

Abstract

Marguerite Duras and Alain Robbe-Grillet: A 'Reading in Pairs'

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St. John's College, Oxford University

Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in French Literature

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This thesis examines the effects of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's intertextual relationship upon the development of their literary careers. Previous critics have predominantly studied the two writers within the mutually exclusive discourses of feminism and structuralism, with the result that the extensive areas of common ground between them have been overlooked. In order to compare their works and to read between the lines of existing criticism, a comparative and double-gendered approach, termed 'reading in pairs', is adopted.

Chapter 1 provides the contextual framework for the paired readings of the subsequent four chapters: it explores the main parallel shifts between Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's corpuses, and examines how these betray the workings of a sustained, permutating psychodynamic rivalry. Chapter 2 studies how similarities of practice in works of the 1950s and early 1960s reflect a brief period of emulative alliance. Chapter 3 focuses on the combative dynamics which characterize their intertextual relationship during the 1970s and 1980s, following Duras's adoption by feminist theorists. Comparison of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's treatment of explicit sado-erotic thematics brings into question some of the gender-related assumptions of previous approaches. Chapters 4 and 5 then study the final stages of the two writers' rivalry within the appropriately narcissistic genre of autobiography. They examine how Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's respective portrayals of the self and of literary history are

influenced by the reversal in fortunes brought about by the phenomenal success of Duras's *L'Amant*.

By comparing Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's treatment of similar thematic and generic elements, this study sheds new light on both writers' *œuvres* and reassesses many of the assumptions and findings of existing criticism. The Concluding Remarks suggest that the 'reading in pairs' method might fruitfully be applied to the study of other writers of the opposite sex, and thus contribute to a more rounded picture of literary history.

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This thesis examines the effects of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's sustained and often antagonistic intertextual relationship upon the development of their literary careers. Their respective association with largely mutually exclusive theoretical movements has led to a general perception of them as being important but parallel figures in literary and critical history, with little common ground between them for critical comparison. This study aims to counter this view, so shedding new light on the works of Duras and Robbe-Grillet, and developing a critical approach which might fruitfully be applied to the reading of other pairs of male and female writers.

In the introduction, an overview of previous criticism reveals that, although both Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's *œuvres* are marked by constant thematic and generic shifts, approaches to their work have continued to be determined by the nature and terms of early studies. From Barthes's first articles of the 1950s, Robbe-Grillet has been seen as a central figure in the development of structuralist theories. Lacan's 1965 essay, 'Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras, du ravissement de Lol V. Stein', established Duras's centrality within psychoanalytic and feminist critical movements. The fundamental differences underlying these theoretical disciplines' relative emphasis on authorial identity and gender have led to the continued critical separation of Duras and Robbe-Grillet. This study develops a critical model which reads against these divisive tendencies, in order to compare how a male and a female writer, working within the

same literary environment, treated similar literary issues. The approach, termed 'reading in pairs', is loosely adapted from Nancy K. Miller, and entails:

reading at the gendered intersections of literary production to suggest the lines of another history of the novel, a history like the one that actually took place: of male and female writers.

Miller's reconstructive reading strategy is adapted to the particular circumstances of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's intertextual relationship, and developed to allow for the exploration of the fruitful areas of mutual influence between them.

A very real, sustained literary rivalry is shown to have existed between Duras and Robbe-Grillet, the permutations of which are mirrored in the often parallel shifts in the development of their literary careers. The textual reflection of their psychodynamic rivalry is reminiscent of Harold Bloom's theory that an 'anxiety of influence' underlies relations between strong literary figures. This study adapts Bloom's model for the specific conditions of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's intertextual relationship: given that the two writers were contemporaries and of the opposite sex, the narrative of a psychic 'sibling rivalry' replaces the original, exclusively male, Oedipal scenario. The thesis thus examines the extent to which changes in the nature of their sibling rivalry had a productive impact on the development of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's literary works.

Chapter 1 provides the psychological and contextual framework for the paired textual readings of the subsequent four chapters, and is divided into two interrelated parts. The first part examines the broad thematic, stylistic and generic shifts between Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's parallel careers, and explores to what extent these correspond to, or diverge from, the revisionary ratios of Bloom's model. The second part studies Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's extra-literary pronouncements on issues of gender and, by highlighting parallels between, and inconsistencies in, the two writers' comments, questions the general critical positioning of the two writers at opposite poles in the feminist debate. Instead, the 'lutte des sexes' between Duras and Robbe-

Grillet, whether waged through their intertextual misreadings of each other's work or through their combative statements in interviews, is shown to reflect the shifting dynamics of both love and hate, similarity and difference, inherent in their particular sibling rivalry.

Chapter 2 then explores the context, nature and effects of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's initial period of emulative alliance during the 1950s and 1960s. By highlighting the two writers' early problems with critical reception, it suggests individual and common motivations for their association: affiliation within the Nouveau Roman allowed Duras to shed her previously conventional reputation, whereas Robbe-Grillet, in the face of critical hostility, could gain confirmation of the validity of his literary beliefs from a more established writer. The chapter then examines the implications, for the two writers' intertextual relationship, of Robbe-Grillet's enrolment of Duras into his literary stable by commissioning *Moderato cantabile*, and discusses the active role which Duras played in the Nouveau Roman group. A 'reading in pairs' of *La Jalousie* and *Moderato cantabile* then focuses upon the textual reflection of the authors' affiliation in general and specific similarities of practice, but also highlights the theoretically-based differences which foreshadow later changes in their intertextual relationship.

Following the period of literary alliance or, to use Bloom's words, of 'initial love for the precursor's poetry', the nature of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's intertextual relationship shifted to one of revisionary strife as, loosely in keeping with the Bloomian model, each writer struggled with the other for literary autonomy. The antagonistic nature of later stages of their rivalry was first provoked by Duras's rejection of affiliation with the Nouveau Roman and adoption by the emerging feminist movement. Robbe-Grillet responded to this perceived desertion, and to the rise of the women's movement in general, by 'misreading' Duras's and feminism's focus on the thematics of feminine desire in works which portray the suppression of female characters by male sexualized violence. Chapter 3 discusses the attack and counter-attack dynamics which characterize the two writers' intertextual relationship

during the 1970s and 1980s, exploring the centrality of gender to their productive sibling rivalry. The first part of the chapter examines the series of interrelated, mutually responsive, revisionary swerves underlying both writers' portrayals of transgressive sexual relations. For although Duras initially asserted her independence of the Nouveau Roman by allowing her work to be appropriated by feminist theorists, she later rejected this alliance by 'misreading' Robbe-Grillet's former 'misreadings' of her desire-centred works. The second part examines the conflicting interpretations of existing criticism of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's work, and discusses the problems created by applying theoretical approaches, initially adopted for the study of the writers' early works, to their later, more extreme and sexually problematic texts. In the third part, a 'reading in pairs' of Robbe-Grillet's *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* (1978) and Duras's *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* (1980) examines the authors' treatment of extreme sado-masochistic thematics, and comparatively analyzes the linguistic and formal strategies employed in portraying the disturbing content. This comparison produces a far less clear-cut picture of the underlying sexual politics than that offered by previous interpretations, structuralist or feminist, largely because of an inability to attribute differences to the gender of the author. The chapter concludes by arguing that, contrary to received views, Duras's combination of graphic content with passages of lyrical description is ultimately more disturbing, in terms of reader response, than the alienation incited by Robbe-Grillet's framing and fictionalizing strategies.

In 1984, Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's struggle for literary individuation moved into the appropriately narcissistic, author-centred arena of autobiography. Chapter 4 explores the construction of the self in Duras's *L'Amant* and Robbe-Grillet's *Le Miroir qui revient*, focusing in particular on the authors' common reworking of the theoretical and personal issues of (auto)biographical representation expounded in Barthes's precursor text, *La Chambre claire* (1980). A 'reading in pairs' of their works explores how each writer responds to the visual nature of Barthes's discussion of the inadequacy of photographic images of a loved one, in their interrelated, fragmented and composite literary portraits of the self and the mother. Differences are identified

between the models of self-definition adopted by the two writers: whereas Duras's mother is portrayed as an antithetical model of frigidity against which the daughter self-assertively rebels, Robbe-Grillet aligns himself with his sexualized mother, constantly underlining the strength of the affective bonds between them. The proximity entailed in this pattern of self-defining identification is shown to lead to theoretical and personal complications unforeseen in Barthes's non-autobiographical work, when Robbe-Grillet depicts the more uncomfortable aspects of his own and his parents' past selves.

The fifth and final chapter examines the effects, on Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's rivalry and the development of their respective works, of the phenomenal success of *L'Amant*. The chapter is divided into three parts, the first of which discusses the intense national and international media attention which followed the publication of Duras's novel, focusing in particular on the author's appearance on 'Apostrophes', which was described at the time as a 'coup médiatique'. It also explores Robbe-Grillet's paradoxical response, in *Angélique ou l'enchantement* (1987), to his rival's publishing and celebrity success. Whilst explicitly condemnatory of the mediatization of the author's persona, he nonetheless repeatedly refers to his own public image, or 'tête d'écrivain', and is seen to rework many of the successful visual elements of Duras's precursor text. The following two parts of the chapter comprise closely-related 'readings in pairs' of the writers' works a decade later. The first 'reading in pairs', of Duras's *Écrire* (1993) and Robbe-Grillet's *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* (1994), compares their accounts of their past œuvres and of the literary milieu of which they once formed a part. It highlights how differences between their respective levels of success at the time of writing affect the nature of these retrospective accounts. Duras thus constructs a solipsistic, creative universe apart from all external influences. Robbe-Grillet, on the other hand, emphasizes his position at the very heart of the Nouveau Roman group and the associated literary and critical environment. A second 'reading in pairs', of *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* and *C'est tout* (1995), explores the relationship between retrospective elements, the writing present, and the

two writers' textual anticipation of the future. It examines how awareness of their own and their rival's literary status leads to the writers' contrasting treatments of the subjects of death and immortality. Duras's portrayed fear of impending death is counterbalanced by confidence in her enduring literary strength. In contrast, Robbe-Grillet's desire to assert his own literary significance results in an emphasis upon the past, and an uncomfortable anxiety about his future position in the canon. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of Duras's death both on the reception of her work and on the dynamics of her and Robbe-Grillet's intertextual rivalry. Not only did Duras's death add an element of retrospective poignancy to her last works, but it also created renewed interest in, and new editions of, her earlier works. Duras's continued (posthumous) success has effectively relegated Robbe-Grillet to the position of ephebe in their previously mobile intertextual hierarchy, and his continued references to her underline his paradoxical desire to deny her claims to literary originality, whilst vicariously allying himself with her success and recognized strength.

Reading Duras and Robbe-Grillet against each other sheds new light on the development of their 'already read' literary texts and entails the re-examination of the critical discourses with which each writer has been associated. Studying a man and a woman writer together also necessitates the development of the new analytic approach of 'reading in pairs'. As the Concluding Remarks suggest, this comparative critical model is potentially applicable to the study of other pairs of writers of the opposite sex, either to provide new angles on old material, by reading together previously separate but individually 'already read' writers, or to contribute to a different view of literary development, by reintroducing neglected, 'underread' writers in the position they originally occupied, alongside their canonized contemporaries. This double-gendered approach works against many existing feminist critics' emphasis upon the creation of a parallel, exclusively female literary heritage, and so might eventually contribute to a more rounded picture of literary history: one which does not comprise separate canons of men's and women's literature, each with its own theoretical

discourse, but one which constitutes an interrelated, mutually influential whole of male and female writers.

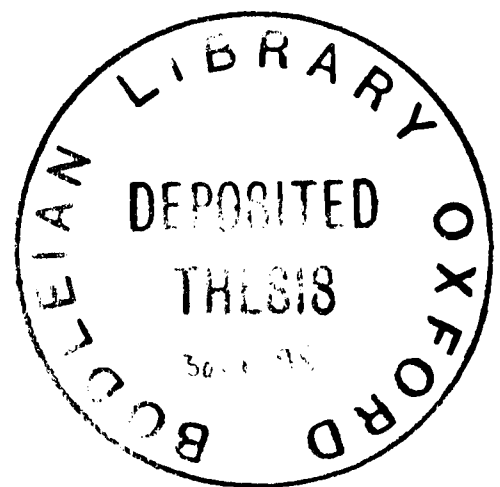
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Introduction

Reading Between the Lines: Approaches to Duras and Robbe-Grillet

Marguerite Duras and Alain Robbe-Grillet are two of the most prominent and influential writers of mid- to late-twentieth century France, with their prolific corpuses of novels, films, interviews and essays spanning several decades. Not only has their constant questioning of the generic, thematic, stylistic and formal conventions of traditional, realist literature reflected the major preoccupations of recent avant-garde literary history, but their often ground-breaking works have also been crucial to the creation and development of some of the most powerful literary critical theories of the period. Their respective association with largely mutually exclusive theoretical movements - Duras with psychoanalytic and feminist criticism, Robbe-Grillet with Barthesian structuralism - has led to a general perception of them as being important but parallel figures, with little common ground for critical comparison. This perception is largely due to the different theoretical terms in which each writer has predominantly been studied, but is also due to a more general tendency to study male and female writers separately. If, prompted to correct this critical tendency, one were to examine the development of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's parallel corpuses against each other, reading at the intersections, one would in fact uncover many potential areas of comparison.

Duras and Robbe-Grillet were both members of the Nouveau Roman group during the 1950s and 1960s. Both began successful avant-garde cinema careers by writing a film-script for Alain Resnais - Duras with *Hiroshima mon amour* (1960) and Robbe-Grillet with *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961) - and went on to write and direct many films of their own, especially during the 1970s. Both writers attracted intense critical attention for their portrayals, in their works of the 1970s and 1980s, of transgressive, sado-masochistic erotic relations. In 1984, they turned, almost

simultaneously, and perhaps surprisingly, to the genre of autobiography. Throughout their later works they both explored similar thematic elements, such as childhood, sexuality, their literary careers, the Second World War and the fear of death, in formally innovative texts. In addition to the above, both Duras and Robbe-Grillet were prominent and consummate media figures, giving countless television, press and radio interviews and being the object of numerous documentaries. When one considers these striking areas of common ground, and the many references, to each other and to literary and contextual issues with which the other was associated, made by Duras and Robbe-Grillet at various points, the need for an extended comparative reading of their works becomes more pressing. This thesis aims to conduct just such a comparative study of Duras and Robbe-Grillet, by reading together pairs of their novels from the course of their careers, and exploring how the corresponding shifts in their parallel corpuses reflect the psychodynamic permutations of a literary rivalry between the two writers.

Duras and Robbe-Grillet have very occasionally both been included in studies of the Nouveau Roman, such as Jean-Bernard Barrère's *La Cure d'amaigrissement du roman* (1964), Ludovic Janvier's *Une Parole exigeante* (1964), Pierre Astier's *La Crise du roman français et le nouveau roman* (1968) or Nelly Wolf's retrospective *Une Littérature sans histoire: essai sur le Nouveau Roman* (1995).¹ These general works, however, do not make any specific comparisons between the two writers. Indeed, Duras's position within the Nouveau Roman has always been disputed and most studies of the group exclude her or refer to her only in passing. More recently, the two writers have been linked in studies of their and other former Nouveaux Romanciers' common adoption of the autobiographical genre, notably in Raylene L. Ramsay's *The French New Autobiographies* (1996),² with the comparison thus being

¹ Published in Paris by Albin Michel, Minuit, Nouvelles Éditions Debresse and in Geneva by Droz respectively.

² *The French New Autobiographies: Sarraute, Duras, and Robbe-Grillet* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996)

focused upon a limited corpus and period. These studies are an exception to the general critical tendency to study Duras and Robbe-Grillet separately.

Duras's first novels, of the 1940s and early 1950s, attracted little critical attention and the few reviews of her work of this period tended to stress its indebtedness to the American realist tradition. The experimental potential of her writing was initially recognized in the late 1950s when Duras was included in the 1958 special edition of *Esprit*³ alongside other novelists in the emerging Nouveau Roman group, and when, in the following year, Blanchot included a study of Duras's use of dialogue in *Le Square* (1955) in his *Le Livre à venir* (1959).⁴ Jean-Luc Seylaz published *Les Romans de Marguerite Duras*,⁵ the first, introductory book dedicated solely to Duras in 1963, but it was not until two years later and over twenty years after the publication of her first novel,⁶ that new and influential critical approaches to her work were first adopted.

In 1965, Michèle Montrelay gave a paper at a Lacan seminar in Paris in which she conducted a Lacanian psychoanalytic reading of the characters in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (1964), treating the text as a case study in clinical hysteria.⁷ This paper provoked the interest of Lacan who, following a meeting with Duras, wrote his seminal essay, 'Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras, du ravissement de Lol V. Stein',⁸ in which he recruits Duras's text as exemplary of his theories of feminine desire and madness. This essay was of crucial importance in establishing the central position of Duras and her novel within psychoanalytic literary theories and in dictating the psychoanalytic nature of many subsequent approaches to her work.

The other major and interrelated trend in criticism of Duras's work is feminist literary theory. Although Lacan's theory is not explicitly feminist in project, the emphasis in his work upon issues of feminine sexuality, its relation to language and

³ 'Le Nouveau Roman', *Esprit*, No. 7-8 (1958)

⁴ Published in Paris by NRF Gallimard, (1959).

⁵ Published in Paris by Minard.

⁶ *Les Impudents* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943)

⁷ This essay was later published in her influential *L'Ombre et le nom: Sur la fémininité* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977), pp. 7-25.

⁸ First published in *Les Cahiers Renaud-Barrault*, 52 (December 1965).

the subversive power of silence and madness, made it enormously influential within the feminist literary theories which gained momentum in the late 1960s and 1970s, especially following the events of May 1968. Just as Duras was the only living writer whom Lacan quoted as embodying his theories, so too was she the only living woman writer cited by Hélène Cixous as an exponent of the concept of 'écriture féminine', elaborated in her ground-breaking essays, 'Sorties' and 'Le Rire de la Méduse'.⁹ A major text in confirming Duras's perceived central position within the feminist debate was *Les Parleuses* (1974),¹⁰ a series of interviews with Xavière Gauthier which are characterized less by any real espousal on Duras's part of a feminist project or specifically female writing style than by her apparent willingness to have her work appropriated by the feminist critic. From then on, however ambivalent and shifting Duras's own position may have been, critical approaches to her work have been almost exclusively dictated by Lacanian and/or feminist theories.

In 1977, Michèle Montrelay's *L'Ombre et le nom*¹¹ was published, (which includes her 1965 Lacanian reading of *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*) and Marcelle Marini published her influential study, *Territoires du féminin*,¹² in which she adopts a broadly anti-Lacanian, Irigarian approach to both *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* and *Le Vice-consul*. Similarly, throughout the 1980s, studies of Duras, whilst predominantly feminist in approach, were broadly divided between supporters and attackers of Lacanian readings. Representative of pro-Lacanian feminist studies are: Carol Murphy's *Alienation and absence* (1982),¹³ an overview of the development of thematics of absence and their relation to stylistic rarefaction in Duras's corpus;

⁹ 'Sorties' is published in Hélène Cixous & Catherine Clément, *La Jeune née* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1975), pp. 115-119. In this essay, Cixous exposes the binary oppositions which underpin phallogocentric language and define the feminine as 'other'. She posits a reclamation of the feminine in its ability to disrupt the masculine order. In a footnote to 'Le Rire de la Méduse', published in *L'Arc*, 61 (1975), pp. 39-54, Cixous includes Duras alongside Colette and Jean Genet as practitioners of 'écriture féminine', defined in 'Sorties' as a disruptive form of language not necessarily related to the gender of the author.

¹⁰ Published in Paris by Éditions de Minuit.

¹¹ *L'Ombre et le nom. Sur la fémininité*, Coll. Critique (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977), pp. 7-25.

¹² *Territoires du féminin: avec Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977)

¹³ *Alienation and Absence in the Novels of Marguerite Duras* (Lexington, Kentucky: French Forum, 1982)

Micheline Tison-Braun's *Marguerite Duras* (1984),¹⁴ a loosely psychoanalytic approach to Duras's treatment of the themes of love, madness and utopia; Sharon Willis's *Marguerite Duras: Writing on the Body*,¹⁵ a reading of desire in *Lol V. Stein*, *Le Vice-consul* and *L'Amour*; Julia Kristeva's *Soleil noir* (1987),¹⁶ a general study of literary representations of depression and melancholy, which includes a reading of the psychological problems of separation from the mother portrayed in *Lol V. Stein*; and, more recently, Raynalle Udris's *Welcome Unreason* (1993),¹⁷ a reading of madness in the *Lol V. Stein* cycle, based on the theories of both Lacan and Foucault. Opposing such strict psychoanalytic approaches is Alice Jardin's *Gynesis*¹⁸ (1985), an overview of the various, conflicting and complementary branches of feminist theory which includes a chapter that is largely critical of the gender politics implicit in Lacan's reading of Duras. Trista Selous's *The Other Woman* (1988)¹⁹ examines the problems involved in various feminist readings of Duras's texts. Although Selous acknowledges the fascination which Duras's fictional works exert, she ultimately sees them, and Lacanian feminist readings of them, as theoretically problematic and politically dubious in their reinscription of essentialist stereotypes of the female hysteric.

Although, as can be seen from the above selection, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* remained the privileged object of study for the prevalent feminist and Lacanian psychoanalytic approaches to Duras from the 1970s onwards,²⁰ Duras largely abandoned the novel form during this period in favour of film. This move towards a visual medium, combined with feminist criticism's emphasis on the gender of the author, contributed to the production of a number of critical works which focused

¹⁴ Published in Amsterdam by Rodolpi.

¹⁵ Published in Urbana & Chicago by University of Illinois Press.

¹⁶ 'La Maladie de la douleur', *Soleil noir: dépression et mélancolie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), pp. 227-265.

¹⁷ *Welcome Unreason: a Study of 'Madness' in the Novels of Marguerite Duras* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993)

¹⁸ *Gynesis: Configurations of Women and Modernity* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 172-177.

¹⁹ *The Other Woman: Feminism and Femininity in the Work of Marguerite Duras* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1988)

²⁰ See most recently, for instance, Michel David's Lacanian study, *Marguerite Duras: une écriture de la jouissance* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1996), published after Duras's death.

upon Duras's persona. Nicole Lise Bernheim's *Marguerite Duras tourne un film* (1974),²¹ takes the form of a series of interviews, interspersed with photographs, with all crew members of *India Song*, about the experience of working with Duras, who is also interviewed. The 1976 collective work, *Marguerite Duras*,²² includes interviews with Duras, short articles by her and critics, film stills and biographical photographs, again all loosely centred around the production and reception of *India Song*. The most influential of such collective, inter-generic works was *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras* (1977), the transcript of a series of filmed conversations between Duras and Michelle Porte, accompanied by photographs of Duras at home in Neauphle-le-Château. In this work, the writer already displays her willing self-promotion.

The foregrounding of the author's persona in the above studies was reinforced, during the 1980s, by Duras's shift to broadly autobiographical writing and by texts such as *L'Été 80*²³ and *La Vie matérielle*,²⁴ which blur the boundaries between fiction and reality. The publication of *L'Amant* in 1984 was swiftly followed by Duras's solo appearance on the literary television programme, 'Apostrophes'. With the celebrity status which this, the Prix Goncourt and subsequent television, radio and press interviews conferred, Duras's media identity became inextricably linked with her work. Hence the concentration, during the 1980s and 1990s, of critical studies on Duras's use of autobiography as well as literary biographies, more or less based upon interpretations of her fiction. In the first category, Leah D. Hewitt includes a chapter on *L'Amant* in her study of women's autobiography, *Autobiographical tightropes* (1990),²⁵ and Raylene L. Ramsay examines the adoption of the autobiographical form by the former Nouveaux Romanciers, Sarraute, Duras and Robbe-Grillet in *The French New Autobiographies* (1996), mentioned above. In *Duras et l'autobiographie* (1990),²⁶ a book devoted solely to Duras, Armel Alette takes *L'Amant* as a key to the

²¹ Published in Paris by Albatros.

²² Published in Paris by Albatros. Republished in 1979 in *Collection Ça/Cinéma*.

²³ *L'Été 80* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980)

²⁴ *La Vie matérielle* (Paris: P.O.L., 1987)

²⁵ 'Rewriting Her Story, from Passive to Active: Substitutions in Marguerite Duras's *The Lover*', *Autobiographical Tightropes* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1990)

²⁶ Published in Paris by Le Castor Astral.

understanding of the entire œuvre. Unlike many other critics, however, she recognizes the strategies employed by the author, in both interviews and literary works, in creating a hermetic system of self-mystification and the dangers of too simplistic an understanding of the relationship between Duras's life and her fictional work. Such critical distance is generally lacking in the often adulatory biographies, such as Alain Vircondelet's *Duras: biographie* (1991)²⁷ or his later *Pour Duras* (1995)²⁸ which he describes as an 'éloge', or Frédérique Lebelley's *Duras ou le poids d'une plume* (1994).²⁹ Christine Blot-Labarrère's *Marguerite Duras* (1992)³⁰ appears to be the best researched of these biographical studies and avoids some of the more naive correlations between the author's life and her fictional works, of which Vircondelet and Lebelley are occasionally guilty.

In summary then, criticism of Duras's work specifically did not really begin until the late 1960s following the publication of Lacan's influential 1965 essay. So central was Duras's perceived role in the rise of feminism that, thenceforth, approaches to her work have been predominantly influenced by the two often complementary discourses of Lacanian psychoanalysis and feminist literary theory. In addition, Duras's manipulation of the visual media and feminist studies' foregrounding of the author's gender have led to numerous critical works - interviews, biographies or studies of autobiography - which centre upon Duras's persona, with the autobiographical *L'Amant* being seen by many such critics as the retrospective key to all of Duras's fiction.

Several critics have, over the years, attempted to step outside the limits of such theoretical approaches and to present a thematic and/or stylistic overview of the development of Duras's corpus, identifying characteristic phases. Notable amongst these are: Alfred Cismaru's *Marguerite Duras* (1971),³¹ a thematic introduction to the early novels and the first book in English dedicated to Duras; Madeleine Alleins's

²⁷ Published in Paris by François Bourin.

²⁸ Published in Paris by Calmann-Lévy.

²⁹ Published in Paris by Bernard Grasset.

³⁰ Published in Paris by Seuil.

³¹ Published in New York by Twayne.

Marguerite Duras: médium du réel (1984)³² which plots the development of the theme of desire throughout her corpus and the corresponding progression towards stylistic rarefaction; and Yvonne Guers-Villate's *Continuité discontinuité de l'œuvre durassienne* (1985),³³ which examines both the diachronic thematic and formal development of Duras's corpus and the synchronic links between texts, in order to identify both their evolution and their continuity. In all of these works, Duras's fiction is read self-reflexively, that is, literary texts are studied either in relation to each other or in terms of the author's own comments on her writing practice. In his book on Duras's novels and films, *Marguerite Duras: Apocalyptic Desires* (1993),³⁴ Leslie Hill highlights the dangers of reading either from within the confines of a particular critical discipline or in relation to the author's professed beliefs. Instead, his extensive overview of the generic and thematic development of Duras's work examines it both in relation to the author's biography and the dominant theories of feminism and psychoanalysis, whilst acknowledging the complications, limitations and ambivalence at stake in such a multi-faceted reading strategy.

If Lacan was the major figure in establishing Duras's transgressive reputation and determining, directly or indirectly, the major trends in reception of her work, then Barthes played a similar role in Robbe-Grillet's career. Whereas Lacan's essay was written over twenty years after the publication of Duras's debut novel, Barthes's influential essays appeared virtually simultaneously with the publication of Robbe-Grillet's very first works. In 'Littérature objective' (1954), Barthes posits a phenomenological interpretation of *Les Gommages* (1953), arguing that Robbe-Grillet's meticulous, non-referential and non-metaphorical description of objects reflects an inherent lack of affective identification between man and the world. This broadly philosophical approach is linked in 'Littérature littérale',³⁵ published the following

³² Published in Lausanne by Éditions de l'Age d'Homme.

³³ Published in Brussels by Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles.

³⁴ Published in New York & London by Routledge.

³⁵ Both of these essays first appeared in *Critique*, and were published in Roland Barthes, *Essais critiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1963), pp. 29-40 and pp. 63-70 respectively.

year, to a structuralist emphasis upon the form of Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur* (1955), in which Barthes argues against the tendency to apply external critical judgements to the thematic content of the fictional work.

Robbe-Grillet's work, like that of Duras, was not used simply as an illustration of an already established theory, but was instrumental in the development of new theoretical discourses. Yet, as has been seen, however central Duras's position within the psychoanalytic and feminist critical debates may have been, her own engagement with them was always at least ambivalent. Robbe-Grillet, on the other hand, wholeheartedly espoused in turn both the phenomenological and structuralist approaches to his work set out by Barthes. Unlike Duras, Robbe-Grillet produced theoretical essays to complement his fictional works, and these, along with Barthes's studies, largely dictated the grounds on which he has thenceforth been studied. The initial event which led to Robbe-Grillet's writing theoretical works was the heated debate which followed the publication of *Le Voyeur* and which is documented in Minuit's 'La Querelle du Voyeur'. Confronted with the incomprehension and hostility of the critical establishment, Robbe-Grillet wrote a series of defensive, explanatory essays for the *NRF*, many of which were later published in *Pour un Nouveau Roman* (1963).³⁶ From the very start, a symbiotic relationship existed between Robbe-Grillet and Barthes, new novelistic forms and new critical theories being inextricably interlinked, both developing in response to the supporters of traditional literature.

The virulence of traditional critics' condemnation of experimental literary forms and of new philosophical and formally based theories also largely accounted for Robbe-Grillet's strategic formation of the Nouveau Roman group with other novelists (and theorists) who shared his belief in the need for new, transgressive writing practices, a fact which Celia Britton discusses in her contextual study, *The Nouveau Roman: Fiction, Theory and Politics* (1992).³⁷ As already discussed in relation to Duras, recognition of this group and of Robbe-Grillet's key role within it was marked

³⁶ Published in Paris by Éditions de Minuit.

³⁷ Published in Basingstoke & London by Macmillan.

in 1958 by the special edition of *Esprit*, in which the title 'Nouveau Roman' was officially adopted. Over the years, studies have continued to link Robbe-Grillet and other Nouveaux Romanciers in terms of their broad, common literary practices and theoretical underpinnings.

Throughout the 1950s and 60s, criticism of Robbe-Grillet (and of the Nouveau Roman in general) largely sprang from polemical debates between supporters and attackers. Indeed, this combative, oral tendency determined the collective form of many critical books. Papers from the 1971 Colloque de Cerisy on the Nouveau Roman were published in *Le Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui*;³⁸ those given at the 1975 conference on Robbe-Grillet were collected to form the double-volumed *Robbe-Grillet: Colloque de Cerisy*;³⁹ and the articles in *Three Decades of the French New Novel*⁴⁰ were originally presented in 1985 at a conference at New York University.⁴¹ Throughout Robbe-Grillet's career, a large proportion of the critical reception of his work, as in the above collections, has centred upon his key role in the Nouveau Roman group, and has tended to read his novels in relation to his own (largely Barthesian) structuralist theories.⁴²

This tendency - to read Robbe-Grillet's fiction in terms of early criticism and of his own theoretical pronouncements - is also true of specific studies of his work. Following the publication of Bruce Morrissette's *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet* (1963),⁴³ the first book dedicated solely to Robbe-Grillet's work, two distinct branches developed within this tendency. For whilst Morrissette read Robbe-Grillet's works in relation to his theoretical essays, he did so in order to recuperate them, reconstructing the plots, characters and chronology which they disrupt. In a largely negative preface

³⁸ Jean Ricardou & Françoise van Rossum-Guyon (eds.), 2 volumes (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, Coll. 10/18, 1972)

³⁹ Jean Ricardou (ed.), 2 volumes (Paris: Coll. 10/18, 1976)

⁴⁰ Lois Oppenheim (ed), (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986)

⁴¹ See also, for instance, the special edition of *Obliques*, 16-17 (Paris: Borderie, 1987), edited by François Jost, which includes a series of short texts by Robbe-Grillet, critical essays, transcripts of interviews and film scripts.

⁴² In this overview, I focus chiefly upon those critical studies which are specifically on Robbe-Grillet. More general studies of the Nouveau Roman are included in the bibliography.

⁴³ Published in Paris by Éditions de Minuit.

to Morrissette's book, Barthes identifies two possible critical approaches to Robbe-Grillet's experimental writing practice, the first of which (his own) destroys meaning and the second (Morrissette's) creates meaning. Barthes recognizes that, whilst the latter approach deflates much of the novelty and subversive potential of the original works, it also has the advantage of making them more widely accessible. Indeed, Morrissette's book was very important in Robbe-Grillet's career for attracting wider academic and public interest, but also, on account of Barthes's introductory caveat, in simultaneously highlighting more transgressive critical approaches.

Early studies which followed Barthes's example include Olga Bernal's *Le Roman de l'absence* (1964)⁴⁴ and Jean Alter's *La Vision du monde d'Alain Robbe-Grillet* (1966),⁴⁵ both of which are anti-recuperative. Instead of reading Robbe-Grillet's disruption of narrative structures in relation to traditional forms, both critics are broadly phenomenological in identifying formal destruction with contemporary views of man's position of philosophical and psychological uncertainty in relation to the world. More in line with Morrissette's recuperative approach is Jean Miesch's *Robbe-Grillet* (1965),⁴⁶ which offers a chronological study of the development of Robbe-Grillet's early novels, analyzing and explaining them in terms of Robbe-Grillet's theoretical works.

In 1964, Ben Stoltzfus published the first book on Robbe-Grillet in English and thereby extended the debate regarding his fiction and theory to the United States. Indeed, the enthusiastic reception which Robbe-Grillet received from American academics did much to provoke greater critical interest in France. *Alain Robbe-Grillet and the New French Novel*⁴⁷ is essentially an introductory study, in which Stoltzfus first positions Robbe-Grillet and the Nouveau Roman within the development of literary history, before focusing upon an analysis of Robbe-Grillet's formal and thematic disruption of narrative point of view. His emphasis upon issues of

⁴⁴ Published in Paris by Gallimard.

⁴⁵ Published in Geneva by Droz.

⁴⁶ Published in Paris by Éditions Universitaires.

⁴⁷ Published in Carbondale by Southern Illinois University Press.

perspective and perception echoes the phenomenological aspects of Barthes's 'Littérature objective' and early French critics' labeling of the Nouveaux Romanciers as 'l'école du regard'.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the same tendencies - phenomenological, structuralist and recuperative - continued to dominate studies of Robbe-Grillet's work. In the first category are Jacques Leenhardt's influential *Lecture politique du roman* (1973),⁴⁸ in which the critic explores the sociopolitical implications of Robbe-Grillet's questioning of viewpoint in a Marxist analysis of *La Jalousie*, and Victor Carrabino's *The Phenomenological Novel of Alain Robbe-Grillet* (1974).⁴⁹ Among the most rigid of the second, structuralist category are: Alain Goulet's *Le Parcours mœbien de l'écriture* (1982),⁵⁰ in which the critic equates the narrative construction of *Le Voyeur* with Escher's painting 'Le Ruban de Möbius II', and conducts a structuralist, mathematical analysis of the underlying signs and patterns in the text; and Paul A. Fortier's *Structures et communications dans La Jalousie d'Alain Robbe-Grillet* (1981),⁵¹ in which Fortier uses statistical and concordancing tools to examine the underlying structures and recurrent motifs in the novel, in order to establish the grounds for its relative sales success. Recuperative studies include Erwan Rault's *Théorie et expérience romanesque chez Robbe-Grillet* (1975),⁵² in which he reads *Le Voyeur* as illustrative of the theoretical beliefs laid out in *Pour un Nouveau Roman* and therefore analyzes it in terms of its disruption of traditional novelistic conventions; and John Fletcher's *Alain Robbe-Grillet* and Ilona Leki's book of the same name, both published in English in 1983,⁵³ which are essentially popularizing, introductory overviews aimed at an American audience unacquainted with Robbe-Grillet's work and which include plot summaries and suggested interpretations.

⁴⁸ Published in Paris by Éditions de Minuit.

⁴⁹ Published in Parma by C.E.M. Editrice.

⁵⁰ *Lettres Modernes*, no. 202 (Paris: 1982)

⁵¹ Published in Quebec by Éditions Naaman de Sherbrooke.

⁵² *Théorie et expérience romanesque chez Robbe-Grillet: «le voyeur»* (1955) (Paris: La Pensée Universelle, 1975)

⁵³ John Fletcher, *Alain Robbe-Grillet* (London & New York: Methuen, 1983). Ilona Leki, *Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Boston: Twayne, 1983).

In his second book dedicated to Robbe-Grillet, *Alain Robbe-Grillet: The Body of the Text* (1985),⁵⁴ Ben Stoltzfus recognizes the two opposing tendencies - thematically recuperative and structuralist - which characterize critical approaches to Robbe-Grillet's work. Stoltzfus aims to reconcile the two in an overview of Robbe-Grillet's fiction and an evaluation of the criticism. By equating traditional narrative order with sociopolitical ideology, however, Stoltzfus ultimately stresses the formal aspects of Robbe-Grillet's work in order to argue in defence of its thematic subversion.

This privileging of form over content, characteristic of Barthes's structuralist studies of Robbe-Grillet's early novels, continued to characterize approaches to the writer's work, even when the nature of the thematics dramatically changed. Just as Stoltzfus adopted a structuralist bias in studying Robbe-Grillet's sado-erotic texts of the 1970s, so too were these the terms within which many critics chose to study his apparently autobiographical *Romanesques* trilogy of the 1980s. Thus Roger-Michel Allemand, in his *Imaginaire, écritures, lectures de Robbe-Grillet* (1991),⁵⁵ reads *Le Miroir qui revient* and *Angélique ou l'enchantement* against *Un Régicide* to show how Robbe-Grillet's disruption of the autobiographical genre is consistent with his previous fictional practice and theoretical beliefs. In *Alain Robbe-Grillet: Autobiographe* (1993),⁵⁶ Sjef Houppermans identifies four interconnected phases within the development of Robbe-Grillet's corpus of which autobiography is the fourth and last, and adopts a loosely structuralist and psychoanalytic approach in comparing the disruption of the genre with the questioning of sexual identity.

Whatever the changes in thematic content throughout Robbe-Grillet's œuvre, his formal innovation continued to be seen as profoundly subversive of either traditional novelistic conventions, man's position in the world, or the dominant ideological order. Few critics sought to question the predominantly formal emphasis of the theoretical approaches adopted. In her essay, 'Reading Robbe-Grillet: Sadism

⁵⁴ Published in London and Ontario by Associated University Press.

⁵⁵ Published in Lion-s-mer by Arcane-Beaunieux.

⁵⁶ Published in Amsterdam by Rodolpi.

and Text in *Projet pour une révolution à New York* (1977),⁵⁷ however, Susan Suleiman adopts a broadly feminist approach both in highlighting the defensive strategies employed by critics to ignore or deny the problematic content, and in analyzing what she sees as the misogynist and pornographic portrayal of sexual relations in the text itself. In 'Robbe-Grillet: Formalism and its Discontents' (1984),⁵⁸ Leslie Hill identifies the faulty theoretical premises upon which Robbe-Grillet's theoretical pronouncements are based and underlines the political dangers and academic limitations at stake in structuralist critics' adoption of his separation of signifier and signified. In *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity* (1992),⁵⁹ Raylene Ramsay highlights the theoretical and political problems inherent in the adoption of either a thematic or a formalist approach. Recognizing both the textually subversive and the sexually reactionary potential of Robbe-Grillet's work, Ramsay refuses to privilege one view over the other, her conclusion ultimately stressing the simultaneity and irreconcilability of the two approaches.

Both Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's long careers are marked by constant generic, thematic and stylistic shifts. As can be seen from the above overview, however, approaches to their works have continued to be determined by the nature and terms of early critical studies. From Barthes's first articles of the 1950s, Robbe-Grillet has been seen as a central figure in the development of structuralist theories. Lacan's 1965 essay established Duras's centrality within the psychoanalytic and feminist literary critical movements. Although the parallel theoretical discourses of structuralism and feminism have been the two most influential in the development of recent literary history, yet they tend to be mutually exclusive, largely on account of the fundamental difference in relation to the status allotted to authorial identity and gender.

⁵⁷ Published in *The Romanic Review*, vol. 68, no. 1 (January 1977), pp. 43-62.

⁵⁸ In *Paragraph*, no. 3 (1984), pp. 1-24.

⁵⁹ *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity: Science, Sexuality, and Subversion* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 1992)

Feminist literary criticism, whether classed broadly as French or Anglo-American, stresses difference between male and female writers; this can take the form of linguistic difference, in a writer's gendered relation to the essentially phallogocentric order of language, or of socio-cultural difference, in the dictation of the terms of inclusion in or exclusion from the (male) canon. In structuralist criticism, on the other hand, the centrality of the Barthesian concept of 'the death of the author' denies the possibility of gender difference on any level and so, arguably, runs the risk of reinscribing the male as universal.

This underlying difference, in relation to the emphasis placed on authorial gender, between the theoretical discourses within which Duras and Robbe-Grillet have been predominantly received, has profound implications for the respective critical interpretations of their work. For instance, whereas blanks in Duras's writing style are seen by feminist critics as exemplary of 'écriture féminine' and of the inscription of undercurrents of female desire, in Robbe-Grillet's work blanks are studied by structuralist critics in terms of their formal disruption of traditional novelistic conventions. When Robbe-Grillet adopts sado-erotic thematics in his novels of the 1970s, structuralist critics continue to focus on his formal innovation, whilst a feminist critic sees the depiction of sexual relations as evidence that 'whatever else *Projet* may be, it is definitely a man's book.'⁶⁰ Feminist critics of Duras, however, widely view her adoption of similar material as indicative of her liberating disruption of conventional sexual hierarchies. Without reference to the practices of writers of the opposite sex, the gender distinctions posited with reference to Duras's or Robbe-Grillet's works could be seen to exist on a critical rather than textual level.

Such exclusive approaches are not, however, restricted to studies of Duras and Robbe-Grillet. The centrality of the concept of the 'death of the author' precludes the study of gender from structuralist criticism, whereas feminist literary theories, in stressing difference, tend to portray the literary institution as a 'male club', determining

⁶⁰ 'Sadism and Text', p. 57.

women writers' positions of oppression or transgression. Male writers, as members of the clan, are seen as largely impervious to the other half of society. Whether as a result of a theoretical denial of difference, or of a critical tendency to emphasize female specificity, there exists to date no extended study of how a male and a female writer, who have been central to the development of twentieth century literary and critical history, have treated similar generic, thematic and stylistic issues.

One approach which does allow for the study of men and women writers, and for the exploration of the effects of mutual influence between them, is Nancy K. Miller's proposed comparative critical model, 'reading in pairs'. This term and the reading strategy which it represents are laid out within the broader context of Miller's reconstructive, feminist studies of the eighteenth century French novel.⁶¹ Miller's main aim is to reinstate women writers within the canon from which they have been excluded. Although the women writers who are the object of Miller's studies were popular and influential in their day, subsequent anthologies by male critics first classified their works within traditionally inferior genres and, for this reason, then excluded them altogether. It is on account of the male value judgements which underlie this exclusion that Miller argues against the Barthesian concept of the 'déjà lu' which presupposes that the canon is fixed and all-encompassing. Since women writers have long been excluded from the canon, Miller argues that their works have in fact been 'underread' and cut off from the historical and critical discourses which have accompanied canon formation. In order to reintroduce neglected and underread women writers and so gain a more accurate picture of literary history, Miller argues in favour of a new critical approach which she calls 'overreading'. As is shown in the following quotation from 'The Knot, the Letter, and the Book', she sees this as a two-fold process:

⁶¹ I focus in particular upon her essays, 'The Knot, the Letter, and the Book', in Nancy K. Miller, *Subject to Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 125-160, and 'Men's Reading, Women's Writing' in Joan DeJean & Nancy K. Miller (eds.) *Displacements: Women, Tradition, Literatures in French* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 37-54. For a more complete listing of Miller's relevant works, see bibliography.

At stake in overreading [...] is first a reading (intratextually) for the signature of a gendered subject. By this I mean more narrowly an icon or emblem within the fiction itself that obliquely figures the symbolic and material process entailed in becoming a (woman) writer. But it must also involve what I will call here, reading outward (intertextually) toward the literature it engages through its writing; or reading 'in pairs': reading at the gendered intersections of literary production to suggest the lines of another history of the novel, a history more like the one that actually took place: of male and female writers. (pp. 129-130)

In an 'overreading' of Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (1747), Miller reads the depictions of the French nation's attitude towards a foreigner as symbolic of male views of women, and sees Zilia's use of Indian quipus, a communicative system of knotting, as a metaphorical modelling of a feminist poetics. In a 'reading in pairs', Miller then reads Graffigny's text alongside examples from the male canon in order to highlight the ways in which the woman writer's plot misreads and disrupts conventional novelistic structures and associated views of sexual roles. Miller's aim in her 'reading in pairs' is to portray women's writing of the eighteenth century as a critique of canonical male texts and thus as 'not so much minor fiction as a minority literature of protest, which of necessity demands to be read in majority context, against what we have learned to see as the monuments of the dominant culture' (p. 136). Miller's 'overreading' project thus brings into question the male value judgements on which the canon has been formed and identifies textual figures of a specifically female signature in Graffigny's writing practice. Her 'reading in pairs' of Graffigny's forgotten work alongside texts by male authors which have been retained by the canon succeeds in reinscribing a female voice within an exclusively male literary domain. By portraying Graffigny's and other women's novels as a literature of critique of male plots and male images of femininity, however, Miller continues to define women writers in relation to a male tradition and not vice versa. Whilst her reconstructive project contributes to overcoming the tendency to underread women writers, it does not explore the truly egalitarian possibility, suggested by her reference to an exchange of letters between Laclos and Riccoboni, that male writers may also

have been influenced by their female counterparts and that the dynamics of critique may in fact be two-way.

Miller addresses some of these issues herself in 'Men's Reading, Women's Writing' (1991),⁶² published three years after 'The Knot, the Letter, and the Book', and in which she reworks much of the earlier essay's material. In the later essay, she acknowledges the danger of reconstructive feminist criticism's creating 'a monolith of "women's writing"' (p. 41), and states that:

... the establishment of such a parallel history ... runs the risk of generating, and perhaps guarantees, an even greater indifference to the question of women's writing itself on the part of those authorizers and disseminators of cultural value, who, as we have seen, are happy enough to have a women's chapter that leaves their story intact. (pp. 50-51)

In order to avoid this divisive tendency and to gain a more accurate, double-gendered view of the development of literary history, Miller therefore argues that:

it is crucial to perform two gestures: first to restore feminist writing to the body of fiction that becomes the novel; the second, to reread the texts retained by literary history through this supplemented and redoubled vision.

(p. 42)

'Reading in pairs' must, therefore, comprise both reading women's texts back into the canon, and rereading canonical male works in relation to these reintroduced works, so as 'to perceive at their points of intersection the differentiated lines of a "bicultural" production of the novel ... more complicated than the familiar, national history of its tropes' (p. 45). Such a two-way process would not only offer a new critical angle on the works of the particular male and female writers who are read in pairs, but would also, by questioning the assumption that 'the category of the writer remains the male-universal against which the woman as writer is judged' (p. 47),

⁶² In Joan DeJean & Nancy K. Miller (eds.), *Displacements: Women, Tradition, Literatures in French* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 37-54.

create a new picture of the contextual development of the novel as a whole. Whilst Miller heralds the theoretical potential of such a two-way reading strategy, her emphasis upon the 'overreading' strand of her reconstructive project, and the use of the 'reading in pairs' strand to portray women's writing as a minority literature of critique, mean that this aspect - of rereading men's texts in the light of contemporary women's texts - is not fully implemented in her critical practice.

In my 'reading in pairs' of Duras and Robbe-Grillet, I intend to carry out both parts of Miller's proposed intergendered project, adapting her model to the particular circumstances of these two writers of the opposite sex, and so exploring the fruitful areas of mutual influence between them. Thus I shall not only, as in Miller's example, read Duras's work within the intertextual weave of Robbe-Grillet's parallel works and hence as disruptive of the metatextual tools of the discourse in which he has largely been classified, but I shall also, as Miller's model suggests, reread Robbe-Grillet's work in relation to Duras's and thus also as a critique of the theoretical movements in which she has predominantly been studied. In so doing, I intend to offer an alternative 'bicultural' picture both of the two writers' works and of the literary environment within which they occupy central positions.

Miller's emphasis upon just one part of her proposed reading model - the reinscription of women writers alongside men - is understandable within the context of eighteenth century literary studies, on account of the traditional exclusion of women from the canon and the consequent neglect of their works. Unlike Graffigny, Duras has not been 'underread' and neither she nor Robbe-Grillet seems to be in danger of exclusion from the late twentieth-century French canon. As has been seen from the overview of criticism of the two writers, however, a reading imbalance does exist which has led to their being read in very different terms. The creation of two parallel canons - a monolith of psychoanalytic, feminist writing and criticism alongside and in opposition to a monolith of structuralist, ungendered works and theory - has contributed to the mutually exclusive classification of Duras and Robbe-

Grillet, and limits both the accepted picture of late twentieth-century literary history and the scope of studies of these two writers.

An underlying difference in emphasis exists between my use of 'reading in pairs' and that of Miller. Whereas she aims to use the 'reading in pairs' method primarily to create an alternative picture of the canon, in my study this element is contextual and secondary to the exploration of the intergendered common ground between Duras and Robbe-Grillet, which has been precluded by the existing dual construction of the canon and its associated critical tools. If shifts in each writer's corpus could be viewed as a critique or misreading of the Other, as representative of the parallel (rather than dominant) discourse, they should also be seen as each writer's textual response to the other, as an influential, individual, contemporary writer of the opposite sex. For, as will be explored in the following chapter, a very real, sustained and permutating literary rivalry existed between Duras and Robbe-Grillet throughout their long careers, the psychodynamic effects of which can be plotted, on a textual level, in the often parallel thematic, generic and stylistic shifts in the development of their works.

The reflection within the development of their literary careers of a psychodynamic rivalry between Duras and Robbe-Grillet is reminiscent of Harold Bloom's theory that an 'anxiety of influence' underlies relations between strong literary figures. This theory, like Miller's 'reading in pairs' critical model, was originally conceived for a very different field of study; that is, the relationship between English and American Romantic poets and their post-Enlightenment forebears. Here I shall highlight those elements of Bloom's theory which make a combination and adaptation of his psychological conceptual framework with Miller's double-gendered reading strategy particularly interesting and potentially fruitful for the particular conditions of the pair of writers under examination.

In *The Anxiety of Influence* and *A Map of Misreading*,⁶³ Bloom studies poetic history in terms of a story of poetic influence or of intra-poetic relations. By suggesting a psychoanalytic model and critical language for the study of the relations between poets, Bloom aims both to deidealize accepted views of poetic creativity, and also to reveal the defensive strategies which poets employ in order to deny influence and assert their own creative autonomy. Bloom sees poetic history as a series of strong poets misreading one another in order to make imaginative space for themselves. A poet's assertion of his own creative value is achieved via a two-fold process which Bloom describes as follows: 'Poetic strength comes only from a triumphant wrestling with the greatest of the dead, and from an even more triumphant solipsism' (*MM*, p. 9). In his studies, Bloom thus examines both the defensive strategies which poets adopt in response to the threat to their originality posed by the presence of precursors, and the effects of such strategies upon their literary output.

The interest of Bloom's approach for the purpose of this study is his emphasis upon the psychodynamics of conflict within intertextual relations, which create a productive momentum of the kind evident in the ongoing literary relationship between Duras and Robbe-Grillet. Bloom aims to plot the manifestations of such an 'anxiety of influence' - that is, the impact which awareness of a strong precursor has upon a poet's creativity - throughout the development of the poet's career. As Bloom puts it, 'poetic influence, or [...] poetic misprision, is necessarily the study of the life-cycle of the poet-as-poet' (*AI*, p. 7). Although the identification of 'intra-poetic' influence does deidealize the status of the author and disrupt the traditional view of literary history, Bloom is keen to assert that this should not be seen as negative criticism since 'poetic influence need not make poets less original' (*AI*, p. 7).

The ephebe's (that is the later poet's) awareness of his own belatedness in relation to the strength and originality of his precursor leads him to 'misread' his precursor's work and so to assert his own creative autonomy and individuality. Such

⁶³ Both published by Oxford University Press, in 1973 and 1975 respectively. When quoting from these works, I shall use the abbreviations *AI* and *MM*.

misreadings take the form of 'revisionary swerves' away from the original, which are at once emulation and critique, as the ephebe follows the precursor to a point and then appropriatively recasts or corrects certain elements. Thus, 'initial love for the precursor's poetry is transformed rapidly enough into revisionary strife, without which individuation is not possible' (*MM*, p. 10). Several such revisionary swerves can be detected in the 'dialectic of cosmic love and hate' (*ibid.*) between Duras and Robbe-Grillet, as each misreads elements of the other's work, changing them to make them characteristically his or her own. The conflictual dynamics present in these textual misprisions are reflected in the tone of references to each other made at different stages in their careers. The increasing hostility of these references, outlined in the following chapter, reflects Bloom's belief in the antagonistic, conflictual nature of intra-poetic relations, since 'strong poets' are 'major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death' (*AI*, p. 5).

Bloom views a poet's literary self-affirmation as the result of a violent struggle, a clash of two egos, whose familial ties account for their sameness, whilst self-defensive rebellion leads to difference or otherness. The psychodynamic model is particularly fruitful for an extended comparison of two writers such as Duras and Robbe-Grillet, as it is able to account for both similarities and differences between them. Miller's 'reading in pairs' model accounts for similarities between paired writers in terms of a female revision or misprision of a male plot. Differences, however, are seen as symptomatic of a broad, female literary tradition largely extraneous to the specific intertextual relationship between a woman and a man writer. In short, without the introduction of the notion of a psychic struggle between writers of the opposite sex, 'reading in pairs' runs the risk of accounting only for their mimetic similarities, so neglecting the productive area of difference. In Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's literary relationship, their metatextual rivalry, intertextual struggle and intratextual depictions are all closely and causally inter-related. By introducing the Bloomian notion of a psychodynamic relationship of attraction and repulsion to a study of Duras and Robbe-Grillet, a 'reading in pairs' is able to account for areas of

similarity and difference between their works on all levels, in terms of this literary struggle. Bloom argues that misreading and misinterpretation of the precursor are an inevitable part of an ephebe's quest for self-affirmation, for 'to do just the opposite is also a form of imitation' (*AI*, p. 31). Bloom's aim is, therefore, not to reinstate source criticism nor to look for stylistic similarities but to study poets' emulative or corrective psychic responses to the influence of precursors upon them.

