to it. It is to resubject herself . . . to certain ‘ideas,’ in particular about herself, developed in/by a masculine logic, but in order to render ‘visible,’ by an effect of ludic repetition, what is supposed to remain hidden: the covering up of a possible operation of the feminine in language.” *Ce sexe*, p. 74.

71“If she can play this role so well, if she does not die completely as a result, it is because she . . . still lives on, otherwise and elsewhere than there where she mimics so well what is asked of her. . . . Heterogeneous to this entire economy of representation, it is she who can interpret it, precisely because she has remained in this way ‘outside.’ ” *Ce sexe*, p. 148.

becomes painfully apparent immediately afterwards in the same scene. Confident that Anne can only parrot his language, Chauvin orders her to speak, to invent. Her response is a “stream of consciousness” association of most of the images that form the fabric of the novel. Without interruption—or punctuation—Anne moves from the crying of the trees in the wind to the birds on the beach after a storm, whose cries, like those of someone who has been murdered, prevent the children from sleeping. As Zepp notes, the passage “forms no further structure of meaning.” 73 This is precisely the problem it poses for Chauvin, who immediately begins to speak in Anne’s “place” in order to incorporate what she has said into his own economy of truth/untruth. “It is true,” he declares—certainly a rare statement in Moderato cantabile—before reducing her monologue to a banal observation on the weather. Anne, however, is no longer listening.

Only her marginality will allow irony to operate on a properly fictional level. When Chauvin tells Anne the story of the reception that she lives out at the dinner party that same evening, he for the most part abandons the tone of supposition and the use of the conditional tense that have marked his discourse since his verbal seduction of Anne. As his fiction seems increasingly to become her reality, Chauvin speaks more often in the present or the future of the indicative. On the other hand, as Anne becomes more implicated in this fiction, her language will take the inverse tack: “Je pourrais vous dire que je suis déjà en retard sur l’heure du dîner.” 74 Chauvin responds with an assertion of truth: “—Vous savez que vous ne pourrez faire autrement que d’y arriver en retard, vous le savez?” 75 Again, Anne’s response is a conditional one: “—Je ne pourrais pas faire autrement. Je sais.” 76 Anne then changes the subject in an ironic diversion of Chauvin’s conversation. She returns to his story of the other women who have died in her house. This time, however, it is not a question of the truth of the story. Anne is speaking from an entirely different position: “—Je pourrais vous dire que j’ai parlé à mon enfant de toutes ces femmes qui ont vécu derrière ce hêtre et qui sont maintenant mortes, mortes, et qu’il m’a demandé de les voir, mon trésor. Je viens de vous

73Zepp, p. 249.
74“I could tell you that I’m already late for the dinner.” Moderato, p. 61. My emphasis.
75—You know that you will not be able to do otherwise than to arrive late, you know that?” Moderato, p. 61. My emphasis.
76—I would not be able to do otherwise. I know.” Moderato, p. 61. My emphasis.
...dire ce que je pourrais vous dire, voyez.”77 Anne's insistent reiteration of the conditional “possibility” of her statement serves to deconstruct Chauvin's narrative superiority. Her own fiction, thrown out almost as a challenge (“you see”), displaces the mirror of truth to reveal its foundation in fiction. In order to move outside of this fiction, Anne must carry her mimesis through to the end. Indeed, in their final meeting it is Anne who will complete Chauvin’s text for him; then she will walk out of it, forever.

Any reading of *Moderato cantabile* that attempts to explicate a gap between language and action or, in an absolute sense, between fiction and reality, risks falling headlong into the “same” trap from which Anne finally extricates herself. Zepp convincingly demonstrates that Anne’s and Chauvin’s “‘life,’ defined by language, is on paper alone.”78 I would suggest a reading strategy that accepts Anne’s and Chauvin’s “literary” existence and takes *Moderato cantabile* literally [au pied de la lettre] as fiction or, more precisely, as the fiction of fiction. The first piano lesson is simultaneously a reading lesson, a sort of mode d’emploi for *Moderato cantabile*. From the first sentence, both the reader and the text itself are positioned in a “field of fiction” [un champ de la fiction]: “—Veux-tu lire ce qu’il y a d’écrit au-dessus de ta partition?” is the question Mlle Giraud poses to Anne’s son. *Would you read what is written?* His response is immediate, “—Moderato cantabile.” It is directly before his (our) eyes; he (we) cannot not read it. The second question is a thornier one: “—Et qu’est-ce que ça veut dire, moderato cantabile?” His response: “—Je ne sais pas.”79 This refusal is followed by silence. The invitation to read is in a sense annulled by a silence that refuses the knowledge or truth the text is “supposed” to contain. Fiction brings its own fiction into question. In an analogous movement, Anne will finally refuse to read, or to be read by, anyone else’s fiction of her. When she steps out of the café for the last time, the fiction that is *Moderato cantabile* ceases.

