

The Family's (bad) romance : the Durassian family

Against Tolstoy's well known adagio 'Toutes les familles heureuses se ressemblent ; chaque famille malheureuse est malheureuse à sa manière' we are going to argue that in the negative community described both in *La Pluie d'été* (henceforth LPDE) and *L'Amant* (henceforth LA), dysfunctional families share many traits in common. Georges Bataille's notion of 'la communauté négative, la communauté de ceux qui n'ont pas de communauté' is amply represented by both sets of characters in the works by Duras here analysed. The dysfunctional family in both texts have echoes of Freud's 1909 conception of the 'family romance', in which the child's fantasies (later repressed) are constructed on the murderous desire to do away with siblings and replace the parents.

The Durassian literary project starts with this auto-fiction (for Borgomano:147 speaks of cryptomnesia, 'hidden forgetting') which describes her life in Indochina in the 1920s and 1930s (the so-called 'cycle du barrage' culminating with *L'Amant* in 1984). We must mind Duras's own words: this is not an accurate historical rendering of her life: 'L'histoire de ma vie n'existe pas. Ça n'existe pas (Duras:14). 'l'histoire en train de récit – c'est tué l'événement- recréer le passé, on le détruit'.

Duras in *La Vie Matérielle* (p.139) claims that '[sa] vie est un film doublé, mal monté, mal interprété, mal ajusté, une erreur en somme'. The filmic and cinematic quality of Duras' stories is reflected in the dialogue.

For the Durassian family presented in LA and LPDE all community whether within the family or outside is hateful: 'toute communauté, qu'elle soit familiale ou autre, nous est haïssable, dégradante' (LA:67). The problem of shame is brought to the surface by Duras in LA: 'nous sommes ensemble dans une honte de principe d'avoir à vivre la vie' (Duras:) In her family 'on ne se regarde pas' (Duras:67) and she further explains 'du moment qu'on est vu, on ne peut pas regarder' (Duras:67). Humankind is always in constant conflict to suppress one another's freedom and reduce each other to a state of an object. This dynamic is found in LA: 'chaque jour nous essayons de nous tuer, de tuer' This is a Sartrian position, almost relying upon his theory of the gaze, except that the gazed object is valueless: 'aucune personne regardée ne vaut le regard sur elle' (Duras:) Sartre's thesis that 'l'enfer c'est les autres' holds true for these communities of impoverished white families, unable to function in harmony when societal forces conspire against them.

Non verbal communication exist in the family portrayed in LA, it seems that all of human links are based on conflict. Duras describes them 'c'est une famille en pierre, pétrifiée dans une épaisseur sans accès aucun' (Duras:66) 'La prison existe parce qu'ils se l'ont imposé sur eux-mêmes' (Duras). Change is impossible because of entrenched psychological reasons 'ils ont la liberté de changer leur situation, mais en fait ils ne le font pas' (Duras: page)

This negativity within the family in which communication does not flow to the point of not greeting each other: 'Jamais bonjour, bonsoir, bonne année. Jamais merci. Jamais parler. Jamais besoin de parler' (LA:66). Duras attributes this lack of connectivity to society at large : 'notre histoire commune, celle d' être tous les trois des enfants de cette personne de bonne foi, notre mère, que la société a assassinée. And she proceeds to state overtly that they are excluded from the white colonial society to the point of driving their mother to a nervous breakdown: 'Nous sommes du côté de cette société qui a réduit ma mère au désespoir. A cause de ce qu'on a fait à notre mère si aimable, si confiante, nous haïssons la vie, nous nous haïssons' (LA:67).