Bloom defines the nature and effects of poetic influence in psychoanalytic terms, seeing 'the relations between poets as cases akin to what Freud called the family romance' (*AI*, p. 8). In his study of a poet's antagonistic relationship with his precursor, Bloom identifies the self-defensive workings of psychological repetition compulsions. Unlike Freud, however, he argues that a poet's anxiety of influence cannot be sublimated by happy substitution. Refusal to accept indebtedness lies at the heart of the struggle between ephebe and precursor, for 'poets as poets cannot accept substitutions, and fight to the end to have their initial chance alone' (*ibid.*).

In keeping with his broadly Freudian framework, the struggle which Bloom describes between strong poets and their literary precursors is assumed to be always exclusively male, and is thus conveniently theorized in terms of an Œdipal conflict: a 'battle between strong equals, father and son as mighty opposites, Laius and Œdipus at the crossroads' (*AI*, p. 11). Like 'those authorizers and disseminators of cultural value',⁶⁴ against whom Miller protests, Bloom sees all strong literary figures as *men* fighting against *male* precursors.

Yet within Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's intertextual relationship, the fact that the literary rival is of the opposite sex is absolutely fundamental to the nature of their struggle. To quote from Robbe-Grillet, whose conscious, parodied intertext here is Marx, but whose unconscious intertext could be seen as Duras, 'La lutte des sexes est le moteur de l'histoire'.⁶⁵ The motor in Robbe-Grillet's literary history is a struggle, not with a literary father-figure but, vitally, with an ambivalent mother/sister. Duras

⁶⁴ 'Men's Reading, Women's Writing', p. 50.

⁶⁵ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Djinn* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1981), p. 19.

does not view herself as the offspring of a female literary tradition, as some feminist literary critics have tried to claim, and she grapples not with a powerful literary mother-figure, but with an oscillating father/brother. The basic psychic impetus within the intertextual relationship of Duras and Robbe-Grillet is of a battle between the sexes, or rather a battle between a strong female and a strong male writer, wrestling with each other to overcome their 'anxiety of influence', to deny their literary indebtedness, and to proclaim their own autonomous originality. In my appropriation of Bloom's psychoanalytic model, I shall, therefore, replace his Œdipal scenario with that of a 'sibling rivalry', thus maintaining adherence to the love-hate dynamics of Freud's family romance whilst introducing the crucial element of gender difference, fundamental to the nature of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's revisionary ratios.

This sibling rivalry narrative of psychodynamic relations also allows for another element central to the intertextual relationship between this pair of writers and which is precluded from both Bloom's and Miller's models, which is the fact that the two writers were contemporaries. Neither theoretical practice in its present form can take account of the two-way nature of the relationship between Duras and Robbe-Grillet. Whilst Miller signals the validity and importance of reading men and women writers together as a two-way process, in practice she emphasizes women writers' critique of texts of the dominant male tradition and so neglects to reread men's texts in the light of female counterparts. Bloom, on the other hand, denies the existence of a two-way struggle, on the assumption that precursors are always and necessarily *dead*. Neither model in isolation (at least in practice), accounts for the two-way, dynamic intertextual relationship which existed between Duras and Robbe-Grillet. Miller does not explore the possibility that, even if a male writer may explicitly 'resist the acknowledgment of female precursors', his writing may implicitly admit it, a possibility which is more in line with Bloom's belief that precursors may be close and strong even if unacknowledged.

Whilst Bloom's studies do not allow for the fact that poetic influence might exist between writers who are both living or who are of the opposite sex, these two

factors are central to the nature of the struggle between Duras and Robbe-Grillet. The sibling rivalry narrative of influence actually confirms and intensifies the patterns of psychodynamic conflict laid out in Bloom's theoretical model. For whilst the sentiments expressed, for instance, in the claim that, 'A poet [...] is not so much a man speaking to men as a man rebelling against being spoken to by a dead man (the precursor) outrageously more alive than himself' (*MM*, p. 19) are purely symbolic, they acquire a particular potency within Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's rivalry given the fact that each writer's literary sibling was physically and psychically alive. The fact that the two writers speak to each other not as a man to a man, but as a man to a woman and a woman to a man, adds the further psychic tension of gender difference to the struggle dynamics of Bloom's Freudian narrative of literary influence.

In this study, I aim to trace the development of the career-long sibling rivalry between Duras and Robbe-Grillet in a 'reading in pairs' of synchronic texts from the course of their writing careers which are illustrative of parallel revisionary shifts. These textually based paired readings will be conducted within the general psychological framework of the writers' misreadings of one other, as they struggle against the threat of influence in order to assert their own literary autonomy. The dual interpretative model employed, in which psychic context and textual practice are seen to be causally interrelated, offers an alternative to the existing critical tendency to study Duras within Lacanian and feminist discourses and Robbe-Grillet within the movements of phenomenology and structuralism. By reading together a man and a woman writer who have both been crucially influential in the development of new literary forms and new and parallel critical theories, I aim to explore the effects on each writer's literary practice of their often rivalrous psychic struggle with their literary sibling. By so doing, I also aim to re-examine some of the gender assumptions posited by existing, non-comparative approaches.

Right up until Duras's death in 1996, both she and Robbe-Grillet were prolific writers of novels and film-scripts, and gave countless television, radio and press interviews. Duras also wrote several plays and Robbe-Grillet produced theoretical essays. The choice of texts for examination within this study is, therefore, inevitably far from exhaustive. The pairs of texts which will be read together have been selected as being representative of the major trends in each writer's oeuvre and are not intended to be exclusively illustrative of the development of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's intertextual relationship. In the gaps between the works studied there remains ample material for further 'readings in pairs'.⁶⁶ The novels selected are paired chronologically in order to plot the development of mutually responsive, revisionary shifts between the two writers' parallel corpuses.

By focusing upon Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's treatment of common material and misreadings of each other's novels, I do not wish to claim that the intertextual relationship between these two writers was the sole, external influence upon the development of their literary careers. Evidence exists of mutual influence between Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute, for instance, or between Duras and Maurice Blanchot. This view is in keeping with Bloom who argues that the influence of a strong precursor is only one of the influences, and awareness of this influence only one of the anxieties, which come to bear on an ephebe's poetry. I hope to show, however, that the sibling rivalry between Duras and Robbe-Grillet forms a central dynamic within the development of both of their literary careers, the productive influence of which has not yet been studied.

The first chapter, therefore, offers an overview of the nature and development of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's literary rivalry, equating thematic, generic and stylistic

⁶⁶ The study focuses primarily upon novels by Duras and Robbe-Grillet, although both writers were also successful scriptwriters and film directors and, indeed, a 'reading in pairs' of their cinema careers would be an exciting future project. As with their novels, corresponding shifts can be plotted throughout the development of their respective film corpuses, from their almost simultaneous débuts with the scripts of *Hiroshima mon amour* (1960) and *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), both of which were commissioned by Alain Resnais, as previously mentioned on page 1.

shifts in their corpuses with Bloomian revisionary swerves in their career-long 'battle of the sexes'. It also examines the ambivalent and often self-contradictory pronouncements made by each writer regarding political and literary gender issues, and suggests connections between such comments and the writers' intertextual relationship. This overview provides the psychological context and broad framework for the 'readings in pairs' of subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 examines the textual repercussions of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's initial period of literary alliance in the late 1950s in a reading of *La Jalousie* (1957) and *Moderato cantabile* (1958). I examine their alliance within the broader literary context and plot the reflection on a textual level of the two writers' differing levels of engagement with the theoretical and literary aims of the Nouveau Roman. By the 1960s, the dynamics of their intertextual relationship had already changed, as psychoanalytic and feminist critical interest offered Duras a means of asserting her literary autonomy from Robbe-Grillet and the other Nouveaux Romanciers. Chapter 3 studies the effects of Duras's self-assertive denial of influence, first in Robbe-Grillet's misreading of his literary sibling's and feminism's focus on feminine desire, and secondly in Duras's subsequent misinterpretative appropriation of similar sado-erotic thematics. In this reading, I bring into question some of the gender related assumptions of critics of Duras and Robbe-Grillet in a 'reading in pairs' of *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* (1978) and *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* (1980). Chapter 4 examines Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's almost simultaneous and arguably surprising move towards autobiography in a reading of *L'Amant* (1984) with *Le Miroir qui revient* (1984). I explore how, in these texts, both writers respond in largely gender related ways to the personal and theoretical issues of visual and literary (auto)biographical representation, of the self and of the mother, raised in Roland Barthes's precursor text, *La Chambre claire* (1980). I discuss the uses which each writer makes of the genre and the complications which can arise from the strategies employed in conveying personally and morally problematic aspects of an individual author's life. The fifth and final chapter examines the impact on Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's work of the definitive reversal in their previously mobile

precursor-ephebe hierarchy occasioned by the phenomenal success of *L'Amant*. In a first 'reading in pairs' of *Écrire* (1993) and *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* (1994), I explore the two writers' very different portrayals of their respective positions within recent literary history. In a second 'reading in pairs', of *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* and *C'est tout* (1995), I then look at how Robbe-Grillet's and Duras's perception of their own relative literary status affects their depictions of the future, particularly in relation to death and immortality.

The rivalrous dynamics of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's intertextual relationship continued to develop during the process of researching and writing this study. I have, therefore, seen the mutually responsive unravelings of the later stages of this relationship, as each writer published new works or made references to the other in interviews, at conferences or, in Robbe-Grillet's case, in correspondence.⁶⁷ The major change in the dynamics of the two writers' literary relationship during this period was, of course, the death of Duras on 3rd March, 1996. The final section of Chapter 5, therefore, explores the implications of Duras's death for the nature of her and Robbe-Grillet's intertextual relationship, and also for the reader's respective response to their last works.

In all of this, I shall examine the extent to which the sibling rivalry between Duras and Robbe-Grillet had a productive impact on the development of both of their literary careers. For although other factors evidently came to bear on the direction which their respective works took, the positions which Duras and Robbe-Grillet occupied within the context of the feminist debate and the reversal in their perceived statuses which occurred in later stages of their careers contributed to the influential, sustained and combative nature of their particular intertextual relationship. As well as exploring how each writer's appropriative misreadings of the other's work may have led to shifts in their respective literary practices, a 'reading in pairs' of their novels will allow us more generally to examine the theoretical grounds on which Duras and

⁶⁷ Extracts from my (unpublished) correspondence with Robbe-Grillet are quoted in Chapter 1 and included in an Appendix.

Robbe-Grillet have been studied. By comparing a male and a female writer's treatment of similar thematic and generic material, I shall re-examine some of the apparent gender distinctions which underlie differences between critical approaches and findings. I hope that the reading method adopted will provide an appropriate and productive model, not only for the study of Duras and Robbe-Grillet, but also for the comparison of other pairs of male and female writers, so contributing to a more rounded, double-gendered picture of literary history.

Chapter 1

'La lutte des sexes est le moteur de l'histoire': Overview and Context

According to Bloom, the study of poetic influence entails not only tracing patterns of self-assertive struggle between a particular ephebe and his precursor, but also replacing that struggle within the general context in which it took place. He writes:

Poetic influence, or [...] poetic misprision, is necessarily the study of the life-cycle of the poet-as-poet. When such study considers the context in which that life-cycle is enacted, it will be compelled to examine simultaneously the relations between poets as cases akin to what Freud called the family romance, and as chapters in the history of modern revisionism.¹

As well as examining the impact of an ephebe's sublimation of his anxiety of influence upon his poetry, the study of intra-poetic relations should also take into account the effect of the individual poet's development on the broader development of poetic history, and vice versa.

This chapter is roughly divided into two, interrelated parts, the first plotting the progression of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's career-long intertextual sibling rivalry, and the second exploring the two writers' explicit responses to the context of critical debates on gender. In the first part, I shall examine the broad thematic, stylistic and generic shifts within Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's parallel careers and explore to what extent these correspond to the progression of Bloom's six revisionary ratios as well as how the particular circumstances of their sibling rivalry disrupt the stages of his theoretical model. I shall then study how shifts in the psychodynamics of their intertextual relationship are reflected in the two writers' explicit references to one

¹ *The Anxiety of Influence*, pp. 7-8.

another. In the second part, I shall examine Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's pronouncements, in interviews, about issues of gender, both socio-political and literary, contrasting those statements which appear to support the critical positioning of the two writers at opposite poles in the gender debate, with those which, on the contrary, betray a far more ambivalent picture of their respective levels of engagement. In this context, I shall examine the implications of each writer's appropriative and common adoption of terms and arguments from apparently opposing gender positions to their own, when discussing the portrayal of sexual relations in their fictional works. Finally, I shall explore possible links between the two parts of this chapter - intertextual and contextual - in terms of an interrelated 'lutte des sexes'.

Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's literary relationship began in the late 1950s when the latter, as 'conseiller littéraire' at the Éditions de Minuit strategically formed the Nouveau Roman group with other like-minded contemporary writers. Duras's earlier works - *Les Impudents* (1943), *La Vie tranquille* (1944), *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (1952), *Les Petits Chevaux de Tarquinia* (1953) and the collection of short stories, *Des journées entières dans les arbres* (1954) - had earned her a rather conventional reputation, with critics stressing her debt to American realist novelists. *Le Square* (1955) was widely viewed as marking a more experimental turn in Duras's writing practice and her use of minimalist, allusive dialogue is reminiscent of the 'sous-conversations' of the fellow Nouveau Romancier, Nathalie Sarraute. It was the publication of *Moderato cantabile* at Minuit in 1958, however, which confirmed Duras's reputation as a writer of the avant-garde. Both she and Robbe-Grillet have subsequently revealed the material role which the latter played in commissioning Duras's watershed novel,² a fact which greatly influenced the formation of their early intertextual relationship and the rivalrous nature of its later stages. Although Duras

² Duras's comments, published in *La Vie matérielle* (1993), and Robbe-Grillet's account in *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* (1994), are discussed later in this chapter.

was the older and more experienced writer, Robbe-Grillet's role as publishing advisor, organizer and theoretician earned him the title of 'chef d'école'. Hence Robbe-Grillet's status at this stage was largely that of precursor to Duras, whom he enrolled within his literary stable. Unlike Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute and Butor, Duras did not produce theoretical essays in support of her literary practice, but she did participate fully in the group's activities and promotional tours.

Importantly, Duras was recognized unequivocally as a Nouveau Romancier by Robbe-Grillet who, when referring in 1960 to critical studies of the Nouveau Roman, commented that, 'Marguerite Duras n'y est ajoutée que pour certains de ses livres, on ne sait trop pourquoi.'³ Robbe-Grillet's accounts - whether contemporary or retrospective - of the formation of the Nouveau Roman, stress not only the common theoretical underpinnings but also the mutual admiration and friendship which united the group. Thus, at the same conference in 1960, he asked:

Qu'est-ce, donc, que ce mouvement? Car il y a vraiment un mouvement; il se trouve que, malgré les différences qu'il peut y avoir entre nous, nous nous rencontrons, nous nous voyons souvent, ou pas très souvent, mais quand nous nous voyons, nous avons l'impression de parler un langage commun.⁴

and in 1996, he wrote:

J'ai beaucoup vu Marguerite Duras, en de multiples circonstances, en France et ailleurs, dans les années 50, 60, et même 70. [...] J'aurais, bien sûr, des tas de petites histoires à raconter sur nos rencontres et notre amitié de cette époque.⁵

The late 1950s and 1960s, therefore, represent a stage of alliance, mutual admiration and, indeed, friendship in Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's literary relationship. Such contextual dynamics of affiliation are reflected in the two writers' works of the period, as will be studied in Chapter 2, in a reading of *La Jalousie* (1957) and *Moderato*

³ Unpublished transcript of Robbe-Grillet's speech, given at a conference on the Nouveau Roman in Keele, on 8 February 1960.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Unpublished letter to Julia Waters, 30 December 1996.

cantabile. Thus, for instance, Robbe-Grillet's collection of short stories, *Instantanés* (1962), reflects in many ways, stylistically, generically and thematically, Duras's earlier collection, *Des journées entières dans les arbres* (1954). Similarly, Duras's *Dix heures et demie du soir en été* (1960) and *L'Après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas* (1962) can be seen as exemplifying the Nouveau Roman's stylistic practices of suggestion and ellipsis, the majority of the supposed 'action' taking place off-stage and construed by the reader via the allusive dialogue and minimal description. Indeed, the latter novel bears many striking resemblances to Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie*, in such aspects as the setting, which is limited to and focused upon the surroundings of a house; the central, male figure's suspicions and implicit construction of an unseen adultery; the recurrent references to the passing of time as reflected in the changes from light to dark and the shifting of shadows occasioned by the movement of the sun; and the construction of the central character's psychological state via his interpretations of visible elements around him.

The often rather paternalistic sentiments expressed by Robbe-Grillet in relation to his fellow Nouveaux Romanciers and his emphasis upon the affective as well as literary and theoretical ties between them provide the contextual psychodynamic basis for the further development of his particular intertextual relationship with Duras. Bloom argues that 'the dialectic of cosmic love and hate governs poetic incarnation'.⁶ Thus Duras's perceived desertion of the Nouveau Roman and appropriation by psychoanalytic and feminist critics during the late 1960s fulfil Bloom's assertion that 'initial love for the precursor's poetry is transformed rapidly enough into revisionary strife, without which individuation is not possible'.⁷

This initial move by Duras, away from her literary sibling and from the quasi-familial context of the Nouveau Roman group, represents the first of many 'revisionary swerves' in her and Robbe-Grillet's struggle for literary autonomy. It

⁶ *A Map of Misreading*, p. 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*

resembles the first of the six stages of misprision suggested by Bloom's model,⁸ that of *clinamen*. Bloom claims that in order to become strong in his own right, a poet must 'misread' his precursor. By swerving away from his influence in an act of misprision which entails a partial correction of the precursor's poem, the ephebe makes self-individuating change possible. In this first stage of revisionary strife, the ephebe, therefore, follows the precursor's example to a point and then performs a corrective swerve which is entirely his own.

Duras's affiliation with Lacanian and feminist literary movements was partly due to her willingness to have her work appropriated by critical discourses other than those which surrounded the Nouveau Roman and hence to assert her own literary originality. It was also due to her timely combination of an experimental writing style, largely developed during her period of alliance with Robbe-Grillet, and thematics of female desire. Her increased emphasis upon the feminine tropes of her fiction, which had previously remained unrecognized, and critics' interpretation of this practice as embodying the concept of 'écriture féminine' represented a corrective swerve away from her literary sibling. By appearing to desert the Nouveau Roman in this way, (a desertion made explicit in 1971 by Duras's refusal of an invitation to the Colloque de Cerisy on the Nouveau Roman) Duras disrupted the previous equilibrium of her intertextual relationship with Robbe-Grillet. The feminist emphasis of her move also determined the nature of his retaliatory, revisionary shift and the central dynamics of gender conflict which characterized much of the two writers' sibling rivalry.

In 1965, the year after the publication of *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, which provoked Lacan's and subsequent feminist critics' interest in Duras, Robbe-Grillet published *La Maison de rendez-vous*. In this work, he exploits the subversive

⁸ The six revisionary ratios which Bloom identifies are: *Clinamen* (or Poetic Misprision), *Tessera* (or Completion and Antithesis), *Kenosis* (or Repetition and Discontinuity), *Daemonization* (or the Counter-Sublime), and *Apophrades* (or the Return of the Dead). When citing Bloom, I mirror his male terms - 'he', 'his', etc. - to refer to the universal categories of 'poet', 'precursor' or 'ephebe'. As discussed, the male exclusivity of Bloom's model necessitates the adoption of different terminology and examples when referring directly to Duras and Robbe-Grillet.

potential of sado-erotic thematics, the solely implicit presence of which in *Le Voyeur* (1955) had already provoked much critical controversy. Robbe-Grillet's works of the 1970s - *Projet pour une révolution à New York* (1970), *Glissements progressifs du plaisir* (film and ciné-roman, 1974), *Topologie d'une cité fantôme* (1976) and *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* (1978) - are marked by scenes of sexualized violence against young, beautiful, helpless women by older male characters in positions of power. As if in response to the rise of political and literary feminism, Robbe-Grillet's male narrators suppress the subversive threat posed by desirous and desire-inciting female characters by means of drugs, torture and murder.

Robbe-Grillet's misprision of Duras's thematics of female desire here resembles the second of Bloom's 'revisionary ratios', that of *tessera*. At this stage, the poet 'completes' the precursor's poem in a different sense, which is his own. He retains elements of the original poem but regenerates them in an antithetical direction. By giving new meaning to the precursor's old terms, the ephebe implies that the precursor did not originally dare enough and had not exploited the full potential of his poetic material. Thus, in the case of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's intertextual relationship, Robbe-Grillet ironizes his sibling's use of the thematics of desire, defensively reasserting the traditional sexual hierarchies of male supremacy and female inferiority. He develops the transgressive literary potential of the thematics of erotic relations by flouting conventional taboos in depictions of the extreme limits of sexual behaviour - sado-masochism, prostitution, incest and bestiality.

The fact that Duras and Robbe-Grillet were both living and writing contemporaneously led to greater mobility within their intertextual relationship and the nature of their respective anxieties of influence than that offered by Bloom's model. Each writer responded to the other in 'revisionary shifts' which resemble, but do not rigorously match, the already loose progression between Bloom's six, uni-directional stages of misprision. Whereas in Bloom's theoretical narrative, the ephebe always necessarily responds to the influence of his dead precursor, in the sibling

rivalry of the pair of writers under discussion, each could alternately or simultaneously react and counter-react to the other.

Thus the *tessera* (completion and antithesis), which Robbe-Grillet's misprision of Duras's thematics of female desire represented, provoked Duras's own revisionary retaliation. Appropriatively misreading Robbe-Grillet's already antithetical misprision of her earlier work, Duras produced, during the 1980s, a series of explicitly sado-erotic texts - *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* (1980), *Agatha* (1981), *La Maladie de la mort* (1982) and *Les Yeux bleus cheveux noirs* (1986) - which in turn depicted extreme sado-masochistic, incestuous or quasi-paedophilic relations. In exploiting not only Robbe-Grillet's erotic thematics but also her own central position within feminist literary discourses, Duras could assert her creative independence from both her literary sibling and the critical classification of women's writing.

Duras's apparently retro-active response to Robbe-Grillet incorporates characteristics from two consecutive stages in Bloom's proposed series of revisionary ratios, *kenosis* and *daemonization*. *Kenosis*, according to Bloom, involves the ephebe's apparent self-humbling in relation to the precursor's poem and resembles repetition compulsion in psychic relations, provoked by the anxiety of a return of the repressed. In strong poets, however, the discontinuity which acknowledgement of a precursor's influence entails, is a liberating stage in the ephebe's struggle for creative space. By humbling himself via a reworking of the precursor's earlier poem, the ephebe also inevitably brings about the humbling of his precursor, with his later poem acting as a two-way deflation of originality. By misreading Robbe-Grillet's earlier erotic texts, Duras not only implicitly signalled his influence upon her creativity, but also undermined his claim to originality via her own subversive appropriation.

As indicated earlier, however, Duras's misreading of Robbe-Grillet's works of the 1970s involved not only the mutually humbling stage of *kenosis*, but also the closely-associated process of *daemonization*. Like *kenosis*, *daemonization* involves the ephebe's opening of himself to the influence of the past poem, but this opening is performed more in relation to the general context than exclusively in relation to the

precursor. The relation between the epebe's poem and that of his precursor thus generalizes away the uniqueness of the latter. By contextualizing her own sado-erotic works and those of her literary sibling within the broader gender debate, Duras was thus able to recast both, to her own creative advantage. However shockingly transgressive Robbe-Grillet's depictions of sexual relations may have been, the treatment of similar material by a woman writer - and, moreover, one who was generally perceived to occupy a crucial position within feminist debates - was inevitably even more subversive of traditional literary and gender expectations. For in this context, as Duras claimed, 'N'importe quelle femme est plus mystérieuse qu'un homme.'⁹

The dynamics of attack and counter-attack around the issues of gender and sexuality determined the nature of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's intertextual relationship throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, with their contemporaneity increasing the speed and mutuality of their responsive retaliations. In line with Bloom's belief that, in misreading each other, poets appropriatively retain certain elements whilst swerving away from others, Duras and Robbe-Grillet do not occupy fixed, opposing poles in their 'lutte des sexes'. In seeking to assert their individual creativity, both writers adopt ambivalent and shifting positions in their depictions of sexual relations, so confounding critical expectations and precluding simplistic, gender-based classification.

The antagonistic dynamics of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's intertextual relationship during this period are characteristic of the fifth stage in an epebe's struggle with his precursor, *askesis* or self-purgation, in order to achieve solipsism. Bloom argues that the sublimation of aggressive (and not, as in Freudian psychoanalysis, sexual) instincts is central to the workings of poetic misprision. Thus poetic history is marked by strong poets' appropriations and transformations of their precursors' works for their own uses. The resistance to the indebtedness which such

⁹ In a conversation with Xavière Gauthier, *Les Parleuses* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1974), p. 50.

appropriation entails leads to their successful sublimation of aggressiveness in their poetry. An ephebe can, therefore, only attain the egocentric illusion of self-engenderment by internalizing his aggression towards his precursor. Bloom distinguishes between the various stages in an ephebe's wrestling with his precursor for solipsistic creative space when he writes that whereas

... *clinamen* and *tessera* strive to correct or complete the dead, and *kenosis* and *daemonization* work to repress memory of the dead, [...] *askesis* is the contest proper, the match-to-the-death with the dead. (AI, p. 122)

Since both Duras and Robbe-Grillet were still writing during their 'match-to-the-death', their wrestling with their literary sibling was a two-way productive process which became increasingly combative as each sought to assert his or her literary supremacy.

Since, according to Bloom, an ephebe wrestles with his precursor in various revisionary stages in an attempt to achieve a solipsistic imaginative space, it is particularly appropriate that the final stages of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's literary struggle took place within the inherently narcissistic genre of autobiography. In 1984, Duras's *L'Amant* and Robbe-Grillet's *Le Miroir qui revient* were both published by Éditions de Minuit, marking their almost simultaneous move to autobiography. However consciously strategic their common shift may or may not have been,¹⁰ Duras and Robbe-Grillet were certainly similarly responding to critical contextual factors as well as more directly to each other. In adopting the autobiographical genre, Duras could exploit to her own ends feminist criticism's emphasis upon the author's identity and so personalize the thematics of feminine desire present in her earlier fiction. Robbe-Grillet's arguably more surprising move was largely prompted by a desire to

¹⁰ In *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe*, Robbe-Grillet claims that the adoption of the autobiographical genre by several former Nouveaux Romanciers was not accidental when he writes:

... ce n'est sans doute pas un hasard [...] si notre groupe semble avoir suivi au cours de ces quarante années des évolutions plus ou moins parallèles et se lance à présent, comme d'un commun accord, dans des entreprises voisines, bien que cette fois encore remarquablement distinctes, de subversion autobiographique. (p. 86)

retaliate against the creative limitations imposed by structuralist criticism's belief in 'the death of the author'. Thus both writers were responding, appropriatively or correctively, to the constraints of critical approaches to their work, in a way which allowed them to explore their solipsistic desire to establish their own creative autonomy. In moving to autobiography, Duras and Robbe-Grillet could also both explore within literary works the interest in the author's persona provoked by the development of the mass audio-visual media. During the 1970s, both writers had successfully exploited the medium of cinema, by writing, directing and even starring in many films.¹¹ Duras in particular attracted extensive media interest throughout her career, and both she and Robbe-Grillet gave numerous television, press and radio interviews, thus blurring the boundaries between writer and work.

L'Amant was a phenomenal national and international, critical and public success, earning Duras the Prix Goncourt and provoking intense and sustained media interest in her work and her persona. The immediate and unprecedented attention established Duras's celebrity status and brought about a definitive reversal in the precursor-ephebe hierarchy between her and Robbe-Grillet from that of their initial affiliation in the late 1950s. Whereas, in the interim, the dynamics of their sibling rivalry had been mobile and two-directional, 1984 represented Duras's apogee as a creative power in her own right, and from then on the two rivals' intertextual responses to each other were markedly different.

Duras's last works were consequently marked by a 'triumphant solipsism' (*MM*, p. 9), as a hermetic fictional universe was created, with Duras as the centre, in splendid isolation. Like *Œdipe*, the later Duras was figuratively blind to any precursors and denied their influence by portraying the writing process, in such works as *Écrire* (1993) and *C'est tout* (1995), as solitary, inspirational and introspective. This denial of influence contrasted dramatically with Duras's claim, a few years before

¹¹ Robbe-Grillet appeared as the fictional script-writer in *Trans-Europe Express* (1966). In *Le Camion* (1977), Duras played opposite Gérard Depardieu, reading the part of the central female character.

the publication of *L'Amant*, that 'on n'écrit jamais seul, mais ce n'est pas seulement qu'on n'écrit jamais seul, on écrit avec les gens qui nous ont précédés'.¹²

Bloom argues that in the last stage of a great poet's life-cycle as poet, *apophrades*, he self-assertively contextualizes and reduces his precursor's power. By subverting the (necessarily dead) precursor's immortality, the ephebe aims to prolong his own afterlife. In Bloom's model,

... the largest irony of the revisionary ratiion of *apophrades* is that the later poets, confronting the imminence of death, work to subvert the immortality of their precursors, as though any one poet's afterlife could be metaphorically prolonged at the expense of another's. (AI, p. 151)

In the sibling rivalry under discussion, however, Duras's rival was not dead and had not, therefore, attained the literary immortality against which Bloom's theoretical ephebe must struggle. According to Bloom,

When a poet beholds his end, [...] he searches for evidences of election that will fulfil his precursors' prophecies by fundamentally re-creating those prophecies in his own unmistakable idiom. (AI, p. 152)

In the later stages of her career, Duras found the evidence of her strength or 'election' not in relation to literary precursors at all, but in the phenomenal critical and public vindication of her work's popularity. With her place in the twentieth-century canon effectively assured, the anxiety which Duras expressed in her later works in the face of death was tempered by her solipsistic confidence in her own literary immortality.

The reversal in the precursor-ephebe hierarchy occasioned by Duras's success led to very different self-defensive and self-assertive strategies in Robbe-Grillet's work. During the period of mobile *askesis* of the 1970s and early 1980s, his response to the 'battle of the sexes' with his literary rival had taken the textual form of the violent suppression of female fictional characters. In *Angélique ou l'enchantement*

¹² In Suzanne Lamy & André Roy, *Marguerite Duras à Montréal* (Montreal: Éditions Spirale, 1981), p. 23.

(1987), however, Robbe-Grillet specifically attacks the feminist movement, dismissing their views on pornographic material with such retorts as:

Ne me dites pas que je livre ici un combat d'arrière-garde: le petit milieu new-yorkais, le petit milieu parisien, où le féminisme militant est certes passé de mode, ne sont pas le monde entier, croyez-moi. (p. 159)

Interestingly, Robbe-Grillet uses, as a key argument against anticipated accusations of misogyny in his writing practice, the fact that the Nouveau Roman group, which he had formed and headed, included the women members, Nathalie Sarraute and Marguerite Duras (pp. 160-161). The influence of his literary rival can be detected implicitly in Robbe-Grillet's appropriative reworking in his text of key motifs from *L'Amant*, such as detailed descriptions of the author's face at various ages, or an account of the writer's first, formative sexual experiences, both of which had proved so powerful in the precursor text.

In *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe*, the sibling rivalry between Duras and Robbe-Grillet and the latter's self-defensive assertions of his own literary strength eventually surface in hostile tirades against Duras's denial of his influence. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom writes that in the final stage of an ephebe's struggle with his precursor, *apophrades*,

... the poem is now *held* open to the precursor, where once it *was* open, and the uncanny effect is that the new poem's achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor's characteristic work. (p. 16)

Robbe-Grillet appears quite literally not only to have held his work open to his literary sibling but also to have helped write her characteristic earlier work, when he includes a long passage in which he claims that he commissioned Duras's *Moderato cantabile* and suggested considerable editorial changes to the original proposed manuscript (pp. 93-96).

So great was Robbe-Grillet's desire to deny the influence of his literary sibling upon his work and to regain his former position as her precursor, that the material of his last, quasi-autobiographical work was dominated by a retrospective recasting of the circumstances of their early alliance during a period when he was seen as her 'chef d'école'. Thus his self-assertive struggle for literary autonomy did not achieve Duras's level of blind solipsism and, reacting to this trait in her later work and comments in interviews, his *apophrades* appears to have been regressively tainted by the devices of the earlier revisionary stage of *daemonization*, when:

... the later poet opens himself to what he believes to be a power in the parent-poem. [...] He does this in his poem, by so stationing its relation to the parent-poem as to generalize away the uniqueness of the earlier work.

(AI, p. 15)

By revealing what he saw as his own role in the establishment of Duras's career, Robbe-Grillet sought both to refute her denial of his influence and to achieve vicarious self-promotion via association with her later success. Despite his *daemonizing* attempt to generalize away Duras's uniqueness by attacking her as an individual, Robbe-Grillet was simultaneously and paradoxically obliged to maintain her strength as a writer, by referring to his admiration for her work. In response to Duras's solipsistic denial of influence in the later stages of their sibling rivalry, Robbe-Grillet's own repressed anxiety of influence returned and his consequent constant references, whether hostile or complimentary, to Duras in his works, in interviews and at conferences, could be seen, as in Freudian repetition compulsions, to be the unsublimated workings of aggressive love-hate drives towards his literary sibling.

The parallel thematic, stylistic and generic shifts between Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's careers can thus be plotted in terms of a series of interwoven revisionary swerves in their psychodynamic intertextual rivalry. The major changes in the development of their literary relationship can also be detected in changes in the nature

of their references to one another made at different stages. The post-1984 reversal in precursor-ephebe status of the two writers, together with the increased interest of the mass media in the authors' personae, contributed to the particularly heated nature of their later comments, especially on Robbe-Grillet's part. The antagonism present in later exchanges was almost entirely absent from the two writers' scarce earlier references to each other which, in keeping with the dynamics of their literary relationship, generally expressed muted admiration and agreement. Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's more recent dialogue thus provides more interesting ground for the exploration of how changes in their retrospective recastings of their earlier literary relationship reflect shifts in their respective success during this later period. It is not possible or, for that matter, desirable to extract empirical facts from these often conflicting comments, but they are interesting in terms of their reflection of shifts in the underlying psychodynamics of 'anxiety of influence' motivating the two writers' accounts.

Given Duras's solipsistic denial of influence in the novels which were published after the dramatic reversal in status between her and Robbe-Grillet brought about by the success of *L'Amant*, it is revealing to compare comments which she made in reference to her literary sibling both before and after 1984. At a press conference in 1981, Duras used the following anecdote to illustrate her attitude towards the reception of her work:

Robbe-Grillet me disait ça un jour, il a dit: «Si toi et moi, on commence à se vendre à 500,000 exemplaires, ce ne sera plus la peine qu'on fasse des livres, c'est-à-dire: ce ne sera plus la peine de faire les livres qu'on fait.» C'est vrai.¹³

In 1991, however, she made strikingly different use of the same information, when she stated:

That reminds me of something Robbe-Grillet told me one day: 'When you and I are in the 500,000 copies range, that will mean that we have nothing

¹³ In *Marguerite Duras à Montréal*, p. 16.

else to say'. So I have nothing else to say, and he still has another book.¹⁴

Despite having rejected her affiliation with the Nouveau Roman in the early 1970s, at the time of the first quotation Duras still identified with the transgressive principles of its 'chef d'école'. In 1981 she still believed, like her literary sibling, that experimental writing would of necessity attract only a small, élite readership. Yet by the time of the second quotation, Duras's use of the same anecdote was quite different. She had gained international renown, celebrity status and establishment recognition with the conferment of the Prix Goncourt and now rejected her previous claims to marginality and elitism. The tone of playful superiority in Duras's assertion of her own strength also marked her implied rejection of Robbe-Grillet as ally and former precursor.

A similar shift can be detected in Duras's references to the role which Robbe-Grillet apparently played in her early career. In 1982, Duras revealed that Robbe-Grillet had indeed commissioned *Moderato cantabile*, and acknowledged the positive impact which he had upon the development of her writing practice, when she wrote:

Quand je travaillais trop mes textes je n'en disposais pas. C'est à partir de *Moderato cantabile*, commandé par Robbe-Grillet - vingt coups de téléphone en un an - que j'ai commencé à écrire n'importe quoi dans une direction donnée.¹⁵

In *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* (1994), however, Robbe-Grillet claims that Duras later reneged on this acknowledgment of his material influence, when he quotes her as saying that:

C'est à partir de *Moderato cantabile* que Robbe-Grillet a voulu me recruter. Quand il a vu que le livre défouçait les frontières, il a voulu en faire profiter le Nouveau Roman. (p. 94)

¹⁴ From an interview, published in English, with Alice A. Jardine & Anne M. Menke, 'Exploding the Issue: "French" "Women" "Writers" and "The Canon"', in Joan DeJean & Nancy K. Miller, *Displacements: Women, Tradition, Literatures in French* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 275-307.

¹⁵ First written in 1982, the essay from which this quotation comes, 'Flaubert, c'est...', is reproduced in *Le Monde extérieur* (Paris: P.O.L., 1993), p. 23.

If, as Robbe-Grillet maintains, Duras did make this statement in 1990, then the shift in her version of events, like that in her use of the earlier anecdote, coincided with the confirmation of her literary strength marked by the success of *L'Amant* in 1984. For whereas in the previous quotation Duras readily admitted Robbe-Grillet's encouragement and positive influence, here she has reversed the chronology, claiming that her success preceded his interest in her work. The sale of far more than 500,000 copies provided Duras with evidence of her own poetic strength and the means of sublimating her anxiety of belatedness.

Robbe-Grillet claimed that the original source of the second quotation above was an interview by Duras with *France Soir* in 1990. Yet no such interview appeared in this publication in that specified year, a fact which problematizes the status of Duras's apparent assertion and of Robbe-Grillet's appropriative use of it. Given the largely self-reflexive and solipsistic nature of Duras's later works, it is feasible that her denial of influence would take a more explicit form. On the other hand, Robbe-Grillet's anger at his former colleague's implicit refusal, through omission rather than overt denial, to acknowledge his role in her career did lead, at the very least, to inaccuracies in other references to Duras, which will be discussed later. Did Duras in fact make the above claim, but in another publication, and so refute her earlier revelation of Robbe-Grillet's material role in the publication of her novel? Or did Robbe-Grillet's indignation at Duras's more general rejection of his influence lead to his inaccurate or falsified portrayal of her? Whichever view one takes of Duras's alleged words, the fact that Robbe-Grillet should include this anecdote in his retrospective account of his own literary career is revelatory of the psychodynamics of conflict underlying his relationship with his literary sibling and of the importance which Robbe-Grillet placed upon this relationship.

As with the first and possibly the second of Duras's contrasting paired comments above, Robbe-Grillet's references to Duras also reflect the reversal in their relative fortunes. A progression is evident from his early, self-assured admiration for

her work to more recent, defensive rejoinders at her lack of generosity. In the 1960s, as was shown earlier, Robbe-Grillet wholeheartedly embraced Duras as a fellow Nouveau Romancier and stressed the links of friendship which united the group's members. In 1979, although Duras had officially broken allegiance with the group some eight years earlier, he still allied himself with her in likening his cinematographic practices with hers, when he remarked:

There are extraordinarily few directors who use a woman as a narrative center. Yes, there are in Marguerite Duras's films, of course, but [...] there are very few directors - and I am one of them - who choose to embody a film in a girl.¹⁶

By 1987, and so after the watershed 'année Duras', the seeds of Robbe-Grillet's later, more hostile backlash were sown when, in the following quotation, he positioned himself in relation to Duras in such a way as to stress his central, organizational role within the Nouveau Roman:

[...] lorsque j'ai voulu regrouper aux Éditions de Minuit, sous l'appellation vague mais qui a fait fortune de Nouveau Roman, les écrivains dont l'œuvre me paraissait la plus forte et la plus novatrice en ce milieu de siècle, j'ai aussitôt inscrit en tête de liste [...] les noms de Sarraute et Duras, aux côtés de Pinget et Simon. Peu de mouvements littéraires doivent, jusqu'à ce jour, se vanter d'une telle égalité intersexuelle.¹⁷

The context of Robbe-Grillet's inclusion of this anecdote is a lengthy defence of his work against accusations of misogyny. Yet the 'intersexual' equality of which he boasts here refers to the ratio of female to male writers within the Nouveau Roman movement, and not to the content of his novels, which were the object of criticism. His account stresses his patronage of the other writers, including Duras, rather than the intertextual influence which they may have had on the development of his career.

¹⁶ From an interview with Germaine Brée, published in English, 'What Interests Me Is Eroticism', in George Stambolian & Elaine Marks (eds.), *Homosexualities and French Literature: Cultural Contexts/Critical Texts* (Ithaca & London, Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 94.

¹⁷ *Angélique ou l'enchantement* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1987), pp. 160-161.

Following years of Duras's ubiquitous presence in the media and at the top of best-seller lists, and allegedly directly prompted by her explicit denial of his role in her career, Robbe-Grillet's antagonism towards his literary sibling eventually surfaced in the third of his quasi-autobiographical 'Romanesques', *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* (1994). Within the context of a retrospective account of his early literary career, Robbe-Grillet used the above quotation, which he claims to be from *France Soir*, to launch a counter-attack against his ungrateful former epebe. Robbe-Grillet's lengthy and often personally hostile tirade against Duras's 'mesquinerie' will be examined in more detail in Chapter 5 in relation to the contrasting account of literary history given by Duras. It is worth noting here, however, the intensely subjective and unreliable nature of both writers' views of events, largely determined by differences between their respective self-assertive motivations. In order to refute Duras's assertion, allegedly made in a wrongly-attributed and, therefore, potentially even non-existent interview, that 'C'est à partir de *Moderato cantabile* que Robbe-Grillet a voulu [la] recruter', Robbe-Grillet claims to provide 'des preuves matérielles - historiques [...] - qui tempèrent sérieusement [sa] version des faits' (p. 94). According to Robbe-Grillet, Duras published a récit in the review *Lettres nouvelles* which, as a result of his encouragement and editorial suggestions, developed into the beginning of *Moderato cantabile*, which was then published by Minuit. Although Robbe-Grillet's claim that he commissioned Duras's novel coincides with her earlier account of events, no such short story was in fact published in this periodical. In response to an enquiry, Robbe-Grillet confessed: 'J'ai raconté mon souvenir sans en vérifier l'exactitude. C'était en quelque sorte un principe d'écriture pour ces *Romanesques*'.¹⁸ So intent was he upon putting the record straight and asserting his claim to influence over his literary rival that he did not verify the 'material' and 'historic' facts of his account.

¹⁸ Unpublished letter to Julia Waters, 25 May 1995.

Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe is marked by Robbe-Grillet's anxious awareness of the success of Duras and other former Nouveaux Romanciers and by his desire to establish what he sees as his own rightful place in the canon. Whilst seeking to undermine her claims to uniqueness by highlighting the part he played in her early career, Robbe-Grillet was at the same time keen vicariously to ally himself with her later success. Thus his criticisms of Duras, both in *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* and in extra-literary comments, typically target her persona and not her work. This tendency is evident in the following extract from a letter, in which Robbe-Grillet wrote of Duras:

... pour la période plus récente [...] elle devenait de plus en plus difficile, et pour tout dire insupportable, souffrant d'une hypertrophie de l'ego qui lui faisait perdre tout humour, alors qu'elle en avait tant autrefois. Son écriture, en revanche, avait conservé toute sa force.¹⁹

The above explicit comments made by Duras and Robbe-Grillet at different stages in their careers reflect the major shift in the hierarchy of their intertextual rivalry, prompted by Duras's meteoric rise to international fame in 1984. Whereas Duras's references to Robbe-Grillet after this date mirror her solipsistic emphasis in her later works upon the solitary nature of her writing practice, Robbe-Grillet's references to Duras, both in interviews and in his literary texts themselves, reveal an aggressive anxiety towards his rival on account of her recognized strength. As has been shown, the initial trigger for the gendered and combative nature of their intertextual relationship was Duras's rejection of the Nouveau Roman in favour of adoption by psychoanalytic and especially feminist theories. This perceived desertion prompted Robbe-Grillet to misread the female bias of Duras's portrayals of sexual desire, and to produce works in which the traditional gender positions are reinforced by male, sexualized violence. Thus the dynamics of a 'lutte des sexes' were central throughout to Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's literary sibling rivalry. As illustrated,

¹⁹ Unpublished letter to Julia Waters, 30 December 1996.

however, by Duras's later revisionary swerve away from feminism via her appropriative misprisions of Robbe-Grillet's sado-erotic thematics, the two rivals did not occupy opposite poles of man versus woman in this battle. Although the issue of gender was crucial to the two writers' struggle for individual creative space, their relative positions were far more mobile than in a simplistic, oppositional model, and reflect the conflicting drives of similarity and difference, love and hate of their sibling rivalry.

Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's respective representations of the writing process appear to support the more essentialist feminist theoretical positions that men and women have biologically determined and different relationships with language. In *Les Parleuses* (1974), Duras identifies the essential difference between a man and a woman as being the latter's ability to give birth - 'le dernier truc qu'elle a et que les hommes n'ont pas, c'est ça, c'est la maternité, c'est irréductible' (p. 154). In *Écrire* (1993), Duras makes an explicit link between motherhood and her own writing experience, as when she writes:

C'est le livre qui avance, qui grandit, qui avance dans les directions qu'on croyait avoir explorées, qui avance vers sa propre destinée et celle de son auteur, alors anéanti par sa publication: sa séparation d'avec lui, le livre rêvé, comme l'enfant dernier-né, toujours le plus aimé. (p. 218)

Duras here portrays writing as a natural, bodily and uncontrollable process. This view is consonant with her earlier likening of herself to an echo-chamber,²⁰ a womb-like receptacle in which preverbal and unconscious elements and influences gestate, eventually to create a textual being independent of the maternal author. Elsewhere in *Écrire* Duras again describes her writing practice as a powerful, natural and life-bringing force, when she writes that, 'l'écrit ça arrive comme le vent, c'est nu, c'est de l'encre, c'est l'écrit, et ça passe comme rien d'autre ne passe dans la vie, rien de plus,

²⁰ *Les Parleuses*, p. 218.

sauf elle, la vie' (p. 65). The disruptive, orderless and spontaneous nature of language which she describes is mirrored in the syntactically disjointed and incantatory style of the writing itself.

The inherently inspirational fluidity of this image of literary creativity is, in Duras's view, necessarily incompatible with any fixed theoretical literary beliefs and thus she states: 'J'ai pas de théorie du roman. Ça me fait rigoler, rien que l'idée'.²¹ Duras equates theory with a typically male form of mental process and maintains that in order to free himself of socially imposed constraints and unleash his creativity, 'l'homme doit cesser d'être un imbécile théorique.'²²

As if conforming to Duras's proclaimed gender distinction, Robbe-Grillet has throughout his career produced theoretical essays in support of his fictional practices. Indeed, extensive self-commentating passages are included in the *Romanesques* trilogy, thus combining literature and theory within the same work. In contrast to Duras's portrayal of the writing experience as one of easy, unmediated flow, Robbe-Grillet describes his relation to writing in more systematic, methodical terms when he says: 'je travaille régulièrement; lentement et régulièrement. Tous les jours. Je travaille, lentement, difficilement et beaucoup.'²³ Whilst he seeks to disrupt the formal conventions of the traditional novel, Robbe-Grillet nonetheless has claimed to possess a profound respect for the rules of French grammar and regularly consults a dictionary and guides for correct linguistic usage when writing.²⁴

Duras's portrayal of her writing experience as instinctual and bodily, and Robbe-Grillet's as intellectual, theoretically driven and systematic contributed to critics' identifying the writers' respective practices with opposing gender positions. Thus Hélène Cixous and others proclaimed that Duras's use of language embodied the concept of 'écriture féminine', the inscription of a woman's body in a style of writing

²¹ *Les Parleuses*, p. 87.

²² Suzanne Horer & Jeanne Soquet, *La Création étouffée* (Paris: Pierre Horay, 1973). Quoted in the 'Notes en Marge' of *Les Parleuses*, p. 225.

²³ In an interview with Jean-Jacques Brochier in *Alain Robbe-Grillet: Qui suis-je?* (Lyon: La Manufacture, 1985), p. 123.

²⁴ Comment made during questions at the conference, *Texte(s) et Intertexte(s)*, at the Institut Français in London on 21 May 1994.

which undermines phallogentric language. When referring to what she saw as the feminine character of Duras's writing, Xavière Gauthier wrote that, 'je suis persuadée que ça ne peut être qu'une femme et vraiment une femme'.²⁵ According to the theories of such 'biological' or 'French' feminists, Robbe-Grillet's systematic and grammatical writing method embodies the phallogentric linguistic order which feminine writing disrupts. Susan Suleiman saw Robbe-Grillet's depictions of sexual relations in one of his novels as evidence of its being 'definitely a man's book'.²⁶ Similarly, Germaine Brée chose to discuss Robbe-Grillet's portrayal of sexual relations with him precisely because 'certain of [his] women readers say that [his] fantasies are one hundred percent masculine'.²⁷ Thus, as political and literary feminist movements gained momentum throughout the 1970s and beyond, Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's perceived positions at opposite poles in the gender debate led to many interviews with each of them which focused upon the sexual politics of their writing. Comparative examination of their respective statements during various of these interviews, in which both were willing if not active participants, reveals a rather more ambivalent picture of their engagement within the 'lutte des sexes' than the gender determined opposition suggested by the above critics.

An important text in establishing Duras's centrality within feminist literary criticism was *Les Parleuses*, a series of conversations with Xavière Gauthier, published in 1974, focusing upon what Gauthier identifies as the essentially feminine nature of Duras's writing. As can be seen from the following interchange, however, Duras's engagement with such a view of her work is rather more ambivalent than that of the explicitly feminist critic:

X.G. Je me demandais si ça, ce ne serait pas quelque chose de femme, vraiment de femme, blanc. S'il y a, par exemple, une chaîne grammaticale, s'il y a un blanc dedans, est-ce que ce ne serait pas là que serait la femme?
M.D. Qui sait? (p. 12)

²⁵ *Les Parleuses*, p. 18.

²⁶ 'Reading Robbe-Grillet: Sadism and Text in *Projet pour une révolution à New York*', *The Romanic Review*, vol. 68, no. 1 (January 1977), p. 57.

²⁷ 'What Interests Me Is Eroticism', p. 93.

Whilst Duras did not wholeheartedly espouse Gauthier's belief in a link between a woman's biology and a specifically feminine form of writing, she did display a willingness to have her work appropriated by such theories and, indeed, provided many statements in *Les Parleuses* which would support the view that she was a consciously feminine writer.

Thus Duras appears to ally herself with political feminism when she states, 'Je ne vois rien dans l'histoire ... qui soit allé aussi vite que le mouvement des femmes' (p. 29). Heralding the revolutionary power of women's disruption of the traditional order, she distinguishes this potential from men's failure to accommodate change when she claims that, 'C'est vertigineux à quel point l'homme est aliéné' (p. 32). The polarized opposition which she establishes here between men and women in the political sphere is supported by her asserted belief in the existence of a parallel, female literary tradition. Describing the pleasure which she felt at the success of a play by Nathalie Sarraute as being based on their common womanhood, Duras then claims that as women, 'Nous ne sommes pas dans la concurrence, puisque nous sommes dans l'opposition' (p. 34).²⁸ Duras makes a direct parallel between her general observation that, 'Quand on fait un livre de femme, [...] on lit très bien ce qu'elle se croit obligée de dire, étant femme' (p. 37) and her own experience, when she says, 'quand je parle de moi, je parle d'une femme' (p. 51).

The ambivalence evident in Duras's response to Gauthier's proposition that there exists a specifically feminine form of writing, led on other occasions to the expression of beliefs which not only contradicted her earlier views but were even wholly anti-feminist in tone. In a series of press conferences published in *Marguerite Duras à Montréal*, Duras asserts that, 'Je ne crois pas qu'il y ait une littérature de femme. Il y a des femmes' (pp. 50-51), so undermining her earlier expressed belief in a female literary tradition of opposition. Indeed, when referring to those past writers

²⁸ As will be examined in the following chapter, Sarraute herself consistently refused to ally herself with feminist literary theories, and opposed the view that gender-related differences might exist between individuals' writing practices.

who have had a positive influence on the development of her own career, the figures she lists are all male:

Moi, j'écris avec Diderot, j'en suis sûre, avec Pascal, avec les grands hommes de ma vie, avec Kierkegaard, avec Rousseau, j'en suis sûre, avec Stendhal, pas avec Balzac, avec les autres, mais totalement à mon insu, c'est ma première nourriture que je lis avec avidité. (p. 23)

Reneging likewise on her earlier assertion of the efficacy, rapidity and power of feminist politics, Duras states: 'On me demande si la proposition féministe est pourrie? Je dis oui. [...] Parce que toute proposition militante est forcément infirme' (p. 33). Although Duras had never claimed to be an explicitly feminist writer and had not espoused consistently feminist views, she had nonetheless previously been willing to be *seen* as a feminist writer, in order opportunistically to benefit from the attention of this resurgent and influential movement and so to assert her independence from the Nouveau Roman. By 1981, however, she was confident of her autonomous popularity - 'Je suis devenue à la mode' (p. 31) - and thus sought, in turn, to avoid classification as a woman writer. Instead, Duras wished to affirm her creative individuality and thus stressed her solipsistic idiosyncrasy in such statements as, '... je parlais de moi, je parle toujours de moi, vous savez. Je ne me mêlerais pas de parler des autres. Je parle de ce que je connais' (p. 36).