Shoshana Felman has written that literature’s basically ironic functioning permits it to deconstruct the fantasy of authority. Her argument is pertinent to our reading of *Moderato cantabile*: “Since irony

77—I could tell you that I talked to my child about all those women who lived behind this beech tree and who are now dead, dead, and that he asked to see them, my darling. I just told you what I could tell you, you see.” *Moderato*, p. 61.

78Zepp, p. 256. Unfortunately, as we have seen, she uses this observation to show their failure to achieve authenticity.

79“And what does that mean, moderato cantabile?”, “—I don’t know.” *Moderato*, p. 7.
precisely consists in dragging authority as such into a scene which it cannot master, of which it is not aware and which, for that very reason, is the scene of its own self-destruction, literature, by virtue of its ironic force, fundamentally deconstructs the fantasy of authority. . . . Literature tells us that authority is a language effect, the product or the creation of its own rhetorical power: that authority is the power of fiction; that authority, therefore, is likewise a fiction.  

80 Moderato cantabile drags us back to the scene in/by which this authority constitutes itself: the murder. “My name is Chauvin.” He is not of woman born, but has (re)created himself in language. He then repeats, reflects, reproduces this Name endlessly, everywhere. The coherence of his creation does not permit a place for anyone but the Same—Chauvin. His authority is indeed the power of the fiction he creates: this authority is born with the Name, is a language effect, and only Chauvin possesses the Word. Inscribed in this scene, however, is “another scene” which is not representable and cannot be reduced to his language: the “black hole”—of their melded shadows—where “all the other words would have been buried.”  

81 This “black hole” negates Chauvin’s careful (re)presentation of his origin in which undifferentiated totality is already broken down and schematized as a face to face—binary—opposition. Constantly present at the very heart of his verbal construction, yet outside of his control due to its absence and silence, this “other scene” threatens to destroy Chauvin’s fiction.

In their first conversation, when Anne speaks of the desperation that must have incited the murder, Chauvin changes the subject to Anne’s own life: “Et il la ramena vers des regions qui sans doute devaient lui être plus familières.”  

82 More familiar, of course, because they are the only ones she has been allowed to see—someone else’s territory that Chauvin knows well. Anne accompanies him, resubmitting herself to the authority of his fiction. In so doing, she rediscovers her presence/absence at his ritual of autocreation as well as her continuing existence elsewhere. From her position in this other scene that Chauvin cannot know, she reveals that his mastery is an (auto)creation of/in language. His authority is a fiction.


81 “tous les autres mots auraient été enterrés.” Marguerite Duras, Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), p. 48. For lack of this “mot-absence” (word-absence), a “mot-trou” (word-hole), Lol remains silent.

82 “And he brought her back toward regions that were undoubtedly more familiar to her.” Moderato, p. 21.
Mimesis: The Birth of Fictions

The last chapter of *Moderato cantabile* carries the process of mimesis/displacement to its conclusion. For the first time, Anne seems to take the initiative in their meeting. She is the one who moves closer to Chauvin. She is the one who fills his glass with wine. This has led some critics to speak of Anne as the “stronger” of the two in the last scene, a sort of reversal of roles. It would be more to the point to speak of her *active submission* to Chauvin’s fiction and to her own annihilation. Like the murdered woman, she gives complete “consent.” Anne is in effect pushing Chauvin to complete his fiction, inciting him to write its inevitable end.