As Bouthors-Paillart (2002) argues, there is a strong suggestion of *métissage* in the works of Duras which comes to the fore in her mother interjections: 'sales petits Annamites' and her description of her siblings and herself as 'des petits créoles plus jaunes que blancs' (Duras, 1984, *Outside*:347). Hence the preoccupation with 'le caractère disjonctif de leur métissage qui motive l'identification de Duras aux rares personnages métis de son œuvre' (Bouthors-Paillart:19). We see thus 'un métissage identitaire' reflected in her writing which is 'une quête d'un improbable métissage originaire' (Bouthors-Paillart:19). The girl gets better treatment at the boarding house 'parce que je suis blanche et que, pour la réputation du pensionnat, dans la masse des métisses il faut quelques blanches' (Duras LA:88). In LPDE, the question of race and origin is left vague ; about the mother : 'Personne ne savait d'où venait la mère...ni de quelle race elle était' (LPDE:45). This *métissage* is unresolved, the teacher wants to know where they come from and the parents are not sure, 'Elle, du Caucase, enfin...de ce côté-là...moi d'Italie. De la vallée du Pô...' (Duras LPDE: 66).

The prolific family is rebuffed by society : 'On parlait d'eux dans Vitry...ces gens-là un jour ou l'autre, ils abandonnent leurs enfants... c'est dommage, des enfants aussi beaux...ces gens-là, les allocations, ils en vivent, vous m'avez comprise' (Duras LPDE:70). And yet Ernesto declares 'c'est nous les plus heureux des enfants de Vitry' (Duras LPDE:70). The father in LPDE says to the daughter, 'tu es sauvage comme ta mère' and the same reflection creeps into the speech of the teacher when referring to Ernesto, 'autant s'en prendre à un animal sauvage' (no use trying to mould him) (Duras LPDE:63). Ernesto far from being undergifted becomes a renowned maths professor in America.

Fear of abandonment crops up in the children's fear that the mother is going to leave them, 'ils craignaient le plus au monde...qu'elle les emmène à l'Assistance Publique, et qu'elle signe ce fameux papier de la Vente des Enfants (Duras LPDE:44-45). The children are aware that the mother had intentions to leave them 'la mère avait en elle des désirs comme ça, d'abandonner...les enfants...et les hommes qu'elle avait aimés De laisser. De s'en aller. De se perdre' (Duras LPDE:45). The children are fatalists: 'sans comprendre l'abandon ils le comprenaient' (Duras LPDE:73). They accept that people are going to leave them but they could not bear to be separated from one another.

The young girl has a problematic relation with the older brother, iterative theme in several novels by Duras. 'L'identification étroite de la sœur avec le frère renforce un désir de réciprocité qui n'est jamais comblé dans les romans de Duras' (Haskett:11). She has murderous desires towards the older brother 'Je voulais tuer mon frère aîné' who she would see as 'ce voile noir sur le jour, de cette loi représentée par lui...une loi animale' (Duras LA:13). The older brother represents the Lacanian "no(m) du père" – the pater familias and societal repressive and patriarchal power, and as such, there is an understated tendency towards incestuous desires on the part of the young girl, as she disavows her Chinese lover and orientates her desire towards her older brother: (LA:66): "en présence de mon frère aîné il cesse d'être mon amant ...mon désir obéit à mon frère aîné, il rejette mon amant". In this search for un 'regard d'approbation' she is looking for her mirror image, and to fulfil her need to re-assert herself in the 'l'univers clos de la famille' (Haskett:12). The older brother takes on his role a patriarch of the family and imposes 'his will, his masculinity, and his racism upon the rest of the family' (Vickroy 2002: 138). In the restaurant scene, we are aware that the down-at-heel family resent the Chinese man for his wealth and are happy to eat the dinner without thanking him for it.

The mother-daughter relationship is characterised by antagonistic and ambiguous feelings. A complex relation worded thus 'Je crois avoir dit l'amour que l'on portait à

notre mère mais je ne sais pas si j'ai dit la haine qu'on lui portait aussi' (LA:33). It has been argued that the daughter's narrative is an attempt to recover 'traumatic memory' in order to rescue the family from their chaos and insanity (Vickroy, quoted in Haskett:85). 'Avec tous les problèmes personnels de la mère, la fille dans *L'amant*, ne reçoit jamais l'amour maternel dont elle a besoin' (Haskett:90). 'Dans des crises ma mère se jette sur moi, elle m'enferme dans la chambre, elle me bat à coups de poing, elle me gifle...' (Duras:71). This is due to the 'amour excessif de la mere pour le frère aine, a l'exclusion des deux autres enfants' (Haskett:91). Yet to make up for a neglectful mother, the Chinese lover takes over the maternal role towards the girl, washes and dresses her (Vickroy:127) This incestuous aspect of their love is reflected in the fact that she becomes his child (it was with his own child he made love every evening)