Whether in the political or the literary sphere, a woman's power lies, according to Duras, in her individuality and her subsequent ability to disrupt the traditional ideology or narrative order. Thus, in typically solipsistic fashion, Duras distinguished between herself and the feminist movement to her own advantage when she stated:

Je crois qu'en évitant le militantisme, les femmes auraient évolué de la même façon. On voit ces choses-là à partir de soi. Je n'ai milité dans aucun mouvement de femme - l'idée me fait encore fuir - et j'ai changé tout comme elles, peut-être plus, pour toujours.²⁹

²⁹ 'Marguerite Duras: Les Yeux Verts', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 312-313 (June 1980), p. 88. Contrary to her assertion, Duras was active in, for example, the feminist events of May 1968 and the campaign for the legalization of abortion.

Overturning her earlier apparent espousal of a tradition of women's writing, Duras here claimed that her own power in effecting positive change was due to her writing as a successful female individual.

Duras did not see her fictional female characters as embodying political feminist roles, but rather as symbolic or mythical figures of disruption. Such a figurative status was already implicit in certain of Duras's pronouncements in *Les Parleuses*. For instance, discussing Michelet's *La Sorcière* (pp. 163-164), Duras argued that witches were burnt at the stake because their link, via the lunar cycles of menstruation, with powerful natural forces was perceived as mad and therefore disruptive of rational male order. Elsewhere, Duras equates women with other symbolically subversive figures such as Jews, the insane or, as in the following quotation, children:

... l'inertie, le refus, le refus passif, le refus de répondre en somme, est une force colossale, c'est la force de l'enfant par exemple, c'est la force de la femme. (pp. 109-110)

For Duras, women represented less a force for political or social change than a trope of transgression and thus she saw herself not as a woman writer within a female literary tradition but as an individual who, by exploiting her status as a woman, could disrupt traditional orders, male and female.

As a male writer and exponent of structuralist theories which preclude the discussion of authorial biography from the study of fictional works, Robbe-Grillet obviously occupied a very different position within literary discourses on gender from that of Duras. Whereas the thematics of sexual relations and feminine desire, however politically ambivalent, form a central dynamic in Duras's fiction, Robbe-Grillet's literary preoccupations, from the creation of the Nouveau Roman onwards, focused on formal innovation and the questioning of novelistic, rather than gender,

conventions. Yet his sado-erotic misreadings of portrayals of female desire, and his perceived role as outsider or even opponent to the feminist literary debate led to his being interviewed on several occasions about the thematics of sexual relations in his fiction. Just as the examination of Duras's various pronouncements reveals an inherent ambivalence in her relationship to the theoretical and political underpinnings of feminism, shifts in Robbe-Grillet's argumentation reveal his appropriative adoption of certain loosely feminist concepts in defence of the transgressive nature of his thematic and formal writing practices.

In 'Le Sadisme contre la peur' (1970),³⁰ Robbe-Grillet defends his portrayal of sadistic violence against female characters in terms of the cathartic value of representing suppressed male fantasies, arguing that,

... ce n'est pas parce que mes terroristes imaginaires décident de torturer à mort un certain nombre de petites filles que mes lecteurs sont appelés à mettre ce projet à exécution. La lecture est une «*catharsis*», le spectacle une purgation. (p. 48)

Elsewhere in the same interview, however, he appears to deny that his works enact the sadistic fantasies of male readers, claiming contradictorily that these representations exorcise society's fears of rape and violence. That is, by reading Robbe-Grillet's novels, the reader does not symbolically purge the wish to violate others but confronts and overcomes his anxiety of *being* violated: 'Or la meilleur façon de dominer [cette angoisse], c'est de la traiter par l'écriture, de lui appliquer un traitement qui va créer une distance entre ces images et moi' (p. 49). Yet the torture, rape and murder portrayed in the discussed *Projet pour une révolution à New York* are performed against *female* victims and thus it is not the (male) reader's or author's anxiety of violence which is dominated, but the threat posed to him by the women characters themselves. In either defensive argument - that of catharsis of male fantasies or that

³⁰ Interview with G. Demur, *Le Nouvel Observateur* (19 October, 1970), pp. 47-49.

of exorcism of male fears - the woman character is seen as a 'femme-objet' (p. 48) who is kept in a position of stereotypical passivity by male, sexualized violence.

In 'La Cover-girl du diable' (1974),³¹ on the other hand, Robbe-Grillet appropriatively uses feminist as well as structuralist arguments in order to defend his portrayal of the torture of women as liberating and transgressive. He argues that the female characters in his film *Glissements progressifs du plaisir* (1974) are not passive victims but the focal centre of the work, and that they embody a disruptive and revolutionary force, 'vibrant de la vie, de la liberté, de la révolution, du plaisir sensuel'. Using the same example as Duras in *Les Parleuses*, Robbe-Grillet likens his heroine, Alice, to Michelet's eponymous *Sorcière* since both are accused of a crime against the social order on account of their subversive and natural power. Robbe-Grillet combines an apparently loosely feminist argument with a structuralist approach, equating social ideology with narrative order, when he states that:

... si [Alice] détraque ainsi toute l'enquête policière, dont elle refuse les normes - la logique causale, l'ordre chronologique, le principe de non contradiction - elle pervertit en même temps un autre code: le système narratif au pouvoir, qui repose sur les mêmes règles, et qui n'est pas «naturel» non plus, comme on voudrait nous le faire croire.

Yet in a third, purely structuralist defence of his film, Robbe-Grillet argues that his female characters should be seen not as fictional representations of real women, but as figurative textual signifieds:

Les corps nus des filles prennent une valeur très différente [...] les belles captives livrées aux supplices dans des caves médiévales ne représentent [pas] mon propre discours: ce ne sont ici que des signifiés placés en position régressive de notre société, et déplacés hors de leur fonctionnement normal.

Here, it is not the female characters themselves who are disruptive of social or narrative ideology. Instead, since they are portrayed as textual rather than

³¹ Interview with M. Grisolia, *Le Nouvel Observateur* (18 February, 1974), pp. 54-55.

representative figures, then it is the suppression and torture of them which are portrayed as transgressive. This third, rigorously structuralist argument clearly contradicts the initial feminist approach and the second combination of feminist and formal concepts. For if the fictional woman is disruptive of male order and this order - socio-political or novelistic - is portrayed as false, then violence against her cannot be liberating but is instead a means of reinstating the structures of a false male ideological order.

Whereas, in the above quotation, Robbe-Grillet equates female characters with thematic *signifieds*, in order to defend the depiction of their torture in terms of his disruption of formal signifiers, in 'What Interests Me Is Eroticism' (1979), he equates his erotic motifs with *signifiers*. Thus he argues that it is the motifs themselves that disrupt and recast socially created sexual stereotypes, including that of the woman as object. He rejects the third form of argumentation employed in his earlier interview, in favour of a defence of *Les Glissements progressifs du plaisir* on largely feminist terms. Indeed, he is keen to deny accusations of misogyny, exclaiming, 'How can anyone say that this film portrays a phallogentric imagination! That seems *aberrant* to me' (p. 95). Robbe-Grillet stresses the feminist angle of his initial argument in 'La Cover-girl du diable' and, using the same illustrative example as in the earlier interview, he argues that:

... the film is an acknowledged adaptation of Michelet's *La Sorcière*, that is, of a book written by a man but which is anything but phallogentric, since for Michelet, *La Sorcière* was precisely the revolutionary principle, the principle of liberty in the midst of the ordered world represented by men. And that, in the most general fashion is how I see my novels as a whole, and my films as a whole. (p. 94)

Robbe-Grillet here glosses over the ultimate suppression of his female characters by their male torturers. Instead, he stresses the disruptive power of his heroines over the social and narrative male order, when he describes his works as follows:

Each narrative has an ordering principle and subversive elements. The ordering principle is always the voice of a white male narrator. The subversive principles are, to the contrary, always colored people, children, and women. (Ibid.)

Robbe-Grillet's words echo those of Duras when she said that, 'ils sont fous, les enfants et les femmes',³² and reflect her apparent belief in women's embodiment of transgressive power.

In the first half of his interview with Germaine Brée, therefore, Robbe-Grillet is keen to suggest that his portrayal of sexual relations is, if not entirely feminist, then certainly anti-sexist in its destruction of traditional gender positions and social and literary conventions. Later in the same interview, however, Robbe-Grillet distinguishes between the liberating potential of his own disruption of the traditional erotic economy and what he sees as the censorial and restrictive aims of radical feminism. In words which foreshadow Duras's dismissal of the political feminist movement, he argues that:

You've got to understand that the militant category is already falsified by its militancy. [...] There is in the whole feminist movement something unspeakably absurd because, as normal as it is to demand equality between the sexes in - how shall I say? - real life, [...] when, on the other hand, you're dealing with relations between individuals, it is absolutely necessary to demand a freedom which includes even slavery if that's what someone enjoys [...] from the moment that imagination takes command, that is, in the life of the couple, equality is nonsense! (pp. 96-97)

Like Duras, Robbe-Grillet believes that gender classifications, whether social, biological or literary, restrict the individual's creativity and sexual freedom. Thus he defends the right of a male writer to portray sado-erotic sexual relations on the (appropriately feminist) grounds that women should not be forbidden to express their masochistic fantasies. Whereas, earlier in the same interview, Robbe-Grillet upheld the feminist potential of his work, stressing the centrality of subversive female

³² *Les Parleuses*, p. 50.

characters, he appears later to contradict this view when he states that in his books, 'there are a series of themes, for example, the theme of masculine sadism. It's a *major* theme, and very, very prominent' (p. 99). He maintains the subversive power of his writing, however, by arguing that the free expression of sexual fantasies - even of male sadism - is more liberating for women than puritanical feminist censorship of erotic literature. He argues that feminist rules and restrictions, as well as theories of a different, feminine form of language, 'would be just the opposite of liberty' (p. 100). Although aware of possible criticism of his views on the grounds that, as a man, he speaks from a privileged position of power, Robbe-Grillet ultimately betrays his underlying attitude towards the feminist arguments which he previously appeared to espouse when he says: 'I can't take it upon myself to meet demands which aim to destroy me' (p. 100).

As has been shown, many critics have regarded Duras and Robbe-Grillet as occupying opposite poles in the feminist debate, with the former's texts embodying the concept of '*écriture féminine*' and the latter's portrayal of sexual relations being one hundred percent masculine. Many of the two writers' own pronouncements on gender issues would appear to support such a divisive view. Yet their use on other occasions of strikingly similar terms and images, when discussing literary or political feminism and the role of female characters in their works, preclude such clear-cut gender distinctions. Whilst certain of Duras's comments suggest a polarized view of the sexes in which men are bad and women are good, others are explicitly anti-feminist, criticising the aim of the feminist movement as '*pourrie*'. Robbe-Grillet uses a similar argument against the rigidity of political feminism, but elsewhere argues that his portrayal of sexual relations is liberating in feminist terms. Underlying the two writers' contradictory responses to feminist issues is a common desire to resist classification, but whereas both writers regard this classification as a threat to their creative freedom as individuals, Robbe-Grillet also implicitly perceives feminism as a threat to his position as a *male* writer.

Both Duras and Robbe-Grillet use the example of Michelet's witch as illustrative of women's affinity with natural forces and ability to disrupt the imposed and artificial male order. To a greater or lesser extent, both writers associate social order with the narrative order of the traditional novel, and portray their fictional female characters as challenging and destroying both. Yet as their likening of women to other groups, marginal to the white, male order - the insane, children, ethnic minorities - suggests, neither writer's conception is essentialist or overtly linked to real women. Both writers explicitly espouse a view of women as figures of disruption. Thus Robbe-Grillet depicts women as textual tropes, variously signifieds or signifiers, which either directly or indirectly disturb novelistic conventions, and Duras sees women as representing quasi-mythical symbols of transgression, rather than embodying social or biological feminist ideals. Both writers thus portray their novelistic experimentation in similar terms, as a means of opposing orderly (male) with subversive (female) elements. Just as Duras states that, 'le roman est une revanche de l'ordre contre le désordre,'³³ Robbe-Grillet claims that the novel represents, 'le champ le plus propice pour mettre en scène dans son déséquilibre permanent cette lutte à mort de l'ordre et de la liberté, ce conflit insoluble du classement rationnel et de la subversion, autrement nommé désordre.'³⁴

In Duras's texts, the subversive potential of female figures is thus often expressed in traditionally non-feminist ways. A woman's role in sexual relations is portrayed as being that of a catalyst, her power lying in her passivity and inherently masochistic drives. In Robbe-Grillet's works, women may indeed disrupt male order, but they are ultimately put back in their place by means of male violence. By portraying women as a trope of disruption, Robbe-Grillet exploits the theoretical potential of questioning dominant ideology and narrative conventions, whilst he maintains his traditional position of male privilege by depicting the suppression of female characters. His texts may enact the disruption of traditional gender hierarchies,

³³ 'Non je ne suis pas la femme *Hiroshima*', *Les Nouvelles littéraires* (18 June 1959), p. 4.

³⁴ *Le Miroir qui revient* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1984), p. 133.

just as his metacritical rhetoric may deploy the tools of feminist literary discourse, but ultimately the male order is re-established. Duras's portrayal of women as mythical symbols of disruption, rather than as possible feminist role models, allows her to occupy a key position within the feminist debate whilst also disrupting feminist readers' expectations by exploring issues of female masochism and sexual violence. Thus, although Duras's texts do question traditional male and female sexual roles, neither is ultimately reinstated. Male order is subverted by female characters' paradoxical passive power, but the possibility of an alternative female order is also denied. Instead, many of Duras's works explore the extreme limits of erotic relations between a series of archetypically gendered individuals. Similarly, when Duras refers to herself as a woman writer, it is as a female individual rather than as representative of women as a literary, political or biological category.

In both Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's novels and references to their writing practices, the figurative trope of the woman is exploited in a particular, appropriative way, in order to allow the writer the freedom to transgress the conventions of traditional literature and achieve greater creative individuality. Gender was, therefore, central to the development of each writer's writing practice and to the nature of their intertextual relationship. As has been shown, the two writers frequently adopted the same images and terms when referring to both broad and specific gender issues, and thus betrayed the impact which the feminist debate had on the development of their literary careers. Yet, contrary to the views of many feminist critics, Duras and Robbe-Grillet were not at opposite poles in the 'battle of the sexes', since neither was primarily motivated by political issues or fixed, gender-related positions. Instead, the inconsistencies in both writers' comments can be seen, like the parallel shifts in their literary corpuses, to reflect their self-assertive responses both to the broad context of the feminist movement and to each other as individuals of the opposite sex. Each writer appropriatively misread elements from the other's work and from both sides of the feminist debate in order to evade restrictive classification and assert their own literary uniqueness. The 'lutte des sexes' between Duras and Robbe-Grillet, whether

waged in their intertextual misprisions of each other's work or in their combative statements on literary and political gender issues, thus reflected the shifting dynamics of both love and hate, similarity and difference, inherent in their particular sibling rivalry.

Chapter 2

Intertextual Alliance: *La Jalousie* and *Moderato cantabile*

By reading Duras's literary career alongside that of Robbe-Grillet, their intertextual relationship can be traced back to when Robbe-Grillet commissioned *Moderato cantabile* for the Éditions de Minuit in 1958. As has already been shown, its publication marked Duras's symbolic entry into the Nouveau Roman group and the beginning of a brief period of harmonious affiliation with Robbe-Grillet, in his role as the group's widely recognized leader. The general perception of the writers as belonging to the two discrete theoretical movements of feminism and structuralism post-dates this initial alliance, as does the antagonistic nature of their later intertextual 'lutte des sexes'. This stage of retrospectively uncharacteristic mutual admiration, common aims and quasi-familial group dynamics, in which Robbe-Grillet, by virtue of his status as 'chef d'école' and 'conseiller littéraire', largely occupied the position of precursor to Duras, will be the object of study of the present chapter.

The chapter is divided into two parts, the first contextual and the second textual, with causal links being made between the two. In the first part, I shall examine the literary environment of the 1950s, discussing the options which were open at the time to a consciously avant-garde and/or a woman writer. By highlighting Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's early critical reception, I shall suggest the possible individual and common motivations which made their particular association, and the more general creation of the Nouveau Roman, desirable. Since critics have frequently retrospectively excluded Duras from classifications of this literary movement, I shall then examine the role which she played, and the status she was perceived at the time as having, in the group. In this, I shall focus not only on those areas of common ground which led many critics to categorize Duras as a Nouveau Romancier, but also

on the differences underlying their categorization, especially in relation to theory, which distinguish between her position and that of Robbe-Grillet.

In the second part of this chapter, I shall explore the reflection of Robbe-Grillet's and Duras's alliance on their fictional practice, in a 'reading in pairs' of *La Jalousie* (1957) and *Moderato cantabile* (1958). Initially, I shall look at similarities between the two works, distinguishing between those which were in line with the general principles of the Nouveau Roman group's questioning of novelistic conventions, and those which, as I shall argue, signal a more specific intertextuality between Duras and Robbe-Grillet. I shall, however, also explore differences in practice, particularly in relation to narrative viewpoint, which reflect the two authors' respective attitudes to the theoretical basis of their fiction, and which implicitly betray the seeds of their later, more discordant, intertextual relationship.

The post-war French literary scene was dominated by Sartre, whose *Temps Modernes* group offered the only serious avant-garde alternative to the traditional literary establishment. As Sarraute highlighted, when referring to her own experiences at the time, '*Les Temps Modernes* était, à ce moment-là, l'unique revue littéraire, et elle était en train de virer vers la littérature engagée...'¹ This emphasis upon politically engaged literature and preference for American realist novelists largely dictated the limits within which writers and critics could work. It was not until the formation of the Nouveau Roman in the late 1950s, that a significant alternative to 'littérature engagée' emerged, within which writers could explore more experimental forms of writing.

Nor did there exist, during the 1950s, precedents for the exploration of the transgressive potential of an explicitly feminine form of writing, as illustrated by the examples of contemporary women writers, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Nathalie Sarraute. Although Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Gallimard, 1949) was

¹ In an interview with Simone Benmussa in, *Nathalie Sarraute: Qui êtes-vous?* (Lyon: La Manufacture, 1987), p. 41.

consequently heralded as a central text for the feminist movement, at the time of its publication its treatment of women's issues was seen as being in line with the 'engagé' emphasis of the contemporary literary scene. Her repeated assertion elsewhere of the universal applicability of her own experiences - '... d'une expérience singulière j'ai passé à un universel'² - implicitly denied the possibility of significant sexual difference. The struggle for equality which she expounded derived from an ontological position and related largely to political, social and educational spheres, rather than to a particularly feminine form of writing, and precluded any notion of strictly biological specificity. Beauvoir underlined her belief in the materialist and cultural roots of sexual difference when, in defence against criticism of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, she wrote:

Un des malentendus qu'a suscité mon livre, c'est qu'on a cru que j'y niais entre hommes et femmes toute différence: au contraire j'ai mesuré en l'écrivant ce qui les sépare; ce que j'ai soutenu, c'est que ces dissemblances sont d'ordre culturel et non pas naturel.³

Indeed, in Beauvoir's autobiographical accounts of her writing career, she constantly emphasized the inspirational and supportive role of her male colleagues, especially Sartre, and, as Elizabeth Fallaize argues, 'It is plain that she did see writing as a male tradition, and that she sought to place her work within it.'⁴

When reading Simone de Beauvoir's accounts of the reception of her work, it is easy to understand why such tactics - of writing like a man, within a male domain, about female issues - were necessary and, in themselves, daring and transgressive enough for the period. In *La Force des choses* (1963), Beauvoir describes how, on publishing *Le Deuxième Sexe*, she was accused, amongst other things, of obscenity, frigidity and lesbianism, (pp. 260-261) and argues that,

² 'Mon expérience d'écrivain', transcription of conference paper given in Japan, 11 October 1966, published in: Claude Francis & Fernande Gontier, *Les Écrits de Simone de Beauvoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), p. 441.

³ *La Force des choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), p. 258.

⁴ *The Novels of Simone de Beauvoir* (London & New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 180.

... les hommes en France se sentent économiquement menacés par la concurrence des femmes; pour maintenir contre elles l'affirmation d'une supériorité que les mœurs ne garantissent plus, le moyen le plus simple est de les avilir. [...] c'est souvent en tant que femme qu'on m'a attaquée parce qu'on pensait m'atteindre en un point vulnérable. (pp. 261-264)

Thus Simone de Beauvoir, whilst recognizing literature as a predominantly male domain and broaching politically feminist issues of personal experience within this male framework and stylistics, was nonetheless mocked and vilified both on account of the content of her writing and of her position as *woman* writer. As Beauvoir pointed out, and as her experience exemplified, to write in the 1940s and early 1950s about women's issues, let alone to write in an explicitly gendered manner, was to run the risk of hostile attacks from the literary establishment.

Nathalie Sarraute, unlike Beauvoir, did not share the literary tastes of Sartre and the *Temps Modernes* group who dominated the contemporary avant-garde, and with whom she nonetheless published some of her early work. As an explicitly transgressive writer, she wished to write neither within the confines of the traditional novel, the conventions of which she brought into question, nor according to the precepts of politically engaged writers, whose interest in the American realist novels overlooked the experimental practices of the writers whom Sarraute particularly admired, such as Proust, Woolf and Joyce. Sarraute's anti-realist theoretical beliefs and her adherence to consistently transgressive writing practices, led to her works being virtually unread when they first appeared. Her original publishing contract with Marin, for instance, was prematurely cancelled with only a fraction of the copies of her novel, *Portrait d'un inconnu* (1946), having been sold. Writing as a transgressive writer, against the grain of the literary establishment or of the dominant avant-garde, meant running the risk of critical incomprehension and public obscurity.

Despite differences in style and literary affiliation from Beauvoir, Sarraute also underlined what she saw as the neutral or asexual nature of her writing, denying any

female specificity at the level of style or, unlike Beauvoir, of content. She explained her emphasis on the neutrality of her writing in the following quotation:

Je ne me place pas à l'extérieur, je ne cherche pas à analyser du dehors. A l'intérieur, où je suis, le sexe n'existe pas. [...] Quand je travaille je ne pense pas en tant que femme. [...] Je ne pense pas que c'est une femme qui écrit. Cette chose-là, ce que je travaille, est en train de se passer quelque part où le sexe féminin ou masculin n'intervient pas.⁵

Whether at the level of the writing self, of the fictional characters within her works, or of reading, Sarraute stressed her belief, like that of Beauvoir, in a non-gendered universality underlying all individual or external factors such as sex, and this belief was based on 'un manque du sentiment de la différence entre les êtres.'⁶ Whereas Beauvoir, writing within the dominant male tradition, was attacked for the politically feminist content of her work, Sarraute was virtually unread on account of the experimental nature of her writing. The 1950s did not offer a fertile environment within which to write consciously as a woman. One can understand why, within this context, Duras's work of the 1940s and early 1950s largely conformed to the tastes and conventions of the time, and thus why an affiliation with the nascent Nouveau Roman group would have been attractive, offering her, like Sarraute, a way to develop the more experimental elements of her writing style.

Despite an already lengthy career, Duras's success during the early to mid-1950s, in terms of both sales figures and critical interest, remained unexceptional. However positive the critical reception of her works may have been, it tended, in keeping with the contemporary emphasis of *Les Temps Modernes*, to stress the conventional nature of Duras's writing and her debt, both thematically and stylistically, to American realist novelists, such as Faulkner, Hemingway and Erskine

⁵ This quotation and the preceding information are from, *Nathalie Sarraute: Qui êtes-vous?*, pp. 140-141.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

Caldwell.⁷ Not only was Duras viewed according to the terms of the dominant critical interest, but she also largely adhered to this prevalent, male tradition in her writing. Her fiction never provoked critical interest to rival the intensity of the debate which followed the publication of Robbe-Grillet's first two novels, *Les Gommages* (1953) and *Le Voyeur* (1955.) His works won him critical acclaim, in the form of the Prix Fénelon in 1954 and the Prix des Critiques the following year, as well as vehement condemnation from the more traditional literary establishment. The controversy surrounding the innovative practices and theories of Robbe-Grillet and the other writers with whom he became associated, was to spawn the Nouveau Roman, 'THE major emanation of the French novel in the second half of the twentieth century',⁸ and a wave of new critics, including Barthes, Blanchot and Bataille. Such upheaval within the literary establishment - 'Tous les grands "anciens" contre et tous les grands "modernes" pour'⁹ - could not have failed to attract the attention of Duras. So great was the critical furore, so intense the polemic, that this ground-breaking and influential movement must have appeared particularly enticing to a writer as long-established but as uncontroversial as Duras was generally perceived to be. By allying herself with the central figure within this upheaval, Robbe-Grillet, Duras was able to develop the more experimental elements of her work and to provoke renewed critical interest with the added frisson of the avant-garde, so dispelling her previous, rather traditional reputation. She was also able to gain, via association with Robbe-Grillet in particular, theorized credibility, whilst simultaneously resisting the potential limitations of producing rigorous theoretical works herself. Affiliation, via Robbe-Grillet, with the dynamic, nascent Nouveau Roman group offered her literary inspiration, a vicarious theoretical base, practical, mutual support and a fertile

⁷ See, amongst others:

Armand Hoog, 'The Itinerary of Marguerite Duras,' *Yale French Studies*, vol. 24 (1959)

Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959)

Germaine Brée, 'The Contemporary French Novel, 1950-1960,' *French Culture Today* (Summer 1961)

⁸ Tom Bishop, 'Opening Remarks', in Lois Oppenheim (ed.), *Three Decades of the French New Novel* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 13.

⁹ Alain Robbe-Grillet in an interview with Jean-Jacques Brochier, 1967, published in *Alain Robbe-Grillet: Qui suis-je?* (Lyon: La Manufacture, 1985), p. 125.

environment in which to develop her writing talents in more fruitful and adventurous directions.

Robbe-Grillet's situation within the literary scene of the 1950s was very different. Unlike Duras, he was not an established writer who wished to lose a (falsely) conventional reputation. Robbe-Grillet was new on the literary scene and his works were little read. He has often referred since to the problems which he experienced in finding a publisher for his first works. Indeed, his first novel, *Un régicide*, which he wrote in 1949, was unanimously turned down at the time, on the grounds that it was too unconventional and would not attract a reading public. It was not published, in fact, until 1978. When *Les Gommages* appeared in 1953, it initially attracted largely negative, critical attention, and sales figures were poor. Recognition by a critical élite did little to encourage a broader audience to read what they saw as a 'difficult' book, a fact which Robbe-Grillet recognizes when he says, 'je suis devenu immédiatement connu cependant qu'on ne me lisait pas'.¹⁰ Robbe-Grillet's next work, *Le Voyeur*, published in 1955, did attract much greater interest, no doubt in part as a result of the earlier prize. Yet the reception by the literary establishment, however heated, was still almost unanimously hostile to this work, which it saw, rightly, as disrupting the conventions of the traditional novel which it sought to defend. There ensued an acrimonious series of academic debates, 'tables rondes', and media discussions, which became known as 'La Querelle du Voyeur',¹¹ between a small number of supporters of Robbe-Grillet's work and the literary old guard. Many of the arguments levelled against Robbe-Grillet by his opponents are based on what he saw as misunderstandings of his aims and misreadings of his work and, indeed, from the start, his career has been marked and fuelled by an antagonistic relationship of attack and counter-attack with the critical establishment. Responding to critics' hostile comments or misreadings of his novels, Robbe-Grillet consistently produced theoretical essays, often as a defence of his writing practice. His mutually

¹⁰ *Alain Robbe-Grillet: Qui suis-je?*, p. 139.

¹¹ This debate is documented in a work of the same title, published by Éditions de Minuit in 1955.

advantageous and productive relationship with Roland Barthes sprang from their common attacks upon traditional critical readings. By allying himself with Duras and other more established writers, Robbe-Grillet was, no doubt, able to reassure himself in the face of such criticism by gaining confirmation of his literary status from a more senior, widely respected, if at the time more conventional, writer.

There has been much disagreement between critics about the degree and nature of Duras's involvement within the Nouveau Roman and, indeed, about whether she was a member of the group at all. Duras's later central position within feminist critical theories and her refusal to produce theoretical essays to complement her writing practice, largely accounted for this exclusion. Yet it was precisely Duras's perceived desertion of the Nouveau Roman which triggered Robbe-Grillet's retaliatory response and led to the rivalrous dynamics of later stages in their career-long intertextual relationship. Despite Duras's later rejection of affiliation with the Nouveau Roman, she did participate in the group's activities and was widely recognized as one of its members by contemporary critics and other Nouveaux Romanciers.

The key event in establishing the existence of the Nouveau Roman as a movement, and in which Duras was included, was the special edition of *Esprit* in 1958, which appeared just months after the publication of *Moderato cantabile*. In this publication, the title 'Nouveau Roman' was first officially adopted to categorize a group of ten contemporary writers, including Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, Michel Butor, Claude Simon and Duras.¹² These writers were selected essentially for two reasons; firstly because 'chacun d'eux rompt, dans une mesure d'ailleurs variable, avec les formes traditionnelles du roman, cherche à renouveler le contenu et les moyens de la littérature romanesque', and secondly because 'il se trouve que chacun de ces dix auteurs est plus ou moins fréquemment cité à propos de ce que des critiques très divers [...] ont appelé tantôt *la nouvelle école du roman*, tantôt *le nouveau réalisme*,

¹² The ten novelists which *Esprit* listed as belonging to the Nouveau Roman group were: Samuel Beckett, Michel Butor, Jean Cayrol, Marguerite Duras, Jean Lagrolet, Robert Pinget, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, Claude Simon and Kateb Yacine.

ou bien encore l'*anti-roman*' (p. 18). The Nouveau Roman was thus defined loosely in terms of common literary practices and consonant critical reception. Duras's publication of *Moderato cantabile* was particularly well-timed in relation to contemporary critical recognition and confirmed her status as a member of the fledgling Nouveau Roman group. The criteria for categorization were broad enough to allow for the inclusion of often quite diverse writers under the unifying banner, and Duras's status as a Nouveau Romancier was accepted as unproblematic. Thus the critic Gennie Luccioni began her essay, in *Esprit*, by unquestioningly applying the label 'nouveau roman' to Duras's fiction in her question, 'Mais enfin le «nouveau roman» est-il abstrait ou est-il concret?'.¹³ In this essay, Duras's work was regarded as exemplary of the movement and so Luccioni argued, in relation to *Moderato cantabile*, that, 'Un art n'est jamais si grand que lorsqu'il tente de sortir de ses limites et ce n'est point faire un reproche aux Nouveaux Romains que de dire que «ce ne sont point des romans»' (p. 77). Duras was thus contemporarily viewed, by the editors of *Esprit* and those critics quoted, as belonging to the Nouveau Roman and her works were seen as embodying the group's common principles. Similarly, Claude Mauriac, remarked that, with the publication of *Moderato cantabile*, 'Marguerite Duras a pu être officiellement enrôlée dans l'équipe des pionniers qui tentent d'ouvrir au roman ses voies nouvelles,'¹⁴ and Claude Roy, suggested a conscious affiliation on Duras's part, when he wrote that, 'On comparera Marguerite Duras aux écrivains dont elle tend en effet à se rapprocher, aux phénoménologues du roman «nouveau»...'.¹⁵

Duras's position within the Nouveau Roman was not just a result of contemporary critical reception, as she was actively involved in the group's activities, participating in several of its tours, conferences and round table discussions, both in

¹³ Gennie Luccioni, 'Marguerite Duras et le "roman abstrait"', *Esprit*, special edition entitled 'Le Nouveau Roman', no. 7-8 (1958) pp. 73-76. The general adoption of the capitalized 'Nouveau Roman' largely post-dates this critical study, although some later critics continue to use the lower case form.

¹⁴ 'L'Étouffant Univers de Marguerite Duras', *Le Figaro* (12 March 1958)

¹⁵ 'Madame Bovary réécrite par Bela Bartok', *Libération* (1 March 1958)

France and internationally.¹⁶ These promotional activities were part of a largely strategic motivation which lay behind Robbe-Grillet's aim, as 'conseiller littéraire' at the Éditions de Minuit, to recruit writers with similar literary practices and beliefs to his own and so to create a literary movement. Although not explicitly stated, a third important factor in influencing the selection of the members of the Nouveau Roman, as laid out in *Esprit*, was the publication house of the writers' most recent novels. Seven out of the ten writers listed in the introductory 'Voici dix romanciers...' published or republished a novel or novels at Éditions de Minuit, and six out of the seven did so in 1957 or 1958.¹⁷

Even within *Esprit's* selection of the Nouveau Roman writers, however, there existed two tiers of classification, with Butor, Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet belonging to a distinct, primary group, based largely on their perceived centrality in the creation of the Nouveau Roman movement and on the fact that they wrote theoretical works in addition to their novels. Robbe-Grillet consistently produced theoretical essays in support of his own writing which also provided a broad, unifying base for the diverse practices of the Nouveau Roman as a whole. From the very start of his career, Robbe-Grillet attracted the attention of the theorist and critic, Roland Barthes. As *Esprit* highlighted, the mutually productive, theory-based relationship between the innovative writer and modernist critic did much to establish the status of the Nouveau Roman as a literary movement worthy of critical interest since, 'jusqu'à l'article de Roland Barthes (*Critique*, juillet 1954) nul ne songe à annoncer l'avènement d'une nouvelle esthétique romanesque' (p. 26). In *Esprit's* second grouping were placed the

¹⁶ A photograph of Duras with Nathalie Sarraute on one of the Nouveau Roman's promotional tours in Edinburgh, can be found, for instance, in Arnaud Rykner's *Nathalie Sarraute* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), p. 169.

¹⁷ Robbe-Grillet published all his novels at Minuit, including *La Jalousie* in 1957. Those novels by Butor published at Minuit, which *Esprit* lists are: *Passage de Milan* (1954), *L'Emploi du temps* (1956) & *La Modification* (1957). Although Sarraute published most of her works at Gallimard, she did republish *Tropismes*, originally published with Denoël in 1939, at Minuit in 1957. Samuel Beckett's three novels, *Molloy* (1951), *Malone meurt* (1951) & *L'Innommable* (1953) were published by Minuit. Claude Simon's *Le Tricheur* (1946) & *La Corde raide* (1948), originally published with Le Sagittaire, were republished by Minuit, where his *Le Vent* appeared in 1957. Robert Pinget's *Mahu ou le matériau* (Éditions Robert Laffont, 1952) was republished by Minuit in 1957, where *Baga* (1956) and *Graal Flibuste* (1957) were also published. Last of all, Duras's *Moderato cantabile* was published by Minuit in 1958.

other seven writers, Duras included, who were classified as Nouveaux Romanciers on account of their innovative literary practices and adherence to general unifying principles, and not as central, theorizing figures. Even within contemporary criticism, an important distinction, based largely on theory, was made between Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's statuses within the Nouveau Roman, a distinction which will be seen later in this chapter to have been important in determining differences in each writer's literary practices in works of the period.

It is enlightening here to compare the basis of Robbe-Grillet's alliance with Duras in their initial stage of mutual admiration and alliance, with his relationship with the other woman writer in the group, Nathalie Sarraute. The underlying differences, which remained latent at this stage, between these two paired relationships, and which centred on the two women writers' relative positions in relation to theory and gender, were later crucial in defining the nature of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's antagonistic rivalry. Both Sarraute and Duras had published several novels before joining the Nouveau Roman group but, unlike Duras, Sarraute had also produced theoretical works which were published collectively, in 1956, in *L'Ère du soupçon*.¹⁸ As Robbe-Grillet's own account of his first meeting with Sarraute confirms,¹⁹ his alliance with her was based largely on commonly held literary views. Indeed, Sarraute's theoretical works in many ways served as reassuring precedents for Robbe-Grillet's theoretical essays, which were published together in *Pour un Nouveau Roman* in 1963, seven years after Sarraute's. The reassurance which Robbe-Grillet gained, in recruiting Sarraute into the Nouveau Roman group, necessarily entailed an element of recognition of his own belatedness. His alliance with Duras was on a very different basis.

Since Duras never published any consciously theoretical works herself, Robbe-Grillet was able, in recruiting her, to use her literary texts as examples of his theory. Whilst Duras gained theoretical weight from association with Robbe-Grillet, he

¹⁸ Published at Gallimard.

¹⁹ In *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1994), p. 83.

gained textual confirmation of his theories from another, relatively well-established writer. If we are to believe his retrospective account of the active role he played in the publication of *Moderato cantabile*, which symbolized Duras's entry into the Nouveau Roman and the beginning of the two writers' intertextual alliance, Robbe-Grillet could also gain vicarious gratification from the positive influence which his editing of her initial draft *récit* had upon his older sibling's writing. Robbe-Grillet's rather paternalistic attitude towards Duras can, indeed, be detected in the following reference to his editorial suggestions, addressed directly to her:

Je t'ai donc suggéré de poursuivre cette histoire (après y avoir supprimé, peut-être, certaines naïvetés dans le genre «cri du cœur», si tu ne les jugeais pas indispensables) et de donner le livre aux Editions de Minuit, où serait sa place naturelle.²⁰

The link established between Duras and Robbe-Grillet, as a result of the latter's commissioning and claimed editing of *Moderato cantabile* - a work which both writers viewed as marking a turning-point in Duras's literary career²¹ - formed the material grounds for their early intertextual relationship within the broader context of the Nouveau Roman group.

The specific circumstances of the two writers at the time doubtless made a literary alliance attractive and advantageous for both of them. In addition to these possible individual motivations, both Duras and Robbe-Grillet were able to obtain the more general benefits of membership of the Nouveau Roman group. In her critical study, Celia Britton argues that the Nouveau Roman was formed both as a self-

²⁰ Ibid., p. 95.

²¹ In her dialogues with Xavière Gauthier, *Les Parleuses* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1974), Duras refers on three separate occasions, and in different contexts, to the critical turning-point which this work represented: '[...] il a fallu écrire beaucoup de livres pour arriver là. Il y a toute une période où j'ai écrit des livres, jusqu'à *Moderato cantabile*, que je ne reconnais pas' (p. 13); 'J'écrivais comme on va au bureau, chaque jour, tranquillement; je mettais quelques mois à faire un livre et puis, tout à coup, ça a viré. Avec *Moderato*, c'était moins calme' (p. 14) and '[...] ce que je raconte dans *Moderato cantabile*, cette femme qui veut être tuée, je l'ai vécu ... et à partir de là les livres ont changé ... J'ai pensé à ça depuis deux ans, deux, trois ans, je pense que le tournant, le virage vers ..., vers la sincérité s'est produit là.' (p. 59) In *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe*, Robbe-Grillet writes, addressing Duras directly, that, 'ce roman, *Moderato cantabile*, marquait le tournant moderniste de ton œuvre.' (p. 95)

defensive strategy against critics' hostility and as a tactical means of increasing sales figures, and that 'the distinctive group identity of the Nouveau Roman helped them to reach a wide audience.'²² The literary establishment traditionally lends more credence to the views of a new and potentially revolutionary literary movement than to the those of any individual writer, however innovative. Thus collectively, the Nouveau Roman could enjoy the marketing advantages, the 'impact publicitaire',²³ of all its members and could provoke a proportionally greater critical response. The impression of theoretical cohesion created by the pairing under the 'Nouveau Roman' banner of Nathalie Sarraute's *L'Ère du soupçon* and Robbe-Grillet's theoretical essays, for instance, attracted far greater attention than either writer's work would have done separately. Sarraute's retrospective remarks on her involvement with the Nouveau Roman are enlightening in this respect:

With regard to the circulation of my books, I owe a lot to this movement of the Nouveau Roman. I say it again and again, but I think that without it my books would not have had the audience that they have had. It is not an enormous audience, for my books are considered to be difficult books, but without the Nouveau Roman, it would have been smaller.²⁴

So far, I have examined the literary context of the 1950s, within which Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's intertextual relationship was first established, and suggested reasons why such an alliance was mutually desirable. Affiliation with Robbe-Grillet offered Duras a means of exploring the more transgressive elements of her writing and of gaining a theoretical basis for her literary practice, whilst simultaneously maintaining a distance from this, by refusing to produce theoretical works of her own. Robbe-Grillet gained, via his conscious recruitment of Duras, reassurance from a more established writer in the face of the often negative criticism levelled against him.

²² *The Nouveau Roman: Fiction, Theory and Politics* (London and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 194.

²³ Réal Ouellet, 'Introduction', *Les Critiques de notre temps et Le Nouveau Roman* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1972), p. 7.

²⁴ Transcript of a paper given in English by Nathalie Sarraute, at a colloquium on the Nouveau Roman at New York University in Autumn 1982. Published in: Lois Oppenheim (ed.), *Three Decades of the French New Novel* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 128.

The creation of a literary movement, of which he was the generally recognized 'chef d'école', also provided him with a body of other writers' works as validation of his own theoretical beliefs and novelistic practices. As anecdotes by both Duras and Robbe-Grillet indicate, their particular alliance, within the general context of the Nouveau Roman, was consolidated by a material link, in the form of Robbe-Grillet's commissioning of *Moderato cantabile*.

In the following 'reading in pairs' of *La Jalousie* and *Moderato cantabile*, I shall explore the reflection of the two writers' explicit alliance on a close, intertextual level. Firstly, I shall examine those similarities of practice which are consonant with Robbe-Grillet's theoretical essays and, although they may be particularly well illustrated within the Duras-Robbe-Grillet pairing, they may also be exploited in the works of other Nouveaux Romanciers, and so cannot be attributed solely to their particular intertextual relationship. As examples of such general common ground, I shall explore both writers' questioning of the novelistic conventions of story, plot and characterization. Secondly, I shall explore those similarities between the two works which reveal the influence of a more specific, intertextual relationship between Duras and Robbe-Grillet, in particular the common fetishization of female body parts and the metonymic use of hands as a symbol for desire. Thirdly, however, I shall examine how certain inconsistencies within Duras's text, especially at the level of narrative viewpoint and style, reflect the author's resistance to the rigorous theoretical beliefs which underpin the works of her literary sibling. These underlying differences, as I shall discuss, also represent the seeds of Duras's later rejection of affiliation and were to contribute to the rivalrous nature of Robbe-Grillet's subsequent backlash and of their later intertextual relationship.

Since Duras never produced theoretical works concerning her own writing practice or literature in general - a fact which has led many critics to exclude her from studies of the Nouveau Roman and so to overlook her intertextual relationship with Robbe-Grillet - I shall focus in my 'reading in pairs' upon those literary, critical views

expressed by the latter and practised by both writers, which underlie their initial period of affiliation. In the essays of *Pour un Nouveau Roman*,²⁵ Robbe-Grillet criticizes the precepts of the traditional, realist novel, in which an omniscient narrator tells a story about psychologically consistent, unified characters, and in which all components play direct, interwoven parts in a linear, causal plot, the forward momentum of which tends towards resolution in a conclusion. Robbe-Grillet believed that such generally accepted, nineteenth-century conventions, especially that of the omniscient narrator, were no longer relevant in the mid-twentieth century. Human beings are not, in his view, unified and definable, but indecipherable both to others and to themselves, and are made up of multiple, conflicting facets, rational and emotional, conscious and unconscious. Any modern fictional text can, therefore, be no more than an observer's subjective *attempt* to impose order and meaning upon events, rather than a description of a pre-established, linear progression. The first of the conventions of the traditional novel which, in keeping with the views laid out in *Pour un Nouveau Roman* and with the broad, theoretical underpinnings of the Nouveau Roman as a whole, both Duras and Robbe-Grillet bring into question, is that of the 'story.'

Traditionally, a novel tells a story; that is, one can reduce its content to an essential anecdote, summarize what it is about. This story dictates the overall direction of the novel - its plot - the second being subservient to the first. Form is used to reveal content. Hence the form which a traditional, story-led novel took was that of a chronological, linear plot, following the progression of the diegesis to its fictive conclusion. If one were looking for a traditional plot, both *La Jalousie* and *Moderato cantabile* might appear to be about an adulterous affair: that of A... and Franck, or of Anne Desbaresdes and Chauvin. Unlike a conventional novel, however, in both cases the adultery forms a central gap in the narrative, around which the work is constructed. In *La Jalousie*, we do not know whether A... and Franck are having an

²⁵ (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1963). See in particular, 'Sur quelques notions périmées' (1957), pp. 25-44, and 'Nouveau Roman, homme nouveau' (1961), pp. 113-121.

affair; we are only presented with what we deduce to be an absent narrator's confused, distorted and partial (in both senses) view of events, from which we must draw our own conclusions. In *Moderato cantabile*, the reader must also play an active role in constructing the desire which lies between the gaps in Anne Desbaresdes's and Chauvin's dialogue, by means of the characters' external actions and the text's patterns of juxtaposition, association and mirroring. Both works feature a (suspected) adulterous relationship on some level, but this is not their essential motivation, this is not what they are about.

In *La Jalousie*, the only scene portraying A...'s and Franck's adultery is a purely *imaginary* one, as the jealous narrator envisages, by mental association with other scenes and motifs, the couple as lovers in a hotel room (p.166). The suspected adultery of A... and Franck provides the narrative focus and stimulus, rather than being itself the main subject of the narrative. Nor does the novel, as its title might suggest, tell the 'story' of the narrator's jealousy, plotting its development, its causes and effects. Jealousy is the general context, the filter through which the surrounding environment, actions and scenes are viewed, rather than being an externally defined and analyzed state of mind. The fictional world appears to be viewed from within the distorted consciousness of a problematic, absent narrator-protagonist whose emotional constitution and very existence are never explicitly signalled. There is no linear, cause-and-effect progression of actions and no final resolution of events. Even the status of these actions and events is uncertain; are they 'real' or imagined, past, present or projected, within the fictional context and timescale of the novel? Ultimately, *La Jalousie* is about the telling of a story, rather than being a story per se.

Similarly, *Moderato cantabile* cannot be described simplistically as the story of an adulterous and self-destructive affair. The only overt reference to an adulterous dimension to Anne's and Chauvin's relationship is given in the comment, towards the end of the book, that 'Les hommes évitèrent de porter leurs yeux sur cette femme

adultère,²⁶ and even this comment is not the judgement of a narrator, but reflects the suppositions of workers in the bar, minor, background figures within the work. We are presented, generally without comment or analysis, with the words, actions and reactions of Anne and Chauvin; their desire must be constructed from these bare materials and from implicit associations between them. The novel does not plot the progression of a fictionally conventional, adulterous love affair, as the culmination of Anne's physical infidelity is no more than a sterile kiss, described as 'mortuaire' (p. 121). Nor are Anne and Chauvin the only couple around whom the actions and events of the novel revolve. Just as the narrative develops around and between the central gap of Anne's and Chauvin's desire, so their conversations construct after the fact the possible motives and events leading up to the murder of the other woman by her (presumed) lover. The 'story' of *Moderato cantabile* is the telling of the first couple's story by Anne and Chauvin; that is, the construction of the narrative, rather than the narrative itself. Hence, mirroring in their words the actions of the murderer and his victim, Anne's and Chauvin's own adultery is a largely verbal one, a creation of their own imaginations, their one kiss the symbolic rather than physical realization of their desire.

In *La Jalousie* and *Moderato cantabile*, a non-adultery forms a central gap in the narrative which would, in a traditional novel, be filled by the story or content. Robbe-Grillet and Duras reject the conventional view that a novel must tell a story, the development and ultimate resolution of which dictate the linear nature of the plot and the interweaving of all narrative elements. Thus, in its questioning of the convention of a story, Duras's work conforms to the broad precepts of Robbe-Grillet's theory. Yet the underlying reasons for Duras's subversion of this traditional narrative element can be seen as quite different from that of her literary sibling. For whereas, in his fiction, Robbe-Grillet aims primarily to explore issues laid out in his theoretical essays, theory and practice being in a mutually interactive and productive relation to

²⁶ *Moderato cantabile*, p. 123. This and all subsequent references are to the 1993 Minuit "double" edition, which contains an appendix of contemporary, critical reviews. As already indicated, the novel was originally published at Minuit in 1958.

one another, Duras's disruption of the conventional story-line centres around her investigation of the unspoken movements of desire. The stress in her work is upon the portrayal of the inexplicable and unexpressed dynamics of a disruptive sexual encounter, rather than upon the theoretical issues which this portrayal entails. This distinction is in keeping with underlying differences, highlighted in the previous chapter, between the two writers' apparently similar espousal of the disruptive force of female sexuality. Both frequently refer to women in figurative rather than real terms, but whereas Robbe-Grillet portrays them as textually disruptive tropes, Duras sees them as mythical symbols for transgression.

In rejecting, albeit for different reasons, the convention of a story, and the traditional form-content dichotomy, Robbe-Grillet and Duras simultaneously reject the structure of the linear plot with its conventional beginning, middle and end, in which all the narrative strands are tied up and a resolution attained. *Moderato cantabile* has a circular structure of constantly repeated scenes through which a progression can, nonetheless, be traced towards an ending, the precise status and interpretation of which are left unresolved. It begins with a murder and ends with the verbal re-enactment of that murder by another couple:

‘Je voudrais que vous soyez morte,’ dit Chauvin.

‘C'est fait,’ dit Anne Desbaresdes.

(p. 123)

The circularity of the overall structure is mirrored in the intervening sections, in which Anne and Chauvin reconstruct and invent the possible events leading to the woman's murder by her lover, by going over and over the same elements in their dialogue. This strand of their conversations, in which they reconstruct the conditions of the other couple's 'story', is interwoven with a strand in which they constantly and repetitively refer to elements of Anne Desbaresdes's life. Simultaneously, a third strand, that of Anne's desirous relationship with Chauvin, develops between the other two strands and beneath the surface of their circular conversations. All three strands revolve

around the central, unknowable and fascinating figure of a desiring and desire-inspiring woman. The structure of *La Jalousie* is also a largely circular one, as the same series of events is constantly repeated: in particular, A...'s and Franck's plans for a trip to town, made either on the terrace or in the dining room; the killing of the millepede; A... brushing her hair or writing a letter; the empty house; A...'s and Franck's return from town. Just as Anne Desbaresdes and Chauvin do not know the facts about the other couple's relationship, so the implied narrator of *La Jalousie* cannot piece together the 'clues' - motifs, scenes, perceived actions, presumed motives - to gain a complete picture of an ultimate truth. Nor, importantly, can the reader, despite the efforts of reconstructive critics such as Bruce Morrissette,²⁷ since the narrative contains many inconsistencies which defy the linear chronology of a traditional plot, and which ultimately centre less around A... and Franck than around the problematic, ontologically uncertain narrator.

The structural and chronological uncertainty at the levels of traditional plot is reflected in the mobile portrayal of characters in both *La Jalousie* and *Moderato cantabile*, which underlines the unfixed, indecipherable nature of any psychological representation. Both novels are constructed around a central gap of adulterous desire and they enact the attempts by individuals to assert control over shifting, largely inexplicable events, thoughts and emotions. Just as Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's works do not follow a linear, cause-and-effect progression of empirical events, their characters are not unified, non-contradictory or psychologically definable in traditional terms. The first defining label imposed by the traditional novelist upon his fictional characters is a name, but, as Robbe-Grillet asks, 'Pourquoi s'entêter à découvrir comment s'appelle un individu dans un roman qui ne le dit pas?'²⁸ In *La Jalousie*, the names of the characters, A... and Franck, do no more than signal their presence. Neither is given a surname which might provide a clue to his or her background or status, and the female figure is not even granted the individuation of a

²⁷ *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1963)

²⁸ 'Nouveau Roman, homme nouveau' (1961), *Pour un Nouveau Roman*, p. 119.

full first name. We are told nothing about the central implicit narrative filter, from whose viewpoint the others are presented, who never addresses himself by name and is never even referred to as 'je', 'tu/vous' or 'il'. All we learn of him or of the other characters in the novel is what is revealed by means of the characters' interactions with each other and with their surroundings.

Similarly, in *Moderato cantabile*, the reader only learns of the names of the characters via their conversations with one another. In the first scene, the principal character is simply referred to as 'une femme' until the piano teacher addresses her as 'Madame Desbaresdes'.²⁹ We do not learn of Chauvin's (incomplete) name until half-way through the book, when he tells Anne his name (p. 60), until which point he is known only as 'l'homme'. His surname reinforces his role as male opposite to the central female character, Anne Desbaresdes, and we never learn his first name. Other figures in the work are not granted names at all, and are constantly referred to, and defined by, the role which they play in relation to the central couple and, in particular, to Anne Desbaresdes - 'l'enfant', 'la patronne' and 'l'homme' (her husband). These figures are not individuated, but act as reminders of Anne's familial and social obligations, as oppositional models to the disruption which Chauvin represents. The main attributes of the child, therefore, are his innocence and vulnerability, those of the landlady, the husband, the men in the bar or the guests at the dinner party, their social conformity and scandalized disapproval. Similarly, in *La Jalousie*, the only details we learn of A... and Franck are those which relate to the narrator's perception of them. A..., whom we infer to be the narrator's wife, is portrayed via attributes which stress her sensuality; her hair, her clothes, her smile. Her refined table manners are contrasted with those of Franck, the coarseness of which reinforces other descriptions of his brutishness, his ignorance of colonial life, his neglect of his sick wife. All of these elements tell us more about the possible narrator-figure's state of mind than about the 'true' nature of those whom he observes, and thus bring into question such

²⁹ (Pp. 7 & 8.) We are, however, immediately and unproblematically informed of her first name, Anne, in the very next sentence. I shall look at such inconsistencies in a later section of this chapter, devoted to the narrative viewpoint.

traditional notions as 'truth', 'identity' or 'character'. A... and Franck may be the only characters who are explicitly 'named', and whose actions are described, but these labels give little more information as to their identity than we gain, via association, about the status of the absent narrator. Duras's labelling of the characters in *Moderato cantabile*, in keeping with her focus upon the implicit, central dynamics of sexual desire, classifies them in terms of their gender and social role.