The descriptions of their physical contact, instigated by Anne, make it clear that the goal of her activity is the re-enactment of the death that she has lived face to face with her husband and Chauvin: “Elle s’avança vers lui d’assez près pour que leurs lèvres puissent s’atteindre. Leurs lèvres restèrent l’une sur l’autre, posées, afin que ce fût fait et suivant le même rite mortuaire que leurs mains, un instant avant, froides et tremblantes. Ce fut fait.”83 The rigidity of their bodies matches that of the literary past tense. Indeed, we are in the midst of a literary illusion; pushed to its limits, Chauvin’s power is reduced to so many words, cold and lifeless monuments. We read it as fiction. His ritual of language is played out to its conclusion, Anne’s verbal death: “—Je voudrais que vous soyez morte, dit Chauvin. —C’est fait, dit Anne Desbaresdes.”84 Earlier in the conversation, Anne had offered to stop talking. Chauvin’s reply to her voluntary silence was negative. Later, when Anne says of the dead woman and/or herself, “—Elle ne parlera plus jamais,” Chauvin insists that she will: “—Mais si . . . Ça recommencera.”85 She must speak his language or he cannot control her, appropriate her space, and then silence her himself. Nothing is more threatening to him than her refusal to speak. Anne has assumed her death, accepted fear. For the first time, her movement is not dictated from the outside. She turns away from Chauvin with only her own body as a point of reference: “Anne Desbaresdes contourna sa chaise. . . . Puis elle fit un pas en arrière et se retourna sur elle-

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83“She drew close enough to him so that their lips could touch. Their lips rested on one another, posed, so that it be done and following the same funereal ritual as their hands, a moment before, cold and trembling. It was done.” *Moderato*, p. 82.

84“I wish you were dead, Chauvin said. —It is done, Anne Desbaresdes said.”

85“She will never speak again”; “—But of course [she will]. . . . This will start all over again.” *Moderato*, p. 82.
mème.”

She moves elsewhere, outside Chauvin's verbal territory. As in the dinner party sequence, Chauvin loses his grip on Anne: “La main de Chauvin battit l'air et retomba sur la table. Mais elle ne le vit pas, ayant déjà quittée le champ où il se trouvait.”

Without Anne, on what or whom can he construct his authority? Her autodisplacement subverts his fiction and closes the text.

And opens new ones. In the last chapter, Anne comes to the café for the first time without her son. He has been replaced by a new creation, a voice. As Anne makes the first move toward her ritual death, the voice of a woman singing in a foreign city can be heard on the radio: “Une femme chanta loin, dans une ville étrangère. Ce fut Anne Desbaresdes qui se rapprocha de Chauvin.”

We hear the voice again, even louder than before, when Anne has left the café:

Elle se retrouva face au couchant, ayant traversée le groupe d'hommes qui étaient au comptoir, dans la lumière rouge qui marquait le terme de ce jour-là.

Après son départ, la patronne augmenta le volume de la radio.

Natural images of death—sunset, red light, end of the day—only prepare Anne's rebirth in another place with another voice. Just as the sound of the sea marks the resurrection of the murdered woman in the first chapter, so the new voice sings Anne's (re)entry into this same circulation. Music is a language “que nous ne pouvons pas decrypter.” It is “une sorte d'annonciation . . . d'un temps à venir où on pourra l'entendre.”

The men in the café complain that it is “trop forte à leur gré” (“too loud for their taste” [p. 84]).

After Moderato cantabile, Anne Desbaresdes passes into spaces that are elsewhere. The questions, Where is she going? What will become of her? are beside the point. The essential is that she continue

86“Anne Desbaresdes walked around her chair. . . . Then she took one step back and turned the other way.” Moderato, p. 84.
87“Chauvin's hand flew up in the air and fell back on the table. But she did not see it, having already left the area where he was.” Moderato, p. 84.
88“A woman sang far away, in a foreign city. It was Anne Desbaresdes who drew closer to Chauvin.” Moderato, p. 78. We can almost read that the woman who sings is Anne Desbaresdes.
89“She found herself facing the sunset, having crossed the group of men who were at the counter, in the red light that marked the end of that day.

“After her departure, the owner turned up the volume of the radio.” Moderato, p. 84.
90“that we cannot decipher.” “a kind of heralding [one could almost say an Annunciation, in the religious sense] of a time to come when we will be able to hear it.” Les Lieux, pp. 30, 29.
to move. She will perhaps become Lol V. Stein, or Anne-Marie Stretter, or Aurelia Steiner, all fictions that rise up, like the child's sonatina, "in the love of the mother"—to circulate, die, and be reborn. The fiction(s) of a woman, women as fiction(s). A perpetual self-creation/destruction that refuses the immobility of any one name and the fixity of any one identity. A music that destroys all the barriers as it moves into the future: "La voici en effet, fracassant les arbres, foudroyant les murs."91

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