The older brother is, in Duras' own words 'le voyou de famille', accused of being 'ivrogne, voleur, souteneur, collaborateur' (Barbérís:82), emblematic of 'cette famille de voyous blancs' caused by maternal deprivation (LA105). This is highlighted by the very fact that the Chinese rich family do not want anything to do with the French 'white trash', 'On dit que c'est un Chinois, le fils du milliardaire, la villa du Mékong, en céramiques bleues. Meme lui, au lieu d'en être honoré, il n'en veut pas pour son fils' (Duras:105). All the family and by extension society, is an accomplice in the girl's being "pimped out": 'son amoralisme [celle de la fille] répond à l'amoralisme de la société injuste qui l'a volée'. 'Cette indignité pour seulement manger bien'. They devour the food and not one of them thank him.

In LPDE the same situation arises : 'les parents, c'étaient des étrangers...ils connaissaient mal leurs propres origines'. They are at the bottom of society living in an 'H.L.M' which 'la commune' modifies for the accommodation of 'les brothers and les sisters'.

Their alienation is further certified by the fact that they are refused a library card 'Mais on avait dit: il ne manquerait plus que ça' when they requested access, so they didn't insist. (Duras LPDE:11-12). In LPDE, the teacher stands for the 'autorité contrôlée par l'Etat' and the superego of society and the parents are afraid of him, even more so because Ernesto refuses to go to school (Duras LPDE:78). Ernesto reasons that it is not a question of refusing to be educated, but refusing to go to school. The family associates going to school with being abandoned: 'La mère elle met les enfants à l'école pour qu'ils apprennent qu'ils sont abandonnés' (Duras LPDE:80). The family is threatened with being sent to prison if they don't send their children to school (Duras LPDE:39).

According to Barbérís, her incestuous feelings reside on her relationship with the younger brother 'le petit-frère': 'l'amour incestueux que porte la narratrice à ce petit frère enfant...est confondu à l'amour maternel'(Barbérís:94) talks about 'la mort du petit frère' that takes the proportion of an inconceivable scandal. 'la douleur...le scandale était à l'échelle de Dieu' (Duras:127). With this death, the community further breaks down within the family: for the young girl : 'c'est à ce moment là que j'ai quitté ma mère' (Duras LA:37).

In LPDE, incest raises its head again. Ernesto declares his incestuous love for his sister to his teacher who is amazed that Ernesto is able to write, 'Les premiers mots...c'était pour ma soeur...j'écrivais que je l'aimais...c'était d'amour que je l'aimais' (Duras LPDE:103-104). This relationship is explicitly portrayed : 'elle s'était glissée contre le corps de son frère' (Duras LPDE:109). Both Jeanne and Ernesto go towards the end of their childhood, 'un événement qui semble encore lointain mais déjà inévitable. Une sorte de fin, de mort.' (Duras LPDE:99). For Ernesto there are oedipal feelings for his mother, when he declares that he is having a sexual

relationship with his sister, the mother is distraught (Duras LPDE:124-126). :‘Jeanne c’est elle, la mère’ (Duras LPDE:125 -126).

Her mother’s physical attacks replicate her lovers attacks (Vickroy:126-127) : « Il devient brutal, son sentiment est désespéré, il se jette sur moi, il mange les seins d’enfant, il crie, il insulte. Je ferme les yeux sur le plaisir très fort... Il me traite de putain, de dégueulasse, il me dit que je suis son seul amour (LA :53). Likewise in LPDE, the children accept with biblical endurance physical abuse : ‘qu’on les chasse, qu’on les prive...ils laissaient faire. Ils aimaient la cruauté de la mère. Ils aimaient la mère. Ils aimaient être abandonnés par la mère’ (LPDE:73-74). The father, Emilio, also feared that the mother was also going to disappear for good, in the no-man’s land by the bars of the port of Vitry, which is described as ‘cette zone frontalière’ which portrays a Europe of urban voids, urban blur, unloved spaces of the city (Duras LPDE:74). They know, once the children leave, it is, as Duras describes it ‘la destruction de la plage noire de leur enfance’ (LPDE:98).