In both *La Jalousie* and *Moderato cantabile*, traditional characters are replaced by figures which act as structuring devices and as catalysts in the depiction of individuals' responses to one another. The movements of observed characters, particularly A... and the child, allow for shifts in scenes and for the forward momentum of the novel's action. When A... moves through the house, the narrative focus changes, as elements are described in the different rooms through which she passes, and as these elements trigger mental scenes, either memories or imaginings. When A... is described as moving to the window, or as turning her head, there often follows a description of the surroundings of the house, as if an observer consequently averts his gaze. Such a shift, from inside to outside, occasioned by reactions to A... 's movements, can be seen, for example, in the following quotation:

A..., dans la chambre, a continué sa lettre [...] Mais la tête aux souples boucles noires se redresse lentement et commence à pivoter, lentement mais sans à-coup, vers la fenêtre ouverte.

Les ouvriers du pont sont au nombre de cinq, comme les troncs de rechange. (p. 103)

Such reactive shifts in scene not only create much of the novel's progression, but also serve as clues, through a series of associations and oppositions, in the reader's construction of a position from which narrative components are observed, filtered and arranged. The opposition between inside and outside, between the domestic order of the colonial house and the strangeness of the tropical surroundings and native inhabitants, implicitly signal an absent narrator's fear of loss of control over his world, and of the loss of his wife to another man, an outsider and intruder.

The child fulfils a similar dual function, of structuring device and psychological catalyst, in *Moderato cantabile*. In the two piano lesson scenes, the trajectory of the child's music provides a structural link between the safety inside Mademoiselle Giraud's apartment and the threat of the outside dock area and the café. Such an opposition between different arenas is elsewhere brought about by the child's movements, in the various scenes depicting Anne's meetings in the café with Chauvin. As the child, playing outside, comes into Anne's field of vision through the doorway, the narrative attention shifts momentarily. At times, his leading his mother away from the café occasions both the thematic end of her discussions with Chauvin and the structural end of the chapter. The repeated juxtaposition of the child outside and Chauvin inside also performs the function of providing the reader with an implicit oppositional framework in which to construct Anne's mental state. By intruding into Anne's physical environment, the child acts as a reminder of her maternal, familial and social duties, and as a representation of innocence in contrast with the prevalent atmosphere of danger and corruption. Anne Desbaresdes explores her potential self through her conversations with Chauvin, and reveals the subsequent change in her attitude through the shifts in her relationship with her child. The figure behind the narratorial position in *La Jalousie* is implicitly constructed by means of the focus upon certain, specific aspects of A... and Franck and of the shifting interpretations which, by means of juxtaposition, are implicitly placed upon these. Both Duras and Robbe-Grillet replace conventional, external psychological analysis with internal patterns of opposition - between inside and out, order and disorder and between central (albeit, in Robbe-Grillet's text, ontologically uncertain) figures and secondary characters.

Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's common questionings of the traditional novelistic conventions of story, chronology and characterization do not in themselves provide substantial proof of specific intertextual influence, as they were in line with the experimental practices of other Nouveaux Romanciers. Indeed, a number of their practices, such as the use of a central, focal gap in the narrative or a loosely circular

plot, in Robbe-Grillet's case, or of allusive dialogue, in Duras's, were already present, to a lesser degree, in certain of their own earlier works.³⁰ The often common manner in which they question the same traditional conventions - their use of the theme of adultery as a central gap or their exploitation of secondary characters as a means of ensuring narrative progression - does already suggest possible, stronger, intertextual links between the two novels than are evidenced by the above, general points of convergence. Yet certain thematic and symbolic motifs common to both *La Jalousie* and *Moderato cantabile*, but which had not previously been developed by either writer, suggest the existence of more specific intertextual influence between the two authors.

The first, particularly striking example of a more direct form of intertextuality is Robbe-Grillet's and Duras's common use of fetishized parts of the fictional female body, as symbolic of sexual desire. The focus is upon the *female* body, that of Anne Desbaresdes and of A..., since it is around these figures, as sexually transgressive incarnations of disorder, that the narrative's exploration of hidden or suspected adulterous desire revolves. In neither text is the reader given a complete or objective portrait of the female character. We learn little of the general physical appearance of A... or Anne. The parts of the body which are focused upon reflect the character's sensuality, and are described as if detached from the woman herself, acting as fetishes or metonymous motifs within the narrative, more revealing thematically than descriptively. Hence, the repeated references to Anne's breasts, or to the magnolia worn between them, like those to A...'s hair, do not help the reader to visualize the woman, but emphasize the perception of her socially inappropriate sensuality. Both women's bodily parts become fetishized, A...'s hair being associated with the absent narrator-husband's jealous desire, and Anne's breasts with Chauvin's sexual attraction

³⁰ *Le Voyeur* (1955) is constructed around the gap of the supposed murder of Violette. *Les Gommets* (1953) ends with Wallas's committing the murder which, at the beginning, he is sent to investigate. Duras's *Le Square* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), is composed almost exclusively of the dialogue between a young nanny and a travelling salesman.

to her. Hence, overt references to these parts increase throughout the books, mapping the covert crescendo of sexual tension, culminating in a climactic, pivotal scene: that of the implied narrator pacing the empty house in *La Jalousie* and that of the banquet in *Moderato cantabile*.

In the former case, A...'s hair takes on nightmarish, animalistic qualities, in the following description:

Pareille à cette nuit sans contours, la chevelure de soie coule entre les doigts crispés. Elle s'allonge, elle se multiplie, elle pousse des tentacules dans tous les sens, s'enroulant sur soi-même en un écheveau de plus en plus complexe, dont les circonvolutions et les apparents labyrinthes continuent de laisser passer les phalanges avec la même indifférence, avec la même facilité.

(p. 174)

The threat which A...'s transgressive sexuality poses to the absent narrator's own desire and his subsequent mounting jealousy become focused obsessively upon A...'s hair, so that it is imagined as possessing a disruptive and fantastic life of its own, divorced from A...'s body or person. Similarly, in *Moderato cantabile*, as the sexual tension between Anne Desbaresdes and Chauvin builds, references increase both to her breasts and to the magnolia flower with which they become symbolically associated. These elements become interwoven with the other recurrent motif for sexual desire, that of drunkenness, in the pivotal reception scene, reaching a climax in the following section:

Les formes vides des magnolias caressent les yeux de l'homme seul. Anne Desbaresdes prend une nouvelle fois son verre qu'on vient de remplir et boit. Le feu nourrit son ventre de sorcière contrairement aux autres. Ses seins si lourds de chaque côté de cette fleur si lourde se ressentent de sa maigreur nouvelle et lui font mal. Le vin coule dans sa bouche pleine d'un nom qu'elle ne prononce pas.

(p. 109)³¹

³¹ It is worth highlighting the strongly lyrical and metaphorical nature of Duras's language in this passage. The inconsistency between this and the sparse, elliptical style used elsewhere, is characteristic of her non-theoretical approach to writing and illustrates a fundamental difference between her practice and Robbe-Grillet's. I examine such inconsistencies and theoretical differences later in this chapter.

In both writers' works, a part of a female character's body comes metonymically to represent both her own sexuality and implicitly also that of her observer, the narrator-husband or Chauvin. Yet a difference can be detected between the two texts, in relation to the central dynamics of desire, sexuality and gender for, whereas in *Moderato cantabile*, the focus is upon a desiring and desire-inciting woman, who inspires fascination, in *La Jalousie*, the woman is the object of jealous suspicion and fear. This difference is linked to the relative narrative focus of the two texts. In Robbe-Grillet's work, the figure who experiences feelings of obsessive jealousy towards the woman is the implicit narrator, from whose partial viewpoint the events are presented and through which they are filtered. The reader is plunged directly into the observing consciousness, with no external narrative commentary or distance. In Duras's text, however, since Chauvin is a character within the narrative rather than the narrator itself, the fascination and desire for the focal female character which he experiences are also described externally and, therefore, presented on what would traditionally be the level of the narrator.

Both Duras and Robbe-Grillet also use parts of the objectivized body in their common treatment of the positioning of hands to represent complicity, intimacy and desire. In both *La Jalousie* and *Moderato cantabile*, the hands of the (perceived) lovers become metonyms for their bodies as a whole and thus, by implication, become the symbolic embodiment of their sexual relations. In *La Jalousie*, repeated references are made to the position of A...'s and Franck's hands upon the arms of their chairs, indicating an observer's detecting or suspecting, in the mirroring of their body language, evidence of the couple's complicity. The increase in such suspicions is reflected in the progression between consecutive descriptions of the hands. Initially, the focus of the implied narrator's jealousy is the positioning of the chairs on the terrace, the proximity of those of A... and Franck arousing his suspicions. As these scenes are repeated throughout the narrative, the focus shifts to include the position of their hands, as in:

Ils sont assis côte à côte, le buste incliné en arrière contre le dossier du fauteuil, les bras allongés sur les accoudoirs, leurs quatre mains dans une position semblable, à la même hauteur, alignées parallèlement au mur de la maison.
(pp. 31-32)

As the jealousy of the implied narrator increases still further, he imagines that he sees their hands moving, although the darkness prevents him from confirming his suspicions:

[...] ils sont assis tous les deux côte à côte, le buste incliné en arrière contre le dossier du fauteuil, les bras allongés sur les accoudoirs aux alentours desquels ils effectuent de temps à autre des déplacements incertains, de faible amplitude, à peine ébauchés que déjà revenus de leur écart, ou bien, peut-être, imaginaires.
(pp. 98-99)

As the text and the jealousy progress, the symbolic connection between the positioning of the couple's hands and their suspected adultery becomes more evident, in the references to the wedding rings worn on each character's left hand. Eventually, in the climactic seventh section, when A... and Franck are imagined together in a hotel room, the sexual consummation of their affair is implied by the focus on A...'s hand as she grips the bedsheet, as if the narrator is reworking in his imagination her earlier action in gripping the tablecloth (pp. 166, 97 & 112).

In *Moderato cantabile*, the development of Anne's and Chauvin's adulterous desire is also plotted through the movement and positioning of their hands and, as in *La Jalousie*, no psychological commentary or analysis of their actions is explicitly made. When Anne first goes to the café, her tension and desire are represented by her hands' shaking, which increases as she and Chauvin discuss the murdered woman, and decreases as she drinks. As her intimacy with Chauvin increases, their mutual desire is enacted implicitly via the description of their hands on the table, as in: 'Il releva la main, la laissa retomber près de la sienne sur la table, il la laissa là. Elle remarqua ces deux mains posées côte à côte pour la première fois.' (p. 48) Anne's increasing desire and her subsequent rejection of her maternal and familial duties are symbolized on a

later occasion by the symbolic opposition between the departure of her son and the subsequent phrase, 'les mains de Chauvin s'approchèrent de celles d'Anne Desbaresdes. Elles furent toutes quatre sur la table, allongées' (p. 87). The progression of the couple's desire is reflected in the shift in emphasis between the above quotations, from the description of their two separate pairs of hands to that of four, commingled. This progression reaches its climax in the following passage, metonymically representing the verbal culmination of their own desire and the reflection of the other couple's murderous consummation:

Elle posa de nouveau sa main sur la table. Il suivit son geste des yeux et péniblement il comprit, souleva la sienne qui était de plomb et la posa sur la sienne à elle. Leurs mains étaient si froides qu'elles se touchèrent illusoirement dans l'intention seulement, afin que ce fût fait, dans la seule intention que ce le fût, plus autrement, ce n'était plus possible. Leurs mains restèrent ainsi, figées dans leur pose mortuaire. (pp. 118-119)

At no point in either *Moderato cantabile* or *La Jalousie* is the implicit or suspected desire ever explicitly revealed, in a commentary or through psychological analysis. The reader of *La Jalousie* is not told that A... and Franck may be having an affair. Nor indeed are we told that events are viewed by a jealous narrator-husband. In *Moderato cantabile*, we are not told that Anne Desbaresdes and Chauvin are attracted to each other, or that they feel an overpowering, destructive affinity with the murdered woman and her lover. Robbe-Grillet brings attention to this common aspect of his and Duras's representative devices when, in an interview, he signals the important place which his external, symbolic representation of the suspected adultery occupies in his text, when he asks '... la jalousie, est-elle autre chose que la vue de deux fauteuils trop proches l'un de l'autre, ou le mouvement d'une main?'³²

So far, the 'reading in pairs' of *La Jalousie* and *Moderato cantabile* has focused upon similarities between Robbe-Grillet's and Duras's practices which reflect, on a textual level, the two writers' alliance. Some of these similarities, as has been

³² *Nouvelles littéraires*, 22 January 1959, p. 4.

argued, are of a more general nature than can be attributed solely to the effect of their particular intertextual relationship, whereas others, especially the metonymic and symbolic use of female body parts and of hands, betray a more specific intertextual dynamics. Even within these similarities, however, certain implicit differences have already been indicated between the two writers' underlying reasons for the use of the same tropes. These centre around their respective relation to theory, and to the thematics of desire as embodied by the figure of the woman. These theoretically and gender related differences, latent within some of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's common practices, become more evident in the two writers' respective treatment of issues of narrative viewpoint.

In *La Jalousie* and *Moderato cantabile*, Robbe-Grillet and Duras both question the traditional, realist convention of the omniscient narrator. Yet there is a fundamental difference between the nature of the two writers' questioning of the theoretical problems posed by this convention. In *La Jalousie*, the problematization of narration and viewpoint, centring upon the uncertain, absent but implied narrator and observer, forms the central dynamic of the work. All related textual elements conform to Robbe-Grillet's theoretical assertion that, 'Non seulement c'est un homme qui, dans mes romans par exemple, décrit toute chose mais c'est le moins neutre, le moins impartial des hommes.'³³ In *Moderato cantabile*, however, the nature of the narrative viewpoint constantly shifts, generally occupying the external, observational *position* of the traditional narrator, whilst alternating between omniscience, incomprehension and uncertainty. Although Duras's narrative viewpoint is omniscient in the sense that it is omnipresent, it is not consistently omniscient in the sense of being able to see or hear everything or to understand the motives behind the actions of the characters depicted. Whilst Robbe-Grillet rejects the convention of the omniscient narrator, Duras questions its validity and undermines the reader's trust, whilst still on

³³ 'Nouveau Roman, homme nouveau', (1961), *Pour un Nouveau Roman*, pp. 117-118

occasions adopting and exploiting its privileged position. The shifts in Duras's narration are linked to the author's relative distance from the theoretical issues which her literary sibling expounds. Since her work is not essentially theoretically driven, as Robbe-Grillet's largely is, Duras need not be consistent in her treatment of novelistic conventions and, thus, whilst sharing certain of Robbe-Grillet's practices, she includes others which contradict them.

In both *La Jalousie* and *Moderato cantabile* there are instances in which the field of perception is limited, so disrupting the realist convention of a narrator's omniscience. Issues of viewpoint, relating to both external, physical and internal, psychological limitations, form a central problematic in *La Jalousie*, as its ambiguous title suggests. The view is frequently obscured by the blinds, frame or faults in the glass of the windows through which the surroundings are observed, or, as in the following extract, by a combination of these elements:

Entre les deux battants, comme à travers celui de droite qui est à demi poussé, s'encadre, divisée en deux par le montant vertical, la partie gauche de la cour [...] Dans le battant gauche, le paysage réfléchi est plus brillant quoique plus sombre. Mais il est distordu par les défauts du verre, des taches de verdure circulaires ou en forme de croissants, de la teinte des bananiers, se promenant au milieu de la cour devant les hangars. (p. 57)

Elsewhere, it is the lack of light which prevents details of the scene from being discerned with precision, as in the following description of A... and Franck sitting on the terrace:

Seules se devinent, dans l'obscurité complète, les taches plus pâles formées par une robe, une chemise blanche, une main, deux mains, quatre mains bientôt (les yeux s'accoutumant au manque de lumière.) (pp. 207-208)

The inextricability of vision and interpretation is implicit in the above quotation's references to the hands of A... and Franck, which, as has been shown, are symbolically

associated, in the associative filter of a jealous mind, with the couple's suspected adultery.

In *Moderato cantabile* too, many scenes are viewed only limitedly, as when Anne is initially unable to see the murder scene, because 'la foule obstruit le café de part et d'autre de l'entrée' (p. 17), or when, during Anne's meetings with Chauvin inside the café, her child is described only when he comes into her view, through the doorway. On another occasion, it is, as in *La Jalousie*, the darkness which impedes vision and which, therefore, prohibits the viewer from knowing with certainty the actions of the murderer, as he is led away by the police: 'Peut-être alors pleura-t-il, mais le crépuscule trop avancé déjà ne permit d'apercevoir que la grimace ensanglantée et tremblante de son visage et non plus de voir si des larmes s'y coulaient.' (p. 20) What is problematic in this instance is not only, in keeping with Robbe-Grillet's practice, the fact that the viewer's field of perception is limited, but also that we are uncertain whose view is being presented. If, as it superficially appears, we are introduced into the immediate presence of the characters by a neutral figure who is not endowed with any insight into their minds, then whose partial view is being depicted, and by whom? Whose imagination has constructed the murderer's possible actions? The status of the 'peut-être' in the above quotation is not the same as of those in the following extract from *La Jalousie*, for instance:

A... fredonne un air de danse, dont les paroles demeurent inintelligibles. Mais Franck les comprend peut-être, s'il les connaît déjà, pour les avoir entendues souvent, peut-être avec elle. C'est peut-être un de ses disques favoris.
(pp. 29-30)

The nature of the narratorial position presents a central area of ontological uncertainty in *La Jalousie*, around which all issues of viewpoint and interpretation are constructed. Thus the reader construes that it is an absent narrator whose suspicions are portrayed by means of the 'peut-être' of this quotation. In *Moderato cantabile*,

there is no such underlying theoretical basis, and thus, no single, rigorous explanation for the shifts between levels of narration and degrees of perception.

As stated above, the narrator in *Moderato cantabile* occupies the position of the traditional, omniscient narrator, being ever-present in the events of the novel. Yet the degree of insight afforded shifts between one of omniscience - not in the sense of knowing everything, but of possessing knowledge which could not naturally be inferred - and one of ignorance or uncertainty, a shift which would be theoretically incompatible. The extensive use of dialogue seems to suggest a neutralized, objective and external narrative position, presenting the characters' words and actions, without commentary or analysis. There are, however, many instances where a possible interpretation is offered for the external manifestations, as in the following example: 'Tout en lavant ses verres, la patronne les lorgnait, intriguée de les voir tant s'attarder, sans doute.' (p. 35) Here, the narrator's traditional omniscience is undermined by the inclusion of the phrase, 'sans doute', but, whereas such a device in *La Jalousie* intentionally underlines the unreliability and subjectivity of the narrative perspective, in this case such doubt seems incompatible with the general stance of Duras's unidentified but omnipresent, narrative position. The reader is led to doubt the interpretation offered whilst still having to accept the omniscience of the narrative position, since no explanation or theoretical justification is offered as to who the possible narrator is, why the judgement offered should be doubted, or why the field of perception may be limited. The narrative position shifts, often apparently arbitrarily, between the two poles of omniscience and ignorance, frequently simultaneously displaying aspects of both; hence, the narrator is able to see everything, but the interpretation of what is seen cannot be accepted with certainty.

There are occasions when, as in *La Jalousie*, no insight is granted into the motives of the characters, whose actions are related. No psychological explanation is given, for instance, for Anne's shaking hands, in the many references to this external phenomenon; the reader must construct the cause implicitly. Likewise, in the following extract, in response to Anne's words, we are told that, 'Chauvin proféra un

mot à voix basse. Le regard d'Anne Desbaresdes s'évanouit lentement sous l'insulte, s'ensommeilla.' (p. 88) We are not told what Chauvin's utterance is, but must assume its nature by interpreting Anne's external reaction. The field of perception, like that of a customer in the bar, is limited, in that Chauvin's words are not heard or are censored. Yet whatever the cause, the inclusion of the phrase, 'sous l'insulte', offers the reader a minimal level of narratorial interpretation.

Elsewhere, the narration is entirely subjective, as the motive rather than the resultant action is described, the cause without the effect. When two men enter the bar, for instance, Duras writes that, 'Ils reconnurent cette femme au comptoir, s'étonnèrent.' (p. 27) Or, in the following extract, the emotional cause is given before an account of the words which would naturally prompt such an analysis:

La dame s'étonna de tant d'obstination. Sa colère fléchit et elle se désespéra de si peu compter aux yeux de cet enfant, que d'un geste, pourtant, elle eût pu réduire à la parole, que l'aridité de son sort, soudain, lui apparut.
- Quel métier, quel métier, quel métier, gémit-elle. (p. 10)

The extent of the commentary upon Mademoiselle Giraud's thoughts, even had it followed her words, betrays a level of psychological insight incompatible with the field of perception of a supposedly objective narrator. Here, the interpretation offered is unquestioned, the ability to enter the psyche of the characters described being that of a traditional, omniscient narrator. In the following example, however, contradictory narrative viewpoints are highlighted by their juxtaposition within the same passage:

L'étonnement de Anne Desbaresdes, quand elle regardait cet enfant, était toujours égal à lui-même depuis le premier jour. Mais ce soir-là sans doute crut-elle cet étonnement comme à lui-même renouvelé. (p. 36)

In the first sentence above, the reader directly enters Anne's consciousness with the description of her feelings towards her son given in terms of their history and

continuity. Given the omniscience implied by this level of insight and broad psychological analysis, the inclusion of an element of doubt with the phrase 'sans doute' in the following sentence, which refers solely to Anne's feelings on this one particular occasion, seems incongruous and displays the non-systematic and non-theoretical basis of the author's treatment of narrative viewpoint.

In the banquet scene of Chapter VII, such shifts become more frequent and are mirrored both by a shift in tense, from past historic to present,³⁴ and by a proliferation of lyrical, descriptive passages, which contrast starkly with the bald simplicity of other sections. In the following extract, for example, the lyricism of the description of the salmon contrasts with the subsequent minimalist style and detached, objective viewpoint in the portrayal of Anne Desbaresdes and her husband:

[...] 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 [...] la crainte d'un manquement quelconque au cérémonial qui accompagne celle-ci se dissipe peu à peu.

Un homme, face à une femme, regarde cette inconnue.

(p. 100)

The inconsistencies and jarring oppositions created by the clash of styles, and the constant shifts in narrative viewpoint from objective, as in the final sentence of this example, to incomplete, to omniscient - as Anne's emotions are described, or as descriptions of Anne inside alternate with those of Chauvin outside - reflect stylistically the thematic disjointedness caused by Anne's drunkenness and her rejection of bourgeois, social conventions. They also reveal, however, underlying differences between Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's treatment of the issues of narration, and of the thematics of feminine desire, based on each author's relative adherence to a theoretical literary base.

³⁴ Duras's use of the past historic as the main tense of narration is again strikingly at odds with Robbe-Grillet's theoretical rejection of it as an outmoded, unnatural and theoretically nonsensical convention.

Such differences were generally overlooked by those critics who recognized Duras's affiliation with the Nouveau Roman, as was illustrated in Luccioni's essay in *Esprit* by her use of *Moderato cantabile* as exemplary of certain, general practices of the group. The distinction made in the same publication, however, between two tiers of membership of the Nouveau Roman, based on whether or not the writers produced theoretical works, already indicated rather different motivations, between Duras and Robbe-Grillet, for their respective questioning of literary conventions. The shifts and inconsistencies present in Duras's text in many ways conformed to those idiosyncratic aspects of Duras's writing practice which Robbe-Grillet termed 'certaines naïvetés dans le genre «cri du cœur»'³⁵ and which, in his account of the role he played in the publication of *Moderato cantabile*, he claimed to have aimed to eliminate with editorial suggestions. Certainly, these aspects are unacceptable according to the suppositions of Robbe-Grillet's theoretical essays. Duras did not however claim to be theoretically motivated, never producing theoretical works of her own, and maintaining a strategic distance from the theoretical underpinnings of the Nouveau Roman with which, through affiliation with Robbe-Grillet, she was associated. The inconsistencies within her text are symptomatic of her non-theoretical relation to writing, a position which she underlined in an interview given soon after the publication of *Moderato cantabile*, when she stated that,

Il faudrait [... pour donner une définition du roman] que j'aie des idées sur le roman. Or je n'en ai aucune. Je sais seulement quand il y a ou quand il n'y a pas de roman, Ça va de soi. On y croit ou l'on n'y croit pas, c'est tout. Un roman existe quand son auteur est possédé par son sujet ...³⁶

This categorically non-theoretical basis to writing is an underlying difference between Duras's practice and that of Robbe-Grillet. In this way, Duras was able to benefit from the avant-garde group environment and develop the more experimental aspects

³⁵ *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe*, p. 95.

³⁶ *Nouvelles littéraires*, 18 June 1959, p. 4.

of her novelistic practice, whilst her simultaneous distance allowed her to conserve the more idiosyncratic and theoretically unjustifiable aspects of her writing.

This position, of being both inside and outside the Nouveau Roman, of conforming to the group's broad, underlying principles in order to explore certain experimental aspects, whilst simultaneously developing very personal, individual material, contributed to Duras's status in the group as something of a 'misfit'. The freedom from a fixed theoretical basis for her work which this position afforded Duras, allowed her, during the 1960s and 1970s, to distance herself from the Nouveau Roman group, and to be appropriated by the new transgressive movement of feminist literary theory, within which she could exploit the thematics of feminine desire, already latent within her earlier works.

Despite her explicit break with the Nouveau Roman in 1971,³⁷ Duras's intertextual relationship with Robbe-Grillet, as will be explored in later chapters, continues implicitly throughout their careers. The seeds of the often antagonistic nature of this continued relationship (which stood out, for its virulence, in contrast to Robbe-Grillet's relationship with Nathalie Sarraute, the other woman in the group) were latent, however, within their early stage of alliance. Both she and Sarraute were accepted as members of the Nouveau Roman on equal, that is non-gendered, terms, with Claude Simon, Michel Butor, Robert Pinget or Robbe-Grillet himself. Sarraute's theoretical essays and basis for her novels, her sustained assertion of the neutrality of her writing practice, her retrospective gratitude for the role which Robbe-Grillet played in helping to establish her career, and her recognition of her own role as member of the Nouveau Roman group, led, on account of the consequent maintenance of the status quo, to Robbe-Grillet's continued sympathetic, if somewhat paternalistic, attitude towards her.³⁸ Duras's later rejection of the Nouveau Roman, denial of

³⁷ Although Duras is known to have argued with Robbe-Grillet before this date, her refusal of an invitation to the Colloque de Cerisy on the Nouveau Roman is generally regarded as marking her definitive rupture.

³⁸ See, in this respect, *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe*, pp. 83-84, in which Robbe-Grillet's attitude towards Sarraute contrasts strikingly with that towards Duras and Simon. This will be examined in Chapter 5.

Robbe-Grillet's part in establishing her literary reputation, her consistently non-theorized writing practice, her emphasis on thematics of female desire and her association, as recognized exponent of the concept of 'écriture féminine', with the feminist literary critical movement were to provoke Robbe-Grillet's hostile backlash against his former sibling, now turned deserter. The literary rivalry between Duras and Robbe-Grillet thenceforth became the most sustained, mobile and central of the various intertextual relationships springing from the Nouveau Roman group.

This chapter has examined the circumstances leading to the first stage in Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's career-long intertextual relationship and outlined the nature of the two writers' positions, at this stage, within the Nouveau Roman. I have looked at Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's relative roles within the literary scene of the 1950s which, prior to the emergence of the Nouveau Roman, had been dominated by the 'littérature engagée' of Sartre, and I have highlighted why their literary alliance was mutually desirable. Since the exploitation of the transgressive potential of an explicitly feminine form of writing was not an option open to a serious woman writer in the 1950s, affiliation with Robbe-Grillet and the Nouveau Roman offered Duras a fruitful environment for the development of the more avant-garde aspects of her novelistic practice, as well as a means of gaining vicarious theoretical credibility. For Robbe-Grillet, who was a relative newcomer to the contemporary French literary milieu, affiliation with older, more well-established writers offered him both reassurance in the face of often hostile criticism and textual validation of his theoretical ideas.

Within a 'reading in pairs' of *La Jalousie* and *Moderato cantabile*, I have examined the textual reflection, in both similarities and differences, of the two authors' affiliation. Similarities between Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's questioning of traditional literary conventions, such as story, plot and character, are in keeping with the latter's theoretical writings and illustrate the common grounds on which Duras was enrolled into the Nouveau Roman. Although the means by which Duras and Robbe-

Grillet brought these conventional elements into question were often mutually complementary, in many cases these were not areas at the time exploited exclusively by this pair of writers. Other similarities between the two texts, however, especially the fetishization of female body parts and the use of hands to symbolize implicit desire, are exclusive to these works and reveal the workings of a more specific intertextuality between Duras and Robbe-Grillet.

A 'reading in pairs' of *La Jalousie* and *Moderato cantabile* reveals not just the extensive network of intertextual similarities which existed during this initial stage of alliance between the two authors, but also striking divergences which hint at the antagonistic nature of the later stages in the two writers' intertextual relationship. Even within the above areas of common ground, as I have shown, can be detected underlying differences relating to the authors' respective adherence to a theoretical base for their texts and to the implicit treatment of female characters. Such differences can be explained by Bloom's oxymoronic statement that, 'To do just the opposite is also a form of imitation, and the definition of imitation ought by rights to include both.'³⁹ In the final section of my 'reading in pairs', therefore, I have looked at particular differences between Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's problematization of narrative viewpoint and shown how inconsistencies in Duras's practice were symptomatic of her general, non-theoretical attitude towards writing. Thus, even within this initial stage of mutual admiration and alliance - during which both Robbe-Grillet and Duras participated in the group activities of the Nouveau Roman, productively developed, under each other's influence, transgressive elements of their writing practices, and established their reputations as innovative, avant-garde writers - one can see the seeds of the more rivalrous nature of their later intertextual relationship. As will be explored in the next chapter, Duras's ambivalent attitude to the broad, theoretical basis of the Nouveau Roman, combined with her development of idiosyncratic stylistic elements and woman-centred thematics, already implicit in

³⁹ Bloom here quotes Lichtenberg in, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 31.

Moderato cantabile, led to the dynamics of 'revisionary strife' in the later stages of her intertextual relationship with her literary sibling, Robbe-Grillet.

Chapter 3

Revisionary Strife in *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* and *L'Homme assis dans le couloir*: Sex, Texts and Contexts

Following the period of literary alliance or, to use Bloom's words, of 'initial love for the precursor's poetry', which can be detected in intertextual resonances between *La Jalousie* and *Moderato cantabile* and other works of the same period, the nature of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's intertextual relationship shifted towards one of revisionary strife as, loosely in keeping with the Bloomian theoretical model, each writer struggled with the other for literary autonomy. As highlighted in the previous chapter, the seeds of this shift could already be detected, even during their initial period of alliance, in underlying differences in each writers' questioning of literary conventions, linked to their respective level of theoretical engagement. The first, major, explicit change in intertextual dynamics was occasioned by the publication, in 1964, of Duras's *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*. Although Duras here developed further experimental, stylistic and thematic elements already present in *Moderato cantabile* and other works of the Nouveau Roman period, her use of an avant-garde writing practice with the thematics of female desire proved to be a timely and powerful combination within the contemporary intellectual environment. The inherent ambiguity of Duras's fiction, her non-theoretical stance and her willingness to allow her work to be appropriated by the new and influential psychoanalytical and feminist theories, provided the means by which she could break free from her literary sibling and the Nouveau Roman group, and assert her own creative independence.

The centrality of the issue of gender to Duras's assertion of literary independence was of fundamental importance to the nature of Robbe-Grillet's consequent revisionary, intertextual backlash. Robbe-Grillet's reactive, self-assertive response to Duras's perceived desertion and to her crucial role within the rise of

feminism in general, can be detected in the sudden thematic change in *La Maison de rendez-vous*, published in 1965. This was the first of a series of works to contain explicitly sado-erotic material, and in which the threat posed by fictional female figures is suppressed by means of sexualized violence. Throughout the 1970s, as the feminist movement gained momentum, the thematics of Robbe-Grillet's fictional works became increasingly sadistic and sexually violent.

Unlike Bloom's theoretical model, in which the different stages within an ephebe's intertextual struggle with his precursor are chronological and uni-directional, the shifts between stages in Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's ongoing intertextual relationship were marked by slippages, overlappings and doublings-back. This mobility was due to the fact that, unlike in Bloom's model, both writers were contemporary, knew each other well and were writing simultaneously within the same literary environment. Each writer could repeatedly react and counter-react to the other and to common external factors. Thus, despite Duras's initial assertion of literary independence from her precursor via affiliation with the feminist movement, and via an increased thematic emphasis upon woman-centred thematics, in a second, later stage of revisionary strife, she returned to the novel form, after a decade dedicated almost exclusively to the medium of film,¹ with the publication of a work which appeared to be a betrayal of her earlier, perceived feminist practice. *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* (1980)² was the first of a number of politically problematic, explicitly erotic works, which portray the darker side of human, heterosexual relations and which in many ways appear to reinscribe traditional, sexual hierarchies. In this work, Duras 'misreads' the erotic material of her literary rival, exploiting her status as woman writer in order both to confound feminist critics and to assert her literary independence from this movement in turn.

¹ It is significant for their intertextual relationship that both Duras and Robbe-Grillet made their entry into cinema, a medium which they were to both continue successfully to explore throughout their careers, during their initial period of affiliation, and within a year of each other. Given that both writers have expressed admiration for the other's cinematographic work, their films would also provide fruitful ground for a 'reading in pairs'.

² Published by Éditions de Minuit.

In this chapter, I shall first examine in more detail the broad, contextual causes and effects of the 'revisionary strife' which characterized the next stages in Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's intertextual relationship, exploring how the conflictual dynamics were initially sparked by Duras's perceived desertion of the Nouveau Roman and affiliation with new psychoanalytic and feminist critical movements. I shall then discuss how the theoretical approaches to the two writers, which were adopted during the period of this initial shift, have ever since dictated the terms within which their works have been studied. I shall explore the problems which the adoption of often mutually exclusive theoretical discourses caused when, in a second revisionary shift, Duras appeared to reject her former alliance with feminism by 'misreading' the explicitly erotic and arguably misogynist thematics of Robbe-Grillet's novels. Finally, in a 'reading in pairs' of Robbe-Grillet's *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* (1978) and Duras's *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* (1980), I shall re-examine some of the gender-related assumptions of existing criticism by reading against one another the two writers' respective textual practices in their treatment of sado-erotic thematics.

As has already been suggested, Duras's publication in 1964 of *Le Ravisement de Lol V. Stein* did not in itself present a conscious break with her precursor, Robbe-Grillet, and indeed the novel retained many of the stylistic and structural features characteristic of her earlier works and of those of the Nouveau Roman group in general. Yet her combination of an experimental writing practice with thematics of feminine desire prompted the interest of the influential psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, and hence of new, psychoanalytically based, feminist theorists. Lacan's essay, "Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras, du ravisement de Lol V. Stein" (1965), was, as one critic put it, '...nothing less than astounding as an event'.³ In this short and complex text, Lacan appropriated Duras's novel as an example of his own

³ Alice Jardine, 'Towards the Hysterical Body', *Gynesis: Configurations of Women and Modernity* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 172.

psychoanalytic theory, a theory which, although far from feminist in its own project, became extremely influential in the ensuing psychoanalytically based, feminist literary debate on account of its emphasis upon issues of female desire and upon the link between the unconscious movements of this desire and the female author's writing practice, concepts central to the theory of 'écriture féminine'. Duras claimed to have understood neither her conversation with Lacan nor the content of the essay which he wrote as a result of this, but she was nonetheless aware of the debt which she owed him for assuring the fame of her novel, when she said: "Et qui a sorti Lol V. Stein de son cerceuil? C'est quand même un homme, c'est Lacan."⁴

Duras was the only contemporary writer whom Lacan cites as an example of his psychoanalytic theory, just as she was the only living woman writer, according to Cixous, to put into practice the theoretically influential concept of 'écriture féminine'.⁵ From the publication of Lacan's text onwards, conflicting and complementary feminist theories, centring on the role of the female body in a woman's relation to language, and which were based largely on interpretations of Duras's text, began to gain a momentum which was matched by the rise of political feminism associated with the events of 1968. Just as Duras was heralded as a central figure and influence within this movement, so feminist issues became central in the study of her work. Whether for or against such concepts as that of 'écriture féminine', critics of Duras have, since Lacan, been unable to avoid discussing her relationship with feminist and psychoanalytic theories.

Duras's attitude towards this new critical interest in her work and to the concepts propounded by these theories was important in determining the later development of her fictional practice, particularly her shift towards explicitly erotic thematics. For her involvement with the feminist critical movement in which she was the central player, can be seen, rather like her previous association with the Nouveau Roman, as a willingness to have her work appropriated in order to assert her own

⁴ Marguerite Duras & Xavière Gauthier, *Les Parleuses* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974), p. 161.

⁵ In a footnote to 'Le Rire de la Méduse', *L'Arc*, 61, (1975), pp. 39-54, Cixous lists Duras, Colette and Jean Genet as writers whose writing inscribes the feminine.

autonomy from her literary sibling, rather than an actual shift towards works with a consciously feminist project, either political or theoretical. As highlighted in Chapter 1, Duras's rather sceptical attitude, of wishing to escape the restrictions of one literary movement without becoming trapped by those of another, was already evident in exchanges with Xavière Gauthier in *Les Parleuses*, a work which was, nonetheless, enormously influential in positioning Duras as an exponent of 'écriture féminine'. Although Duras was willing to discuss at length her role as a woman writer and her writing practices, she was reticent to make a direct theoretical link between the two. Her essential ambivalence to theories of feminine specificity in writing, already discussed in Chapter 1, can be detected in the following exchange:

- M.D. On me dit que c'est asexué.
 X.G. Que c'est asexué! Ce que vous écrivez?
 M.D. Oui.
 X.G. Je ne le pense pas du tout. Il y a un erotisme...
 M.D. Oui, mais d'un erotisme...
 X.G. ...qui pourrait être d'un homme ou d'une femme?
 M.D. Commun, oui.
 X.G. Non, je ne le pense pas du tout. Je pense que ça ne peut être que d'une femme [...]
 M.D. Sans doute. (p. 19)

There is an inherent opacity within Duras's writing practice which, combined with her focus upon a central, desirous woman figure, made it fertile ground for feminist interpretations which, in her wish to assert her literary originality and deny Robbe-Grillet's influence, she was for a time willing to encourage. Following the publication of Lacan's essay, *Le Ravisement de Lol V. Stein* became the central text in feminist critical debates, and the benchmark for studies of Duras's work, to such an extent that Duras complained: 'le livre a été appréhendé par des gens, si bien que j'en suis dépossédée.'⁶ *Le Ravisement de Lol V. Stein* became, as Leslie Hill described, 'the disputed territory between different groups of critics'.⁷

⁶ Ibid., p. 188.

⁷ *Marguerite Duras: Apocalyptic Desires* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 66.

If Lacan's essay on Duras was crucial in establishing her focal position within feminist literary theories and hence the nature of future criticism of her work, then it was Roland Barthes's studies of Robbe-Grillet which dictated both the latter's importance within structuralist theories and the terms in which the writer was henceforth studied. The formal, textual aspects of Robbe-Grillet's writing practice have been the predominant focus of critics' studies of his works since Barthes wrote his influential essay, 'Littérature littérale' (1955), in which he defended *Le Voyeur* with the following argument:

Et si nous sommes tentés de lire le viol et le meurtre comme des actes relevant d'une pathologie, c'est en induisant abusivement le contenu de la forme: nous sommes ici victimes, une fois de plus, de ce préjugé qui nous fait attribuer au roman une essence, celle même du réel, de *notre* réel; nous concevons toujours l'imaginaire comme un symbole du réel, nous voulons voir dans l'art une litote de la nature.⁸

So powerful and persuasive was Barthes's rhetoric within the contemporary literary, critical environment, so revolutionary was his overturning of traditional critical approaches to literature, and so wholehearted was Robbe-Grillet's espousal of Barthesian and structuralist concepts in his theoretical works and formalistic practices, that thenceforth criticism of Robbe-Grillet's fictional works, either for or against, was defined in terms of these formal, anti-thematic theories.

Le Voyeur, published in 1955, nine years before *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, already contains thematic elements of male sadism. The nature of the narrative, however - that is, the reconstruction of a hidden sexual murder - largely dictates the sadistic content. This sadistic content remains implicit throughout the novel, since the circumstances of the possible, absent murder, leading to the discovery of the young girl's body, must be construed by the reader by means of textual 'clues' provided by the unreliable narrator and protagonist, Mathias. Such 'clues' include the central,

⁸ Roland Barthes, 'Littérature littérale', *Essais critiques* (Paris: Editions Le Seuil, 1955), p. 67.

typographical gap provided by a blank page, as well as repeated references to pieces of rope, to cigarette ends and to the skin of young girls' necks. However prevalent implicit references may be, nowhere in *Le Voyeur* is the reader presented with an explicit description of the sexual crime or of male sadism towards a female victim.

Following the publication of Duras's *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* and the beginnings of new critical approaches to which this contributed, the sadistic content of Robbe-Grillet's work, from the publication of *La Maison de rendez-vous* (1965) on, became suddenly and markedly more explicit. This work also centres around an absent or ambiguous murder but, whereas in *Le Voyeur* the nature of the crime dictated the implicit sadistic elements, here the murder is of a male character, Edouard Manneret, and thus there is no direct link between this and the sado-erotic thematics which are prevalent from the very start of the novel, as in:

La chair des femmes a toujours occupé, sans doute, une grande place dans mes rêves. Même à l'état de veille, ses images ne cessent de m'assaillir. Une fille en robe d'été qui offre sa nuque courbée - elle rattache sa sandale - la chevelure à demi renversée découvrant la peau fragile et son duvet blond, je la vois aussitôt soumise à quelque complaisance, tout de suite excessive.⁹

In this novel, the sadistic and erotic depiction of women and young girls and the portrayal of misogynistic sexual relations become the context in which the narrative occurs, rather than a direct result of the narrative.

Robbe-Grillet's textual backlash became even more vehement in his post-1968 novels, in which women became not the context for, but the target of, male aggression. In *Projet pour une révolution à New York* (1970), Robbe-Grillet's next novel, attacks on fictional female figures become the generative momentum of the narrative. The revolution of the title, which forms the central dynamics of the novel, is attained by the three-fold rape, murder, and burning of beautiful, virginal, young girls. Throughout Robbe-Grillet's works, an implicit link is established between the

⁹ *La Maison de rendez-vous* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1965) Quotation from 'Collection "double"' edition, p. 9.

torture and mutilation of the fictional female body and the manipulation and disruption of the body of the text. So powerful is the rhetoric of structuralist, Barthesian discourse, that within criticism of Robbe-Grillet's works, the portrayal of sexual violence is consistently defended in terms of textual violence.

Yet it is interesting to note that Barthes's defence of Robbe-Grillet's work on purely formal grounds was made at an early stage in Robbe-Grillet's career, when the violent and misogynistic elements of his novel remained covert and could be explained or justified as being the direct result of a central, hidden event in the novel and the protagonist's psychological state. Similarly, Duras was heralded by feminist critics as an exponent of '*écriture féminine*' during a period when her novels still centred on implicit depictions of sexual relations, on the catalytic power and passive undercurrents of female desire. The employment of both theoretical approaches became more problematic and, in terms of their intertextual relationship, more interesting, when both Robbe-Grillet and later Duras began to write thematically more disturbing, explicitly sado-erotic novels.

The circular and generative relationship between fictional practice and criticism in the intertextual relationship between the two writers can be identified in their common, dual motivation for developing explicit, erotic thematics in their texts. In focusing upon these elements, both writers were not only reacting intertextually to each other, with Robbe-Grillet first responding self-defensively to Duras's alliance with feminist theories, and Duras, at a later stage, 'misreading' and self-assertively reworking the erotic elements of her literary rival's work. They were also responding provocatively to the respective critical debate of which they were a part. That is, Robbe-Grillet began to write consciously shocking, provocative and disturbing novels, because such material was legitimized by the dominant critical discourse's emphasis upon textual and formal elements. Duras focused upon explicitly erotic, sado-masochistic thematics in order to challenge and confound those critics who had previously heralded her as a feminist writer, and so sought to assert her own literary autonomy from this critical discourse.

Yet such was the potency of their earlier works in establishing their respective statuses and the grounds on which they were studied, so powerful was the influence of the two, distinct theoretical discourses within which they had become the key figures, that, although both writers provocatively challenged and undermined critics' expectations, criticism of their explicitly erotic works continued to be dictated by the terms and approaches which had developed in response to their earlier, thematically less extreme works. I shall now briefly examine a representative selection of criticism of Robbe-Grillet's and Duras's erotic texts, highlighting how the nature of the approaches to their early works has limited the scope and determined the findings of studies of their later works. I shall then attempt to rectify the imbalances created by this critical tendency and by other external factors, by 'reading in pairs' on a textual level, two explicitly erotic works, Robbe-Grillet's *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* (1978) and Duras's *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* (1980).

Critics of Robbe-Grillet's erotic works are strikingly split between defenders and attackers, with the former almost exclusively basing their defence on formalist grounds of stylistic and generic innovation, and the latter generally adopting a more thematically led approach and exploring the feminist implications of the writer's depictions of female characters. So powerful has been Barthes's influence on critical discourse, that the debate around Robbe-Grillet's works remains dominated by structuralist theories. Supporters or dissenters are obliged to define their approaches in relation to the often loosely Barthesian concepts so explicitly endorsed by Robbe-Grillet himself.

In a study of Robbe-Grillet's *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, Daniel P. Deneau uses Barthes's persuasive argument that literature cannot be judged according to the same criteria as real life in order both to undermine Robbe-Grillet's attackers on the grounds of theoretical naivety and to defend his own position, as when he writes that, 'anyone who mistakes the mannequin sequence in *Projet* for "reality" or serious

sado-eroticism is, quite frankly, superlatively nearsighted'.¹⁰ This structuralist argument has become so widely accepted that Deneau offers no further justification for his claim that the apparently disturbing sado-erotic content is neutralized, on a formal level, by the author's 'wit'. He does not propose any theoretical explanation, other than an inability to read properly, for other critics' unease and does not define the terms 'wit' and 'humour', on which his argument is based. Nor does Deneau define his use of the concept of pornography when defending Robbe-Grillet's text in the following, loosely structuralist manner:

[...] whatever is potentially pornographic in *Projet*, whatever might be called sadism, sado-eroticism, or plain cruelty, is in the long run neutralized by "wit" - is robbed of its horror or dark fascination. Robbe-Grillet's goal in *Projet* is quite unlike that of a writer of simple pornography or erotica.
(pp. 49-50)

What is striking in Deneau's analysis is the discrepancy between his extended, seemingly gratuitous quotations of some of the most thematically disturbing of Robbe-Grillet's passages and the often cursory nature of his own formalistically based interpretations.

In his analysis, Ben Stoltzfus is more theoretically rigorous, but his approach still depends upon a separation of form from content and upon a predominant privileging of the first of these elements. Like Deneau, Stoltzfus pre-empts possible criticism of Robbe-Grillet's work or of his own approach by turning the blame for such interpretations upon the reader, as can be seen in the emotive vocabulary employed in the following quotation: 'this new fiction seeks readers who are willing to live with the autonomy of language and who are not offended by its generative, reflexive, and sexual characteristics.'¹¹ Here, as throughout his essay, the 'sexual characteristics' to which Stoltzfus refers are those of language and structure, as he

¹⁰ Daniel P. Deneau, 'Bits and Pieces Concerning One of Robbe-Grillet's Latest Verbal Happenings: The "Sado-Erotic" *Projet*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 25, no. 1 (Spring 1979), pp. 37-53. P. 47.

¹¹ Ben Stoltzfus, 'The Body of Robbe-Grillet's Text: Sex, Myth, and Politics in the "Nouveau Nouveau Roman"', *Neophilologus*, vol. 68, no. 2 (April 1984), pp. 192-205. P. 192.

merely alludes to the strikingly erotic thematics. In order to assert the liberating, revolutionary nature of Robbe-Grillet's textual practices and thus to justify the disturbing content which he explicitly ignores, Stoltzfus offers the following, loosely formalist, theoretical model of language, in which feminist critical beliefs in the phallogentricity of language are reversed:

The artist's pen (poetic signifier for "phallus") opens up *langue* (poetic signifier for "vagina"), pares, thrusts, exposes, reveals and plays - above all plays with everyday words - violates ideology which is hidden within the folds of *langue* whose vestments are convention - the norms of the establishment.
(p. 196)

By distorting feminist theories, Stoltzfus equates traditional sexual hierarchies of male dominance and female submission with liberating and revolutionary fictional practices. When referring to a scene from *Projet*, in which a female character is tied astride a saw and slowly and graphically tortured, Stoltzfus thus not only denies the disturbing nature of the content, but also defends it in terms of formal innovation:

Since *langue*, like the chained lovely in the above example, is bound by convention, it has to submit to the author's designs. Accordingly, in Robbe-Grillet's fiction modesty is flaunted, images are exaggerated, plausibility is destroyed, cultural ideology is whipped, taboos on incest are violated, social codes are sacrificed, piety is crucified, *doxas* are burned. The traditional text is deformed, its body maimed, dismembered, injected, experimented on.
(p. 198)

Stoltzfus's formalist argumentation denies any correlation between the disruption of the body of the text and the violation of the body of the 'chained lovely' depicted.

Susan Suleiman recognizes that the formalist emphasis of many of Robbe-Grillet's critics has led to the negation of "what has been most avoided", that is, the sado-erotic content. She identifies two different approaches, one strictly formalist, the other cultural, (which is, nonetheless, dependent on the structuralist notion of the

writer's lack of personal responsibility) which have led to this negation and to the generally held belief in the subversive nature of Robbe-Grillet's writing practice:

The formalist rationalization treats the thematic constants as the 'natural' consequences of certain rules of transformation: the cultural rationalization treats them as mythological *données* that the text seeks to deconstruct. In both cases, the text is seen as profoundly subversive. (p. 50)

Suleiman recognizes in both approaches the use of tactics which serve to 'shame' the non-formalist reader, and which can be identified in the language used by Deneau and Stoltzfus. She argues that these tactics contribute to formalist theories' dominance in dictating the reader's approach, and that:

It would appear, then, that to pay attention to the sado-erotic content of the fiction is a sign both of degenerate reading habits and of acute prurience. Little wonder that no critic writing about *Projet* has stopped to linger in this realm! Signifiers are safer. (p. 51)

Suleiman sees Robbe-Grillet's 'distancing devices' as a dual means of dictating the reader's complicitous response to the text; firstly, using the interrupting tactics of deferral, they maintain the reader's excitement and arousal, and secondly, by revealing the content to be 'only play', they allow him to enjoy this excitement without experiencing the anxiety of participating in 'real' violence. In Suleiman's opinion, Robbe-Grillet's sado-erotic text, through its violent suppression of women, enacts the male fantasy of self-engenderment. Whatever the value of the formal innovation which Deneau and Stoltzfus defend, Suleiman believes that Robbe-Grillet's fictional works are not liberating in terms of their portrayal of sexual relations, and claims that, 'Far from deconstructing male fantasies of omnipotence and total control over passive female bodies, *Projet* repeats them with astonishing fidelity.' (p. 57)

From this brief overview, one can identify the powerful influence of Barthesian, formalist theory upon the approaches and findings of critics of Robbe-Grillet. Whether a supporter or an attacker, the critic's terms of analysis when dealing

with Robbe-Grillet's most disturbing texts are dictated by those of past critics and past texts. Supporters such as Deneau and Stoltzfus use Barthesian concepts in order to defend the sexual power structures, within the content, with which their language reveals them as complicitous. Suleiman's argument is based upon debunking the formalist bias of past criticism and is, therefore, nonetheless dictated by it. Such is the power of the critical discourse established around the key exponent, Robbe-Grillet, so insidious is the intellectual shaming within its rhetoric, that even those critics who acknowledge the existence of disturbing erotic content in his later works are still obliged to define their own approach in relation to formalist terms and concepts.

Similarly, within approaches to those texts by Duras which confound and disturb critics on account of their explicitly erotic nature, one can identify the powerful influence of Lacanian and feminist critical discourses. In her critique of Duras' erotic texts, Marcelle Marini adopts a consciously feminist reading position.¹² She sees this position as problematized by the necessity, within *L'Homme assis dans le couloir*, of identifying either with the pole of female victim within the sexual dynamics portrayed or with that of male aggressor. She sees this choice as personally disturbing, since, 'Pour une femme, lire sous la plume d'une autre femme les séquences comme la philosophie de l'érotisme noir, redouble la souffrance, à cause de la voix qui les porte.' (p. 43)

When examining on a thematic level the nature of the sexual relations depicted, Marini concludes that Duras's erotic texts reinscribe the traditional hierarchy of male superiority and female submission, which is that of misogynist pornography:

La croyance en la cruauté comme vérité salvatrice de l'acte sexuel est essentiellement le fait d'une littérature d'hommes s'adressant à d'autres hommes: elle scelle un véritable pacte de réassurance entre ceux qui sont, en général, socialement déjà assurés de gagner à ce jeu de la jouissance et de la mort.
(pp. 40-41)

¹² 'La Mort d'une érotique', *Les Cahiers Renaud-Barrault*, 106 (September 1983), pp. 37-57.

Yet, despite viewing Duras's works as misogynistic and pornographic on the level of content, Marini ultimately argues that Duras in fact questions and undermines these pornographic thematic conventions. Firstly, Marini defends the erotic content of Duras's work on the grounds of the author's revelation of an autobiographical 'crise sexuelle' which led her to write *L'Homme assis dans le couloir*:¹³ authorial intent is seen as defusing the problematic nature of the thematics. Secondly, Marini identifies certain textual practices which she believes undermine accusations of pornography. Central to these is her assertion that it is a *female* observer who narrates, the gender of whom negates the traditional, sexual, power relations of the events recounted. Marini's identification of the narrative figure with a 'voix de femme' is based, not upon textual evidence, but again upon Duras's own comments.¹⁴ In both cases the conflation of woman writer with narrator is used in defence of textual content.

From the very start of her article, 'Translating Duras: "The Seated Man in the Passage"', Mary Lydon reveals her critical framework, when she states that Duras's text is 'at variance with certain feminist views on sexuality.'¹⁵ Like Marini, Lydon adopts a consciously feminist stance, and so describes her feelings of revulsion and horror at the thematics of sexual violence and female passivity depicted. She too ultimately defends Duras's work, in terms of past critical approaches, as she argues that:

[...] it is precisely the *unconscious* that is Duras's subject - a fact immediately recognized by Lacan when he encountered *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* - the mysterious dark wellspring of desire, not its conscious parade. (p. 261)

Lydon uses the concepts, terminology and agenda of the dominant critical discourse surrounding Duras's earlier œuvre in order to portray her explicitly erotic texts as consonant with a positive, feminist project. She cites several of the same textual elements as Marini in her defence, as she argues:

¹³ Duras made this comment in *Les Parleuses*.

¹⁴ In 'Les Yeux verts', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 312-313 (June 1980), p. 55.

¹⁵ In *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 24, no. 2 (Summer 1983), pp. 259-275; p. 259.

[...] to focus exclusively on the emphasis on sexuality in "L'Homme assis dans le couloir", as the provoked feminist reader is likely to do, is to risk blindness to the difference within, embodied at the level of narrative by the woman voyeur (Duras herself?) and inscribed at the textual level in the words representing sexual difference. (p. 262)

Like Marini, Lydon conflates author with narrator and interprets the supposedly female narrative position, like the slippages of gender markers, in psychoanalytic terms in order to herald Duras's work as a feminist text.

Whilst adopting a Lacanian feminist approach, Lydon does revealingly recognize that she has a personal, gendered investment within such an interpretation when she refers to her subjective translation of Duras's use of the future conditional. Her choice of the form, 'Say that the man had been sitting...', she admits as being, 'motivated by the translator's reluctance to acknowledge that the events described "actually" took place. Translation, like psychoanalysis, is also a locus of transference.' (p. 266) Lydon, like Marini, is aware of the inherent ambiguity within Duras's text and thus reveals, in her positive interpretation of the problematic, erotic work, the influence of Duras's central position within feminist critical debate and her own, gendered predisposition to defend another woman's work.

Yvonne Guers-Villate also reads Duras's erotic texts within the context of gender related theoretical models, revealing in the very title of her essay, '*La Maladie de la mort: Feminist Indictment or Allegory?*',¹⁶ the issues at stake in any reading of Duras, as a result of the terms within which her reputation has become established. She first reads the text as a feminist indictment, in its portrayal of female power and male weakness. She then, however, shows how the narrator's direct addressing of the male figure as 'vous' and references to the female as the third person 'elle' subjectivizes the man whilst objectivizing the woman. In these terms, the text can be interpreted as an allegory of traditional sexual relations. Guers-Villate's ultimate

¹⁶ In Sanford Scribner Ames (ed.), *Remains to be Seen: Essays on Marguerite Duras* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), pp. 28-39. *La Maladie de la mort* was published in 1982 by Éditions de Minuit.

conclusion, therefore, takes the form of a non-conclusion, describing the problematic nature of Duras's work: 'Whether indictment or allegory, *La Maladie de la mort* truly bears the hallmark of Durasian ambiguity: in artistic conjunction, all the possible levels of interpretation are mutually inclusive' (p. 134). Guers-Villate's recognition of the inherent ambiguity in Duras's erotic texts, combined with her own and other critics' problematic responses to the material, reveal implicitly the dilemma created for critics of Duras's later works by the past critical emphasis upon the exemplary feminist credentials of the writer.

The influence of past criticism of Robbe-Grillet's work, which places him at the centre of the structuralist theoretical movement, divides critics of his explicitly erotic work into supporters or attackers. Whichever side the critic takes, approach and findings are nonetheless dictated by the terms of this powerful discourse. Such is the inherent ambivalence of Duras's fictional practice, that both sides of the critical argument, for and against, are present within the same studies of her explicitly erotic texts. So powerful is the influence of past, feminist criticism of her work, so essential is Duras's role within the creation of such discourses, that approaches tend, nonetheless, to defend her on the grounds of her gender and therefore in relation to feminist and psychoanalytic approaches.

In order further to underline the influence of past criticism in defining the terms of analysis, I shall now compare the studies of one critic, Leslie Hill, who has written separately on both writers' explicitly erotic works. In so doing, I shall look at how, despite Hill's awareness of the powerful influence of past critical discourses upon contemporary study of Robbe-Grillet, he adopts different approaches and comes to radically different conclusions in his analysis of each writer's work.

In an essay on Robbe-Grillet's erotic texts,¹⁷ Hill recognizes the central role which the author's work played in the establishment of the 'powerful contemporary orthodoxy' of formalist theory. Hill shows that many widely-accepted formalist

¹⁷ 'Robbe-Grillet: Formalism and its Discontents', *Paragraph*, no. 3 (1984), pp. 1-24.

concepts expounded by Robbe-Grillet are founded upon a misinterpretation of the Saussurian notions of signifier and signified, langue and parole. Robbe-Grillet conflates the signified with social ideology and thus claims that his reversal of the relationship between signifier and signified, and his consequent formally disruptive games with the signifier, present a revolutionary new mode of writing. Yet, as Hill points out, no such hierarchy exists in Saussure's model, in which signifier and signified are mutually inclusive, not exclusive. Hill seeks to redress this imbalance, not with a return to emphasis upon the signified alone, as in thematic criticism, but by showing that Robbe-Grillet's fictions, far from deconstructing the meaning of the signified, are in fact:

[...] haunted by the self-evident but oddly ironic knowledge that writing is always and already immersed in signification, in representation and conventions which have received definition before the novels begin.
(p. 9)

Since signifiers and signifieds are inextricably linked, then 'the more the play of the signifier is extended, the more the weight of the signified must be reinforced' (p. 12). By re-establishing the true status of the signified in his study of Robbe-Grillet, Hill shows that the frequent 'mises en abyme' do not simply narrativize the writing process in terms of aggression against the body of the text, but represent, 'an act of inscription whose purpose is to rape the image of the female body' (p. 12). Hill goes on to argue that,

Under cover of a literary device which is alleged to fragment representation, what is at work here is a remorselessly voyeuristic practice of writing which asks its readers to subscribe to a series of singularly loaded fantasmatic metaphors and to connive with its author in an activity of textual aggression directed not at canonic stereotypes of *langue* but at the image of the phallic mother.
(p. 17)

The 'ludic strategies' which Robbe-Grillet deploys on the level of the signifier do not undermine or eliminate the signified, but recast it as a voyeuristic fantasy. Hill

reads Robbe-Grillet's constant reinscription of erotic stereotypes on the level of the signified, which his 'literary devices' or 'ludic strategies' on the level of the signifier repeatedly disrupt and distort, not as evidence of the author's undermining of cultural ideology, but as evidence of an underlying fear of and aggression towards the female body. The willingness of critics to accept purely formalist readings, with their stress upon the liberating possibilities of the play of the signifier, has, according to Hill, led them to avoid analyzing the thematics upon which such play depends, and so to overlook the more disturbing interpretations offered by the study of the signified.

Interestingly, Hill's approach and conclusions, in his study of Duras's representations of human relations in *L'Homme assis dans le couloir*, are strikingly different.¹⁸ Hill admits that Duras's text is 'disturbing and provocative' in its association of sexual pleasure and violence. Yet he asserts that 'the rhetorical complexity of the story makes it impossible to attribute the text to any ready-made literary category' (p. 58), and goes on to support this view by revealing a 'coherent literary strategy' behind the 'structural changes' effected between the original 1962 text¹⁹ and the revised 1980 version. In short, whereas Hill refused to agree that Robbe-Grillet's formal play with 'literary devices' and 'ludic strategies' undermines the truly disturbing nature of the signifieds which they disrupt, in his study of Duras's explicitly sado-masochistic, erotic text he does just that.

The structural changes between the two versions of the text to which Hill refers are the inclusion in the later text of a first-person narrator and the shift in mode from a combination of present and past tenses, to the present, with action recounted in the conditional. The combination of a tense 'not of definite events, but of conjecture, allegation, unconfirmed report, and theatricality', with the removal of the act of looking from the male character, means that the text should be seen, according to Hill, 'not as a representation of events, but more plausibly as an exploration or enactment of fantasy' (p. 59). For Hill, Duras's 'self-presentation of the text as fantasy' by means of

¹⁸ In *Marguerite Duras: Apocalyptic Desires* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 57-63.

¹⁹ *L'Arc*, 20 (October 1962), pp. 70-76.

these structural devices is seen as a defence against criticism, as a means of neutralizing the problematic content, whereas the formal, distancing strategies in Robbe-Grillet's texts, which also reinforce their 'fantasy constructs', are seen as the means by which the author manipulates the reader into the position of voyeur or accomplice. When referring to the language which Duras uses in the description of the two protagonists' sexual organs, Hill, like Lydon, concentrates on her application of 'gender marks' or pronouns which are of the opposite biological sex to that of the character, in order to stress her disruption of traditional gender roles, and does not acknowledge other elements, such as the recurrent bestial adjectives and derogatory imagery applied to the woman, which in fact reinscribe such roles. Whereas formalist 'slippages' between levels of fictional reality, such as 'mise en abyme' in Robbe-Grillet's works, are seen as tactics which hide from the reader the true and disturbing nature of the text's thematics, in Duras's text, stylistic and structural slippages - between gender, and between the diegesis and the language with which it is described - are seen as 'making it impossible for the reader simply to construe the text as a crudely pornographic depiction of a violent heterosexual encounter' (p. 60).

Nowhere is Hill's will to defend Duras more evident than in his analysis of the final episode of *L'Homme assis dans le couloir*, in which the male character, with the woman's agreement, beats her, apparently to death. Although Hill refers to the 'painfulness' of the response elicited, he nonetheless argues that 'to read it literally, as a real enactment of murder, would be to disregard the many rhetorical slippages by which Duras prevents the reader from taking up a commanding voyeuristic position' (p. 62). Such an argument has powerful resonances of Barthes's formalist defence of Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur*, referred to above, the implications of which Hill believes to be restrictive and dangerous for criticism of Robbe-Grillet's work.

The conflicting and often very personal responses to the style and subject matter of the erotic works of Duras and Robbe-Grillet - the will to defend versus the fear of complicity; feelings of revulsion or horror versus those of insensitivity or self-defensiveness; fear of self-exposure versus fear of theoretical naivety - are also

reminiscent of the broader pornography versus eroticism debate. This similarity is not arbitrary, since many of the critiques of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's erotic texts aim to establish whether or not they are 'pornographic' as opposed to 'literary', as if these terms were mutually exclusive. Works by both writers have been censored as obscene and, indeed, if one applies the rather nebulous criteria of definition used within the generally non-literary, pornography debate, both writers' erotic texts could, on the grounds of their sado-masochistic content, be seen as pornographic. Such is the sensitivity of such issues that even Hill, who is critical of the pornographic structures of Robbe-Grillet's texts, writes of the 'soft porn' conventions which the writer claims to undermine. If one applies even the most liberal criteria of the pornography debate to an analysis of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's more explicit erotic texts, one finds that there is nothing 'soft' about the two writers' portrayals of humiliating, non-consensual sexual acts, extreme sadistic violence, incest or paedophilia. In terms of content, then, both Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's erotic works could be defined as pornographic.

Yet such definitions are generally based on social and cultural criteria, the pornographic content being assessed in terms of the author's intent or its possible effects upon the (male) reader. Such definitions are problematized when confronted with works which consciously question the limits of what is acceptable, thematically, generically and structurally, in literature. Both Duras and Robbe-Grillet exploit essentially hard core pornographic content within a highly stylized literary form, so questioning the generic limits between art and pulp fiction. Such blurring of boundaries leads to the divergence of views evident within different critics' views of the two writers' works, some defending them from a formalist perspective, whilst others attack them on the grounds of the thematic content. For the purposes of this study, I wish to remove the texts from the general, extratextual, pornography debate, by examining their erotic content on literary grounds. In so doing, I accept Susan Sontag's view that,

[...] there are writings which it seems reasonable to call pornographic - assuming that the stale label has any use at all - which, at the same time, cannot be refused accreditation as serious literature.²⁰

By reading criticism of Robbe-Grillet with that of Duras, I have highlighted some of the theoretical, gendered and often very personal issues at stake within the study of their problematic texts. By now adopting a close, textual approach in a 'reading in pairs' of *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* and *L'Homme assis dans le couloir*, I intend to overcome the tendency of critics to be influenced by the dominant, mutually exclusive discourses of structuralism or feminism in their studies of Robbe-Grillet's and Duras's explicitly sado-erotic works. This paired method, of reading a man's and a woman's works against each other, allows the study of the two texts on the same terms, unrelated to the sex of the author or to the cultural and social issues of the pornography versus literature debate.

Several factors contribute to my selection of Robbe-Grillet's *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* and Duras's *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* for a 'reading in pairs', the first of these being chronology. Although both writers wrote other erotic works which would also provide many areas for comparative study, the works in question are the closest in terms of publication date, Robbe-Grillet's text appearing in 1978 and Duras's in 1980. The second contributing factor is that, although *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* is the last, and in many ways the culmination, of a series of sado-erotic texts,²¹ it has received much less critical attention than the others, notably *Projet pour une révolution à New York*. Since it contains many of the elements characteristic of the series as a whole, it presents interesting, relatively unexplored material for a reading with Duras's *L'Homme assis dans le couloir*, which marked her resumption of the novel form after a period dedicated to the medium of film. In addition, *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* includes the largely uncharacteristic scene, which has been

²⁰ 'The Pornographic Imagination', *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1966), pp. 35-73; p. 36.

²¹ *La Maison du rendez-vous* (1965); *Projet pour une révolution à New York* (1970); *Glissements progressifs du plaisir* (ciné-roman) (1974); *Topologie d'une cité fantôme* (1976).

overlooked by critics, of an incestuous rape at the Opera, and which offers revealing areas of comparison with the literary strategies at work in Duras's text, in particular her combination of explicit and implicit elements.

Within this 'reading in pairs', I shall look firstly at the nature of the sexual thematics of the two writers' works, comparing their respective portrayals of the relationship between sexual desire and violence, between sadistic and masochistic drives and the traditional male-female hierarchy, and the role of female figures within the erotic economy. Of particular interest in this respect is a comparative analysis of each writer's recurrent depictions of male and female genitalia, and the revealing language, imagery and consequent status associated with each. I shall then look at the narrative viewpoint adopted in each work, an aspect so often focused upon by critics in support of Duras, and explore issues of gender and voyeurism which arise from the nature of the narrator's position within the material recounted. I shall finish my 'reading in pairs' by examining the relationship between explicit elements of both texts, which have been the main focus of studies of the writers' erotic works, and less studied, implicit, framing elements, such as descriptions of the context or setting. I shall examine the function of these stylistic and structural aspects in the construction of the fictional atmosphere and in influencing the nature of the reader's response to the erotic relations portrayed.

The nature of the erotic, sexual relations depicted in Robbe-Grillet's and in Duras's text appears to be very different: *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* presents a Sadean montage of fantastic scenes of sexualized torture against multiple female subjects, whereas *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* portrays the progression of a sado-masochistic encounter between a man and a woman. Yet both texts display an extravagant fascination with the dark side of heterosexual relations. Robbe-Grillet's text enumerates scenes in which women are hunted, killed and made into canned food, fed to dogs at a banquet, sacrificed in religious rituals, chained and put on display, drugged, set alight, imprisoned and subjected to humiliating interrogations or bogus

medical experiments, all by men. In Duras's text, the woman displays her genitals to the man, urinates and is urinated upon. The man kicks and stands upon her, she fellates him and licks his anal cavity and is eventually, at her own invitation, beaten, possibly to death, by him. In both texts, women are the victims of male, sexualized violence but, whereas in *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* the violence is imposed upon innocent female figures, in *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* the woman actively invites her victim status, asking the man to beat her to death. Whereas Robbe-Grillet presents his female characters as unwitting, dehumanized objects of male sadistic fantasy, Duras explores the paradoxical power of the female, passive role in a male-female, sado-masochistic encounter.

In Robbe-Grillet's text, the female figures are depersonalized and undifferentiated, all young, beautiful, innocent and sexually provocative. In Duras's text, although there is only one, central female figure, she is not endowed with an individualized identity either. Neither she nor the male figure has a name, defined personality or distinguishable characteristics beyond their respective positions of willing passivity and active aggression within the sado-masochistic hierarchy enacted. Duras's female character is portrayed as wanting to be beaten whereas, in Robbe-Grillet's fantastic scenarios, any sexual pleasure the female characters experience is due to their very unwillingness to be subjected to male aggression. In both texts, however, the narrative is constructed in such a way that the female character is presented as deserving to be attacked, on account of her physical appearance and of the fact that she is a woman. In *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*, it is as a direct result of her beauty that Angélica is to be sacrificed during a religious ceremony, rather than executed in some more 'mundane' fashion (p. 182). In *L'Homme assis dans le couloir*, the man's initial violence, in which he kicks and stands on the woman, follows a lengthy description of the position of her body, in which the obscenity, bestiality and ugliness of her pose are highlighted (p.12), so implying that she deserves to be mistreated, that the man's violence is the natural reaction to her unnatural, repulsive appearance. In both works, male violence is portrayed as the inevitable sexual

response to the female body. Female biology dictates a woman's passive, victim status.

The role which biological difference plays in the differentiation of sexual roles depicted in Robbe-Grillet's and Duras's texts, is reflected in the nature of their respective depictions of male or female genitalia, which are the repeated focus of both narratives. As the title suggests, a recurrent, generative motif within *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*, is the female pubic region, depicted either figuratively, as in the form of the door pediment's bas-relief (p. 8), in the numerous references to triangles or inverted eyes, or the inscription of the letter V, or literally, as the focus of the many descriptions of naked, young women. In these latter descriptions, the women's sexual organs are the specific focus of both male attention and male aggression. After Nathalie is hunted and caught by dogs, for example, the hunter

[...] tient le grand couteau qu'il s'apprête à lui enfoncer dans le ventre, l'empalant avec lenteur par sa nature féminine, pour achever la proie vaincue sans l'abîmer davantage, dans un flot de sang vermeil. (p. 160)

When her corpse is consequently displayed at a banquet, along with other game, in a tableau of the hunt's spoils, the sexual motivation behind the hunter's suppression of the woman is again underlined by the focus placed upon the blood which runs from her aggressed vagina, the symbol of her femininity, in the following passage:

Les invités des deux sexes admirent à loisir l'œuvre d'art, sa sensualité, ses finesses, l'équilibre des masses et des couleurs, non sans remarquer au passage qu'un peu de sang frais s'écoule encore entre les cuisses disjointes de l'adolescente [...] (p. 164)

Similarly, when docteur Morgan conducts medical experiments on the unconscious Angélica, the focus of his intrusion is again her genitals:

[...] il pratique la piqûre amollissante sous-cutanée, dite de disponibilité totale, directement dans la chair dodue et ferme du coussinet pubien. Enfin il

introduit, avec douceur, un ovule programmé dans le sexe de la patiente.
(p. 202)

When Christine is drugged and crucified as part of a religious ceremony, the target of the priest's aggression, depicted in great detail, is again her bleeding and publicly displayed vagina:

[...] le prêtre [...] tend le cierge à bout de bras vers la suppliciée qui commence à perdre ses forces; et, pour la ranimer, il éteint la flamme en l'enfonçant de quelques centimètres tout en haut des cuisses, dans la fente médiane qui s'ouvre sous la toison noire triangulaire, souillée de vermillon. (p. 213)

In this example, as throughout Robbe-Grillet's text, the female genitals are the site of male aggression and are no longer private but constantly on display, the public property of a hostile, male narrative gaze. This gaze is undoubtedly 'male', despite Robbe-Grillet's occasional attribution of voyeuristic pleasure to female figures, such as Lady Caroline, or his reference to the 'invités des deux sexes' in the above quotation, since even these actions and reflections are constantly mediated and controlled by a male narrator.

In the fictional world of *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*, the status of women is one of objects of male sexual sadistic pleasure, and the means by which male characters assert their traditional power and supremacy is sexual violence. This status is confirmed by the striking contrast between the proliferation of images of female sexual parts and the total absence of literal representations of the penis. Instead the male organ becomes fetishized, its place taken by phallic objects, such as the knife, the egg or the candle of the above examples. By means of this fetishizing, the male characters are distanced from actual sexual contact with the female objects of their aggression, their detached manipulation and torture of the very essence of sexual difference which the female genitals represent, becoming a symbolic means of reasserting the traditional sexual hierarchy of male dominance and female passivity. Despite the abundance of thematic erotic motifs, *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* is less

about sex and male sexuality than about the assertion of male power to which female sexuality is seen as posing a threat.

In *L'Homme assis dans le couloir*, explicit descriptions of both the man's and the woman's genitals abound. Indeed, as the following quotations display, (the first referring to the woman and the second to the man) both the female and male figure are portrayed as centring upon their sexual organs, their very actions dictated by their gendered sexual urges:

Je vois l'enclave du sexe entre les lèvres écartées et que tout le corps se fige
autour de lui dans une brûlure qui augmente. (p. 12)

Forme des premiers âges, indifférenciée des pierres, des lichens, immémoriale,
plantée dans l'homme autour de quoi il se débat. Autour de quoi il est au bord
des larmes et crie. (p. 23)

Traditional gender positions are reinforced by the difference in relative emphasis given to the depiction of the male or female genitals, and the nature of the gaze upon them. The woman's genitals are depicted above as she exposes them provocatively to the male figure and to the observing narrator, and later when she urinates before them. Yet, far more space is allotted to the description of the man's erect penis; an entire third of the short text is devoted to a description of fellatio (pp. 22-31). During this lengthy description, the man's penis is portrayed as an object of common fascination and reverence, the woman's kneeling before it in an act of adoration or quasi-religious veneration. The penis becomes the focus of both the woman's and the man's gaze, as if endowed with an identity of its own, detached from the rest of his body, almost fetishized. The couple's awed veneration of the phallus' transcendental mystery is evident in the vocabulary employed in the following passage and in the very length and pace of the description, as the penis (the feminine gender label of which possibly refers to 'la verge') is revealed, as if in slow motion:

Elle est arrivée près de lui, s'accroupit entre ses jambes et la regarde elle, et seulement elle [...] Avec soin elle la met à nu dans sa totalité. Ecarte le vêtement. En sort les parties profondes. S'éloigne légèrement d'elle, la met dans la lumière.

Je vois que l'homme a baissé la tête et qu'il la regarde, qu'il regarde en même temps que la femme ce spectacle de lui-même. Elle bat toujours dans des soubresauts au rythme du cœur. A travers la finesse de la peau qui la recouvre s'étale le réseau sombre du sang. Elle est pleine de jouissance, remplie de jouissance plus qu'elle ne peut contenir et tant à l'étroit d'elle-même elle est devenue qu'on hésite à y porter la main.

L'homme et la femme la regardent ensemble. Cependant qu'ils ne font aucun geste vers elle et qu'ils la laissent encore. (pp. 24-25)

The care with which the penis is treated in the diegesis is matched linguistically by the mythical, lyrical terms with which it is described, so emphasizing its latent power and its central role as source of fascination.

References to the woman's genitals are strikingly different. The earlier quotation, for example, which presents the vagina as the centre of the woman's identity, follows a lengthy description stressing her ugliness and bestiality, as well as her conscious, aggressive revealing of herself to the man. This aggression is underlined by the description of her mounting sexual desire in terms of burning, which contrasts with the more passive response of the man in the paired quotation, who is portrayed as trying powerlessly to resist the woman's arousal of him, as she takes his penis in her mouth. In the following quotation, the vocabulary used to describe the woman's genitals contrasts strikingly with that used in association with the penis, its unnatural, bestial nature reinforced by the woman's act of urinating before the man:

Les yeux toujours fermés, elle [...] modifie l'écartement de ses jambes, les oblique vers lui afin qu'il voie d'elle encore davantage, qu'il voie d'elle plus encore que son sexe écartelé dans sa plus grande possibilité d'être vu, qu'il voie autre chose d'elle, qui ressorte d'elle comme une bouche vomissante, viscérale. (p. 15)

The linguistic slippages of gender markers in describing the couple's sexual organs may question gender positions, but other linguistic elements, such as selection

of vocabulary and use of imagery undermine much of the liberating potential of such questioning. The woman's apparent activity, as she exposes herself to the man, as she takes his penis in her mouth and, ultimately, as she asks to be beaten, is more reminiscent of the misogynist excuse, 'She was asking for it', than of positive female liberation via the transgression of sexual taboos. Similarly, the man's apparent passivity, as he is seen as the unwilling victim of his libido, incapable of controlling the power of his revered penis, and unable to resist arousal by the dominating woman, excuses his subsequent violence as inevitable and natural, as though 'he couldn't help himself'. The partial disruption of gender positions on a linguistic level paradoxically contributes to the reinforcing of the underlying, traditional sexual politics of male supremacy and female victimization by disguising male aggression as passivity and female suppression as activity.

Thematically, both Robbe-Grillet's and Duras's texts reinscribe the traditional, Freudian sexual poles of male activity and female passivity and portray, within very different frameworks, sexual relations as inextricably linked with male violence. In neither text is sex itself the textual climax or narrative focus. With one notable exception and even this is uncharacteristically veiled,²² Robbe-Grillet's work does not contain any scenes of sexual intercourse. In Duras's text, despite detailed, explicit descriptions of other sexual acts, penetration itself is referred to extremely briefly, with the couple's orgasms taking place 'off-stage', in a textual blank:

Il s'allonge longtemps sur elle, il la pénètre, reste encore là, sans mouvements, tandis qu'elle pleure.

Ils viennent de jouir. Ils se sont séparés. (p. 31)

In *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*, it is not sex but the assertion of male power via the violent humiliation of the fictional female body which provides the narrative momentum. In *L'Homme assis dans le couloir*, the narrative climax is not mirrored by

²² I refer here to the scene of incestuous rape at the Opera, pp. 204-208, which I discuss in more detail later.

the couple's sexual climax, but by the man beating the woman, apparently to death. In both texts, the male characters' assertion of their own active, aggressive role by means of violence against the female body is presented as normal. In Robbe-Grillet's text, sexualized, sadistic violence is portrayed as acceptable since its fictional status, like that of all other thematic elements, is constantly underlined via narrative slippages; in Duras's text, sado-masochistic violence is portrayed as the inevitable, natural consequence when the merging of powerful, instinctive, biologically differentiated urges in a heterosexual encounter is pushed to an extreme. In Robbe-Grillet's fictional world, female characters are reduced to the sexual stereotypes of male, pornographic fantasy, whereas in Duras's text, both male and female figures are inflated to the status of universal, heterosexual archetypes.

Such underlying, thematic gender positions are mirrored on a structural level by the nature of the respective narrative gaze upon the female figures (and, in Duras's text, also upon the male figure). Despite the constant mobility and ambivalence of the narrative position in Robbe-Grillet's text, it remains always and undeniably a male voice or gaze. At the start of the novel, the narrator is absent, actions and observations being reported neutrally through the use of abstract nouns or third person infinitives: 'Impression, déjà, que les choses se rétrécissent. Ne pas trop se poser de questions. Ne pas se retourner. Ne pas s'arrêter. Ne pas forcer l'allure.' (p. 7) Within the space of four pages, however, the narrative position changes to 'on' and, within the same long sentence, to 'je' (p. 10). On other occasions, the first person narrator is conflated with figures from the text, docteur Morgan or the inspector, Franck V. Francis, with these personae then frequently portrayed as disguises, so adding a further layer of ambiguity to the already mobile and uncertain position. Whether the narrator is a character actively involved in the action of the text, whether he is observing others' actions or photographs thereof, or he is cast as the author being interrogated regarding details and inconsistencies in his text, his is a consistently male, voyeuristic stance. The voyeuristic pleasure which the narrator gains from the sadistic actions enacted, observed or recounted, is evident in such comments as the following, as he

looks at a photograph of a young woman tied astride two stools: 'Sans vouloir me l'avouer, je suis fasciné par son teint de porcelaine pâle' (p. 20). Elsewhere, when describing, imagining or watching a number of women who are bound and on display, dressed in provocative underwear which allows the onlooker to see the beads which have been embedded in their genitals as a form of decorative torture, the voyeuristic response of the narrator is revealed in the comment: 'la décoration de perles laisse craindre (ou espérer) le pire quant au sort qui les attend' (p. 112). The status of these scenes shifts between photographic representation, staged action and 'real' action, with corresponding shifts in the status of the narrator. In all cases, the narrator gains gratification from his involvement, direct or oblique, in the torture of the female body, presented either literally or as symbolic of the body of the text, and whose sexual parts form the obsessive focus of the generative, pornographic, narrative fantasy.

Nowhere is the male, narrative control more evident than in the rare cases which explicitly favour a female figure's voice, as when the narration shifts, without transition, from a male to a female character, as in:

Je prends entre mes mains ma pauvre tête sans cheveux, qui est comme un œuf, elle aussi. Non, je ne suis pas folle. Je sais bien que cette Nathalie est quelqu'un d'autre: moi, je suis la plus récente épouse de lord G., lady Caroline, née de Saxe. (p. 162)

As Caroline recounts, in a 'mise en abyme', her childhood readings from a book which featured the sadistic tortures and deaths of legendary young women, her apparent naivety in describing her pleasurable, sexual response to the material resembles that of the mediated pornographic conventions of 'Readers' Wives'. A female figure may explicitly voice her sexual pleasure, but this is presented within the general context of a male, sadistic fantasy. The ultimately male narrative control is reinforced by the framing of this fictional female voice by that of two male figures, the bald narrator above and the voyeuristic, intrusive interrogator who interrupts her: '«Racontez, maintenant, l'histoire de la petite Christine», dit la voix du haut-parleur, faussement

neutre, détachée, quoique toujours trop forte, trop présente' (p. 163). The only voice which a female figure is granted is one mediated by a controlling male narrator and which conforms to the gratification of a male sexual fantasy.

Many arguments against accusations of pornography or the reinscription of traditional, misogynist sexual hierarchies in *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* have focused upon the nature or, more specifically, gender of the narrator. Lydon and Marini unproblematically refer to the narrator as female, a position which might to an extent undermine the sexual hierarchy of traditional, male oriented erotic conventions. In doing so, however, they conflate author and narrator, as a result of Duras's own claim during an interview that 'les amants n'étaient pas isolés mais vus, sans doute par moi',²³ since there are no indications on a textual level as to the possible gender of the narrator. Leslie Hill claims that the potential voyeurism of the narrative figure in Duras's text is negated by the mobility of the gender positions adopted. Not only is this a claim which he does not make in defence of Robbe-Grillet's work, in which the narrative position is also mobile, but, as already demonstrated, such a claim does not take into account the differences in the nature of the gaze applied to the male and to the female character. As already shown above, although the narrative viewpoint does shift to focus upon both the male and the female genitals, the gaze upon the penis is one of adoration, whereas that upon the vagina is one of disgust.

Similarly, although the diegesis is recounted, generally in the first person, by a witness to the couple's sexual encounter, the removal of the narrative power from the male figure does not in itself render the sexual positions portrayed equal. In the following extract, for instance, the woman is cast in a passive role, lying still with her eyes closed, her perception of the man's actions mediated through the reported action of the narrator: 'Nous entendons que l'on marche elle et moi. Qu'il a bougé. Qu'il est sorti du couloir. Je le vois et je le lui dis, je lui dis qu'il vient.' (p. 14) Elsewhere, the narrator intercepts to tell the woman, whose eyes are still closed, what the man is

²³ 'Marguerite Duras: Les Yeux verts', p. 33.

doing as he urinates on her before then brutally kicking her dehumanized and totally passive body: 'Je lui parle et je lui dis ce que l'homme fait. Je lui dis aussi ce qu'il advient d'elle. Qu'elle voie, c'est ce que je désire.' (p. 17) Here, the narrator's voyeuristic position is more explicit, as he not only adopts an active, interpretative role, but also expresses his own wishes regarding the couple's activities.

The narrative position shifts, initially between a non-committal 'on' to a more personal yet ambivalent 'je' and later, between detached observation and interpretative intervention, and between apparent objectivity and the expression of subjective desires. Such shifts in levels of involvement are matched by shifts in the level of knowledge displayed. Thus, when the man sits down after his first outburst of violence against the woman, the narrator attributes an emotional cause to the physical phenomena observed, in the statement: 'Je vois qu'il est exténué d'amour et de désir, qu'il est d'une extraordinaire pâleur et que son cœur bat à la surface de tout son corps.' (p. 21) Similarly, the narrator interprets the woman's tears, as she takes the man's penis in her mouth, in terms which once again reinforce the organ's sanctity:

Sa bouche en aurait été pleine. La douceur en est telle que des larmes lui viennent aux yeux. Je vois que rien n'égale en puissance cette douceur sinon l'interdit formel d'y porter atteinte. Interdite. Elle ne peut pas la prendre davantage qu'en la caressant avec précaution de sa langue entre ses dents. Je vois cela: que ce que d'ordinaire on a dans l'esprit elle l'a dans la bouche [...]
(pp. 26-27)

This perspicacity serves not to negate the voyeurism of the narrator, but to betray a narrative complicity with the underlying sexual hierarchies, portraying the man's violence and the woman's submission to the power of the phallus as natural and desirable. Such a narrative position is underlined at the very end of the text, when, after watching the man brutally beat the masochistic woman, the narrator implicitly defends the man, not by attributing definite interpretations to what is seen, but by claiming complicitous ignorance: 'Je vois que l'homme pleure couché sur la femme.

Je ne vois rien d'elle que l'immobilité. Je l'ignore, je ne sais rien, je ne sais pas si elle dort.' (p. 36)

Although shifts in Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's narrative viewpoint do to a degree undermine the rigid control of the conventional voyeuristic gaze, both works still in fact reinscribe, either implicitly or explicitly, traditional views of male aggression and female submission. Both narrative positions reveal a fascination with the female body, particularly the genitals, which is simultaneously tainted by fear or repulsion. The sacrosanct status of the male body, however, is maintained, either by the penis's literal absence from the narrative and replacement by fetishistic objects, as in *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*, or by a linguistic strategy which stresses its centrality and reverence, as in *L'Homme assis dans le couloir*. Both texts employ voyeuristic narrative strategies of rendering private experience public, *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* portraying women as objects of male sexual gratification within the fantastic, ritualistic society, 'Le Triangle d'Or', reminiscent of Sade's 'Société des amis du crime', and *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* depicting the sado-masochistic activities of a couple and the dehumanizing, beating and presumed murder of the woman through the account of a complicit onlooker. However different the formal organization and selection of erotic elements, both texts betray positions of narrative complicity with, and privileging of, the traditional male pole in the underlying sexual power structures.

Despite such underlying political similarities between the two texts, the reader's response to the respective presentation of the erotic material is extremely different, and this, as I shall now explore, is due largely to stylistic considerations, most specifically the relationship between explicit and implicit elements within the texts, such as the relationship between erotic scenes and their context and setting.

In keeping with the style of his earlier novels, Robbe-Grillet's erotic texts depict explicit scenes of sexualized torture and humiliation of the female body in a detached, factual, obsessively detailed manner. The sheer recurrence and fantastic extravagance of such elements, combined with the complicitous, cold and objectifying stance of the shifting narrative figure, elicit feelings of shocked repulsion and

alienation in the reader, who is kept at a distance from the self-consciously fictional material. The text's thematics explore, in the Sadean tradition, the limits of human degradation and dehumanization and the sexualized hatred and fear of the female body, whilst the very explicitness of the representations and the conscious presentation of these as fictional, fantasy constructs aim to shock the readers and challenge their criteria of judgement. The effect of these shock tactics may be that the torture of the fictional female body becomes routinized, but such routinizing, combined with the constant shifts from one scene to another, from a graphically depicted scene of horrific torture to its presentation as fiction, also has the effect of distancing and alienating the reader, not just from the content, but from the political structures of the work as a whole.

Duras's text has also been criticized for the explicit nature of the erotic material depicted. It is not simply the shocking nature of the narrative content which incites such reactions, since, as Yvonne Guers-Villate points out, the same sado-masochistic thematics are present, but implicitly, in earlier works, such as *Moderato cantabile*.²⁴ What for many critics makes Duras's text so problematic, especially in relation to the position which her earlier works had established for her within the feminist critical debate, is the very explicitness of the sado-masochistic erotic content, a stylistic shift which Guers-Villate explores in her study. Examination of *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* on a close, textual level, however, reveals many of the implicit stylistic elements - lyricism, mysticism, the unsaid, the use of setting to create a psychological atmosphere - which are characteristic of her earlier, supposedly 'safer' works.

In *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*, the settings for the erotic scenes - labyrinths, prisons, castles, churches - are the stereotypical 'mises en scène' of Sadean erotic literature, their theatricality and isolation reinforcing a male fantasy world, 'où disparaît la jouissance des femmes parce que la question de leur désir n'est jamais

²⁴ 'De l'implicite à l'explicite: de *Moderato cantabile* à *L'Homme assis dans le couloir*', *The French Review*, vol. 58, no. 3 (February 1985), pp. 377-381.

posée qu'en miroir du désir masculin'.²⁵ The fantastic settings reinforce the extravagant nature of the sado-erotic content. In *L'Homme assis dans le couloir*, on the other hand, the mystical, vague landscape within which the sado-masochistic encounter takes place contrasts sharply with the apparently graphic depiction of the sexual organs and behaviour of the couple. (I use the term 'apparently' here since, as I have already shown, despite the extreme nature of the acts depicted, the language which Duras uses is frequently far from the cold and objective style of Robbe-Grillet.) Duras's narrator cuts from the description of the erotic elements to that of the surroundings and back again, in much the same way as Robbe-Grillet uses structural slippages or distancing devices at key moments in his narrative. Such shifts in *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* are abrupt and reinforce the fictional nature of the content, presenting it as a disturbing fantasy construct and not as 'real', and so have the effect of alienating the reader. In *L'Homme assis dans le couloir*, however, the shifts fade in and out smoothly, forming a seamless continuum with the action, as can be seen in the opening section here quoted, in which the two protagonists are introduced:

L'homme aurait été assis dans l'ombre du couloir face à la porte ouverte sur le dehors.

Il regarde une femme qui est couchée à quelques mètres de lui sur un chemin de pierres. Autour d'eux il y a un jardin qui tombe dans une déclivité brutale sur une plaine, de larges vallonnements sans arbres, des champs qui bordent un fleuve. Après, très loin, et jusqu'à l'horizon, il y a un espace indécis, une immensité toujours brumeuse qui pourrait être celle de la mer.

(pp. 7-8)

The imprecision and underlying sexual symbolism of this description, in which elements of the landscape are presented in abstract terms - 'déclivité', 'vallonnements', 'espace', 'immensité' - and whose haziness and vagueness - 'indécis', 'brumeuse', 'qui pourrait être' - are seen as extending indefinitely - 'larges', 'très loin', 'jusqu'à l'horizon' - create a mythical, poetic atmosphere which merges with and pervades that of the

²⁵Anne-Marie Dardigna, *Les Châteaux d'Eros ou les infortunes du sexe des femmes* (Paris: François Maspero, 1980), p. 15.

sado-masochistic diegesis itself, so colouring the reader's response to this disturbing material.

At key moments throughout the narrative progression, the focus shifts from the narrative momentum of the couple's erotic encounter to a description of the surroundings. Within these latter descriptive sections, the vagueness and immensity present in the above, initial passage also build a progressive, atmospheric momentum. Thus, in the midst of the thematically important fellatio section, in which the woman's perverse dominance and the man's helpless submission gradually build up to a sexual climax, the narrative switches to the following description of the scenery:

Au-delà d'eux je vois encore que c'est un pays sans arbres, un pays du nord. Que la mer devrait être étale et chaude. C'est une chaleur claire aux eaux décolorées. Il n'y a plus de nuages au-dessus des vallonnements, mais il y a toujours ce brouillard lointain. C'est un pays qui fuit devant soi, qui ne laisse pas de le voir et le voir encore, un mouvement où ne jamais s'arrêter, ne jamais connaître la fin. (pp. 25-26)

The same elements are present as in the first passage - 'la mer', 'des vallonnements', 'le brouillard' - but a progression can be seen in the emphasis now placed upon the heat, the clouds and the haze, which create an atmosphere which is more mystical and psychological than physical. The symbolic nature of the landscape is underlined by the narrative quasi-metaphysical interpretation of the second half of the quotation, with its incantatory repetitions and references to infinity.

Such resonances of eternity and fate, abstracted from the increasingly symbolic descriptions of the landscape, reach a peak in the final break in the narrative. This passage follows the violent beating of the woman by the man and precedes the final tableau, in which the woman lies still, presumably dead:

Je vois que la couleur violette arrive, qu'elle atteint l'embouchure du fleuve, que le ciel s'est couvert, qu'il est arrêté dans sa lente course vers l'immensité. Je vois que d'autres femmes, que d'autres femmes maintenant mortes ont regardé de même se faire et se défaire les moussons d'été devant des fleuves bordés de rizières sombres, face à des embouchures vastes et profondes.

Je vois que de la couleur violette arrive un orage d'été. (pp. 35-36)

Here, description of the scenery is reduced to the elemental, in which the colour of the sky takes on apocalyptic shades. This passage has the tone of a supernatural vision, in which the implicit parallel between the fate of the woman in the text and that of the dead women of the passage, and the association of the approaching summer storm with the powerful forces of nature, create an atmospheric continuum, in which sado-masochistic drives and the link between sexual desire and the beating to death of the woman by her lover appear natural, inevitable and desirable.

Whereas Robbe-Grillet's shifts between levels of fiction have the effect of distancing the reader from the sadistic content, in Duras's text such breaks from the diegesis create a fictional atmosphere which seduces the reader into a position of complicity with the violent, politically suspect material. However shocking Robbe-Grillet's depictions of the humiliation, torture and murder of female figures may be, the implicit elements in Duras's text are ultimately more disturbing, in terms of critical response, than the explicit, since the combination of overtly sado-erotic content with covert, lyrical, mystical elements creates a context in which the former is made, by association, to appear beautiful. Robbe-Grillet's pornographic motifs are revealed in all their repulsive, garish unreality as stereotypes of sadistic male fantasy, their disturbing nature not negated by breaks in the narrative progression, but at least placed under erasure. The sado-masochistic dynamics of Duras's text, however, are rendered all the more insidiously powerful by their elevation, through shifts in narrative register, to the status of literary, universal archetypes of the human condition.

The disturbing implications of this mingling of explicit with lyrical elements can also be seen at work in Robbe-Grillet's fictional practice, in the strikingly uncharacteristic episode in *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*, when the young virgin, Caroline, is raped by her father at the Opera.²⁶ Certain thematic elements are consonant with Robbe-Grillet's erotic works in general: Caroline is young, beautiful

²⁶ Pp. 204-208, particularly pp. 206-207.

and virginal, her aggressor, an old man; the rape takes place in a public place, so reinforcing the male figure's power and the inherent humiliation of the young girl's position; and, although this is the only example of incest in his work, the extreme nature of the sexual behaviour depicted is consistent with Robbe-Grillet's project of constantly seeking to flout sexual taboos and shock his readership. As in *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* and Duras's treatment of the thematics of incest and paedophilia in such works as *L'Été 80*,²⁷ what makes this scene particularly disturbing is less the content than its representation. In his description of the father's arousal and penetration of his daughter, Robbe-Grillet rejects his usual, cold and detached style for one which combines description of the father's actions and Caroline's mounting sexual pleasure and eventual orgasm with implicit, metaphoric comparisons with the sea imagery of the scene taking place on stage, as in:

La blessure... le navire... l'attente... Les doigts insidieux ne se contentent plus d'effleurer les algues blondes aux boucles soyeuses et la fissure - humide, déjà, dirait-on - entre les parois polies des falaises de marbre. Ils passent et repassent en ondes successives, sans se lasser, sur les lèvres bivalves qui s'entrouvrent. La marée montante pénètre dans les anfractuosités, écarte les dentelures d'une anémone de mer, où l'eau s'enfonce et se retire en un va-et-vient mouvant. (pp. 206-207)

Robbe-Grillet manipulates the convention of romantic literature in which sexual intercourse is conveyed implicitly by veiled metaphor, combining it with shocking and extremely unconventional content, so eliciting or, to use an appropriately sexual term, arousing an uncharacteristic reader response of attraction and complicity with what is thematically some of his most disturbing material. Ultimately, Duras's literary strategy of presenting disturbing, sexually explicit material in a lyrical form which implicitly makes it appear natural and desirable, a strategy which Robbe-Grillet here employs, is more disturbing in terms of the reader's response, than are Robbe-Grillet's

²⁷ An interesting 'reading in pairs' could be conducted between narrative and linguistic elements in the Opera scene in *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* and in the depiction, in *L'Été 80*, of the implicitly paedophilic, quasi-incestuous relationship of the monitrice and the young boy, framed by the movement and natural power of the sea.

characteristic distancing strategies, which alienate the reader from the often horrific, sado-erotic material portrayed.

In this chapter, I have discussed the two, overlapping and interrelated stages of 'revisionary strife' in Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's intertextual relationship which led to their common adoption of explicitly sado-erotic thematics. After their initial period of alliance in the 1950s and early 1960s, Duras's affiliation with the feminist theoretical movement represented her assertion of independence from her literary sibling, now turned rival. Robbe-Grillet, as I have shown, responded to this perceived desertion of the Nouveau Roman group, by 'misreading' the thematics of feminine desire within Duras's works.

I have examined how each writer became, at this stage, inextricably linked with two influential, theoretical orthodoxies, Robbe-Grillet with that of structuralism and Duras with feminism. As has been shown, these critical approaches to their work were henceforth profoundly influenced by the terms of these two mutually exclusive discourses, even though changes in the nature of both Robbe-Grillet's and Duras's works made such approaches increasingly problematic. By studying a selection of criticism of Robbe-Grillet's and Duras's sado-erotic texts, I have highlighted how the dependence on the theoretical methods and notions of either structuralism or feminism contributed to the two authors' writing being judged in strikingly different ways. The fact that a critic who focused his study of Robbe-Grillet's work on the potentially dangerous limitations posed by received critical approaches, nonetheless defended Duras's work on precisely those grounds, led me to examine other gender related and personal factors which have influenced critical studies. The socio-political distinction made between erotic literature and pornography, the fact that Duras was a woman, and that she was seen as occupying a central role in the feminist movement, contributed to the various critics' strikingly divergent interpretations of her and Robbe-Grillet's erotic works.

By examining Robbe-Grillet's *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* and Duras's *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* against each other in a 'reading in pairs', I thus compared each writer's use of the thematics of sado-masochistic eroticism. In a close, textual analysis of the two writers' respective treatment of certain tropes - the representation of male and female figures; the relative depictions of male and female genitalia; the relationship between sexual acts and the stereotypic poles of male aggression and female submission; and the nature and gender of the voyeuristic narrative gaze - a far more problematic picture emerged of the underlying sexual politics and sado-masochistic hierarchies than that offered by either structuralist or feminist interpretations. Strikingly, such problematization is due largely to an inability to attribute underlying differences to the gender of the author. Indeed, as the final section of the 'reading in pairs' highlighted, Duras's combination of explicit with implicit elements, of stark depictions of sado-masochistic acts with passages of lyrical description, draws the reader into a position of complicity which is ultimately far more disturbing than the alienation and repulsion incited by the framing and fictionalizing strategies which Robbe-Grillet almost consistently employs.

Chapter 4

Towards Self-Individuation: *L'Amant* and *Le Miroir qui revient*

The publication of *Le Miroir qui revient* and *L'Amant* by Éditions de Minuit in 1984 marked Robbe-Grillet's and Duras's almost simultaneous move to autobiography. This essentially narcissistic, author-centred genre was a particularly appropriate arena for the development of the later stages of their struggle for literary autonomy and the assertion of their individual strength. In these works, to a greater or lesser degree, both writers revealed the autobiographical sources of elements of their earlier works, including the thematics of erotic desire discussed in the previous chapter. In so doing, both writers illustrated once again their generative and often antagonistic relationship with their critics: Duras manipulated feminist criticism's focus upon female desire and foregrounding of the gender of the writer, whilst Robbe-Grillet confounded structuralist notions of the autonomy of the text and of the figurative 'death of the author'. In both cases, the adoption of the autobiographical genre was largely seen by critics as a surprising move, appearing to renege on the transgressive writing practices on which their reputations had been based. Yet Duras and Robbe-Grillet were not the first avant-garde writers of their generation to turn to autobiography: both Roland Barthes and Nathalie Sarraute had already published strongly autobiographical works,¹ so re-establishing the genre as intellectually worthy and as potentially fruitful ground for experimental forms of writing. Like these precursors, Duras and Robbe-Grillet self-consciously brought into question the conventions of the genre, to produce works which were both autobiographical and avant-garde.

¹ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 1975); Nathalie Sarraute, *Enfance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983).

In this chapter, I shall examine Robbe-Grillet's and Duras's questioning, within *Le Miroir qui revient* and *L'Amant*, of issues of autobiographical and biographical representation. I shall look first at both writers' self-reflexive depictions of the transgressive nature of their autobiographical projects, before examining how their works mirror on several levels the theoretical and personal issues of (auto)biographical representation expounded in Barthes's *La Chambre claire* (1980).² I shall explore, in particular, Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's textual reworkings of Barthes's discussion of the inadequacy of photographic representations of the self and of the mother. I shall discuss the two writers' responses to the theoretical issues of visual representation of the self raised in Barthes's text, and their practical implementations of these in their construction of a fragmented, composite autobiographical self. I shall then explore how Duras and Robbe-Grillet develop the theoretical and personal elements of Barthes's discussion of photographs of his late mother, and how they put these issues into textual practice in their respective portrayals of their own mothers. Since autobiography, unlike Barthes's explicitly academic precursor text, necessarily centres on the identity of the author, I shall then discuss the interplay, in *L'Amant* and *Le Miroir qui revient*, between the representation of the mother and of the self. I shall look at the nature of the mother-child relationship portrayed and the role which the mother is depicted as playing in the formation of the autobiographical self, especially in relation to sexuality. I shall then look at how, in autobiography, differences in the nature of the identification between mother and self, when confronted with problematic elements of either the mother's or the author's life, can lead to theoretical, personal and ethical complications unforeseen in Barthes's explicitly non-autobiographical work. In this respect, I shall study the conflictual dynamics underlying Robbe-Grillet's account of his own and his parents' past political beliefs and actions.

² Published jointly by Éditions de l'Étoile, Gallimard & Seuil.

Duras and Robbe-Grillet are both keen to underline the avant-garde credentials of their potentially surprising adoption of the autobiographical genre by including self-reflexive passages within *L'Amant* and *Le Miroir qui revient*, which depict or describe the unconventional nature of their respective works. Thus following a passage of apparently conventional autobiographical narration, Duras explicitly reflects upon her literary project with the comment: 'J'ai beaucoup écrit de ces gens de ma famille'.³ The critical distance so established between writer and autobiographical content is then increased still further when she writes: 'L'histoire de ma vie n'existe pas. Ça n'existe pas. Il n'y a jamais de centre. Pas de chemin, pas de ligne. Il y a de vastes endroits où l'on fait croire qu'il y avait quelqu'un, ce n'est pas vrai il n'y avait personne.' Duras hereby destabilizes any simplistic, conventional, biographical approach to her work, highlighting the ambiguous relationship between the author as writer and the author as character, between the aleatory chronology of a life and the necessarily formalized, insufficient and falsifying account of this. She continues to maintain that her fictional work is rooted in her life but that, instead of relating known, remembered elements or 'périodes claires', in *L'Amant* for the first time, as the following quotation indicates, she deals with areas of her life which have consciously or unconsciously remained hidden, unknown: 'Ici je parle des périodes cachées de cette même jeunesse, de certains enfouissements que j'aurais opérés sur certains faits, sur certains sentiments, sur certains événements.' Thus, whereas Duras underlines the fragmentary, shifting, unstable nature of her account, so destabilizing the reader's relationship with the characters and events recounted, she simultaneously and almost paradoxically confirms her investment in the writing project itself. Although her autobiography cannot be true or complete, her relationship as author of the work to that work is a personal, not a theoretically driven, one. Duras underlines this non-theoretical autobiographical position in the following passage, the lyricism of which,

³ This and the following quotations are from *L'Amant*, pp. 14-15.

with its characteristic tripartite structures, is stylistically consonant with the work as a whole:

Mais le plus souvent je n'ai pas d'avis, je vois que tous les champs sont ouverts, qu'il n'y aurait plus de murs, que l'écrit ne saurait plus où se mettre pour se cacher, se faire, se lire, que son inconvenance fondamentale ne serait plus respectée, mais je n'y pense pas plus avant.

Duras evokes the post-modern nature of her work and her ambiguous 'autobiographical pact';⁴ for, whilst the narrator can be identified with the name of the author on the cover, the stable nature of the identity which such a name traditionally implies is fragmented and problematized.

Robbe-Grillet also portrays, in passages of theoretical commentary within the literary work itself, the self-contradictory, unstable nature of his autobiographical project and his dismissal of any 'pact' of sincerity with his reader. His claim, which is consciously controversial in relation to his past works and theories, 'Je n'ai jamais parlé d'autre chose que de moi' (p. 10), is framed by statements which pre-emptively and retrospectively qualify and undermine it. Immediately preceding this claim, Robbe-Grillet includes a contextual, editorial aside stating that the views expressed in this and the following statements are already out-dated. Immediately after it, he states that, 'Comme c'était de l'intérieur, on ne s'en est guère aperçu', thus questioning the nature and extent of his claimed autobiographical investment.

Given his central position within the development of structuralist theories and his former espousal of their notion of a faceless, 'dead' author, Robbe-Grillet is particularly conscious of potential criticism of theoretical inconsistency for his adoption of the genre of autobiography. Ann Jefferson describes this constant awareness of, and consequent attempts to pre-empt, future critical approaches as an

⁴ In *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), Philippe Lejeune maintains that a pact of sincerity between author and reader is a prerequisite of autobiography, an assertion which both Duras and Robbe-Grillet consciously refute.