Poverty is real, not imagined, and results in madness: Vickroy argues that poverty has literally knocked down the walls of the family, each one fending for himself (Vickroy 2002: 132). The mother had desperately tried to construct an image with photographs she had had taken of her children...images for posterity, but they became merely illusionary depictions of a family increasingly doomed to chaos and insanity’ (Vickroy:131). Vickroy (1998) claims that the mother’s descent into madness leads her to abandon children emotionally. She is a failed colonial, unable to rise above her local condition. The girl’s jaunty hat illustrates her poverty, and a childhood of powerlessness (according to Vickroy:125). We can see a parallel of trying to literally keep her head above water in her financial struggle. In LPDE material lack is also coveted. The mother: ‘je voudrais...des biens matériels (Duras LPDE:94) and these are very specific needs ‘un bon frigo...et puis de l’argent’ her only richness is Ernesto. A material task that Ernesto sees impossible ‘on peut pas rattraper les parents’.

The importance of solidarity with the dispossessed is discussed in Hill 1993 (p.49).¹ Crawley 2001:216) remarks that ‘the politics of refusal’ crops up in Duras’s work, ‘which it is always extravagantly exposed’ yet that despite them being excluded from any established community, Duras offers her characters no immediate mutual solidarity (Hill :43). Blanchot looks for an epithet for the concept of ‘communauté’ in order to distinguish between ‘la communauté traditionnelle et communauté éléctive’(Blanchot:78). Blanchot was sensitive to the ‘antagonisme entre la société ordinaire et le relâchement sournois du lien social’ which presupposes; ‘un tel monde qui précisément est l’oubli du monde’ (Blanchot:58).

In LPDE we are told that the mother starts to lose her cultural heritage : her cooking and also her language : ‘La mere a oublié la langue de sa jeunesse...comme si elle était visitée par le souvenir d’une langue abandonnée’ (Duras LPDE:27). Failure of language (parents being immigrants, vernacular language resister, Neva song, lack of common speech, truncated speech, broken French) is argued to be linguistic métissage. The staccato style has been argued to be connected to the characteristics of Vietnamese, which she spoke more than French (Bouthors-Paillart:140). Duras also uses a non-naturalistic, stylised mode of language that runs counter to realist expectations about the manner of conversation of the poor and the uneducated’ (Hill 1993:54).

¹ See also Nancy, *La Communauté desoeuvrée* , where community is also thought of negatively, on the basis of a shared lack or exposure, and Blanchot’s own *La Communauté inavouable* (1983).

The importance of the 'livre brûlé' and the clandestine life that the dysfunctional family lives in LPDE brings us to ponder on its role in the narrative : 'Lire alors, ne serait-ce pas aussi accéder a cette 'perte' toujours recherchée? (Borgomano p.28). The children listen enthralled to the tale of the Kings of Israel which Ernesto indirectly links with the Holocaust. 'Ernesto avait dit qu'ils étaient morts...Ernesto avait dit: gazes et brûlés' (Duras LPDE: 57). The children are not fazed because they say 'ah oui...c'est ça...on savait'. 'Je vous ai vus tous morts depuis mille ans' said by Ernesto. (Duras LPDE:121). We can therefore link the burnt books to the holocaust and Jewish identity, a people who were seen as inferior and therefore, like these outsiders, contaminating the « master race ».

Conclusion

There is an element of triumph among the 'alienés' : negative community by whose standards ? Hill sees in this search for community an impossibility : 'In this way, then, as Blanchot argues in his account of *La Maladie de la mort* in *La Communauté inavouable*, if Duras's text describes an impasse, it also offers the prospect of a lovers' community, Such a community would rely on no prior institution or legislative order, but merely on a singular, unrepeatable contract' (Hill 1992:155).

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