'anxiety of anticipation'.⁵ This anxiety is evident in Robbe-Grillet's comment, following the above quotation, that:

[...] je viens là, en deux lignes, de prononcer trois termes suspects, honteux, déplorables, sur lesquels j'ai largement concouru à jeter le discrédit et qui suffiront, demain encore, à me faire condamner par plusieurs de mes pairs et la plupart de mes descendants [...] (p. 10)

By underlining his awareness of possible, theoretical objections and, moreover, by describing them as 'ces rassurantes niaiseries' which 'ont perdu en quelques années ce qu'elles pouvaient avoir de scandaleux, de corrosif, donc de révolutionnaire, pour se ranger dorénavant parmi les idées reçues' (p. 11), Robbe-Grillet is keen to defend the transgressive nature, in terms of both theory and writing practice, of his autobiographical work.

As has already been pointed out, by adopting the genre of autobiography in which to develop their subversive forms of writing, Duras and Robbe-Grillet are following the example of other contemporary avant-garde writers, notably Roland Barthes. In exploring, theoretically and personally, the relationship between present and past selves and associated issues of the representation of the autobiographical self's identity, Duras and Robbe-Grillet echo in many ways Barthes's precursor text, *La Chambre claire* (1980). This work, although not explicitly autobiographical, is Barthes's overtly personal response to the theoretical problems posed by photographic, and by extension any, representation's inability to paint a true, complete portrait of a person's 'essence'. It is interesting to note that both *L'Amant* and *Le Miroir qui revient* were originally commissioned for rather different projects with a strong photographic element: the proposed format which eventually spawned *L'Amant* was to be a commentary on a series of autobiographical photographs, and *Le Miroir qui revient* was initially conceived, like Barthes's *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975), as a literary portrait of the author, accompanied by illustrations and photographs, in the

⁵ Ann Jefferson, 'Autobiography as intertext: Barthes, Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet', in Michael Worton and Judith Still (eds), *Intertextuality: theories and practices* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press), pp. 108-129.

Seuil series, *Écrivains de toujours*.⁶ Barthes prefaced his autobiography with the warning to readers that 'Tout ceci doit être considéré comme dit par un personnage de roman', foreshadowing Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's self-reflexive caveats. Yet the actual presence within Barthes's work of photographs, including ones of himself and his family, makes it a less interesting intertext than *La Chambre claire*, the explicit project of which - a theoretical if personal analysis of photography - gives way to reflections upon the inability of absent, referential photographs to capture his own or, more poignantly, his late mother's 'essence' or self.

The following comment by Barthes on his failure to recognize himself in photographs, since their fixed and two-dimensional nature is incompatible with an identity which is ever-shifting, composite and self-contradictory, presents an important precursor to Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's self-conscious depictions of self in *L'Amant* and *Le Miroir qui revient*:

... c'est «moi» qui ne coïncide jamais avec mon image; car c'est l'image qui est lourde, immobile, entêtée [...], et c'est «moi» qui suis léger, divisé, dispersé et qui, tel un ludion, ne tiens pas en place, tout en m'agitant dans mon bocal ... (pp. 26-27)

For Barthes, photography's fixing of the subject in one pose, at one particular instant, means that it is unable to capture a person's essence, an inability which is particularly frustrating and disappointing for the spectator when that person, the object or 'spectrum', is either oneself or a loved one.

In keeping with the absence of photographs in the autobiographical strand of Barthes's text, Duras uses the description of a hypothetical, because non-existent, photograph of herself as an adolescent, on the ferry crossing the Mekong river, as a central, generative trope in *L'Amant*. Other absent although apparently existing photographs form additional, secondary gaps around which characters and associated

⁶ The origins of both texts are now well-documented. Duras discusses the genesis of *L'Amant*, originally to be called *L'Image absolu*, in an interview with Hervé Le Masson, 'L'Inconnue de la Rue Catinat', *Le Nouvel Observateur* (28 September, 1984), pp. 92-94. Robbe-Grillet refers to the original commissioning of his work in a footnote in *Le Miroir qui revient*, p. 10.

events are constructed. According to Duras, what gives the central, absent photograph of her former self its particular evocative and narrative potency is its very non-existence, and hence its power to escape fixity and predictability. She expresses such views in the following passage:

C'est au cours de ce voyage que l'image se serait détachée, qu'elle aurait été enlevée à la somme. Elle aurait pu exister, une photographie aurait pu être prise, comme une autre, ailleurs, dans d'autres circonstances. Mais elle ne l'a pas été. L'objet était trop mince pour la provoquer. Qui aurait pu penser à ça? [...] C'est pourquoi, cette image, et il ne pouvait pas en être autrement, elle n'existe pas. Elle a été omise. Elle a été oubliée. Elle n'a pas été détachée, enlevée à la somme. C'est à ce manque d'avoir été faite qu'elle doit sa vertu, celle de représenter un absolu, d'en être justement l'auteur. (pp. 16-17)

This 'image absolue', then, gains its strength and status as absolute from the very fact that it does not exist, that the events which could have been its subject, had one been able to predict their later formative role in the author's life, are thus freed from the fixity of what Barthes terms photography's 'noème', that is the authenticating link between them and an outside 'reality', the proof that 'Ça-a-été'.⁷ Instead, as the use of the conditional tense in the passage quoted suggests, the link created, by means of this central absence in Duras's narrative, between the recurrent, absent photograph and the autobiographical reality of the author's life, is one in which imagination, distortion and even forgetfulness play a generative role. The absence of photographic evidence and its replacement with textual depictions prove not that 'Ça a été', but that 'Ça aurait pu être'.

Robbe-Grillet explores similar issues of self-representation, of the capturing of the 'moi', in an analysis of a painting rather than a photograph of himself. Like Duras's 'image absolue', this painting is absent from the text, although it does exist: apparently, it is exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art in New York.⁸ What the

⁷ *La Chambre claire*, p. 120.

⁸ *Le Miroir qui revient*, pp. 58-59. In a footnote, the editor identifies the painting as Marc Tansey's *Robbe-Grillet cleansing everything in the sight* (sic).

reader is presented with instead is Robbe-Grillet's written appropriation and interpretation of another person's representation of his image of Robbe-Grillet. Given the narcissistic nature of Robbe-Grillet's autobiographical project, it is notable that, in his appropriation of the painting, he forgets the name of the original artist, correcting his parenthesis, 'dont j'oublie le nom de façon passagère', not in the body of the text itself, but in an editorial footnote. Robbe-Grillet textualizes another art form, transforming into autobiography another artist's use of the medium of painting which, lacking the photographic medium's self-authenticating link of 'Ça-a-été', is even further removed from the original 'reality'. In his transformative description of the painting, Robbe-Grillet focuses upon the fragmentation of self represented in the original by its depiction of the author cleaning a scattered assortment of objects:

En s'approchant pour regarder avec plus d'attention, on s'aperçoit qu'il s'agit en fait d'objets parfaitement reconnaissables, bien que fossilisés et en miettes, qui sont les débris disparates de notre civilisation, de notre culture, de notre histoire, [...] mélangés à des éléments brisés tirés de mes propres récits, romans ou films [...], et jusqu'à mon propre visage, et aussi moi-même à genoux en train de laver, reproduit à échelle très réduite et pétrifié comme tout le reste.

Je me reconnais volontiers dans cette allégorie pleine d'humour.

(p. 59)

The allegory of the painting becomes, through Robbe-Grillet's literary appropriation, an allegory for his form of self-representation in which imagination and interpretation play a constitutive part.

Both Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's literary descriptions of a visual medium's representation of a self and of a moment in that self's existence, illustrate the fact that autobiography is always necessarily distant, composite and fragmented, not only because it is always at least two removes from the original object of representation, but also because this object - the autobiographical self, past or present - is itself composite, fragmented and unstable. For both writers, it is the autobiographical representation's very lack of fixity or of self-authentication which captures the flux and randomness inherent in the notion of an ever-evolving 'self'. In their illustration

of this lack via a parallel with a visual medium, Duras and Robbe-Grillet are responding to the theoretical issues of representation raised in Barthes's discussion of photography; although whereas Barthes discusses these issues in relation to absent but real photos, Duras does so in relation to an absent, because non-existent, photograph, and Robbe-Grillet in relation to an absent but existing painting.

Duras and Robbe-Grillet both aim to render the fragmentation, highlighted in their self-reflexively interwoven discussions of a visual representation, in their textual construction of an autobiographical self which is unstable and multi-faceted. Shifts between various levels of *je* reflect the multiple positions occupied by the autobiographical self at different times in relation to the events of his or her life. Duras's narrating voice slips between levels of self, at times engaging wholly with either a young or the aged *je* or, at others, strikingly distancing one from the other, the younger *je* becoming the object of the other older *je*'s gaze, as in the address to the reader, 'regardez-moi' (p. 24). This visually-motivated fixing of an objectified *je* by self-subjectified *je*, reminiscent of Barthes's claim that 'la Photographie transformait le sujet en objet...'⁹, is linked thematically with the young *je*'s provocative, desirous and desire-inciting nature: 'J'ai déjà l'habitude qu'on me regarde.' (p. 25)

The objectivization of the past self by the gaze of the present self through the act of remembering and thence of constructing a narrative, is most strikingly linked to the fragmentation of this many-layered self in those cases where a shift of person is effected from *je* to *elle*, when referring to the younger autobiographical self. Thus, sandwiched between two passages in which the younger *je* is clearly and repeatedly signalled, in conversations with her mother, is a passage describing the crossing of the river and the first exchange with her future lover, in which *je* is transposed into *la petite*, the girl's role as daughter shifting to that of object of male desire and object of a male gaze (pp. 29-31). The implicit links which, by means of this shift from first to

⁹ *La Chambre claire*, p. 29.

third person or to a third-person epithet, are being forged between watching, desire, objectivization and the younger autobiographical self are used to most consistent effect within the lengthy series of connected passages (pp. 44-56), which recount the young girl's sexual initiation with her Chinese lover. In this account, traditional sexual roles of active and passive are not reversed, but are displaced and complicated, as the young self is seen both as the passive object of male desire - but an object who revels in, and powerfully manipulates, this apparent passivity - and as the active, desiring subject, gaining self-assertive liberation through manipulation of sexual roles. Such shifts in agency are matched by the symbolic shift, at the midpoint of the account and immediately following the loss of her virginity, from *elle* to *je* (p. 50). On a textual level, hierarchies of past and present, remembered and imagined, narrator and narrated are disrupted, reflecting the construction of a fragmented, autobiographical self.

Robbe-Grillet does not explore this fragmentation of the self in the same stylistic manner. Instead, in keeping with his explicitly theoretical project, much of his questioning of the traditional homogeneity of the self occurs in extensive sections of theoretical self-commentary within autobiographical passages. Shifts between levels of *je*, between an older and a younger Robbe-Grillet are, therefore, framed by passages of theory, of which these shifts are illustrative. In the following extract, for instance, the nature of the *je* shifts from one paragraph, in which issues of autobiography are explored - 'Et c'est encore dans une fiction que je me hasarde ici' - to the next, in which the *je* explicitly refers to Robbe-Grillet as a child - 'J'ai longtemps cru, étant enfant, que je n'aimais pas la mer' (p. 13). The tense of the second quotation, however, displays the controlling presence of the older *je*, that is, of Robbe-Grillet the narrator. Although the splitting of the *je* brings into question notions of the stability of the autobiographical self, the narrating *je* of the author takes precedence over that of earlier selves.

Differences in the nature of the author's engagement with various levels of a composite autobiographical self are matched by the nature and degree of interaction

between this *je* and secondary characters within the works, another means by which both Duras and Robbe-Grillet put into autobiographical practice issues of the traditional homogeneity of the self raised in Barthes's work. In *L'Amant*, the identity of the young *je* is explored through her identification, as part of a female continuum, with the desirous or desire-inciting nature of other female characters, especially her schoolfriend, H el ene Lagonelle. H el ene's role, as symbol of natural, innate desire, is that of catalyst for the young *je*'s assertion of her own sexuality or, indeed, for the older, narrating *je*'s retrospective interpretation of this exploration. Duras's younger *je* explores her self-fascination via a projection of her own nascent sexuality and sexual desire onto the beautiful, sexualized body of her mirror and substitutional complement, in an imagined, erotic triangle between herself, her lover and her friend.¹⁰ Hence, in the following quotation, the young *je* explores her own desirous nature, as prompted both directly by H el ene Lagonelle's sexually-arousing, nubile body, a mirror of her own, and indirectly via the narrator's fantasized, voyeuristic substitution of her friend for herself in a sexual relation with her lover:

Je suis ext enu e du d esir d'H el ene Lagonelle.
 Je suis ext enu e de d esir.
 Je veux emmener avec moi H el ene Lagonelle, l a o u chaque soir, les yeux
 clos, je me fais donner la jouissance qui fait crier. Je voudrais donner H el ene
 Lagonelle   cet homme qui fait  a sur moi pour qu'il le fasse   son tour sur
 elle. Ceci en ma pr esence, qu'elle le fasse selon mon d esir, qu'elle se donne l a
 o u moi je me donne. Ce serait par le d etour du corps de H el ene Lagonelle,
 par la travers ee de son corps que la jouissance m'arriverait de lui, alors
 d efinitive. (p. 92)

In the construction of this imaginary sexual triangle, the young *je* both finds expression for her own otherwise suppressed or silenced desires and, through projection, objectivizes her desiring self onto another, undesiring, since unknowing, body, thus exploring her self by means of substitutive self-voyeurism.

¹⁰ Such sexual triangles are frequent in Duras's fictional works. See, for instance, the voyeuristic love triangle of Lol watching Jacques Hold and Tatiana Karl in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*; the circulation of desire between the one female and two male figures in *L'Amour*; or the triangle formed between the couple and the voyeuristic narrator in *L'Homme assis dans le couloir*.

Robbe-Grillet also uses secondary characters within his work as mirrors and supports for the construction of the autobiographical self or, more precisely, as illustrative of his theories regarding autobiography and self-identity in general. Hence the main secondary character in *Le Miroir qui revient* which acts as complement to and projection of the narrating *je*'s composite identity is not, as with Hélène Lagonelle in Duras's text, cast as a real-life figure from Robbe-Grillet's past, identification with whom is seen as constitutive of the younger *je*'s self-development. Henri de Corinthe is, instead, a fictional creation of the controlling author, composed of elements of his own and a collective past, of the writer's fictional work and of common mythology.

The shifting identification between autobiographical self and fictional double is made stylistically explicit in instances within the text where the narrating *je* becomes an ambiguous label, slipping imperceptibly from one to the other figure, and thus problematizing the status of both these figures and of the identity of the *je* in general. In a passage (pp. 22 - 24), in which Robbe-Grillet claims that Corinthe was a real-life friend of his father whilst simultaneously undermining this statement by highlighting his own unreliability as narrator - 'Je n'ai jamais connu, personnellement, Henri de Corinthe. Peut-être même ne me suis-je jamais trouvé en sa présence, comme j'en imagine aujourd'hui l'éventualité' (p. 22) - slippages in register and between scenes are matched by problematizing slippages in narrative identity and levels of *je*. The focus shifts from the *je* of the writing present in the above quotation, to remembrances of childhood, prompted by his father's stories which are recounted in the retrospective past tense, and then to an account of such remembered or invented events, recounted in the present tense ('...il [Henri de Corinthe] se tient à présent...'). The apparently autobiographical nature of this account is then undermined by the change in scene, register and person in the following paragraph:

Vacillements de la lampe à pétrole, feu follet sur les paluds, blème chevalier qui glisse entre les pans de brume, bruissements d'eau, cri d'alarme soudain, perçant la nuit, d'un grand oiseau tout proche, brusque crépitement du feu qui reprend dans les bûches mourantes... Angélica... Angélica... Pourquoi m'as-tu quitté, petite flamme? Qui me consolera de ton rire léger? (p. 23)

It is the very composite nature of narrator and secondary character, and the reader's subsequent inability to establish with any precision the level of identification between author and his protagonist double, which constitute Henri de Corinthe's paradoxical, reflective role within the text, at once unstable and distorting and yet, (therefore), revealing of the shifting, fragmented, autobiographical self. Both the narrating *je* and his fictional alter ego are cast as 'personnages de roman' which 'sont aussi des sortes de fantômes : on les voit, ou les entend, sans jamais pouvoir les étreindre; si l'on veut les toucher, on passe au travers' (p. 21). Corinthe, whose pseudo-biography runs alongside and overlaps with Robbe-Grillet's (pseudo-)autobiography, is used as a mirroring double for the author, so complicating the relationship between autobiography and fiction and disguising elements of one as of the other. The following quotation, which explicitly refers to Corinthe's jumbled account of his finding the mirror, can thus also be seen to reflect the nature of the autobiographical self:

Bien que cette séquence finale de l'épisode (dit du miroir qui revient) demeure pour toujours d'une extrême confusion, tant les relations diffèrent entre elles et se mélangent à des réminiscences inconscientes du folklore, un certain nombre de points peu contestables semblent malgré tout pouvoir être fixés comme repères. (p. 99)

Duras and Robbe-Grillet respond to the theoretical problems of representation discussed in Barthes's *La Chambre claire*, particularly in their depiction of visual - photographic or painterly - representations of the autobiographical self. Given the autobiographical nature of their projects, they then attempt to construct a textual representation which captures the essential instability of the autobiographical self, by means of a fragmentation of the *je* into different levels and of the exploration of the self's identity by means of identification with other, biographical or fictional, characters.

Both writers also respond to Barthes's discussion of the inadequacy of photographic and, by extension, any representation in relation to the central figure of the mother. In *La Chambre claire*, Barthes's mother represents the ultimate example of his discussion of the spectator's response to, and the inherent nature of, photography, for not only is she illustrative of Barthes's theories of representation, she is also the emotional impetus behind his exploration of such issues. The very personal nature of and motivation for this tribute are expressed in the following passage, referring to his emotions when looking through old photographs, soon after his mother's death:

Je n'espérais pas la « retrouver », je n'attendais rien de « ces photographies d'un être, devant lesquelles on se le rappelle moins bien qu'en se contentant de penser à lui » (Proust). Je savais bien que, par cette fatalité qui est l'un des traits les plus atroces du deuil, j'aurais beau consulter des images, je ne pourrais jamais plus me rappeler ses traits (les appeler tout entiers à moi). Non, je voulais, selon le vœu de Valéry à la mort de sa mère, « écrire un petit recueil sur elle, pour moi seul » (peut-être l'écrirai-je un jour, afin qu'imprimée, sa mémoire dure au moins le temps de ma propre notoriété.)
(p. 99)

Barthes's academic study of the medium of photography gives way to a very personal account of his grief and of his frustration at being unable to recapture the *air* (p. 166) of a loved one, this account essentially constituting a moving homage to his late mother. The putting into writing of his grief is, then, an attempt to come to terms with photography's inadequacy and inability to represent a person's essence and, thus, ultimately with theory's inability to explain or overcome this shortcoming. Barthes argues that the nature of the photograph's representative function and of the spectator's response, varies firstly with the nature of the *spectrum*, that is the object, of the photograph and secondly with the nature of the spectator's relationship to that *spectrum*, because:

[...] dès qu'il s'agit d'un être - et non plus d'une chose - l'évidence de la Photographie a un tout autre enjeu. Voir photographiés une bouteille, une branche d'iris, une poule, un palais, n'engage que la réalité. Mais un corps, un visage, et qui plus est, souvent, ceux d'un être aimé? Puisque la Photographie (c'est là son noème) *authentifie* l'existence de tel être, je veux le retrouver en entier, c'est-à-dire en essence, « tel qu'en lui-même », au-delà d'une simple ressemblance... (p. 166)

In *L'Amant* and *Le Miroir qui revient*, Duras and Robbe-Grillet both respond to the theoretical issues raised in *La Chambre claire*, concerning the representation of the mother figure, but, as in Barthes's text, they also draw attention to the emotional and psychological nature of the bond between writer and mother, in the important place allotted to her biographical depiction within their respective autobiographical works. Both Robbe-Grillet and Duras, like Barthes, discuss the inadequacy of representation by relating this to their own attempts to capture fleeting, elusive memories of their mothers.

The inevitably partial nature of attempting to represent her mother's *air*, through glimpses of her appearance and behaviour, is expressed by Duras in the following entreaty to the reader: 'Est-ce qu'on aperçoit quelque chose de cette femme à travers cette façon d'être? [...] Je le crois. C'est dans cette vaillance de l'espèce, absurde, que moi je retrouve la grâce profonde.' (p. 117) Similar sentiments, of a being recalled fleetingly and frustratingly through fragments of remembered characteristics, here aural not visual, can be seen in the following passage, in which Robbe-Grillet describes his involuntarily hearing his mother's voice:

Elle avait une voix grave, bien timbrée, d'autant plus puissante qu'elle parlait souvent avec passion. [...] Et maintenant, quelquefois, à intervalles irréguliers, j'entends à nouveau sa voix. [...] Cela dure en général quelques dizaines de secondes. Les phrases sont nettes, très présentes, toutes proches et parfaitement articulées. Pourtant, je ne saisis pas ce qu'elle dit. J'entends seulement le ton de sa voix, les sonorités, les inflexions, le chant pour ainsi dire. (pp. 80-81)

Both of these quotations reflect Barthes's feelings of frustration when trying to evoke the memory of his mother: 'Je ne la reconnaissais jamais que par morceaux, c'est-à-dire que je manquais son être, et que, donc, je la manquais toute.' (p. 103) By including the mother in their works, as an important figure alongside and constitutive of the autobiographical self Duras and Robbe-Grillet put Barthes's discussion of the inadequacy of representation into textual practice and attempt to construct an image of her now absent and always elusive 'essence' by means of anecdotal snapshots.

Responding to the medium which Barthes's work discusses, Duras's homage to her dead mother is constructed essentially around two absent (yet here supposedly existing) photographs: the first, which she calls 'la photo du désespoir' (p. 41), taken in the courtyard of their house in Hanoi, and the second taken just before her mother's death (p. 118). Thus, the biographical depiction of her mother mirrors Duras's use of an absent, non-existent photograph of the crossing of the Mekong river in the construction of her young, autobiographical self. Duras's use of photographs aims to portray the mother, to capture her 'essence' not simply by attempting to construct a textual whole from the fragmented visual image, but also by discussing the ritual, and necessarily falsifying function of photography. Thus she evokes her mother's nature by describing the psychological importance which the taking of photographs played in her life.

The first aspect of the use of absent photographs in the portrayal of the mother - that is, the attempt to recapture her essence by means of a written translation of a visual medium's inadequate representation - is illustrated by Duras's description and interpretation of the photograph taken in the courtyard of the house in Hanoi. Just as Barthes claims to recognize his mother's *air* better in a photograph of her as a child than in later ones which superficially resemble her better, so too Duras states: 'Je la reconnais mieux là que sur des photos plus récentes.' (p. 21) The look on the mother's face, her disordered appearance, and the neglected aspect of her children beside her are, unlike later photographs, expressive of the instability, despair and even madness which constitute a large part of the mother's character and, hence, of the psychological

dynamics which Duras describes in her work. Although the photograph here betrays visual clues to the mother's state of mind, these give no fixed answers to the questions they provoke:

Ce que j'ignore comme elle devait l'ignorer, c'est la nature des évidences qui la traversaient et qui faisaient ce découragement lui apparaître. Était-ce la mort de mon père déjà présente, ou celle du jour? La mise en doute de ce mariage? de ce mari? de ces enfants? ou celle plus générale du tout de cet avoir?
(p. 22)

The fact that so little can be known about the context and background of this photograph, about the source of the mother's despair which has been captured on film, makes it imaginatively alive and open to tangential, (auto)biographical interpretations. It thus fulfils for Duras what Barthes describes as the *punctum* of certain photographs, that is, their ability to animate and be animated by the spectator, so escaping fixity by inspiring creative, interpretative movement:

Lorsqu'on définit la Photo comme une image immobile, cela ne veut pas dire seulement que les personnages qu'elle représente ne bougent pas; cela veut dire qu'ils ne *sortent* pas: ils sont anesthésiés et fichés, comme des papillons. Cependant, dès qu'il y a *punctum*, un champ aveugle se crée (se devine) ...
(CC, p. 90)

In contrast to the creative interest in aspects of the *spectrum* inspired by this first photograph, it is the very lack of an associative 'ombilic' between image and person and the clearly artificial format's lack of *punctum*, which give Duras's description of the second, important photograph of her mother its paradoxical, evocative power. The flat, lifeless nature of the image and the fact that this was consciously the last photograph taken of the mother before she died, emphasize the association with death which is an inherent quality of any photograph's authenticating link with the past, its 'ça-a-été'.¹¹ In Duras's description of this last photograph, she

¹¹ Furthermore, Duras's description of her mother's retouched image recalls Barthes's association of photography with the death-like masks of traditional theatre: '... la figuration de la face immobile et fardée sous laquelle nous voyons les morts' (CC, p. 56).

compares her mother's image to that of old Vietnamese people in their last photographs, in their common resemblance and in the traditional function of such images as a means of preparing for and confronting impending death. For the fact that her mother's portrait lacks any true link with her appearance or individual essence, since it resembles all the others, is not here merely a result of any (visual) representation's inadequacy in relation to its original 'spectrum', but is an intentional, essential aspect of the portrait's ritual nature, as Duras recognizes in the following passage:

Tous les gens photographiés, j'en ai vus beaucoup, donnaient presque la même photo, leur ressemblance était hallucinante. Ce n'est pas seulement que la vieillesse se ressemble, c'est que les portraits étaient retouchés, toujours, et de telle façon que les particularités du visage, s'il en restait encore, étaient atténuées. Les visages étaient apprêtés de la même façon pour affronter l'éternité... (p. 118)

The inability of these photographs to resemble the individual who is their object constitutes their ritual power as a means of confronting and forming a part, which is both 'noble' and 'effacé' (p. 119), with the eternal continuum of death.

This ritual use of photography, as a means of confronting an uncomfortable, unstable reality by projecting a traditional, stable, homogenous image onto that reality, highlights most strikingly facets of the mother's character in Duras's depiction of customary family trips to the photographer (pp. 115-117). The photographs, as part of a habitual 'rite familial', take on a central, communicative role, a means of seeing oneself and the other family members, in a family which has ceased to communicate, as is expressed in the following:

Les photos, on les regarde, on ne se regarde pas mais on regarde les photographies, chacun séparément, sans un mot de commentaire, mais on les regarde, on se voit. On voit les autres membres de la famille un par un ou rassemblés. On se revoit quand on était très petit sur les anciennes photos et on se regarde sur les photos récentes. La séparation a encore grandi entre nous. (p. 115)

The photographs, then, become a reassuring means of avoiding reality, of presenting an image of conventional unity to the spectator, whether this be the outside world or other family members, and thus of hiding the underlying, dysfunctional nature of the reality. Despite the intense conflict within the family, which forms a central dynamics in Duras's narrative, despite the disgrace and scandal which her daughter's affair has provoked, the mother is able to present a conventional, unified image to others by showing these photographs. The representation's integration belies the spectrum's disintegration.¹² Photographs in Duras's text thus become not only a motif for the exploration of the dichotomy between representation - of the family unit or of the mother's essence - and reality, but also a central, focusing trope for the construction of the mother's character around associated, textual 'snapshots'.

In the following quotation, Robbe-Grillet also refers to photographs' inadequate representative function, stressing the emotional toll on the spectator of their inability to act as satisfactory souvenirs or tokens in his homage to his multi-faceted, beloved parents:

Naturellement, une sensible tendresse filiale apparaît dans mon hagiographie du clan, comme un petit bouquet déposé au passage sur une tombe. Mon père et ma mère ont beaucoup vécu pour leurs enfants, ils nous ont consacré la meilleure part de leur travail, de leurs soucis, de leurs projets. Cette menue monnaie que je leur rends n'est-elle pas misérable en comparaison? Ne suis-je pas en train de dessiner seulement un père pittoresque, comme le deviennent tous les gens dès qu'ils sont peints? Est-il acceptable que toute une vie d'homme ne laisse que ces maigres traces, oubliées au fond d'un tiroir avec quelques photos jaunies [...]

(p. 57)

Robbe-Grillet's aim, then, in his biographical reconstruction of his parents, is to bear witness to their importance in his life, by painting a portrait which is more complete than that afforded by insubstantial, semi-referential photographs. The 'snapshots'

¹² Pierre Saint-Amand compares Duras's depiction of photographs with that of Barthes and studies the use made of photographs in creating an image of unity which belies the fractured, dysfunctional familial reality in 'La photographie de famille dans *L'Amant*', in Alain Vircondelet (ed.), *Rencontres de Cerisy: Marguerite Duras* (Paris & Montreal: Écriture, 1994), pp. 225-240.

which he depicts are not generally photographic ones, being instead anecdotes or memories, which Robbe-Grillet textualizes in an attempt to represent fleeting glimpses of his family's and especially his mother's past, composite nature. In aiming to portray his mother via a montage of apparently insignificant, remembered details, which often stand out for their sheer mundanity, he includes references for instance to her love of gardening, to her culinary inventiveness, to her eye for detail, and even to 'notre remarquable disposition pour perdre du temps à ne rien faire' (p. 178). Even in the most mundane recollections and insignificant constitutive traits, Robbe-Grillet establishes important, affective links between himself and his mother, a sentiment expressed in the following passage:

L'importance des choses [...] ne réside évidemment pas dans leur signification intrinsèque, mais dans la façon dont elles ont marqué notre mémoire. Et les liens les plus forts entre les êtres proches sont surtout faits - c'est connu - de petites choses insignifiantes. Ainsi, je suis certain d'avoir entretenu avec ma mère, durant toute mon enfance et bien au-delà, un intense réseau de goûts partagés, qui probablement venaient d'elle, mais aussi un tissu solide, bien que plus impalpable, de menus événements et de sensations infimes vécus au jour le jour d'une façon identique. (p. 177)

Whilst acknowledging Barthes's theoretical and personal frustration at the inadequacy of visual, and by extension any, modes of representation of a human being, Duras and Robbe-Grillet do, however, also attempt to bear witness to the essence of their mothers by painting necessarily composite, fragmented images of them around textual snapshots. Since their works have a far more autobiographical emphasis than Barthes's text, both Duras and Robbe-Grillet foreground, within this personal response, the role which their mothers play in the formation of the autobiographical self. Fundamental differences between the nature of the relationships portrayed between author and mother, and the self-defining role of this relationship, can be seen to be related largely, though not exclusively, to issues of gender and sexuality. That is, the writer's relationship with his or her mother, and the consequent representation of the latter, can be seen as largely affected by the gender of

each and by their respective relationship to desire. The explicitly non-autobiographical nature of Barthes's work and his status as a homosexual male, together largely account for his portrayal of his mother as one of unmitigated adoration of the only important woman in his life, who takes on the status of an ideal, Madonna figure. This, at least, is the interpretation given by Duras who, within the broader context of a discussion of the sexualized nature of a writer's relationship to his or her writing vocation, says of her reading of Barthes's *La Chambre claire*:

J'ai essayé après sa mort de lire son livre sur la photographie, je n'y suis pas parvenue encore une fois sauf un chapitre très beau sur sa mère. Cette mère vénérée qui a été sa compagne et la seule héroïne du désert de sa vie.¹³

Thus, Duras's account of her mother in *L'Amant* engages with the emotive, personal nature of Barthes's testimony, as well as with the problematic, theoretical issues which such a response provokes, but her position in relation to her mother within this account varies from Barthes's as a result of her autobiographical interest and her status as a heterosexual woman. Duras's representation of her mother centres upon the conflictual dynamics within the mother-daughter relationship occasioned by the latter's development as a heterosexual, desirous woman. The central role which desire and sexuality play in the construction of the daughter's identity leads to a complex, love-hate relationship with her mother, who is at once both gender model and figure of parental authority against which she self-assertively rebels. The complex, paradoxical nature of this mother-daughter relationship stems from the daughter's self-definition and self-assertion in terms of the similarities and the differences which she simultaneously detects between herself and her same-gendered mother. Thus the mother in Duras's text is seen alternately and even simultaneously as understanding and proud of her daughter's unconventional nature, ('cette inconvenance lui plaît' (p. 33)), as collusive in her daughter's scandalous behaviour, ('la mère permet à son enfant de sortir dans cette tenue d'enfant prostituée' (ibid.)), and

¹³ *La Vie matérielle* (Paris: P.O.L., 1987), p. 42.

as disapproving and outraged ('elle hurle [...] que sa fille est une prostituée, qu'elle va la jeter dehors, qu'elle désire la voir crever [...] (p. 73)) to the point of beating her daughter for the disgrace she has caused. The daughter's attitude towards her mother is portrayed as similarly paradoxical, as in the phrase, 'la saleté, ma mère, mon amour' (p. 31). The underlying tensions caused by recognition in the other of aspects of the same-gendered self are most explicitly treated in a rare scene of tenderness and intimacy in which, on first seeing the daughter's diamond ring, given to her by her lover, the mother says that it reminds her of one given to her by her first husband, and then:

Nous nous sommes regardées longuement et puis elle a eu un sourire très doux, légèrement moqueur, empreint d'une connaissance si profonde de ses enfants et de ce qui les attendait plus tard que j'ai failli lui parler de Cholen.
Je ne l'ai pas fait. Je ne l'ai jamais fait.
Elle a attendu longtemps avant de me parler encore, elle l'a fait, avec beaucoup d'amour [...] (p. 114)

Underlying the mother's paralleling of her younger self and her daughter, and the subsequent exchange of loving, knowing looks above, is an expression of gender-based and familial understanding, which is coloured, nonetheless, by a simultaneous, implicit recognition of differences, which prevent full communion.

The fundamental difference, underpinning their interactions, centres around each woman's respective relationship with desire, a fact which is voiced by the mother as she says: 'je ne te ressemblais pas, j'ai eu plus de mal que toi pour les études et moi j'étais très sérieuse, je l'ai été trop longtemps, trop tard, j'ai perdu le goût de mon plaisir' (p. 114). In contrast, the daughter asserts her independence via the discovery of her own sexual desire. A parallel between daughter and mother is implied in the text by the inclusion, at the point which marks the daughter's loss of virginity and consequent gaining of an adult identity, of a passage referring to the mother which claims that, 'La mère n'a pas connu la jouissance.' (p. 50) As highlighted earlier, the transition from child to woman, from ignorance to knowledge, from virginity to

sexuality, is matched by a shift in identification between narrator and younger self, symbolically marked by the shift in labelling person from *elle* to *je*, from object to subject. The young girl asserts her individuality and defines her identity through her sexuality (her 'jouissance'), with the mother therefore acting, on account of her portrayed lack of desire, as a model of opposition in the construction of the autobiographical self.

Robbe-Grillet's account of his mother in *Le Miroir qui revient* is powerfully central to the autobiographical strands of his work and his portrait of her, like Barthes's and Duras's depictions of their mothers, stands out stylistically on account of its very personal tone. Like Barthes and Duras, Robbe-Grillet's depiction of his mother and of his relationship with her is coloured by his gender position, as heterosexual, childless man. Robbe-Grillet hints at a tacit link between his mother and the development of his own sexuality early in the text when, referring to the fact that his bed is divided from the living room, where his mother reads, by a curtain, he states that 'le regard qui me parvenait, de temps à autre, par-dessus la feuille du journal déployé, dérangeait des plaisirs solitaires déjà fortement marqués de sadisme' (pp. 15-16). This hint is reinforced by the fact that elsewhere (pp. 179-183) a discussion of his own sexuality and of the possible sources of his sadistic tastes, is interwoven with a simultaneously contrastive and complementary account of his mother's apparent sexual openness and his own conjectures as to the nature of her sexuality. Although, after discussing the network of similarities between son and mother, he states that, 'toutes les questions d'ordre ouvertement charnel, ou même simplement à forte implication érotique, nous séparaient [...] de façon radicale' (p. 181), he nonetheless then writes that, 'Pourtant, je suis persuadé qu'il n'y avait pas trace, chez elle, de puritanisme ou de pruderie. La sensualité de ses rapports avec le monde était flagrante...' (p. 182). Indeed, links between the nature of his sexuality, his childlessness and his relationship with his mother are made in Robbe-Grillet's statement that his mother 'm'a toujours conseillé de ne pas avoir d'enfant (j'ai suivi son conseil, peu enclin d'ailleurs à m'intéresser aux bébés, ni aux petits garçons; quant

aux petites filles...)' (p. 80). The quasi-Œdipal nature of his account of his relationship with his mother is further implied when he compares his relationship with his wife to that with his mother, casting himself, strangely, in the latter's role: following a series of scenes which highlight his protective attitude towards his 'épouse-enfant' who is 'à la fois ma femme et mes enfants' (p. 186), he describes his constant worrying about his wife's welfare as being 'comme faisait maman jadis...' (p. 188).

Just as Robbe-Grillet's choice of anecdotes to portray his mother constantly emphasizes the almost exclusive bond between her and her son, based on mutual preferences and behaviour, so too does his portrayal of her as a sexual being strengthen his identification with her. This foregrounding of the mother/son bond above all others within the family structure is reflected in Robbe-Grillet's treatment of other family members. Robbe-Grillet's figuratively castrates or sexually negates his father in intimations of his mother's 'relations lesbiennes - sentimentales ou bien davantage, je l'ignore - pour lesquelles son indulgence m'a toujours paru évidente' (p. 181). His elder sister, Anne-Lise, is virtually excluded from the text and hence from the 'family romance', no independent relationship being constructed between her and either parent. Indeed, the extremely rare references to her almost all define her in terms of her role as complement to Robbe-Grillet, that is, as 'ma sœur' and generally within the phrase 'ma sœur et moi', or are even completely implicit, as in phrases such as 'chez nous', 'la famille' or in Robbe-Grillet's reference to his wearing a ring symbolically comprised of four, interwoven rings.¹⁴ Whereas in Duras's text, the relationships between the mother and her eldest son, and between the daughter and her two brothers are structurally and psychologically important and therefore interwoven with that between mother and daughter, Robbe-Grillet's virtual exclusion of his sister

¹⁴ She is named on two occasions as 'Anne-Lise, ma sœur' and 'ma sœur, Anne-Lise' (pp. 50 & 156). Elsewhere, for example: 'ma sœur' (p. 19); 'ma sœur et moi', (pp. 48, 117, 134, 204); 'chez nous' (p. 117); 'la famille' (p. 139); 'notre mère' (p. 196); 'nous' (p. 207, strikingly after a series of references to 'ma mère' and 'mon père'). The ring is referred to on pp. 48 and 108.

from his autobiography results in the foregrounding of the son's relationship with his mother.

The fact that Robbe-Grillet is childless, which he states to be due at least in part to his mother's advice, also serves to strengthen the underlying pattern of identification between mother and son in the formation of the autobiographical self. Whereas Duras portrays the birth of her son as a means of asserting her independence from her own mother and family, and of projecting herself into the future of a matrilinear continuum, Robbe-Grillet's relation to his family is essentially backward looking. Duras's rejection of and by her mother, with the latter favouring her elder son, is seen as a necessary step in her development as a woman and in freeing herself from the emotional web of her immediate family. Robbe-Grillet, on the other hand, emphasizes his attachment to, rather than his rejection of, his family, both immediate and past. His portrayal of his grandfathers in descriptions of old photographs and remembered anecdotes, is reminiscent of Barthes's depiction of his grandfather, whom he refers to in *La Chambre claire* as 'La Souche'. Like Robbe-Grillet, Barthes stresses the reassuring affinity created by such retrospection, when he writes,

Le lignage livre une identité plus forte, plus intéressante que l'identité civile - plus rassurante aussi, car la pensée de l'origine nous apaise, alors que celle de l'avenir nous agite, nous angoisse[...] (p. 162)

By foregrounding the relationship between mother and son, and by placing this within a retrospective genealogy, Robbe-Grillet portrays himself as the heir to his family's physiological, psychological and behavioural heritage.

Duras's self-definition by means of a rejection of her mother establishes a certain solipsistic distance between self and (m)other. Robbe-Grillet's representation of his autobiographical self, in contrast, is based on a pattern of identification, of proximity, encapsulated in the phrase, 'Mes parents, c'est déjà moi en train de prendre forme' (p. 58). His selection of apparently insignificant details in the portrayal of his mother's composite 'essence' includes anecdotes which not only pay homage to her as

an exceptional individual, but also simultaneously reflect upon the authorial self to his narcissistic advantage. For instance, Robbe-Grillet's inclusion of a series of anecdotes which aim to display the outstanding, unconventional, quasi-divine nature of 'notre sainte mère' or 'notre mère mythologique,' is textually prompted by another which recounts Bruce Morrissette's desire to meet Robbe-Grillet's mother. In this account, Robbe-Grillet claims that the critic's reason for this was that:

[...] avant de se consacrer tout à fait à mon œuvre, il voulait être sûr que j'étais un authentique grand écrivain ; or les génies ont eu nécessairement une mère exceptionnelle ; il savait à présent que la mienne l'était! (p. 195)

Similarly, elsewhere Robbe-Grillet includes the following, self-flattering account of his identification with his parents, when he quotes his mother as saying that '...si j'étais intelligent, ça venait d'elle, mais que, si j'avais du génie (et elle le croyait, bien entendu), ça ne pouvait venir que de papa' (p. 80).

So far then, in Robbe-Grillet's intergenerational autobiography, self-definition through identification with his mother's sexuality or with his family's genius reflects advantageously upon the autobiographical self without posing a threat to his wish to pay homage to his mother. Yet the proximity entailed in Robbe-Grillet's basing his construction of the self on this strong identification with his mother, when not associated exclusively with issues of gender and sexuality, raises theoretical and ethical problems, not present in Barthes's or Duras's works. For the identification stressed in the claim, 'Mes parents, c'est déjà moi en train de prendre forme', establishes a link between the authorial self and both strengths and potential flaws in the parental selves portrayed. Robbe-Grillet's self-definition becomes particularly problematic when it entails the revelation of his and his family's wartime activities and political beliefs.

Both Duras and Robbe-Grillet refer to the shock which they experienced after Liberation on learning of Nazi atrocities. Both writers attempt to disrupt oversimplified retrospective views which portray occupied France as a nation either of

Resistance heroes or of collaborating cowards. Yet the contrasting positions which the two writers occupy in relation to the material related, in terms of personal and vicarious investment, lead to very different, underlying autobiographical dynamics.

In *L'Amant*, Duras integrates references to the Second World War within her central portrayal of familial relations. The period of the war is metaphorically associated with her elder brother's tyranny over the younger brother. It becomes a symbol of her hatred and fear of the former, and her love for, and grief at the premature death of, the latter, as is expressed in:

Je confonds le temps de la guerre avec le règne de mon frère aîné. C'est aussi sans doute parce que c'est pendant la guerre que mon petit frère est mort [...] Je vois la guerre comme lui [le frère aîné] était, partout se répandre, partout pénétrer, voler, emprisonner, partout être là, à tout mélangée, mêlée, présente dans le corps, dans la pensée, dans la veille, dans le sommeil, tout le temps, en proie à la passion saoulante d'occuper le territoire adorable du corps de l'enfant, du corps des moins forts, des peuples vaincus [...] (p. 78)

The war, like Duras's elder brother, exerts a powerful, destructive and ubiquitous force upon its innocent victims. By means of this symbolic link, Duras depicts her own, very personal response to the collective horror of war. A connection between the symbolic and the historical is established by the revelation of her brother's real collaborational activities (p. 95). Since these are referred to only in passing, they are depicted as symptomatic of his innately selfish, cruel and opportunistic nature. His collaboration is seen as an inevitable extension of his behaviour towards his own family, as evidenced in his bullying subjugation of his brother, financial exploitation of his adoring mother and psychological control over his young sister.

Elsewhere in *L'Amant*, Duras includes a brief passage dedicated to her wartime acquaintance, Betty Fernandez, and her husband, Ramon, who we learn were collaborators. This fact is briefly included late in their portrayal which, instead, emphasizes Betty's refinement, education and amicable manner. Whereas the brother's collaboration is depicted as the natural consequence of his cruel and weak

disposition, that of Betty Fernandez is portrayed as an unfortunate and uncomfortable aspect of an otherwise charming person, whose more positive attributes, her grace and beauty, predominate in Duras's retrospective image of her:

Je me souviens de la grâce, c'est trop tard maintenant pour que je l'oublie, rien n'en atteint encore la perfection, rien n'en atteindra jamais la perfection, ni les circonstances, ni l'époque, ni le froid, ni la faim, ni la défaite allemande, ni la mise en pleine lumière du Crime. (p. 83)

Here and in the positioning of her later revelation, 'Collaborateurs, les Fernandez' (p. 85), immediately after a description of their loyal and sincere friendship, Duras portrays their collaboration not as a defining characteristic, but as an unfortunate flaw, an error of misguided judgement, retrospectively wrong and foolish. In her attempt to understand and justify her former friends' views and actions, Duras even likens their behaviour to her own membership of the French Communist Party, as she writes:

L'équivalence est absolue, définitive. C'est la même chose, la même pitié, le même appel au secours, la même débilité du jugement, la même superstition disons, qui consiste à croire à la solution politique du problème personnel. (Ibid.)

Duras's ambivalent attitude to the issue of collaboration, as elsewhere in her text to that of colonialism, is the result of an attempt to overcome the distortions of retrospective judgements and to portray each not as a black and white historical case, but as an (auto)biographical context, an environment within which people lived. Her portrayal of her brother's and friends' collaboration is not judgmental. Yet her construction of an autobiographical self in terms of a rejection of her family distances her from the material recounted.

Robbe-Grillet's self-definition in terms of identification with his mother and his constant underlining of his love for his parents lead to an uncomfortable association between autobiographical self and his parents' extreme right-wing, revisionist views. Whereas Duras's references to the Occupation are only secondary in

comparison to her central, autobiographical account of her precocious affair with her Chinese lover, in *Le Miroir qui revient* Robbe-Grillet's wartime experience as an S.T.O.¹⁵ is the major revelation. In the many long passages relating to the war, Robbe-Grillet's portrayals of his own and his parents' often problematic 'essence' are composed of snapshots and anecdotes which, far from being 'insignifiants', are in fact laden with conflicting explanatory, (self-)justificatory and exonerating significance. The conflicting desires inherent in his wishes to pay homage to his beloved parents and portray himself as the heir to an exceptional and brilliant family lineage, whilst also attempting to defend and exonerate his parents' beliefs and justify his own actions in terms of those very beliefs, lead to fragmented and contradictory drives within Robbe-Grillet's autobiographical and biographical representations.

Identification with his parents allows him to explain his own actions in terms of his love for them, and so an account of his work as an S.T.O. (pp. 122-128) follows, and is contextualized by, a lengthy account of the roots and nature of his parents' views (pp. 112-122). Elsewhere, Robbe-Grillet attempts to defend the love for his parents which led him to accept the validity of their anti-semitic, Pétainist beliefs: he neutralizes the problematic aspects of his and his parents' past by balancing his discussion of their political views with family anecdotes stressing their normality. Apparently 'insignificant' snapshots, such as his mother's excessive love of animals which leads her to carry a sick bat under her blouse (pp. 199-200), or his father's bizarre cries when picking redcurrants (pp. 81-82), are thus included which portray their unconventional nature as harmless and charmingly eccentric rather than as politically reactionary. In the following quotation, Robbe-Grillet stresses not only the insularity and idiosyncrasy of the family unit, towards which he feels enormous affection and loyalty, but also, in contradiction, his simultaneous (perhaps retrospective) sense of his own distance from them:

¹⁵ Abbreviation for Service de Travail Obligatoire. During the Occupation, French nationals were conscripted to help the German war effort, so allowing French Prisoners of War to return home. There is much debate as to whether such work was voluntary or obligatory. Indeed, Robbe-Grillet's own account alternates between these two positions although he does indicate that not all his colleagues at the Institut Agronomique were conscripted.

Je n'avais probablement pas pour mes bons parents une admiration aveugle et sans borne, je ressentais plutôt avec eux une sorte d'alliance sacrée, de communauté fraternelle, de solidarité à toute épreuve. Nous formions comme un clan, mon père, ma mère, ma sœur et moi. [...] Un tel esprit de famille n'allait pas sans une certaine distance vis-à-vis du reste des êtres humains: un vague sentiment de supériorité, ou pour le moins de différence.

(p. 48)

Robbe-Grillet's practice here in constructing a composite image of his parents' and, particularly, his mother's essence via textual 'snapshots', in many ways resembles Duras's mother's use of family photographs in *L'Amant*. Just as she was able to look at the ritualized, stable photographic images of her family and obtain reassurance from their inherent inability to portray the true, fractured nature of their 'spectrum', so too can Robbe-Grillet, although far more self-consciously, attempt to construct portraits of the autobiographical and biographical selves which paint an image of integration and stability over a flawed, dysfunctional, disintegrated reality.

Unlike Duras's mother, however, Robbe-Grillet does at other times confront the reality of his parents' views, in an attempt to explain their conduct to an anticipated hostile reception. On occasions, he seeks to defend them within the context of the political climate of wartime France. He is at pains to stress that, however extreme and retrospectively faulty they may have been, 'cet esprit «collaborationiste» ne s'est jamais concrétisé dans les actes, ni sous la forme d'un engagement au sein d'une quelconque phalange, ni dans la moindre fraternisation personnelle avec l'occupant' (p. 117). Like Duras, Robbe-Grillet portrays the often contradictory nature of the Occupation, which was far more complex than the clear-cut views more usually expounded, claiming that 'la vérité, pour ne pas s'écailler, a besoin d'être régulièrement repeinte' (p. 47). Unlike Duras's ambivalent portrayal of collaborators, however, Robbe-Grillet's revelation of widespread hypocrisy in the following quotation can be seen to be very personally motivated:

Dès la libération de Paris, papa avait considéré avec dégoût la sarabande grotesque des F.F.I. de la onzième heure, et la veulerie du bon peuple qui se sentait subitement gaulliste et guerrier, avec le même enthousiasme qu'il avait mis naguère pour acclamer Pétain et l'armistice, comme ces mêmes filles [...] qui ouvraient aussitôt leur lit, aux draps encore moites, à de nouveaux soldats vainqueurs. (p. 131)¹⁶

Robbe-Grillet's wish to exonerate his parents leads to his use of highly emotive language and the portrayal of his parents' continued loyalty to Pétain and their revisionist beliefs as morally superior to the hypocrisy of many fellow Frenchmen following the German defeat.

On other occasions, however, a desire for self-exoneration leads Robbe-Grillet to stress his personal distance from the more extreme of his parents' views, if not from his filial love for them. Following his contextualizing listing of his parents' right-wing views and his mother's revisionist refusal to believe that the Holocaust occurred, Robbe-Grillet states: 'arrivé à ce point de mon récit, voici qu'il me devient de plus en plus difficile de continuer à dire «nous» pour parler de l'idéologie familiale' (p. 121). Indeed, Robbe-Grillet states that post-war revelations of Nazi atrocities caused a massive change in his life:

...c'est une véritable coupure que l'année 45 a représentée dans mon existence. Car mes rapports personnels avec l'ordre ont été profondément altérés à partir de la Libération, et surtout après l'entrée des troupes alliées en Allemagne, accompagnées chaque jour de monstrueuses révélations sur la matérialité des camps et sur toute la sombre horreur qui était la face cachée du national-socialisme. (p. 122)

Here, the instability inherent in any representation of the (auto)biographical self leads, when confronted with the disruptive nature of elements of that self's autobiography, to a decisive delineation between levels of the self. For not only is a distance established between the younger Robbe-Grillet and his parents, but Robbe-Grillet the writer also distances his present from his former self. Self-justification necessitates self-fragmentation and the privileging of the narrating over the narrated *je*.

¹⁶ F.F.I., here meaning members of the Resistance, stands for 'Forces françaises de l'intérieur'.

Yet the self-contradictory conflict created by the simultaneous wishes to stress affinity in paying homage to his parents, and to underline personal distance from the more politically dubious aspects of their identity leads to fractures even within the privileged, narrating *je*. For, whilst claiming to reject his parents' and his own former views, Robbe-Grillet follows the above quotation with the following parenthesis in which he appears implicitly to countenance certain elements of their revisionist beliefs:

(Chambres à gaz ou pas, je n'y vois pour ma part aucune différence, du moment que des hommes, des femmes et des enfants y mouraient par millions, innocents de tout crime sinon celui d'être juifs, tziganes ou homosexuels.)
(p. 122)¹⁷

In responding to the theoretical issues raised by Barthes's *La Chambre claire*, Robbe-Grillet acknowledges the fact that any biographical representation of a person's 'essence', especially of a loved one, is always already emotionally and personally inadequate. His portrayal of his own parents is further destabilized by the need to confront the ethically problematic aspects of their multi-faceted lives and identities. As the shifting position occupied by the writer in relation to these biographical representations demonstrates, Robbe-Grillet's predominant construction of an autobiographical self by means of intergenerational identification leads to a further fragmentation of the *je* than that envisaged or implemented in either Barthes's or Duras's works. Such conflictual fragmentation can be seen in the inconsistencies in Robbe-Grillet's autobiographical account of his work as an S.T. O.

¹⁷ In an interview with Raylene Ramsay in 1991, Robbe-Grillet went so far as to claim that concentration camps had never existed, or at least not in Germany. Ramsay explains Robbe-Grillet's adoption of suspect revisionist views in terms of his desire to vindicate his parents' ideology. It is also striking that in the same interview, Robbe-Grillet brings Ramsay's attention to Duras's *L'Empire français* (1940), which she wrote under her real name, Donnadiou, and in which she adopts a pro-colonial stance, in order to argue that he was not the only writer whose views at the start of the war were retrospectively proved incorrect. Raylene L. Ramsay, *The French New Autobiographies: Sarraute, Duras, and Robbe-Grillet* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), p. 72.

In the depiction of his enrolment and work at a Nuremberg arms factory, Robbe-Grillet repeatedly defends himself against accusations of collaboration by stressing his feelings of disjointedness and distance from the reality around him: 'J'étais une zone démilitarisée, un observateur solitaire et sans mandat, oublié dans une ville ouverte' (p. 136). Yet elsewhere he indirectly reveals his commitment to the German cause, his belief in their propaganda, by stressing his shock and disillusionment when confronted with the reality behind the Nazi facade of order. Thus, in his accounts of life in the camp, whilst stating that he was ignorant throughout of the true, hidden face of the régime for which he was working, he nonetheless, contradictorily includes references to his witnessing whilst there the arrest and disappearance of a Ukrainian worker, and the detention of a nurse who, on his return, is quoted as saying, 'J'ai connu un autre genre de camp' (p. 128). Robbe-Grillet's professed level of engagement with German ideology also shifts according to whether he is aiming to defend himself retrospectively in terms of his later disillusionment, in which case the S.T.O. are described as 'des ouvriers français plus ou moins volontaires' (p. 122), or contextually, in terms of his inability to act otherwise, in which case they are depicted as being enrolled 'par force', for 'le service du travail obligatoire' (p. 142).

As in his biographical portrayals of his parents, Robbe-Grillet's autobiographical account at times establishes a distance between his present and his former self, so defending the narrating *je* by condemning the actions and beliefs of the narrated *je*, and emphasizing the fragmentation within the autobiographical self. At others, however, Robbe-Grillet's construction of a composite, interrelated self implies an affinity between the different elements and the apparent espousal of sentiments more in keeping with his earlier self. Comparing conditions in his own work camp at Fischbach with those of concentration camps in such statements as '...nous n'étions ni maltraités ni enfermés derrière des barbelés concentrationnaires' (p. 123), or comparing the S.T.O. workers' lot with that of Jews in 'Nous-mêmes, nous ne portions pas d'insignes ni repères spécifiques sur nos vêtements [...] mais les Allemands juifs

avaient comme en France une étoile jaune sur la poitrine...' (p. 126), is at the very least politically insensitive. The associative proximity which self-portrayal through affinity entails results in the narrating *je*'s seeking not merely to contextualize the beliefs of the narrated *je*, but also to defend his former self by equating his experiences with those of the victims of the régime with which, however unwittingly, he colluded.

In this chapter, I have studied Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's almost simultaneous shift to autobiography with the publication, in 1984, of *L'Amant* and *Le Miroir qui revient*. Such a shift was largely characteristic of their responsive, antagonistic and productive relationship both with each other and with their critics. Aware of potential critical responses, both Duras and Robbe-Grillet implicitly warn against conventional, simplistically biographical readings of their texts in self-reflexive passages which highlight the avant-garde nature of their particular uses of the autobiographical form. The potential shock of their move, as I have shown, is not due solely to their common adoption of the autobiographical form, but also to the nature of the autobiographical content: Duras's account of her precocious affair with a Chinese lover in colonial Indochina, and Robbe-Grillet's revelation of his role as an S.T.O. in wartime Germany. Their engagement with both the theoretical and the personal aspects of autobiography is in common with the issues raised by Roland Barthes in his discussion of the mechanisms and limitations of photography's representation of a person's essence in *La Chambre claire*. The two writers' autobiographies rework Barthes's study of the inability of visual images to capture the true 'essence' of the autobiographical self or of the mother.

Duras and Robbe-Grillet, therefore, portray the fragmented, shifting nature of their own identities through the textual depiction of visual representations of themselves. In *L'Amant*, an absent and imaginary 'image absolue' becomes a central, generative trope in the construction of the autobiographical narrative. In *Le Miroir qui revient*, Robbe-Grillet describes a painting of himself, the collage-like montage of which he sees as encapsulating the composite nature of his self. In both cases, as I

have highlighted, it is the images' very lack of authenticating fixity which the writers see as enabling them to capture a sense of the flux inherent in a person's essence. As has been shown, in developing Barthes's views within their specifically autobiographical works, Duras and Robbe-Grillet reflect the belief in a fragmented, composite self in shifts between levels of a multiple *je*, between objectivization and subjectification of the self and in patterns of oppositional or complementary paralleling between the autobiographical self and secondary characters. Differences have, however, been identified in the underlying motivation for these shifts and oppositions in the construction of the autobiographical self which are in keeping with the authors' respective assertions in passages which reflect upon the self-conscious nature of their literary projects. Whereas Duras underlines the fact that her engagement with autobiography is prompted by a personal and bodily relation of self-fascination and self-exploration which precludes fixity, Robbe-Grillet states that his work is motivated by his theoretical questioning of traditional autobiographical conventions. This underlying distinction is in line with differences in the two writers' relationship to the theoretical issues of literary production which first emerged during their period of alliance within the Nouveau Roman group, discussed in Chapter 2. Robbe-Grillet's explicitly theoretical and formal motivation is, as has been shown, disrupted by the problematic nature of the (auto)biographical content treated.

Such problematization comes into play, as we have seen, in the depiction of the mother. Duras and Robbe-Grillet both respond to the personal, emotive nature of Barthes's account of the frustration he experienced when confronted with the inadequacy of photographic representations of a dead, loved one. Yet they both attempt to overcome this inadequacy by constructing a biographical portrait of their mothers via either the textual description of absent photos or the evocation of recalled anecdotes, figurative 'snapshots'. These textual portraits are also, given the autobiographical nature of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's works, interrelated with the construction of the autobiographical self, the mother becoming a vehicle for self-

definition. Unlike Barthes's strictly academic study, in their works biographical and autobiographical depictions are interwoven.

I have explored how each writer defines and explores his or her earlier self, particularly regarding gender and sexuality, in relation to the mother. Although in *L'Amant* areas of gendered and familial similarity are identified between mother and daughter, the underlying dynamics of their relationship is of conflict. The daughter defines herself, in exploring her own sexuality, by rebelling against her apparently desireless mother. I have shown how Robbe-Grillet, on the other hand, constantly underlines patterns of similarity between himself and his mother, emphasizing this bond to the virtual exclusion of other familial relationships.

In the final sections of this chapter, I have examined the complications which such a model of self-definition presents when, far from emphasizing common strengths, identification necessitates the recognition of both parental and autobiographical faults. Whereas Duras's self-assertive rejection of her family allows her a degree of solipsistic distance from the darker aspects of their lives and actions, Robbe-Grillet's repeated underlining of the powerful bond between himself and his parents leads to conflict between his wishes to pay homage to them and to exonerate himself. Despite Robbe-Grillet's assertion of a theoretical motivation for his adoption of the autobiographical form, it is ultimately an inability to resolve the conflict between personally problematic aspects of the (auto)biographical content which leads to a fragmentation of the self which is far more complex and disturbing than that expounded by Barthes or put into textual practice by Duras.

Chapter 5

Anxious Anticipation and Triumphant Solipsism: The Last Works

The publication of *L'Amant* in 1984 marked a dramatic turning-point in Duras's career. From then on, she was never out of the public gaze and her status changed almost overnight from that of elitist intellectual to ubiquitous national and international media celebrity. The resulting disparity between the critical and public attention granted to Duras and to Robbe-Grillet disrupted the dynamics of their intertextual rivalry and definitively reversed the hierarchy of the early stages of their literary relationship. A major event in establishing Duras's celebrity status and the success of her novel was her appearance, on 28 September 1984, less than three weeks after the publication of *L'Amant*, on the literary television programme, 'Apostrophes'. It was an event of great importance not only in Duras's career, but in redefining more generally the role of the writer in the age of audiovisual mass media.

This chapter is divided into three parts, the first of which provides the contextual background for the other two. In the first part, I shall discuss the media attention which followed the publication of *L'Amant*. In particular, I shall explore those elements which made Duras's 'Apostrophes' appearance such a powerful 'coup médiatique', and shall discuss Robbe-Grillet's rather paradoxical intertextual response to his rival's success, in *Angélique ou l'enchantement* (1987). Two closely-related 'readings in pairs' will then study the impact on their works a decade later of the writers' relative success and their awareness of the status of their literary rival, upon their later works. In the first 'reading in pairs', of Duras's *Écrire* (1993)¹ and Robbe-Grillet's *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* (1994),² I shall examine the two authors' accounts of their writing careers, that is, their reflection in the present upon their past *œuvres* and upon the past literary milieu of which they formed a part. In a second

¹ Published by Gallimard, Paris.

² Published, as were all Robbe-Grillet's works, by Éditions de Minuit, Paris.

'reading in pairs', of *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* and *C'est tout* (1995),³ I shall explore the relationship between these retrospective elements, the writing present, and the two writers' textual anticipation of the future. I shall look in particular at Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's treatment of the subjects of death and immortality in works that both writers conspicuously portray to be their last. I shall examine why, despite strong, underlying, structural and thematic similarities, the two writers produced stylistically different texts. I shall then conclude the chapter by discussing the implications of Duras's death, just four months after the publication of *C'est tout*, upon readings of this text, upon the reception of her posthumous *La Mer écrite* (1996) and upon the dynamics of her intertextual relationship with Robbe-Grillet.

For months after the publication of *L'Amant*, Duras was widely fêted, with the terms 'événement' and 'phénomène'⁴ repeatedly used to evoke the seemingly miraculous, meteoric nature of her rise to national and international fame. Duras's work, as the following example of the many press articles indicates, was everywhere: '«*L'Amant*» par ci, «*L'Amant*» par là [...] Et pas moyen d'y échapper!'⁵ The exceptional speed of this rise to fame was underlined in the following quotation: 'Quelle époque réconfortante puisque, dans ces années de TGV, la renommée fonce dix fois, mille fois plus vite qu'avant. Que tous ceux qui aiment Duras se lèvent!'⁶ Duras was described as 'Presque un monument national'.⁷ With her novel's translation into numerous foreign languages, *L'Amant* even became 'mondial'.⁸ The

³ Published by P.O.L., Paris.

⁴ Cf., for example:

Olivier Séguret, 'Duras se fait coffret', *Libération*, 28 September 1984, p. 43: 'S'il n'est pas nouveau, le phénomène Duras prend pour cette année 1984 des formes différentes.'

'Les Goncourt aimaient *L'Amant* de Duras', *Libération*, 13 November 1984, pp. 29-30: 'Les journalistes, les éditeurs, les libraires et les lecteurs avaient besoin d'un événement, [...] Ce fut Duras.'

Pierre Billard, 'Goncourt: pourquoi Duras?', *Le Point*, no. 635, 19 November 1984, p. 132: '...le phénomène Duras.'

Yves Florence, 'Mises à mort', *Le Monde*, 19 November 1984: 'Tout écrit de Mme. Marguerite Duras est un événement trop considérable pour n'être pas aussitôt publié...'

⁵ *Libération*, 18 October 1984.

⁶ Albert Algoud, *Libération*, 18 October 1984.

⁷ *L'Express*, 28 September - 4 October 1984, p. 191.

⁸ 'Les Goncourt aimaient *L'Amant* de Duras', *Libération*, 13 November 1984, p. 29. A cover-slip on later editions of *L'Amant* features the phrase 'un succès mondial' on the front, alongside a photograph of

unprecedented sales figures of *L'Amant* were so newsworthy as to provide the material for recurrent press coverage in newspapers for several months,⁹ and a graph of the book's growth in sales was used in a full-page advertising campaign.¹⁰ Duras's wide recognition by the general reading public preceded the work's recognition by the critical establishment, which was marked by her being awarded the prestigious Prix Goncourt in November 1984. Indeed, in an interview in *Le Point*, one of the Goncourt judges highlighted *L'Amant*'s universal, critical and public appeal in the following comment regarding its sales success:

Nous sommes là dans les eaux des *miracles* d'édition [...] Dans ce club très select des hauts succès, le déchaînement des phénomènes de librairie est parfois plus évident que le couronnement des ambitions littéraires. ...«*la magie*».¹¹

The year 1984, with *L'Amant* constantly heading national and international best-sellers lists, Duras's television, press and radio appearances, the awarding of the Prix Goncourt and the sudden critical and popular interest in her work and life, represented Duras's literary apotheosis.

Duras's masterful solo performance on 'Apostrophes' contributed to propelling Duras and her book to unprecedented heights of national and international renown.¹² The programme stood out, in the history of 'Apostrophes', as a particularly effective piece of intergeneric, literary and audiovisual drama. The performative power of this appearance centred upon the manipulation, in both the literary text and the television appearance, of the author's image, especially her face. At the time of her television appearance, Duras was, of course, no stranger to the manipulation of the visual image,

the adolescent Duras. On the back is a list of twenty-eight languages into which the novel has been translated.

⁹ For example, *L'Express*, 28 September - 4 October 1984, p. 191.: 'C'est la surprise de l'automne. Un mois après sa sortie, «L'Amant» s'installe en tête des best-sellers, et les Éditions de Minuit en vendent 4000 exemplaires par jour.'

¹⁰ See, for example, *Le Monde*, 26 April 1985.

¹¹ François Nourissier (Académie Goncourt), 'Goncourt: pourquoi Duras?', *Le Point*, no. 635, 19 November 1984.

¹² This programme is available on video-cassette, as are all the special, solo-author 'Apostrophes' appearances.

having written, produced and directed many films and plays. In *Le Camion* (1977), Duras had read the part of the female protagonist. *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras*, published the same year, was a transcript of interviews with Michelle Porte, accompanied by early and contemporary photographs of Duras.

Duras's performance on 'Apostrophes' thus mirrors many of the presentation and acting techniques of cinema. Firstly, costume: she wears the large, dark-rimmed glasses, white polo-neck jumper, black waistcoat and diamond rings which become her trademark 'look Duras'.¹³ Secondly, diction: Duras's slow, deliberate, rhythmical style of speech, with its many interlinking clauses and repetitions, strongly resembles her writing practice. Thirdly, delivery: Duras interacts in a calm, confident, conversational manner with Pivot, exploiting the visual performative tools of smiles, glances and gestures. In so doing, she maintains control of the interview, effectively directing her fellow actor, Pivot, who remains uncharacteristically respectful throughout. Lastly, the script: Duras's reworking within *L'Amant* of visual - photographic and cinematographic - features, centring on her own image, provides ample material for adaptation to the drama of the televised, face-to-face interview.

The motif of the face, central to *L'Amant*, is exploited to great dramatic effect in 'Apostrophes'. Photos of the young Duras are intermittently superimposed upon the face of the author, so that the visual gaps of absent photos around which the novel is constructed are symbolically filled by the intergeneric blending of the TV montage. This blending of interrelated genres and images, literary, photographic and televisual, with the presence of the author, is particularly close and striking when Pivot discusses the opening sections of Duras's novel. Picking up the book and addressing Duras, Pivot says, 'Votre livre, *L'Amant*, commence par deux pages sur votre visage.' He then brings attention to the dramatic potential of the intergeneric juxtaposition of

¹³ Duras ironically refers to her style of clothing in this way in, 'L'uniforme Duras', *La Vie matérielle* (Paris: P.O.L., 1987), when she writes:

J'ai un uniforme depuis maintenant quinze ans, c'est l'uniforme M.D., cet uniforme qui a donné, paraît-il, un look Duras, repris par un couturier l'année dernière: le gilet noir, une jupe droite, le pull-over à col roulé et les bottes courtes en hiver. (p. 75)

literary text and performative context created, as he continues, pointing at Duras, 'Alors c'est intéressant parce que là les spectateurs le voient votre visage.' Summarizing Duras's opening paragraphs, Pivot refers to the sudden ageing of her face at eighteen. Duras then interjects, creating another intertextual and intergenerational link as she points to a book on the table in front of them and says, 'Oui. Regardez sur les photos que j'ai là, dans un livre qui s'appelle *Les Lieux*', and brings attention to her characteristic 'yeux cernés'. It is thus Duras who stage-manages the interview, establishing its progression and continuity, with Pivot and the camera crew diffidently following her lead.

The various, interrelated levels of the literary text become transposed into that of the audiovisual medium. As Pivot begins to read from the opening section of the novel, in which first Duras's old and then her young face are described, the camera focuses upon the listening author and gradually an image of the face of the young and beautiful Duras is superimposed onto that of Duras the old writer. The TV audience *sees* simultaneously the contemporary face of the writer-interviewee and the photograph of Duras at eighteen, and *hears* Pivot reading, from Duras's text, first a description of the latter photograph and then of the face of the writer: 'J'ai un visage lacéré de rides sèches et profondes, à la peau cassée. Il ne s'est pas affaissé comme certains visages à traits fins, il a gardé les mêmes contours mais sa matière est détruite. J'ai un visage détruit.' (p. 10)

From 'Apostrophes' onwards, Duras's image was constantly used to promote *L'Amant*: photos of her face, and notably those photos featured on 'Apostrophes', were used on the book sleeve, in press advertisements and in bookshop displays. This marketing of Duras's media image conformed to the following comment, made by a bookshop owner:

Télégénie oblige: le public peut avoir oublié le nom de l'auteur celui de l'éditeur, le titre et le sujet de l'ouvrage, mais il reconnaîtra aussitôt la physionomie du monsieur ou de la dame qui a su si bien parler et l'émouvoir

à la télévision.¹⁴

From the mid-1980s until her death in 1996, Duras became the ultimate writer-celebrity, with her image constantly in the press and on television. Name and face were inextricably linked: to such an extent that Duras frequently took on the role of interviewer rather than interviewee, her status as celebrity taking precedence over that of writer.¹⁵

It is precisely such mediatization of the author which Robbe-Grillet criticizes in his *Angélique ou l'enchantement*, published in 1987, in which he condemns the need to possess or create 'une forte présence stéréotypée: une véritable tête d'écrivain' (p. 29). Although in the following quotation, Robbe-Grillet explicitly refers to his own experience, there are strong intimations of his awareness of 'le phénomène Duras', as he writes:

Il y a quelque chose d'irritant pour un homme de plume, de ratures et de solitude, à se voir sans cesse [...] placé sous les feux de la rampe, réduit à son image sur la couverture du livre (ou sur une bande) et à son bavardage dans les journaux, à la radio, sur les écrans de télévision. (p. 29)

Robbe-Grillet here appears to wish to reinstate the notion of a writer's solitary, faceless anonymity and writes, addressing the reader-cum-viewer, that, 'c'est par mes écrits que je m'adresse à vous, évitez donc de vous intéresser trop exclusivement à ma barbe, à mes mimiques, à mes boutades' (p. 29).

Yet Robbe-Grillet's intertextual response to Duras's media fame largely reflects the paradoxical nature of his comment, made in an interview soon after the publication of *L'Amant* and his own *Le Miroir qui revient*, that, 'l'écrivain est

¹⁴ Quoted in: Edouard Brasey, *L'Effet Pivot* (Paris: Éditions Ramsay, 1987), p. 282.

¹⁵ The most controversial of the press articles which Duras wrote as author-journalist rather than as interviewee, was 'Sublime, forcément sublime Christine V.', *Libération* (17 July 1985), pp. 4-6, in which she fictionalized the circumstances of the murder of Grégoire Villemin by his mother, who was subsequently proved innocent. See also, for instance: Duras's four interviews with François Mitterrand in *L'Autre Journal* between 26 February and 23 March 1986; 'Thierry Lévy ou la littérature évitée', *Le Matin* (17 February 1987); or Duras's interviews with Michel Platini, 'Qu'est-ce que c'est que ce jeu-là? Démoniaque et divin', *Libération* (14 & 15 December 1987), in which she is photographed signing a football.

quelqu'un qui écrit, pas quelqu'un qui parle. [...] Pourtant, chaque jour davantage, l'écrivain est quelqu'un qu'on fait parler, qu'on apostrophe.'¹⁶ Robbe-Grillet's criticism of the contemporary media's emphasis upon a writer's image is introduced, in *Angélique ou l'enchantement*, by a description of a photograph of himself as a young, beardless writer, an image which he criticizes for its 'manque de consistance' (p. 28). On other occasions, he makes explicit links between his physical appearance (particularly his beard) and his media role, as when he introduces a detailed description of his face with the phrase, 'De temps à autre, lorsque je ressens le besoin, pour quelque entrevue ou mondanité, de soigner mon aspect physique [...]' (p. 15). He then reveals a direct and conscious link between his current appearance and his media role, when he writes:

[...] je me suis laissé pousser la barbe, et cela sur les conseils de [ma femme] qui me trouvait auparavant le visage mou, dépourvu de présence, accrochant mal la lumière et pour tout dire peu photogénique, tare sans aucun doute fâcheuse, aujourd'hui, pour un homme de lettres. (p. 16)

Despite claiming to wish to be judged by his writing and not his appearance, Robbe-Grillet nonetheless admits on several occasions to a very conscious adoption of a 'look stéréotypée', 'photogénique', 'une tête d'écrivain'. In spoken interviews, he stresses the importance of his status as a writer, whilst in his writing he constantly refers to his public role of 'quelqu'un qu'on fait parler'.

The paradox inherent in Robbe-Grillet's words is not solely a response to the mediatization of writers in general, (after all, Robbe-Grillet has appeared on 'Apostrophes' no less than four times and has given countless interviews, although never on his own) but it also betrays his anxiety at the unparalleled success of the mediatization of Duras's image in particular. If one considers the number of instances in *Angélique ou l'enchantement* when Robbe-Grillet describes his own face, a motif which is moreover entirely absent from his previous works, it becomes obvious that

¹⁶ Interview with Jean-Jacques Brochier in, *Alain Robbe-Grillet: Qui suis-je?* (Lyon: La Manufacture, 1985), p. 119.

these descriptions do not solely deconstruct the contemporary foregrounding of an author's persona. Robbe-Grillet's explicit criticisms could be viewed as a response to Duras's consummate manipulation of the media, as epitomized by her appearance on 'Apostrophes'. There are, however, other instances which implicitly reveal Robbe-Grillet's more indebted, intertextual relationship with his literary rival, as he misreads and reworks elements, particularly the motif of the face, from *L'Amant* itself.

As in Duras's text (pp. 9-10), Robbe-Grillet includes a detailed description of his face very near the beginning of his work (pp. 14-16), and the face described is easily identified as that of the author, contemporaneous with the writing of *Angélique ou l'enchantement*. The meticulous, self-critical nature of the description and his use of the motif to link different levels of his autobiography are also strikingly similar to Duras's use of the image of her face. Robbe-Grillet traces the passing of time, the reflection of the past and the anticipation of the future in changes in his face as he writes, referring to marks and scars: 'Ces diverses traces suspectes en surface se remarqueront d'ailleurs de moins en moins, à mesure que deviendront plus larges et plus foncées les taches noires qui sont le signe de la vieillesse' (p. 16). He shifts from a description of his contemporary, bearded face to one of his earlier appearance as a young writer (*ibid.*), and on to one of his face when he was seventeen years old (p. 17).

Just as, in *L'Amant*, shifts between textual representations of visual images perform a broad, structural function, throughout *Angélique ou l'enchantement* Robbe-Grillet uses absent or imaginary photographs, particularly of himself at various ages, as recurrent lacunae around which to construct his narrative. As was discussed in the previous chapter, the central gap around which the narrative is constructed in *L'Amant* is that of an absent, since non-existent and imagined, image of Duras at fifteen and a half, crossing the Mekong River. The power of this image, the 'photo absolue' of the novel's original title, is its very absence and ability thus to unleash the creative potential of the imagination. Duras describes this quality in the following words, quoted earlier in Chapter 4: 'C'est à ce manque d'avoir été faite qu'elle doit sa vertu,

celle de représenter un absolu, d'en être justement l'auteur' (p. 17). In *Angélique ou l'enchantement*, Robbe-Grillet underlines the role of the imagination in the creation of textual representations in strikingly similar terms: 'J'ai toujours été [...] incapable de décrire ce que j'ai sous les yeux (la plume m'en tomberait aussitôt des mains), sans doute parce qu'il y manquerait la dimension imaginaire: celle de l'esprit absolu' (p. 125).

Whilst explicitly condemnatory of the promotion of Duras's or any writer's media persona at the expense of his or her writing, Robbe-Grillet simultaneously acknowledged the necessity of possessing just such an image. He did so not only by revealing his own conscious adoption of a 'tête d'écrivain', but also implicitly, in his intertextual reworking, throughout his own novel, of the photographic structures and motifs, particularly of the author's face, which had proved such a performative combination in Duras's precursor text. In so doing, Robbe-Grillet was responding both to the media impact of Duras's solo 'Apostrophes' appearance and to the international popularity of *L'Amant*.

1984 not only marked a turning-point in Duras's career, but also brought about a decisive reversal in the previously mobile equilibrium of precursor and ephebe in the intertextual relationship between her and Robbe-Grillet. This reversal of literary, celebrity and financial fortunes inevitably had an important impact upon each writer's self-perception in relation both to their own past and to each other. In *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe*, Robbe-Grillet highlights the singularity of Duras's celebrity status when, in order to describe the crowd of admirers who accompanied André Breton to a preview of *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, he writes that the latter was, 'entouré [...] de toute une «rumeur isotherme» (comparable à celle que nous verrions plus tard graviter autour de Duras dans ses moindres déplacements)' (p. 182).

Duras's constant and intense media coverage was in stark contrast to that dedicated to Robbe-Grillet during this period. He was at this point far less prolific

than his literary rival,¹⁷ but the differences in coverage are not simply ones of scale. The publication of *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* still warranted a cover-page photograph in *La Quinzaine littéraire*, but this was not accompanied by extensive coverage or interviews in the more mainstream press. Robbe-Grillet's reputation remained, arguably more so than ever before, elitist and academic. His work may have been included on university syllabuses, but neither his name nor his face would have been recognized by the French general public. Duras acknowledged the difference between her situation and that of Robbe-Grillet when, in the following comment, she contrasted the reception of her own works with those of her more theoretically motivated contemporaries: 'De Robbe-Grillet à Sollers, ça y va. Mais ils le savent bien, personne ne lit plus ça qu'ils écrivent.'¹⁸

This disparity in nature and extent of the public attention granted to the two writers and the impact which it had upon the psychodynamics of 'anxiety of influence' within their intertextual relationship will form the context for my 'reading in pairs', of Duras's *Écrire* (1993) and Robbe-Grillet's *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* (1994). In this I shall look at the writers' respective references to their own past, literary works, their retrospective accounts of their writing careers and their perceived position within recent literary history, and the relationship between these accounts of the past and each writer's depiction of his or her place within the contemporary literary environment. With *Écrire* and *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe*, Duras and Robbe-Grillet again chose to write works which are strongly autobiographical, but abandoned the thematic material of childhood and adolescence, and focused instead upon their careers as writers, referring to their past works, literary environment and the nature of their writing practices. The two works are, however, structurally and stylistically very

¹⁷ After 1984, Robbe-Grillet only published two works, *Angélique ou l'enchantement* (1988) and *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* (1994). He also co-produced the film, *Un bruit qui rend fou* (1995). Duras, on the other hand, published: *La Douleur* (1985), *Les Yeux bleus, cheveux noirs* (1986), *La Pute de la côte normande* (1986), *Emily L.* (1987), *La Vie matérielle* (1987), *La Pluie d'été* (1990), *L'Amant de la Chine du nord* (1991), *Yann Andréa Steiner* (1992), *Écrire* (1993), *Le Monde extérieur* (1993), *C'est tout* (1995) and the posthumous *La Mer écrite* (1995), as well as several plays.

¹⁸ 'La Vie Duras', interview with Marianne Alphant, *Libération*, 11 January 1990.

different. Duras's work comprises a series of five short, loosely connected texts. The first of these, which will form the basis of my initial 'reading in pairs', is a fluid, lyrical, non-chronological reflection upon interrelated elements associated with writing in general and Duras's writing in particular. Robbe-Grillet's work is the third in his Romanesques trilogy and as such is consonant with the preceding two works in its interweaving of autobiographical and fictional elements, of passages of theoretical exposition with textual representations of this theory, and in its constant undermining and pre-empting of the reader's expectations and potential approaches.

In Duras's many references in *Écrire* to her past literary works, she constantly emphasizes the importance of the physical location of their writing, echoing the emphasis upon place of the much earlier work, *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras*,¹⁹ and in such a way as to stress the solitude and individuality of her writing practice. By means of these allusions, Duras draws the reader of *Écrire*, who is also implicitly assumed to be a reader of her œuvre in general, into a closed, personal, inspirational universe, as in: 'Là, j'ai écrit *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* et *Le Vice-consul*' (p. 16) or, 'J'ai fini *Lol V. Stein* ici, j'ai écrit la fin ici et à Trouville devant la mer.' (p. 21) The association between work and place of writing is even more close, precise and personal in the following: '*Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* et *Le Vice-consul*, je les ai écrits là-haut, dans ma chambre, celle aux armoires bleues, hélas maintenant détruites par des jeunes maçons. Quelquefois, j'écrivais aussi ici, à cette table-là du salon.' (both p. 16) The above quotations all refer to locations well-known to Duras's readers and viewers of her films - her house at Neauphle-le-Château and the Hotel des Roches Noires on the sea-front at Trouville - and so reveal the writer's assumption of a level of recognition on the part of her addressee. This level of recognition becomes one of writer-reader intimacy in the third quotation above, as Duras focuses not just upon the place of writing of her earlier works but also upon her immediate surroundings, at the time of composition of *Écrire*. Through Duras's allusions to her

¹⁹ Produced with Michelle Porte (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977). Indeed, Duras refers to this earlier work, 'un film sur moi' in *Écrire*, p. 47.

bedroom and to items of domestic furniture, a closed, introspective environment is created, between past and present literary works, between literary and autobiographical locations, between Duras the writer and Duras at home, and all centring upon the presence of the writer, 'ici' and 'maintenant'.

On occasions the link between writing and physical location is portrayed as a clearly material one, as when Duras writes that, 'Cette maison de Neauphle-le-Château, je l'ai achetée avec les droits de cinéma de mon livre *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*' (p. 29), whereas at others, this link is seen as one of autobiographical inspiration, as in: 'Devant ma chambre il y a ce rosier fabuleux de *L'Homme Atlantique*' (p. 20), or in, 'Ce qui compte dans cette maison de Neauphle-le-Château ce sont les fenêtres sur le parc et la route de Paris devant la maison. Celle par où passent les femmes de mes livres' (p. 57). Objects and characters from Duras's immediate surroundings are portrayed as being integrated into her works, their fictional contexts corresponding to those of their writing. The physical and psychological setting of *Écrire* becomes by extension, via the depiction of Duras's writing practice and past works, the exclusive location for her other works, a self-reflexive, self-generative, writer-centred environment cut off from the outside world.

The isolation inherent in the portrayal of this writerly environment is underlined still further by Duras's emphasis upon the solitude which she sees as a prerequisite of writing. Following the above reference to the writing location of *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (p. 21), Duras claims that, even when other people are with her, the writing process itself is a solitary one, necessitating a distance between writer and others. This isolation referred to in the following quotation is portrayed as characteristic of the locations in which she chooses to write:

À Trouville pourtant il y avait la plage, la mer, les immensités de ciels, de sables. Et c'était ça, ici, la solitude. C'est à Trouville que j'ai regardé la mer jusqu'au rien. Trouville c'est une solitude de ma vie entière. J'ai encore cette solitude, là, imprenable, autour de moi. Des fois je ferme les portes, je coupe le téléphone, je coupe ma voix, je ne veux plus rien.

Je peux dire ce que je veux, je ne trouverai jamais pourquoi on écrit et comment on n'écrit pas. (p. 21)

Duras's repetition of the word 'solitude', her constant underlining of the first person, and her centring of this solitude 'autour de moi' create a solipsistic, inspirational universe. The intentionally sought separation, brought about materially by cutting off possible modes of communication and turning in upon herself, is linked in the last sentence to a less physical, more mystical portrayal of the writing vocation as instinctive, untheoretical and individual.

Within *Écrire*, Duras constantly refers to the very personal relationship between herself and her writing, with the creative process frequently portrayed, as in the following quotation, as a presence itself, a means of overcoming loneliness:

Je parle de la solitude mais je n'étais pas seule puisque j'avais ce travail à mener à bien jusqu'à la clarté, ce travail de forçat: écrire *Le Vice-consul de France à Lahore*. Et il a été fait et traduit dans les langues du monde entier, et il a été gardé. (p. 39)

By stressing the often painful feelings of obligation and inevitability when writing, Duras again depicts writing as being a powerful inner drive, springing from herself and her solitude. Yet the second part of this quotation reveals Duras's awareness of the public success of her private endeavour: from her solitary creativity within a closed, hermetic, personal universe are produced literary works which will be sold and read throughout the world. Thus Duras's creation, by means of references within *Écrire* to the context of the production of her past works and to the inexplicable, instinctual nature of her writing practice, of a solipsistic, solitary writing universe, centring upon a relationship of intimacy between reader and writer, is also linked to, and is largely a result of, the writer's awareness of her relationship with the broader literary and critical environment.

These various elements - the personal, bodily relation of writer to vocation, the necessary solitude of writing and Duras's relationship as writer with the outside world

- are all interwoven in the following passage, in which Duras's initial emphasis upon her solitude when writing is contextualized by her reference to the well-known literary figure, Raymond Queneau, but is also paradoxically confirmed by his quoted advice to her:

Il faut toujours une séparation d'avec les autres gens autour de la personne qui écrit les livres. C'est une solitude. C'est la solitude de l'auteur, celle de l'écrit. [...] Cette solitude réelle du corps devient celle, inviolable, de l'écrit. Je ne parlais de ça à personne. Dans cette période-là de ma première solitude j'avais déjà découvert que c'était écrire qu'il fallait que je fasse. J'en avais déjà été confirmée par Raymond Queneau. Le seul jugement de Raymond Queneau, cette phrase-là: «Ne faites rien d'autre que ça, écrivez.»
(pp. 17-18)

By portraying Queneau's advice as confirmation of, rather than as inspiration for, her writing talent, Duras casts him as part of her creative universe, rather than herself as part of the broader, literary milieu to which he belongs. Similarly, when referring to Lacan's essay, 'Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras, du ravissement de Lol V. Stein', Duras emphasizes the role which this played, not in establishing her literary reputation, but in contributing to the shaping of her personal writing practice and beliefs:

Personne ne peut la connaître, L.V.S., ni vous ni moi. Et même ce que Lacan en a dit, je ne l'ai jamais tout à fait compris. J'étais abasourdie par Lacan. Et cette phrase de lui: «Elle ne doit pas savoir qu'elle écrit ce qu'elle écrit. Parce qu'elle se perdrait. Et ça serait la catastrophe.» C'est devenu pour moi, cette phrase, comme une sorte d'identité de principe, d'un «droit de dire»...
(pp. 23-24)

In both of the above examples, Duras emphasizes simultaneously her importance within the contemporary critical environment, and her singularity and separateness. Other literary and critical figures are portrayed as recognizing her idiosyncratic genius and Duras asserts her independence by appropriating their work in support of her own practice, and by incorporating their identities within her text. This self-referential

appropriation can be detected in her following assertion that, 'quand je lisais des critiques, la plupart du temps j'étais sensible au fait qu'on y disait que *ça ne ressemblait à rien*. C'est-à-dire que ça rejoignait la solitude initiale de l'auteur' (p. 31). Here Duras signals her awareness of the critical, literary context and of her role within that context; but again, by emphasizing others' recognition of her difference, she also stresses the distance between them and herself. Duras's references to past criticism of her work do not attempt to construct a historical, factual, chronological account of her literary career: they portray the writer, not as part of a literary continuum, but in terms of her separation from this and of her creative individuality.

Duras stages other contemporary figures even more overtly as characters in a creative universe of which she is the central focus, by casting them as her friends, rather than as actors, writers, critics or publishers in their own right. Thus Michael Lonsdale is portrayed by Duras as the character he played in her film: 'même dans ses autres rôles, pour moi, il est encore le vice-consul de France à Lahore. Il est mon ami, mon frère' (p. 25). Delphine Seyrig is identified with her film role as Anne-Marie Stretter in *India Song*. Other influential contemporary figures are referred to as friends who attend Duras's dinner parties at Neauphle, with the intimacy and informality of these occasions stressing the direct, personal links between them and the writer:

Il y en avait beaucoup, des Gallimard, quinze peut-être, quelquefois. Je demandais qu'on vienne un peu avant pour mettre les tables dans une seule pièce afin qu'on soit ensemble. [...] Il y avait toujours Robert Antelme et Dionys Mascolo et leurs amis. Et mes amants aussi, surtout Gérard Jarlot...
(pp. 31-32)

By the recurrent inclusion of the names of famous and influential figures, Duras implicitly signals to her reader her position within the contemporary cultural milieu, whilst more explicitly portraying them in their referential role to her, as friends, lovers, or characters in her films. By removing these figures from their field of more general influence within the Paris literary environment, and recasting them within the

very personal environment of her home at Neauphle, Duras portrays herself as the centre around which the others gravitate. Furthermore, as a result of the location of these references at Neauphle, this focus is upon herself at the time of writing *Écrire*, that is, at the height of her post-*L'Amant* fame.

The relationship between Duras's accounts of her past works and the past literary environment, and her present status, as contemporaneous with the writing of *Écrire*, is highlighted particularly clearly within the very preface of the book, in which she refers to the genesis of the collection of texts, which form an interrelated entity with a series of film projects. Both of the first two texts, 'Écrire' and 'La mort du jeune aviateur anglais', were produced in parallel with films made of Duras at home, recounting their content. Duras's celebrity status and critics' interest in her persona, simultaneously spawn a literary work and a media spectacle. All of the contextualizing elements act as the support for the portrayal of Duras as writer and creative genius in self-engendering isolation.

Thus within *Écrire*, as well as her constant use of the self-referential first-person, as in 'J'ai ma table, mon lit, mon téléphone, mes tableaux, et mes livres' (p. 33), Duras also, in contrast, draws attention to the public and media potency of this well-known 'moi' by naming herself, portraying herself in the third person, as she would be seen or imagined by her viewers and readers: 'Dans la nuit, imaginer Duras dans son lit en train de dormir seule dans une maison de quatre cents mètres carrés' (p. 32). This awareness of how she is perceived by others leads to her tendency to include phrases which pre-emptively highlight the importance and quotability of her words for her readers, as in such statements as, 'Il m'a fallu vingt ans pour écrire ça que je viens de dire là' (p. 20), 'Je ne sais pas pourquoi, ces mots que je viens de dire me font pleurer' (p. 35) or, 'Ce n'est pas simple ce que j'essaie de dire là, mais je crois qu'on peut s'y retrouver...' (p. 64). The inclusion of such self-referential phrases emphasizes Duras's awareness of the presence of the reader, and also of the awed nature of much reception of her work. By providing textual pointers which guide the reader's interpretations, Duras constructs a fictional, autobiographical and historico-

literary world which hermetically refers to her, with the author guiding potential critical readings of her work.

Robbe-Grillet, in *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe*, also attempts to construct a hermetic, self-referential world composed of elements from his autobiography, from recent literary history and from his past fictional works. Unlike Duras, however, he does not attempt to seduce his readers into a position of awed intimacy but, as in earlier works, he draws them into his own œuvre by means of constant 'sister-textual'²⁰ clues and apparently implicit references to his past works. He then expels them by explicitly overturning past critical interpretations or pre-empting potential future ones. Although the two writers use different strategies, both aim to re-establish the author as guide to, and self-generative source of, his or her literary work. Such strategies can be seen at work in Robbe-Grillet's inclusion of names or motifs from past works without explicitly naming the original context, and so obliging the reader, who must necessarily be acquainted with the corpus, to identify the allusions. Thus a selection of the many motifs from Robbe-Grillet's œuvre which appear in the text include: a lost ball shoe (p. 91), (*Souvenirs du triangle d'or* or *Le Miroir qui revient*); a painting by the brother of Edouard Mannaret (p. 49), (*La Maison de rendez-vous*); iron rings and rope (p. 93), (*Le Voyeur* or *Topologie d'une cité fantôme*); a reference to Marc Tansey (p. 152), (*Le Miroir qui revient*); Breton legends and red curtains (*Le Miroir qui revient*); a wounded soldier, snowy landscapes and a labyrinth, (*Dans le labyrinthe*). Such sister-textual references proliferate throughout the work with none of the selection of characters or motifs above restricted to just one text, since each of Robbe-Grillet's texts reworks elements from the others. In the account of Corinthe's walking through the labyrinth of underground passages in the Breton cliffside, the protagonist, the setting, the strange young woman he meets, the broken torch he holds, the rooms

²⁰ Ann Jefferson adopts this term to describe the relationship between texts from the same corpus, especially of the same genre in, 'Autobiography as intertext', Michael Worton and Judith Still (eds.), *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1990).

which he enters, and the objects over which he stumbles in the dark (pp. 133-142; pp. 208-211), are all recognized by readers of Robbe-Grillet's œuvre, as being drawn from the closed, introspective storehouse of his past works.

As well as including such implicit references to his own works, Robbe-Grillet frequently refers explicitly to them in such a way as to preclude the critic's task of recognizing and reassembling the intertextual clues: that is, the author performs the critic's task for him. Robbe-Grillet constructs all of his works as an interconnected whole, dictating the limits and nature of critical approaches by the inclusion of self-referential interpretative guides, such as: '(lire à ce sujet les *Souvenirs du Triangle d'or*)' (p. 64); '(comme a déjà été rapporté dans *la Maison de rendez-vous*)...' (p. 202); '...cet éclairage portatif qui fait brusquement défaut dans un corridor problématique se trouve déjà mentionné à la page 148 des *Souvenirs du Triangle d'or*' (p. 212). The index which features at the end of *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe*, as in the previous two volumes of the *Romanesques*, performs a similar, paradoxical function of appearing to aid the reader, by means of a critical guide, whilst in fact impeding him, since the author thus dictates the terms in which the work should be read. Elsewhere, Robbe-Grillet overturns past structuralist approaches to his work, whilst simultaneously dictating and precluding possible future critics, by positing the autobiographical source of his fictional material, as when he claims that, 'A la Martinique, [...] j'enregistrais sans le savoir divers éléments dont les figures incertaines deviendront beaucoup plus tard *la Jalousie*' (p. 13), or when he states that, also whilst in Martinique, he was fascinated by the window-display of a shop selling communion dresses, and that, 'Si mes souvenirs sont exacts, le sacrifice des douze communiantes figure aujourd'hui dans *Projet pour une révolution à New York*' (p. 14). The use of elements of his own past works as the material for his 'final' work, *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe*, and his consciously provocative emphasis upon the autobiographical inspiration for this, seek to create a closed, fictional universe of sister-textuality within which Robbe-Grillet is the guiding centre.

Robbe-Grillet's anticipation of critical responses to his work is also evident in his depiction of the historical, literary context within which his works are positioned, although the nature of the position which he portrays himself as occupying is strikingly different from that of Duras in *Écrire*. Whereas fictional motifs and elements of his past works become dispersed to form the ruined elements from which the present text is constructed, Robbe-Grillet's account of the publishing history and literary context of his early works and of the foundation of the Nouveau Roman is rigorously chronological. He thus aims, within autobiographical sections of his last work, to set the record straight as to his position within twentieth-century literary history, a position which has been questioned by, amongst other factors, Duras's international reputation.

Whereas Duras's references in *Écrire* to the domestic context, within which her works were produced, are introduced in such a way as to enhance the writer's distance from the contemporary literary scene, in Robbe-Grillet's account, in contrast, he is keen to underline his central position within this same context. His assertion of his own status is portrayed in relation to, rather than to the exclusion of, other influential writers, and so Robbe-Grillet repeatedly refers to his instrumental role in the creation of the Nouveau Roman. It is striking, in fact, that his account plots, chronologically, the publication of his early novels of the Nouveau Roman era, but that material from subsequent works is integrated fragmentedly within the fictional strands of his work. Whereas Duras's emphasis is upon her status at the time of the text's writing, when her literary and media recognition was at its height, Robbe-Grillet's emphasis is upon the 1950s and 60s, arguably the period of his greatest literary influence.

In a series of passages plotting the writing of *Un Régicide*,²¹ *Les Gommages*, *Le Voyeur* and *La Jalousie*, Robbe-Grillet gives a chronological account of the successes and problems encountered in the publication of his early works. A very strong

²¹ As Robbe-Grillet's account depicts, although *Un Régicide* was his first work, written in 1949, it was not in fact published until 1978.

element of his account is the portrayal of the contemporary publishing environment, the differences between the publishing houses, and the often antagonistic relationship between writers and their publishers. He portrays himself, in contrast, as both friend and colleague of Jérôme Lindon, stressing his dual role as writer and as 'conseiller littéraire' at Minuit. In presenting his view of events, Robbe-Grillet is able, in the light of his subsequent success and literary importance, to take retrospective revenge upon the publishers who refused his work at the time. All of the related contextual material serves to portray Robbe-Grillet as a well-connected, influential figure within the Parisian literary and publishing circles of the 1950s and 1960s, whilst also providing the background to his accounts (frequently repeated and reworked from different angles) of the establishment of the Nouveau Roman, and of the key role which he played in this as writer, theoretician and publishing adviser.

In the first of the many passages dealing with the Nouveau Roman, Robbe-Grillet initially recounts the conditions of its conception. *La Jalousie*, having been refused by Gallimard, was published at Minuit but was an economic failure, attracting a very limited readership. Yet the success of Butor's *La Modification*, also published at Minuit, ensured the survival of its publishing house and, by attracting media attention for its other writers, particularly Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute, provoked critical interest in what was perceived as a new literary movement. It was thus, according to Robbe-Grillet, that 'le Nouveau Roman était né'.²² Although claiming that the Nouveau Roman was initially largely the result of inter-connected media rumours, Robbe-Grillet does nonetheless state that, 'Quelque chose, cependant, avait vu le jour: ce que Sarraute appelait le «suspçon», une onde d'inquiétude, d'excitation, de courage, où les esprits ouverts sentaient frémir le vent de la liberté', so establishing more concrete theoretical and literary grounds for its creation.

In Robbe-Grillet's account, the theoretical links which he perceives between his and Sarraute's work are portrayed as being reinforced by ones of friendship when,

²² This and the following quotations are from *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe*, pp. 83-86.

on meeting her, 'La discussion de vive voix avec cet auteur ouvertement révolutionnaire, son intelligence acérée, son humour, m'ont aussitôt convaincu que nous devons faire alliance et que le Nouveau Roman serait donc multipiste.' Thus, Robbe-Grillet asserts that the creation of the Nouveau Roman and the group status of this were his own idea. Robbe-Grillet's sympathetic portrait of Nathalie Sarraute, which is in sharp contrast to his later hostile attacks upon Duras and Claude Simon, can be seen to be the direct result of her recognition of and, according to him, her justified gratitude for, the role he played in establishing her reputation: 'elle du moins a voulu me rendre justice: son œuvre, qu'elle savait importante mais croyait autrefois vouée au silence, avait émergé de l'ombre grâce à ce qu'elle appelait mon énergie et mon optimisme'.²³ Robbe-Grillet claims that 'le Nouveau Roman n'a jamais été une école, encore moins une théorie littéraire d'ensemble', and states that he is neither perturbed nor surprised by other Nouveaux Romanciers' later denial of affiliation. He then undermines such claims, however, so revealing his own investment in the status of the Nouveau Roman as a group, when he writes that, 'en fin de compte, mon amicale obstination aura triomphé de leur frilosité prudente, ombrageuse, égocentrique'. He sees the media and critical coverage, which has consistently associated the names of other writers with his own, as confirmation of the importance of 'ce phénomène incontestable, désormais historique' which was the Nouveau Roman and, thus, of his own important role in the creation of this phenomenon.

Robbe-Grillet goes on to overturn the other writers' claims to individuality and solitude, (which, as we have seen, form the central impetus of Duras's account in *Écrire*) by arguing that it is paradoxically their very independence which is the reason for their forming a group:

S'ils se sont trouvés réunis, c'est précisément par l'esprit d'invention personnelle qui caractérisait les uns et les autres, par leur commune volonté d'indépendance: c'est leur différence fondamentale qui permet, dès l'abord, de les rassembler.

²³ Sarraute's original speech is transcribed in: Lois Oppenheim (ed.), *Three Decades of the French New Novel* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986) and cited in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

There is a sharp contrast between Duras's depiction of herself as isolated from other writers and from the literary milieu which gravitates around her singular persona, and Robbe-Grillet's desire to promote himself precisely in relation to those around him. This can be seen most strikingly in Robbe-Grillet's extension of his portrayal of the group dynamics of the Nouveau Roman of the 1950s and 1960s into the present of his writing project, as he claims that a common motivation lay behind the complementarity of the former Nouveaux Romanciers' literary careers:

Mais ce n'est sans doute pas un hasard, cependant, si notre groupe semble avoir suivi au cours de ces quarante années des évolutions plus ou moins parallèles et se lance à présent, comme d'un commun accord, dans des entreprises voisines, bien que cette fois encore remarquablement distinctes, de subversion autobiographique.

The link between the nature of Robbe-Grillet's retrospective account of his past relationship with Duras within the group dynamics of the Nouveau Roman, and her later eminence as an individual, can be seen in the fact that his account is prompted by her alleged retrospective denial of this relationship. Robbe-Grillet claims to have read an interview with Duras in 1990, in which she denies any involvement with the Nouveau Roman and in which she says that, '«C'est à partir de *Moderato cantabile* que Robbe-Grillet a voulu me recruter. Quand il a vu que le livre défonçait les frontières, il a voulu en faire profiter le Nouveau Roman.»'²⁴ Duras's apparent assertion here of her own self-engendering and inspirational status, leads to Robbe-Grillet's wish to set the record straight when, addressing Duras directly, he states that, 'Mais ici, quand même, ma petite Marguerite, il y a des preuves matérielles - historiques, si j'ose dire - qui tempèrent sérieusement ta version des faits.' Still

²⁴ This and the following quotations are from *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe*, pp. 94-96. Robbe-Grillet here asserts that the interview in question appeared in early 1990 in *France Soir*. As discussed earlier in Chapter 1, no such interview exists in this newspaper. There I maintain, however, that the historical verifiability of Robbe-Grillet's claim is less significant for the psychodynamics of his intertextual relationship with Duras than the importance which he places upon what he perceives as Duras's ungrateful denial of his influence in the later stages of her career.

strikingly addressing Duras directly, he alleges, as 'historic' proof of the falsity of Duras's claim, that she published a short story in *Lettres nouvelles* which, with his help, would become the beginning of *Moderato cantabile*, since it was he who saw instantly 'qu'il y avait là aussi - dans tes hâtives pages - une belle force de subversion au sein même des formes narratives, que nous étions déjà quelques autres à mettre en question chez Minuit.'

In his exclamation, 'Pardonne-moi de te comparer, ô toi, l'incomparable!' - Robbe-Grillet expresses his anger at Duras's dissociation from him and the Nouveau Roman group, stating that previously 'tu craignais moins qu'aujourd'hui de tels rapprochements'. Robbe-Grillet's direct addressing of Duras, his 'tutoiement' and the emotive language used, make this anecdote stand out from those referring to other writers, and reflect the privileged position which she occupies as his major literary rival. Robbe-Grillet states that, contrary to Duras's later assertions of autonomy, she did in fact participate in the activities of the Nouveau Roman group and, what is more, that it was largely his suggestions of editorial changes to her récit - 'Je t'ai donc suggéré de poursuivre cette histoire (après y avoir supprimé, peut-être, certaines naïvetés dans le genre «cri du cœur», si tu ne les jugeais pas indispensables) et de donner le livre aux Editions de Minuit, où serait sa place naturelle' - that led to the publication of her watershed novel, *Moderato cantabile*, and by extension to the success of her work in general. Indeed, Robbe-Grillet goes on to remind Duras of other examples of his and Minuit's help in her career when he asks, 'Tu te rappelles, Marguerite, qui a rajouté ce «dit-elle» si durassien, rythmant désormais l'infinitif «Détruire» sur la couverture de ton roman?' He even updates his account of the context of their past relationship with references to further examples of Duras's egotistical denial of influence, added at a later, editing stage in the production of *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe*.

Robbe-Grillet's version of events, then, is largely motivated by the wish, within what is conspicuously portrayed as his last work, to have the final word over his literary rival. The very personal basis of this desire is revealed in the following

quotation, in which he responds to what he perceives as Duras's lack of gratitude for all he once did for her with the statement:

Nous nous affligeons toujours de voir les écrivains que nous lisons avec passion, dont nous admirons les œuvres sans réserve, faire preuve d'autant de mesquinerie: jamais aucun d'entre eux ne voudra reconnaître ce qu'un éditeur aura fait pour sa carrière, sa renommée, son avenir, l'épanouissement de son génie.

Within this quotation which explicitly refers to a period in the past, Robbe-Grillet's reference to writers' later careers and fame betrays another strong motivation, contemporaneous with the time of writing. His painful awareness of the difference between his and his former colleagues' perceived reputations can be seen as underlying his account, being briefly voiced in the following reference, (which still takes the form of a direct address), to the reception of *Moderato*:

Quant au début de percée hors frontières dont tu as bénéficié à cette occasion [...], il ne faut pas non plus l'exagérer: rien à voir avec ce que fera *l'Amant*! Et mes propres petits travaux [...] n'avaient, sur ce point en tout cas, rien à t'envier.

As this anachronistic reference to *L'Amant* within the context of the publication of *Moderato cantabile* reveals, whilst aiming to highlight his own role in the establishment of Duras's and other Nouveaux Romanciers' careers and thereby debunk their claims to literary autonomy, Robbe-Grillet also constantly betrays his awareness of the disparity between his and their later statuses. Similarly, in his account of the role which he played in establishing Claude Simon's early career, (which immediately follows the above passage relating to Duras), Robbe-Grillet highlights a contemporary motivation for this account. After referring to Simon's being awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, Robbe-Grillet gives as a reason for his being initially reluctant to write an article for *Paris-Match* about his earlier relationship with Simon the fact that, 'je risque de ne pas être assez public' (p. 97). Indeed, although Simon was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1985, Robbe-Grillet claims a

vicarious part in Simon's fortune by means of his assertion that, 'c'est, en un sens, tout le Nouveau Roman qui se trouve glorifié' (p. 97), which again highlights the role which he claims he played in establishing his former colleague's early career.²⁵

In a similarly anachronistic fashion, in the following quotation, Robbe-Grillet conflates the possible causes for Simon's and Duras's ingratitude, once they had become individually successful in the 1980s and 1990s, with tensions within the Nouveau Roman group during the 1950s and 1960s:

A l'intérieur [...] de ce groupe (vaille que vaille indestructible) qu'on appelle Nouveau Roman, si je ne prétends pas être le plus jaloué par mes petits camarades, probablement aurai-je été du moins celui dont les autres se méfiaient le plus, on peut même dire le plus haï, par moment, suspecté toujours des desseins les plus noirs, des combinaisons les plus retorses, à cause tout d'abord de mon rôle - réel ou supposé - auprès de l'éditeur, cet ennemi atavique, mais aussi pour le titre fort inadéquat de «chef d'école» dont m'ont gratifié longtemps les gazettes. [...] Il est possible aussi qu'ils ne m'aient jamais pardonné ce que je faisais pour eux. (p. 101)

Hinting at the difference in fortune between his and Simon's or Duras's later careers in his suggestion that 'je ne prétends pas être le plus jaloué', Robbe-Grillet continues to criticize them in personal terms, whilst acknowledging their talent as writers. Indeed, he makes this distinction clear when he states that:

Dans [l'œuvre] de Claude Simon, il n'y a pas trace de la moindre petitesse, ni de sécheresse rapace dans celle de Marguerite Duras. [...] Non, la générosité, ou même la simple reconnaissance, n'apparaissent guère, dans l'ensemble, comme allant de pair avec le génie. (Ibid.)

By attacking personal traits and behaviour of his former colleagues and simultaneously confirming his belief in their literary genius, and by highlighting his

²⁵ In a review of *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe*, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 October 1994, Michael Sheringham highlighted the very personal tone of Robbe-Grillet's references to other former Nouveaux Romanciers, when he wrote:

... he sounds off about the touchy ingratitude of Marguerite Duras and Claude Simon (who are both now more famous than the man who is convinced that he gave them their first break.) [...] Robbe-Grillet seems disinclined to notice, or to worry about how hopelessly petty and unilluminating he is being [...]

role as 'chef d'école' in cultivating this genius, Robbe-Grillet attempts to gain what he sees as justified recognition.

The vicariousness implicit in his constant portrayals of his role in the group dynamics of the Nouveau Roman leads Robbe-Grillet to ask, 'Pourquoi ne pas admettre même (quelle honte y aurait-il?) que des interactions réciproques aient eu néanmoins loisir de s'exercer, d'un auteur à l'autre?' (p. 104) Contrary to his previous claim that the Nouveau Roman was formed as 'un espace de liberté créatrice, intense bien que vouée à demeurer individuelle' (ibid.), Robbe-Grillet here claims that the group was not just the result of a largely strategic, publishing move, but also the result of strong, common literary practices and patterns of mutual, intertextual influence. Not only does he assert his importance in literary history by emphasizing the material role which he played in the foundation of the Nouveau Roman, he now also emphasizes the textual links with other Nouveaux Romanciers, associating himself with those of his contemporaries, particularly Duras, who are now more successful than he, whilst simultaneously deflating their claims to literary autonomy. Thus, in yet another metacritical passage, Robbe-Grillet establishes strong, textual links between his own work and certain texts by other former Nouveaux Romanciers, notably *L'Amant*, identifying what he calls 'une théorie des débris mobiles' (p. 153), common to the underlying structure of all these works. Indeed, Robbe-Grillet also repeatedly refers in his public appearances to this unifying theory with particular reference to Duras's works, a fact which he acknowledges here as a reason for the brevity of his study.²⁶

In contrast to Duras's assertion of her literary status by portraying her writing vocation as a solitary activity, Robbe-Grillet asserts his claim to a position in twentieth-century literary history precisely in terms of his relationship with other writers, particularly Duras, whether this be by means of his portrayal of the active role he played within the material organization of the Nouveau Roman, from which the

²⁶ Robbe-Grillet recounted the same anecdote, for instance, in his talk, 'Du Nouveau Roman à la Nouvelle Autobiographie', at the colloquium, *Texte(s) et Intertexte(s)*, Institut Français, London (21 May 1994).

others all benefitted, or of the identification of intertextual links between his and their later works. Within Robbe-Grillet's frequent reconstructive and appropriative accounts, the prevalence of references to Duras, the direct, dialogic nature of his personal attacks on her, his repeated assertions of the part he played in establishing her early career, and his recurrent, complimentary references to *L'Amant* in particular, confirm Duras's position as his major 'camarade de lutte' (p. 105) within the literary milieu described. Robbe-Grillet's paradoxically hostile and flattering (since based on her personality and her literary work) treatment of her can be seen as largely the result of Duras's contemporary, international media status, recognized by Robbe-Grillet in his reference to the 'rumeur isotherme' (p. 182) which follows her wherever she goes, and the contrast between this and his own relatively modest status within the academic circuit of 'conférences et cours universitaires' (p. 153).

Within the appropriately narcissistic genre of autobiography, Duras and Robbe-Grillet enacted the final stages of Bloom's model of the 'anxiety of influence', as the two clashing egos struggled to the death to come to terms with their poetic influence and to assert their own literary autonomy. Differences in the nature of their texts and of the writers' egotistical self-assertions therein largely resulted from differences in their relative contemporary standing and the change in the dynamics of intertextual rivalry which these brought about. Since both writers were alive when the works discussed were published and since the hierarchies within their literary relationship constantly mutated throughout their careers, Duras could not strictly occupy the position of precursor, in Bloom's theoretical model. Nonetheless, Robbe-Grillet was effectively relegated to the position of ephebe by his former literary sibling's public and critical recognition. Duras's apotheosis in 1984 confirmed her poetic strength and allowed her to assert her individual literary space, by denying in her subsequent works the influence of her rival. Duras's solipsistic stress upon her own independence from external influence was strikingly at odds with her claim, made previous to her ascendancy, that, 'les écrivains qui pensent être seuls au monde,

et même les grands écrivains, c'est de la connerie monstre. [...] Je fais mes livres avec les autres.²⁷ At this later point, however, Duras's response to her literary rival resembled the sixth stage in Bloom's theoretical model, that of *askesis*, or Purgation and Solipsism. By curtailing the influence of the precursor (or sibling), the later poet 'yields up part of his own human and imaginative endowment, so as to separate himself from others, including the precursor [...]; the precursor's endowment is truncated'.²⁸ Duras's position, as a contemporary of her literary rival, was not that of a 'later poet', and the very contemporaneity of the two writers facilitated her denial of the possibility of Robbe-Grillet's influence.

Robbe-Grillet, however, was painfully aware of being in the shadow of his former sibling or, according to his reconstructive view, his former ephebe, and so his self-assertion was tempered by recognition of her eminence. His response to his own anxiety of influence was a dual one: he asserted his own former influential role in relation to Duras, whilst also acknowledging mutual influence by vicariously associating himself with her later success. His strategies in the struggle with his literary rival initially resemble Bloom's theoretical stage of *apophrades* or the Return of the Dead, in which the later poet 'holds his own poem so open again to the precursor's work that at first we might believe the wheel has come full circle, and that we are back in the later poet's flooded apprenticeship, before his strength began to assert itself in the revisionary ratios'.²⁹ Not only did Robbe-Grillet claim, via his references to his editorial contributions to Duras's work, that Duras spoke at least at moments in his voice, but his text also opens up, in his account of their often common past as well as intertextually, to include Duras, to allow her previously denied influence to return. This Return of the Dead is, however, linked with another, earlier, Bloomian stage, that of *daemonization* or the Counter-Sublime, in which, 'the augmented poetic consciousness sees clear outline, and yields back to description what it had over-yielded to sympathy. But this "description" is a revisionary ratio, a

²⁷ *Les Parleuses*, p. 217.

²⁸ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

daemonic vision in which the Great Original remains great but loses his originality...³⁰ Thus Robbe-Grillet counteracted the opening of his work to his precursor by generalizing away Duras's uniqueness by contextualizing it, especially in relation to his own work, his own Counter-Sublime.

Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's struggle for creative space was waged through their respective reconstructions of recent literary past. This struggle over the past was linked, as in Bloom's conceptual model, to a struggle against death: 'For every poet begins (however "unconsciously") by rebelling more strongly against the consciousness of death's necessity than all other men and women do.'³¹ In setting the record straight as to their place in the past literary environment, and in asserting, by different means, their status in the literary present, both Duras and Robbe-Grillet sought to construct an image of themselves which would be projected into the future, after their deaths, through their writing. Duras's solipsistic assertion of her own autonomous genius reflected her confidence of overcoming figurative death by her almost guaranteed position in literary history. Robbe-Grillet's assertion that he was a 'strong poet' since he had influenced other 'strong poets', particularly Duras, was a means of assuring his own posthumous influence in the future, as part of the canon. Both Duras and Robbe-Grillet revealed, in their later works, a common anxiety in the face of death, and the nature of this anxiety was linked to each writer's relative anxiety of influence.

I shall now look at Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's textual treatment of death, firstly on a general, thematic level and secondly as more directly linked with the writer and the writing practice. I shall examine the nature of the literary monument which each writer attempts pre-emptively to construct in their final works. Thus, although I shall refer in passing to *Écrire*, I shall concentrate my 'reading in pairs' on Duras's *C'est tout* (1995) and Robbe-Grillet's *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe*, since these two

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 15-16.

³¹ Ibid., p. 10.

works were both consciously portrayed as being their writer's last. Given the finality claimed by both writers for these texts, I shall then examine the implications which Duras's death, just four months after the publication of *C'est tout*, has both for critical readings of her work and for the dynamics of her intertextual relationship with Robbe-Grillet.

One can already detect the impact of Duras's literary and media success upon her treatment of the thematics of death, in her depiction of the death of a fly in 'Écrire', and that of a soldier during World War II in 'La mort du jeune aviateur anglais', both in *Écrire*. In these, Duras emphasizes her very personal interaction with the subject-matter, in her consistent use of the first person narrative, and in her many references to her own reactions and feelings. In both accounts, and at least partly ironically in the former, Duras repeatedly emphasizes writing's power to endow once anonymous or insignificant objects with immortality. What is more, Duras's combination of references to the immortality of writing in general, with an extremely subjective mode of narration, highlights her awareness of the immortality of her writing in particular, as a result of her received literary status. Such a combination can be seen, for example, in the reference to the young English pilot's age: 'Vingt ans. Je dis son âge. Je dis: il avait vingt ans. Il aura vingt ans pour l'éternité, devant l'Eternel.' (p. 88)

In *C'est tout*, death forms the almost obsessive thematics as well as the generative motivation for the production of the text. As if in a transcription of dialogues, Duras discusses her fear of death, evokes the memory of a dead lover, refers to the death of her mother and constantly underlines the atmosphere of decline and finality with the repetition not only of the word 'la mort', but also of the associated 'fini', 'rien' and 'c'est tout' of the title. In *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe*, the decline of the eponymous protagonist towards death is portrayed within nightmarish landscapes of war, ruins and the Underworld of classical mythology. Dead soldiers, the corpses of pelicans and of murdered young women constitute part of a literary universe of flotsam, broken glass, photographic tokens, remnants of lost civilizations and fragmented motifs from Robbe-Grillet's past works. Within this general

disintegration, Henri de Corinthe, as the author's fictional double, attempts to construct his autobiography from elusive, unstable elements of his past. Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's texts plot the decline and enact the figurative death of the central character. Whereas in *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe*, as the title suggests, this character is Henri de Corinthe, who is the fictional mirror and double of the author, in *C'est tout*, it is Duras herself on whom the text centres. Robbe-Grillet's link with the textual enactment of physical decline is thus largely a theoretical one, whereas Duras's is predominantly personal and emotional.

Robbe-Grillet posits a theory of the death of the traditional, realist novel, claiming through his fictional mouthpiece, Corinthe, that new, shifting literary forms can only be created from the ruins of old, stable ones: 'Ainsi en irait-il du roman moderne - le dernier roman - qui édifie ses structures mouvantes avec le matériau ruiné de l'ancien, celui du réalisme, c'est-à-dire de la certitude' (p. 144). A link is made between this theory of the new novel³² and modernist autobiographical representations, which destroys conventional notions of a stable identity, when Robbe-Grillet writes, again through his fictional double, that, 'c'est l'être lui-même dont l'émiettement, la dissolution, se prolongent sans fin' (p. 145). Notions of a fragmented self are interwoven with theories of the death of the traditional novel. Robbe-Grillet thus provides a theoretical basis for his representation of Corinthe's progression towards death, which he depicts as illustrative of Nietzsche's claim that,³³

«Ce qu'il y a de grand dans l'homme, c'est qu'il est un pont et non un but: ce que l'on peut aimer en l'homme, c'est qu'il est un passage et un déclin. J'aime ceux qui ne savent vivre autrement que pour disparaître, car ils passent au-delà.»
(p. 191)

Henri de Corinthe is represented, in a 'mise en abyme' mirroring of Robbe-Grillet's writing process, as battling in vain against his own physical deterioration whilst also

³² The term which Robbe-Grillet uses here (p. 146) is the non-capitalized 'nouveau roman'. When referring to the group of writers of which he was the perceived leader, he generally uses the capitalized form, 'Nouveau Roman'.

³³ Robbe-Grillet also includes a shorter version of this quotation from Nietzsche on p. 179.

attempting to construct an ever-disintegrating autobiography. Corinthe embodies Nietzsche's view of man as he, 'se retourne sur lui-même pour dévisager son propre moi, c'est-à-dire sa propre mort' (p. 192).

An implicit link between death and both Corinthe and Robbe-Grillet is made in the unspecific first person used in the following quotation, which thus potentially refers simultaneously to the fictional character's and the author's practices and aims in writing their autobiographies:

... je ne puis pas m'abstenir de me retourner, car je dois ruiner derrière moi toute chose et je ne peux vivre autrement que pour disparaître à mon tour.

Je suis le dernier écrivain, mais qui sera un écrivain absent. Une fois de plus je m'avance et la neige qui tombe sur mon chemin, ou la mer qui monte et envahit à nouveau le sable blond, effacera au fur et à mesure la trace de mes pas. (pp. 192-193)

Here Robbe-Grillet explicitly deconstructs the traditional notion that a writer's work, especially his autobiography, acts as a monument for eternity, claiming instead that writing, by constantly destroying what came before it, so brings about the writer's oblivion. This embedded, self-reflexive exposition of the disintegration of literature and of autobiographical identity is mirrored by, and here foreshadows, the gradual dissolution of the structure of the text. So, in the final passages of the novel (pp. 224-229), which depict Corinthe's dying, shifts between scenes become ever swifter, paragraphs and sentences become shorter and more syncopated, until, as death beckons Corinthe in the guise of his late fiancée, the text itself abruptly ends with the words, 'Le moment est donc venu. Selon ce qui a été prescrit, je signe ici mon mémoire inachevé.' (p. 229)

C'est tout is portrayed as a means of Duras's confronting the physical and mental decline towards death, and is largely a response to Yann Andréa's question, 'Vous avez peur de la mort?' (p. 9). The text's motivation, unlike that of Robbe-Grillet's, is therefore intensely personal rather than theoretical, although the disintegration of the self to which it bears witness is, as in his work, also reflected in

the text's general sparsity of lay-out and diminution towards the end, which marks Duras's figurative death. The work's structure and typography enact the project inherent in its original, proposed title, 'Le livre à disparaître' (p. 11). Thus we can plot a progression of physical decline from the statement, 'Je n'ai plus de souffle' (p. 19), to the lethargic, 'Je n'ai plus envie de faire l'effort' (p. 25), to the following excerpt, the typographical diminution of which reflects the decline towards death which it expresses:

Ce que je vais devenir.
 J'ai peur.
 Viens. (p. 33)

The gradual, physical disintegration culminates in the words, 'Je ne tiens plus ensemble' (p. 54), and Duras's symbolic death in the very last line, 'Je n'ai plus de bouche, plus de visage' (p. 55). The loss of physical presence expressed in these last words is reflected in their typographical fading out. The reference to the face, or rather its absence, at the end of *C'est tout*, reworks and contrasts with the inclusion of a similar motif at the beginning of *L'Amant*. Indeed, this sister-textual allusion recurs almost rhythmically within the text (pp. 34, 40 & 51), drawing attention to the well-known physical appearance of the writer. Yet, the positioning of the depiction of the face at the very end of *C'est tout*, as opposed to the beginning in the precursor text, signals its reworking as symbolic of finality and closure, rather than of introduction and generation. As this final reference to the face highlights, although the textual disintegration and self-destruction within Duras's work reflect the underlying progression of Robbe-Grillet's text, it is, on the contrary, non-theoretically led and resembles rather a 'cri du cœur', a heartfelt attempt to come to terms with the fear of death.

This fear of impending oblivion, which is figuratively anticipated in the formal aspects of the text, is tempered by Duras's expression of confidence in her creative genius, gained as a result of her contemporary literary reputation. The angst portrayed

is physical rather than literary. Awareness of the status of the authorial signature can be seen in Duras's repeated self-naming, as when she responds to Yann Andréa's question, 'Que diriez-vous de vous-même?' with the simple reply, 'Duras' (p. 8). Elsewhere, the link between her name and her writing vocation is reinforced, as in the following exchange:

Y.A. Vous êtes qui?
 M.D. Duras, c'est tout.
 Y.A. Elle fait quoi, Duras?
 M.D. Elle fait la littérature. (p. 26)

or in the claim that, 'Quand on dit le mot écrivain à Duras, ça fait un double poids' (p. 30). By repeatedly naming herself as if referring to a third person, and by underlining the inextricable bond between this name and the writing vocation, Duras exploits the public recognition of her, as persona and as writer. Awareness of her popularity leads to a confidence in her literary worth which is, at times, in stark contrast to her fear of physical decline. In reply to Yann Andréa's question, 'Êtes-vous très douée?', for example, she replies, 'Oui. Il me semble bien.' (p. 15) Elsewhere, she explicitly refers to her international fame with the exclamation that, 'Dites donc, ça se confirme Duras, partout dans le monde et au-delà' (p. 38), and her contemporary success can be seen as the cause of the relative, temporal nature of her claim that, 'Il se trouve que j'ai du génie. J'y suis habituée maintenant.' (p. 39)

In contrast to the physical deterioration depicted, and as if to reject the inevitability of death which her text enacts, Duras affirms her confidence in her writing ability, as she self-assertively projects her creative, productive strength into the future, as in:

Moi, je peux tout recommencer.
 Dès demain.
 A tout moment.
 Je recommence un livre.
 J'écris.
 Et hop, voilà! (p. 37)

Duras's self-projection into posterity through her writing leads to the apparently narcissistic nature of the following claim: 'Dans l'avenir je ne veux rien. Que parler de moi encore, toujours, comme une plate-forme monotone. Encore de moi' (p. 44). In Duras's insistence here upon herself and upon the future, she creates an impression of quasi-physical immortality. In her work, she confronts impending death and the associated disintegration of both writing and body, with plans for future writing and so for self-continuance. The confidence in her own creative worth and in her position in literary posterity, afforded by her present (to the time of writing) national and international reception, can be seen in the following exchange, which foreshadows much of the rest of the text:

- Y.A. Et le paradis, vous irez?
 M.D. Non. Ça me fait rire.
 Y.A. Pourquoi?
 M.D. Je ne sais pas. Je n'y crois pas du tout.
 Y.A. Et après la mort, qu'est-ce qui reste?
 M.D. Rien. Que les vivants qui se sourient, qui se souviennent.
 Y.A. Qui va se souvenir de vous?
 M.D. Les jeunes lecteurs. Les petits élèves. (pp. 10-11)

Duras's fear of physical death is counterbalanced by total confidence in her literary immortality.

Both Duras and Robbe-Grillet stake their claim to literary immortality in these, their supposedly final works. Duras does so in a work which crystallizes many of her œuvre's thematic and stylistic features, even on occasions to the point of self-parody. She bids farewell to her readers, indirectly addressing them as she directly addresses Yann Andréa as either 'tu' or 'vous' and, although she occasionally alludes to her past literary works, the emphasis throughout is upon the writer's self, upon her literary persona as known name and face. Robbe-Grillet incorporates his treatment of the thematics of death and immortality into a much larger work, which includes extensive reflections on his own past works and literary environment. Past and future, as

opposed to present and future, are therefore more closely linked than in Duras's text. In contrast to Duras's confident assertion of her own literary immortality and her apparent wish to defy death itself by projecting future writing plans, Robbe-Grillet recounts, in his work, his encounter with a student on a train who, when learning his name, exclaims, 'Mais ça n'est pas possible, il est mort depuis longtemps!' (p. 226). Whereas Duras's contemporary status leads a critic to comment that, 'Elle doit être mortelle comme tout le monde, Marguerite, mais elle semble être indestructible',³⁴ Robbe-Grillet suffers a figurative, literary death by fading from the public eye whilst still physically and creatively active.

The above anecdote of Robbe-Grillet, (referring to his meeting a student who believes he is dead), is one of a series of fleeting memories, introduced by the phrase, 'Je me souviens...' which are drawn from periods of the author's childhood and especially his writing career, and which are interwoven with motifs from his own works and the events of Henri de Corinthe's fictional autobiography. The incantatory nature of this repeated phrase acts as a litany, in the last pages of the work, leading to Corinthe's death. This interweaving of elements from the author's life and his fiction, again underlines Corinthe's role as double of the writer, and his textual death and the end of the text symbolically prefigure the end of Robbe-Grillet's literary career and his eventual death.

Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe is presented as Robbe-Grillet's 'dernier roman' (p. 144), a claim which the author has been keen to underline in public appearances.³⁵ As such, this work represents the author's final word, the literary image of himself and of his writing which he wishes to pass on to posterity. Given his relatively minor contemporary status in comparison with that of his literary rival, Robbe-Grillet stresses his retrospective, reconstructive account of the position he occupied in the recent literary past, when his status was at its height, as the grounds on which he will

³⁴ Jean-François Josselin, 'Le Bouquet de Marguerite', *Le Nouvel Observateur* (10-16 October 1995)

³⁵ In response to a query at the colloquium, *Texte(s) et Intertexte(s)*, Robbe-Grillet stated that, 'Je n'écris plus rien', and at a film retrospective held at the Maison Française in Oxford on 25 September 1996, he categorically claimed that, 'Mon œuvre est finie.'

be received in the future. Thus, he creates a textual universe, in which he seeks to gain literary immortality not from the depiction of his contemporary persona, but in terms of his past œuvre. This is figuratively symbolized by Henri de Corinthe's journey through the labyrinth in search of immortality: in this reworking of the Underworld of classical mythology, the characters whom Corinthe comes across, the objects which litter his path, and the various rooms into which he passes, are all intertextual motifs and scenes drawn from Robbe-Grillet's previous works. Henri de Corinthe's immortality, like Robbe-Grillet's anticipated, posthumous status, is therefore constructed from the material of the author's own, hermetic, self-reflexive literary world.

Although Robbe-Grillet claims, in accordance with the theory which he posits, constantly to bring about the ruination of the current and previous works as he writes, these ruined elements remain under erasure, contained within the frame of his novel. Chronology and traditional cohesion may be broken down, fragments of autobiography and of fiction interwoven in an appearance of textual flux, but this movement is limited and internalized by the self-reflexivity of the whole. The image which Robbe-Grillet portrays of himself as author for the future, is not that of a traditional, fixed and coherent monument, but resembles rather a Cubist statue, composed of disparate, conflicting fragments, but a statue nonetheless.

Indeed, Robbe-Grillet includes a depiction of just such a shifting, modernist monument to the memory of an author when referring to Sartre's work. He makes an explicit parallel between the self-contradictory, fragmented nature of the latter's work and his own writing project, when he writes:

Ce que je peux aimer [...] dans l'œuvre du Sartre en question ici, dans sa pensée, c'est que, tout autant que la mienne bien que de façon fort différente, elle aura été toujours déjà en ruine, comme par vocation. J'ai souvent reconnu l'importance qu'avait eue pour moi la fréquentation d'un tel ensemble mouvant, insaisissable ...
(p. 179)

By means of this parallel between his and Sartre's writing practices, Robbe-Grillet implicitly highlights the disparate, yet homogeneous nature of the image of the authorial self which he wishes to leave behind for posterity, by linking Sartre's writing practice with the form of the literary monument by which he has been posthumously received:

Car je porte, pour ma part, au crédit d'une agile fièvre vitale ces brutaux changements de cap, ces apories créatrices débouchant aussitôt sur un autre projet, ce militantisme à retournements, ces inéluctables fissures, ces vastes entreprises philosophiques qui se voulaient intégrales et définitives, mais dont l'emballement (la logorrhée?) finissait chaque fois par caler avant terme, laissant à sa mort tout un continent splendide, effondré. (Ibid.)

Both Robbe-Grillet and Duras implicitly underlined, by means of the titles and thematic and stylistic emphasis of *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* and *C'est tout*, the status of these as their *last* works. Yet Duras's death, on 3 March 1996, just four months after the publication of her work, created an additional, retrospective poignancy which has almost inevitably had an impact upon any consequent reading. The fact that *C'est tout* really was Duras's last work before her death colours readers' interpretations and, to an extent, casts a different light upon some of the accusations of pretention and self-indulgence which were levelled against it at the time of publication.³⁶ In comparison, then, Robbe-Grillet's claim that *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* is his last book, is seen as a strategy, a choice which cannot incite similar, retrospective nostalgia. Indeed, even at the time of the publication of *C'est tout*, critics repeatedly and pre-emptively referred to it in terms of the writer's farewell to her public, a response which Robbe-Grillet's text did not, nor did it aim to, provoke. The following review, less mocking of Duras's perceived self-parodying than most,

³⁶ Cf., for example, Josyane Savigneau, 'Duras prise au piège', *Le Monde* (3 November 1995): 'Peut-on aimer l'écrivain, reconnaître la place qu'il occupe dans la littérature française et dire de son dernier «livre» qu'il est désolant?'

Or, Hervé de Saint Hilaire, 'Marguerite Duras: Les ravissements d'une vieille dame', *Le Figaro* (23 November 1995): 'C'est le sort d'un mythe d'agacer ou de séduire. Et voici l'illustration avec ce texte qui va et vient entre la sincérité et la caricature, entre le ridicule et le pathétique.'

reflected the general response to the thematics of death and immortality and to the emotive style of her text:

Les indications scéniques impliquent [...] son regard extérieur sur l'écrivain qui meurt en Duras, avec elle, mais cela fait encore partie du processus de dévoration par la page blanche, d'une entreprise de récupération personnelle et littéraire si bien mise au point qu'on jurerait réalisé le pari prévu: morte, elle écrira encore.³⁷

The above quotation is doubly ironic: not only did Duras die soon after *C'est tout*'s publication, so fulfilling the text's prophecy, but she also appeared to write from beyond the grave when, on 15 March, just twelve days after her death, *La Mer écrite* was published.³⁸ This work comprises a series of short texts which accompany photographs taken in Normandy under Duras's direction, of places and motifs which inspired her fiction. In contrast to Duras's project in *L'Amant*, she here provides retrospective visual evidence of the recurrent thematics of her œuvre: the sea, children, gulls, the beach and hotel at Trouville, deserted tennis courts, war graves. These images and the sparse, poetic style and lay-out of the accompanying text present a retrospective summary or epitome of the Durassian fictional universe. The posthumous context of *La Mer écrite* gives Duras's recurrent references to death and immortality a ghostly resonance, particularly in the concluding line: 'Ce sont des endroits où on revient toujours, pour voir si on est encore vivant face aux mouettes.' (p. 66) Duras's words express, as if from beyond the grave, her wish to live on in the places she brought to fictional life in her writing. Yet Duras did not have the last word in her text as, in a postface, it is Yann Andréa who retrospectively explains the collaborative context within which *La Mer écrite* was produced. The positioning of Duras's text within this reflective, commentating and contextualizing frame, as Andréa writes of Duras in the third person as 'elle' or 'M.D.', reinforces the poignancy of her position in the past. It also simultaneously portrays her as a mystery still to be

³⁷ Claire Devanieux, 'C'est tout Duras', *Libération* (12 October 1995)

³⁸ *La Mer écrite*, text by Marguerite Duras, photographs by Hélène Bamberger (Paris: Marval, 1996)

discovered, pieced together via the textual and visual clues provided in the preceding work: 'On croit comprendre quelque chose. Des mots. Des images.' Ironically, in writing this postface, Yann Andréa fulfils the project which he claims Duras narcissistically proposed to him on her deathbed: 'C'est ce qu'elle m'a dit avant sa mort: «Il ne vous reste plus que ça à faire, écrire sur moi.»'³⁹ Temporarily at least, Duras's immortality was thus assured by her disciple's remembering and committing this memory to writing.

Not only does Duras's death add an element of retrospective poignancy to the reading of her last and even posthumous works, it has also, in more material terms, created renewed interest in, and new editions of, her earlier works. Her films and interviews have been screened again, television retrospectives and biographies have been produced, and constant media coverage has kept her persona, her famous face and name, in the public eye. In many ways, Duras's physical death has done much to ensure the immortality of her œuvre, and to reconfirm her literary and celebrity status. Moreover, by dying, Duras has assumed the role of Bloom's necessarily dead precursor in her intertextual rivalry with Robbe-Grillet who, for the time being at least, has been relegated to the position of ephebe. Robbe-Grillet's continued appearances on the academic circuit of conferences, colloquia and retrospectives, in the role of 'auto-professeur',⁴⁰ are constantly in the shadow of the undeniable, international media status of his former literary rival, now precursor. His repeated references to Duras, whether flattering or hostile, vicariously self-promotional or denigratory, bear witness to the intensity of his 'anxiety of influence'.

This chapter has examined the reflection, within Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's later works, of the reversal within the hierarchy of their career-long intertextual relationship, brought about by the immediate success of the Duras's *L'Amant* in 1984. From then on, Duras has been the focus of constant critical, public and media

³⁹ Yann Andréa in an interview with Philippe Lançon, 'Le survivant', *Libération*, 18 March 1996.

⁴⁰ Robbe-Grillet uses this term in the index of *Angélique ou l'enchantement* (1987), p. 249, to refer to his academic post in New York, where he taught his own novels and films.

attention, in France and abroad, whereas Robbe-Grillet's reputation has remained predominantly academic. Robbe-Grillet's anxious awareness of Duras's fame both as a writer and as a celebrity led, as has been studied, to his paradoxical intertextual response in *Angélique ou l'enchantement*. Whilst he criticized the contemporary media's focus on a writer's persona, he nonetheless referred to his own consciously-adopted image and, indeed, reworked several of *L'Amant's* author-centred motifs in his own text. A decade later, both writers' works reveal an acute awareness of the differences between the nature and extent of the interest that they provoked, both in their retrospective accounts of the past and in their pre-emptive self-projection into the future.

Contrary to her earlier claims to write with others, Duras's references in *Écrire* to her past works and the past literary environment portray an image of solipsistic solitude and creative individuality, within a closed, personal, writing universe, divorced from external influence. The reconstruction of a writerly context within which all elements gravitate around the central figure of the author, can be seen to have resulted from Duras's contemporary celebrity status, to which she repeatedly alludes in *Écrire*. Awareness of her position in the contemporary literary scene had a particular bearing, however, on Duras's last published work before her death, *C'est tout*. In this, Duras's anxiety in the face of impending death is counterbalanced by her confidence in her creative ability and belief that her contemporary status would ensure her literary immortality.

Robbe-Grillet's portrayed relationship with both past and future was equally driven by the desire to assert his own literary significance. His position within the contemporary literary milieu, more modest than that of his intertextual rival, led to an emphasis upon reconstructive accounts of his central role in the literary past, particularly in relation to the creation of the Nouveau Roman. In contrast to Duras's emphasis upon her individuality and separation from the literary context, Robbe-Grillet's assertion of his own status stresses his centrality in just such a context. By highlighting his role in the establishment of the Nouveau Roman group, he not only

wished pre-emptively to be remembered as its theoretical 'chef d'école', but also to stake his claim to a vicarious share in his former colleagues' good fortunes. Whereas Duras believed her position in literary history to be assured, to such an extent that she even appeared, with the publication of *La Mer écrite*, to write from beyond the grave, Robbe-Grillet was uncomfortably aware of the risk, if not of literary oblivion, then at least of a relatively humble or restricted position in the twentieth-century canon, on account of his contemporary status. Largely relegated to the position of ephebe in the intertextual hierarchy with Duras as a result of her apogee, Robbe-Grillet attempted to ensure his own literary immortality largely in relation to her. Thus he aimed to undermine Duras's claims to literary autonomy by drawing attention to his influential role in the establishment of her early career and also, paradoxically, to align himself vicariously with her later success, by acknowledging her recognized literary genius.

Concluding Remarks

Duras's death marked the end of the mutually responsive literary rivalry between her and Robbe-Grillet, the psychodynamic reflections of which have been identified as underlying parallel shifts in both writers' literary careers. It remains to be seen how Robbe-Grillet, effectively relegated to the position of ephebe during the later stages of their intertextual relationship, will respond to Duras's continued posthumous success and, as time goes by, to his own impending death. This study has examined the progression of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's career-long rivalry and the effects of its various revisionary stages on the development of their respective writing practices. The identification of extensive grounds for critical comparison, both biographical and intertextual, runs contrary to the predominant critical tendency to study the two writers separately, within the mutually exclusive theoretical discourses of feminism and structuralism. Reading together synchronic pairs of texts from Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's *œuvres*, within the psychodynamic context of the development of their literary rivalry, has instead allowed for the intertextual examination of how a man and a woman writer, working within the same literary environment, approached similar thematic and generic material.

The critical frameworks within which Duras and Robbe-Grillet have principally been examined were initially adopted in studies of their early novels; but they continued to hold sway even when the thematic content of the two authors' works later changed. The tendency to continue to apply the same theoretical approaches has led critics of Duras's later works to overlook those aspects which might in fact undermine the view that her depictions of transgressive sexual relations are liberating or even feminist. By continuing to read Robbe-Grillet's works in terms of their formal innovation, many critics have denied the problematic nature of their thematics. These contrasting views have been compounded by critics' selective interpretations of the writers' comments in articles or interviews. Reading Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's

metatextual pronouncements against each other has shown that both writers used many of the same illustrative examples, feminist and anti-feminist, when discussing the sexual thematics of their works or broader literary and political gender issues. As has been demonstrated, Duras's engagement with feminism was, from the very start, ambivalent, and Robbe-Grillet frequently adopted and distorted feminist terminology in order to defend his work in terms of both textual and sexual liberation. Both equated female characters in their works with figurative tropes of disruptive power, rather than seeing them as fictional representations of real women. Highlighting parallels between, and inconsistencies in, the two writers' comments has thus disrupted the prevalent view that Duras and Robbe-Grillet occupied opposite poles in the feminist debate.

Many of the problems encountered by critics when attempting to classify Duras or Robbe-Grillet resulted from the authors' wilful avoidance of just such classification. By constantly developing new and unexpected literary material, by shifting theoretical allegiance, or by rewriting and recasting their own fictional material in a different light, both sought to refute past critical readings whilst dictating and pre-empting potential future responses. Duras and Robbe-Grillet thus appropriatively 'misread' elements not only from each other's works but also from dominant theoretical discourses, especially feminism, in order to assert their own literary strength and individuality. Both were engaged in a playfully antagonistic game with their critics. As Robbe-Grillet put it: 'Lire des critiques vous oblige parfois à prendre des chemins très différents.'¹ Yet Duras and Robbe-Grillet exhibited, right from the beginning of their intertextual relationship in the 1950s, very different levels of engagement with literary theory. The often self-contradictory nature of Duras's metatextual comments and inconsistencies in her literary practice are in line with her refusal to produce theoretical works of her own, and with her essentially appropriative and ambivalent relationship with literary theory in general. As Emma Wilson points out in reference to Duras's many interviews, 'The reader becomes aware of how far

¹ 'Moi, Robbe-Grillet...', interview with Pierre Fisson, *Le Figaro littéraire* (23 February 1963), p. 3.

Duras's words only ever reflect and displace the drama of her text, never attempting to offer further insight.² Instead of providing a theoretical or autobiographical explanation of her fictional works, Duras's comments formed a parallel part with them, in the author's project of self-mystification. Robbe-Grillet, on the other hand, saw his novels and his theoretical essays as parallel and complementary means of questioning traditional literary conventions. Like Duras, his literary practices and theoretical beliefs were not consistent throughout his career, but shifts in his fictional works were accompanied by corresponding mutations in his theoretical and self-commentating pronouncements.

Although Duras's perceived centrality in feminist literary criticism and Robbe-Grillet's position in the development of structuralist theories have led to the separation of critical studies of their works and to the positioning of the two authors at opposite poles in relation to gender issues, both their metatextual comments and their literary practices defy such exclusive classification. Indeed, a 'reading in pairs' of their novels within the broader context of the development of conflicting theoretical discourses, has revealed the impact of a sustained literary rivalry between Duras and Robbe-Grillet upon the development of their works, and suggested extensive areas of mutual interchange between the apparently opposing positions with which they have traditionally been associated.

The psychodynamic progression of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's literary relationship broadly corresponds to the revisionary stages identified in Harold Bloom's studies of intra-poetic influence. Bloom's theory that poetic history is marked by strong poets' struggles with their precursors for creative space, has proved a productive model for examining the mutually self-defensive and often antagonistic nature of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's sustained literary rivalry, and the reflections of this on their respective and interwoven literary careers. This study has plotted the

² "'Mon histoire de Lol. V. Stein': Duras, Reading, and Amnesia', *Sexuality and the Reading Encounter* (Oxford & New York: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 165.

various stages of appropriative 'misreading' which characterized Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's struggle with each other. The fact that Duras and Robbe-Grillet were of the opposite sex and writing contemporaneously has necessitated the adoption of a new psychological narrative, recognizing the particular conditions of this pair of writers. For the purposes of this study, I have therefore replaced Bloom's exclusively male Oedipal model with a narrative of 'sibling rivalry', introducing the central issues of gender and contemporaneity whilst maintaining the love-hate dynamics of the original.

From the foundation of Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's alliance in the late 1950s to Duras's literary apogee in the late 1980s and 1990s, the psychodynamic permutations of their sibling rivalry led to mutually responsive shifts in the two writers' literary practices. The late 1950s and early 1960s marked a brief period of affiliation as, by commissioning *Moderato cantabile*, Robbe-Grillet enrolled Duras into his literary stable. Their works of this period not only display common questionings of traditional novelistic forms, such as story, plot and characterization, which are in line with the practices of the Nouveau Roman group as a whole, but also display structural and thematic similarities which betray a more direct, mutually emulative influence between the two writers in particular. Thus in both Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie* and Duras's *Moderato cantabile* parts of the observed woman's body are used fetishistically to symbolize her transgressive sexuality. Similarly, the implicit or suspected adulterous affair, which forms a central generative gap in both novels, is represented by means of metonymous depictions of the couple's hands, the positioning of which covertly signals the progression of their desire. As has been demonstrated, however, even at this early stage, the authors' divergent levels of commitment to the theoretical underpinnings of their novels led to differences in their treatment of certain literary conventions. In Robbe-Grillet's novel, the ontological uncertainty of the narrative position is in line with his theoretical questioning of the realist, omniscient narrator. In *Moderato cantabile*, however, the narrative viewpoint

repeatedly shifts, at times being one of traditional omniscience, whilst at others highlighting, through its portrayed limitations, the falsity of such a stance. These implicit underlying differences, even within the two writers' period of alliance, foreshadowed the later, more combative nature of their intertextual relationship.

Following an initial period of mutual 'love for the precursor's poetry', Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's intertextual relationship shifted to one of revisionary strife as, loosely in keeping with the Bloomian stage of *askesis*, each writer struggled with the other for literary autonomy. The antagonistic, attack and counter-attack rivalry between the two writers was initially provoked by Duras's rejection of affiliation with the Nouveau Roman through adoption by the emerging feminist movement. As has been shown, Robbe-Grillet responded to this perceived desertion, and to the rise of feminism in general, by appropriatively 'misreading' Duras's thematics of feminine desire, in works which portray the suppression of female characters by male sexualized violence. In keeping however with her non-theoretical stance, Duras then later rejected her alliance with feminist theories by writing explicit, sado-erotic works of her own. Although this second appropriative, revisionary swerve might appear to confound those critics who had previously heralded Duras as an exponent of a specifically feminine form of writing, her sado-erotic texts have nonetheless largely been interpreted as disruptive of the traditional sexual order. Similarly, critics of Robbe-Grillet's works of the 1970s and 1980s have predominantly continued to focus upon his subversion of the novel form, and so have overlooked or denied the problematic nature of the content. As has been demonstrated, even those critics who have examined separately both writers' erotic texts have used contrasting theoretical arguments, and have therefore come to strikingly different conclusions. For whilst Robbe-Grillet's linguistic distancing strategies have occasionally been criticized for reinforcing the misogynistic power relations of his novels, similar devices in Duras's texts have ultimately been seen to transgress both textual and sexual hierarchies. A comparison of the authors' treatment of similar, extreme sado-masochistic thematics, in a 'reading in pairs' of Robbe-Grillet's *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* and Duras's

L'Homme assis dans le couloir, has led to rather different findings. Contrary to the critical tendency to identify textual practices with the gender of the author, and thus to highlight the subversive, feminist credentials of Duras's texts, this comparative reading has suggested that Duras's combination of graphic thematics with passages of lyrical description is ultimately more disturbing, in terms of reader response, than the alienation incited by Robbe-Grillet's framing and fictionalizing strategies.

1984 signalled the move of the writers' sibling rivalry on to the appropriately narcissistic, author-centred ground of autobiography. In *L'Amant* and *Le Miroir qui revient*, both appropriatively responded to the theoretical and personal issues of self-representation and of representation of the mother explored in Barthes's precursor text, *La Chambre claire*. The 'reading in pairs' has discussed how, in putting such issues into autobiographical practice, both Duras and Robbe-Grillet respond to the visual medium of Barthes's discussion, and construct composite literary portraits of their former selves alongside, and interwoven with, portraits of their mothers. Although both Duras and Robbe-Grillet portray themselves and their mothers by means of textual 'snapshots' of their respective allusive 'essences', differences have been identified between the models of self-definition adopted by the two writers. Whereas Duras defines her young self in opposition to her mother's perceived lack of sexual desire, Robbe-Grillet grants his mother sexuality and constructs his autobiographical self by means of a strong identification with her. In contrast to the distance, between the self and the mother's formative influence, inherent in Duras's (auto)biographical portrayals, the proximity involved in Robbe-Grillet's identification with his mother leads, when confronted with the uncomfortable material of his and his parents' extreme right-wing views, to underlying, conflictual drives, unforeseen in Barthes's non-autobiographical work.

The international popularity of *L'Amant* brought about a decisive reversal in the hierarchies of influence in Duras's and Robbe-Grillet's literary rivalry, and this sudden change was reflected thenceforth in their texts. Robbe-Grillet explicitly condemned the mediatization of an author's image, which was epitomized by Duras's

performative appearance on 'Apostrophes'. Yet a reading of *Angélique ou l'enchantement*, in the light of her success, has suggested a more emulative response to his rival's success. For, although critical of the media's emphasis upon an author's appearance and comments, he nonetheless repeatedly refers in his work to his own public image or 'tête d'écrivain' and, as in Duras's precursor text, uses the motif of the author's face as a generative narrative trope. The impact, on their works of a decade later, of the reversal in the two rivals' fortunes has been examined in a comparative reading of their respective portrayals of their past literary careers and of the future. Whereas in *Écrire* Duras constructs a contemporaneous, solipsistic writing universe apart from all external influence, Robbe-Grillet's retrospective accounts in *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* emphasize his centrality, as 'chef d'école' of the Nouveau Roman, in recent literary history. A 'reading in pairs' of their 'final' works, *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* and *C'est tout*, has highlighted the effect of each writer's awareness of their respective literary statuses on their depictions of death and immortality. Thus Duras's portrayed fear of impending death is counterbalanced by the confidence in her enduring literary strength brought about by her fame at the time of writing. In contrast, Robbe-Grillet attempts to overcome his anxiety, and preemptively ensure his position in the canon, by constructing a composite literary monument to himself from elements of his past work. The anxiety and hostility occasioned by Duras's apogee and Robbe-Grillet's own relatively inferior status, lead him to attack his rival on personal grounds, whilst paradoxically acknowledging, and allying himself with, her literary strength.

The method adopted in this study, of reading Duras and Robbe-Grillet 'in pairs', has allowed me to read against the tendencies of previous criticism, and has thereby produced new angles, both inter-biographical and intertextual, on these two well-established writers. Importantly, the strategy employed, of reading men and women writers in pairs, also provides a potential positive new direction for literary gender studies. To date, many feminist critics have rightly highlighted women writers'

exclusion from the canon as a result of dominant, male value judgements and insufficient or inappropriate categorization of their works. In so doing, their reconstructive approaches have tended to work towards the establishment of a specifically female literary tradition, alongside the dominant male canon. Thus, in *A Literature of Their Own*,³ Elaine Showalter advocates the construction of a solely female literary lineage, which would reinstate neglected female figures of the past and so provide a sense of continuum for today's and tomorrow's women writers. Whilst the creation of a specifically female canon has many strengths and worthwhile advantages, it also has certain inherent limitations. In 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness', Showalter herself recognizes that such a female continuum must necessarily exist alongside, and thus be influenced by, the dominant male tradition, arguing that:

If a man's text [...] is fathered, then a woman's text is not only mothered but parented; it confronts both paternal and maternal precursors and must deal with the problems and advantages of both lines of inheritance. [...] men's writing has resisted the acknowledgment of female precursors.⁴

She does not, however, acknowledge the possibility that a man's text may also be mothered and that, even if male writers may explicitly deny the influence of female precursors, their works may covertly betray just such an influence. The lineage of women's writing which Showalter seeks to create is seen as influenced by, but not influential upon, the parallel and dominant male tradition.

As Nina Auerbach points out, such a one-sided and limiting view of the relationship between men's and women's writing may paradoxically be due, at least in part, to the very strength of the feminist movement, since:

There is a sense in which our sisterhood has become too powerful; as a school, our belief in ourself is so potent that we decline communication with the

³ Printed by Princeton University Press, 1977; reprinted by Virago Press, London, 1982.

⁴ 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness', *Critical Inquiry* (Winter 1981), pp. 203-204.

networks of power and respectability we say we want to change.⁵

According to Auerbach, if they do not engage in a dialogue with the male literary institutions, feminist critics will continue to talk solely to one another. Similarly, Margaret Ezell⁶ argues that, in fighting against the institutionalizing tendencies of the traditional, exclusively male canon, feminist critics have created a parallel female literary institution, which leaves the original canon in place. Myra Jehlen more negatively recognizes that exclusively female approaches run the risk of creating 'a sort of female enclave apart from the universe of masculinist assumptions' and argues instead for a 'radical comparativism' which would seek to locate 'the difference between women's writing and men's that no study of only women's writing can depict'.⁷ Yet the comparativism which she espouses entails the rereading of male texts from a woman's viewpoint rather than a two-way reading of both men's and women's writing.

As was highlighted in the introduction to this study, Nancy K. Miller also recognizes that much of feminist criticism's emphasis upon gender difference, and upon the establishment of a specific women's literary history, is in danger of assuring the continued marginalization of women's writing - there but separate - within the academic structures which influence syllabus and canon formation. She thus argues in favour of a new 'pedagogical politics' of reading men's and women's works together, in order to gain a 'bi-cultural' view of the development of the novel. The 'reading in pairs' strategy which she advocates entails not only reading women's texts back into the canon but also rereading men's canonized texts in the light of these reintroduced works. Despite the evident strengths of this proposed approach, Miller chooses, when putting her 'reading in pairs' method into practice, to read texts by women writers which were written *after* those of their male counterparts. In so doing, she establishes

⁵ 'Feminist Criticism Reviewed' in Janet Todd (ed.), *Gender and Literary Voice* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980), p. 258.

⁶ *Writing Women's Literary History* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993)

⁷ 'Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism', *Signs* (Summer 1981), pp. 576, 585 & 584 respectively.

the woman's novel in a position of critique of the dominant order, which the paired male writer's work embodies. She does not reread men's texts in the intertextual weave of women's. Thus, although Miller sheds interesting new light on the development of the novel by granting women a voice, she ultimately continues to define this voice in relation to dominant, male terms.

Many existing feminist critics have thus expressed their concern that the creation of a specifically female literary heritage, and consequent construction of two parallel but separate canons, run the risk of leaving the dominant male tradition in place. Yet the analytic methods which they have employed continue to reinforce this gendered division. The 'reading in pairs' approach adopted in this study offers a means of overcoming such separatist tendencies. Reading together writers of the opposite sex not only re-introduces women into gaps in the canon but, by revealing the influence which they have had on their male counterparts, also challenges the traditional stability of this exclusively male canon. The two-way reading strategy allows us to question the grounds on which canons (male and female) are formed, and the terms in which texts by writers of both sexes are traditionally studied.

The 'reading in pairs' carried out in this study has allowed me to explore how a man and a woman, writing in the same literary environment, responded to each other and to common external factors when approaching similar thematic and generic issues in their novels. Although Duras and Robbe-Grillet have predominantly been positioned by critics in separate, parallel corpuses and studied in mutually exclusive theoretical terms, the comparative, double-gendered approach of 'reading in pairs' has cast new light on the development of both of their literary careers and, in so doing, has re-examined the terms in which they had previously been viewed. Clearly there remains much potential ground for further 'readings in pairs' of the extensive literary and film corpuses of Duras and Robbe-Grillet, or for reading either author with other contemporary writers and acquaintances, such as Maurice Blanchot or Nathalie Sarraute. Moreover, the 'reading in pairs' method is potentially applicable to other pairs of writers, either in order to shed new light on old material, by reading together

previously separate but individually 'already read' writers, or to contribute to a different view of literary history by reintroducing neglected, 'underread' writers into the canon in the position they originally occupied, alongside their canonized contemporaries.⁸ In her study of forgotten French women writers of the 1920s and 1930s, Jennifer E. Milligan calls for just such a reintegrative approach, arguing that critics should

work to illuminate a whole gamut of possible links and bonds between disparate works, to suggest diverse juxtapositions, to draw together the already canonized and the popular, and to propose different ways of approaching texts.⁹

By applying this critical model to the reading of *other* pairs of writers, a more rounded picture of literary history may eventually emerge: one which does not comprise separate canons of men's and women's literature, each with its own theoretical discourses and critical schools, but one which constitutes an interrelated, mutually influential whole of male and female writers.

⁸ Possible pairs of writers for future studies include: Riccoboni & Laclos; Sand & Flaubert; Colette & Proust; Clara & André Malraux; Louise de Vilmorin & Malraux or Saint Exupéry; Elsa Triolet & Louis Aragon; Catherine Pozzi & Paul Valéry; Beauvoir & Sartre.

⁹ *The Forgotten Generation: French Women Writers of the Inter-war Period* (Oxford & New York: Berg, 1996), p. 217.

Appendix

Selected Correspondence

In reply to a request for further information regarding the reference, in Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe (pp. 94-96), to the publication of a récit by Duras which was to become the beginning of Moderato cantabile (See Chapters 1 & 5), Robbe-Grillet wrote:

Neuilly, le 25 mai 1995

Chère Julia Waters,

Pardonnez-moi de vous répondre avec quelque retard : j'étais en voyages divers. Et, malheureusement, je ne puis vous être d'aucun secours : j'ai raconté mon souvenir sans en vérifier l'exactitude. C'était en quelque sorte un principe d'écriture pour ces *Romanesques*. Mais je comprends parfaitement que vos soucis ne sont pas du même ordre, et qu'il serait fort intéressant de comparer avec précision les deux textes successifs de Duras. Que faire? Je ne vois pas dans quelle autre revue elle aurait pu écrire

Bien cordialement,

Robbe-Grillet

Following Duras's death, Le Nouvel Observateur published a biographical article about the author, in which appeared a photograph of Duras and Robbe-Grillet, taken by Willy Rizzo (7-13 March 1996, p. 83). In reply to a request for more information as to the date and circumstances of this portrait, Robbe-Grillet wrote:

Neuilly, le 30 décembre 1996

Chère Julia Waters,

Je ne lis pas le Nouvel Observateur et n'ai donc pas vu cette photo. J'ai beaucoup vu Marguerite Duras, en de multiples circonstances, en France et ailleurs, dans les années 50, 60, et même 70. Aussi existe-t-il certainement de nombreuses photos où l'on nous voit ensemble. Pourriez-vous m'envoyer une reproduction de celle qui vous intrigue? Si j'ai une barbe, elle est postérieure à 1970. Auparavant je portais seulement une petite moustache.

J'aurais, bien sûr, des tas de petites histoires à raconter sur nos rencontres et notre amitié de cette époque. Ça ne serait guère que du bavardage. De même pour la période plus récente où elle devenait de plus en plus difficile, et pour tout dire insupportable, souffrant d'une hypertrophie de l'ego qui lui faisait perdre tout humour, alors qu'elle en avait tant autrefois. Son écriture, en revanche, avait conservé toute sa force. N'est-ce pas là, pour un écrivain, le principal? Puisque vous faites une thèse sur nos œuvres romanesques, il est peut-être inutile de trop vous intéresser à nos personnes! [...]

Bien cordialement,

Robbe-Grillet

When I sent Robbe-Grillet a copy of the above-mentioned photograph, he replied:

Neuilly, le 30 mars 1997

Chère amie,

Je suis tout à fait incapable de préciser où et quand la photo en question a été prise : comme vous pouvez le constater, le décor est totalement absent ; on dirait presque un photo-montage. Le plus simple serait de demander au photographe, Willy Rizzo, mais je n'ai plus son adresse. [...]

En tout cas, d'après nos trombines respectives, à Marguerite et à moi, ça se situe dans les années 60, où nous nous sommes beaucoup vus, dans de multiples circonstances. Laure Adler, qui écrit une biographie de Duras, me dit qu'elle a noté beaucoup de ces rencontres dans ses carnets intimes (que le fils, Jean Mascolo, laisse quelquefois consulter.)

Bonne chance!

Amicalement à vous,

Robbe-Grillet

According to Willy Rizzo, the photo was in fact taken as a joke. It was common knowledge in Paris that Duras and Robbe-Grillet had argued and that they were, by the late 1960s, 'très ennemis'. In 1966, Rizzo invited both writers separately to his studio without their knowing that the other would be there. They agreed to pose for a photograph which thus ironically commemorated their former alliance.

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