Scenes of Misrecognition (Koltès, Duras)

Abstract

What is it about confession scenes that makes them such a productive heuristic device in late twentieth-century French theater, given that so often playwrights only tease us with the prospect of confession's truth-telling potential, all the better to quash it? Whether these disclosures are extracted under the glare of courtroom or police interrogations, or elicited in the more intimate settings of the bedroom or the analyst's couch, modern theater's interest in confessions appears to reside less in their probative value than in the questions they raise about the dramatic form and our investment in it. I propose to pursue this inquiry through a discussion of two plays: Marguerite Duras's oft-staged *récit* from 1982, *La Maladie de la mort*, and Bernard-Marie Koltès's 1986 play *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*. What fascinates me most about these "postdramatic" works is the curious way in which they appear to bear all the markings of confessions yet pointedly refuse to behave like them, thwarting our desire for revelation, catharsis, and closure at every turn. As performative utterances, these abortive confessions ultimately perform little apart from their own undoing. This failure is due in no small part to the persistence with which they direct our focus elsewhere: instead of the familiar spectacle of a character's full and frank confession (assuming such a thing were even possible), the disquieting theater of Koltès and Duras demands instead that we attend to what we disavow.

Keywords: twentieth-century French theater; *La Maladie de la mort*; *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*; confession scene; misrecognition

Scenes of Misrecognition (Koltès, Duras)

> Le désir de l'homme trouve son sens dans le désir de l'autre,
> non pas tant parce que l'autre détient les clefs de l'objet désiré,
> que parce que son premier objet est d'être reconnu par l'autre.
> —Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*

What is it about confession scenes that makes them such a productive heuristic device in late twentieth-century French theater, given that so many playwrights only tease us with the tantalizing prospect of confession's truth-telling potential, all the better to quash it? Whether these disclosures are extracted under the glare of courtroom or police interrogations, or elicited in the more intimate settings of the bedroom or the analyst's couch, modern theater's interest in confessions appears to reside less in their probative value than in the questions they raise about the dramatic form and our investment in it. I propose to pursue this inquiry through a discussion of two plays: Marguerite Duras's oft-staged *récit* from 1982, *La Maladie de la mort*, and Bernard-Marie Koltès's 1986 play *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*. What fascinates me most about these works is the curious way in which they appear to bear all the markings of confessions yet pointedly refuse to behave like them, thwarting our desire for revelation, catharsis, and closure at every turn. As performative utterances, these abortive confessions ultimately perform little apart from their own undoing. This failure is due in no small part to the persistence with which they direct our focus elsewhere: instead of the familiar spectacle of a character's full and frank confession (assuming such a thing were even possible), the disquieting theater of Koltès and Duras demands instead that we attend to what it is that we *dis*avow.

Act One: *What's the deal?*

Dans la solitude des champs de coton hinges on an elusive deal, the concept of which is defined in drolly formal terms in the Prologue.[1] The play opens with a male figure lurking in the shadows of a desolate street corner. Named only as *Le Dealer* in the text, he calls out to a passing stranger designated in turn as *Le Client*:

> Si vous marchez dehors, à cette heure et en ce lieu, c'est que vous désirez quelque chose que vous n'avez pas, et cette chose, moi, je peux vous la fournir; car si je suis à cette place depuis plus longtemps que vous et pour plus longtemps que vous, et que même cette heure qui est celle des rapports sauvages entre les hommes et les animaux ne m'en chasse pas, c'est que j'ai ce qu'il faut pour satisfaire le désir qui passe devant moi, et c'est comme un poids dont il faut que je me débarrasse sur quiconque, homme ou animal, [*sic*] qui passe devant moi. (9)

Part virtuoso verbal jousting and part medieval *disputatio*, the ensuing dialogue sees the Client, adamant that he is merely *en route* to his destination, denying in ever more elaborate fashion that he desires anything at all. With equal obduracy, the Dealer counters the Client's parries with his own ripostes, refusing all the while to reveal which goods or services are on offer. Right up to the end, both remain steadfast in their tight-lipped resolve: "Non, je n'ai joui de rien, non, je ne paierai rien" (54), declares the Client as he tries, not for the first time, to take his leave. It is only in the last line of the play that the violence, simmering just below the surface of their exchange, threatens to erupt:

> LE DEALER: S'il vous plaît, dans le vacarme de la nuit, n'avez-vous rien dit que vous désiriez de moi, et que je n'aurais pas entendu?
> LE CLIENT: Je n'ai rien dit; je n'ai rien dit. Et vous, ne m'avez-vous rien, dans la nuit, dans l'obscurité si profonde qu'elle demande trop de temps pour qu'on s'y habitue, proposé, que je n'aie pas deviné?

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[1] "Un deal *est une transaction commerciale portant sur des valeurs prohibées ou strictement contrôlées, et qui se conclut, dans des espaces neutres, indéfinis, et non prévus à cet usage, entre pourvoyeurs et quémandeurs, par entente tacite, signes conventionnels ou conversation à double sens—dans le but de contourner les risques de trahison et d'escroquerie qu'une telle opération implique—, à n'importe quelle heure du jour ou de la nuit, indépendamment des heures d'ouverture réglementaires des lieux de commerce homologués, mais plutôt aux heures de fermeture de ceux-ci*" (7, italicized in the original).

LE DEALER: Rien.
LE CLIENT: Alors, quelle arme? (61)

Held in abeyance, the Client's final question serves to cut the Gordian knot. But as for what in effect constitutes the object of the deal—drugs, sex, weapons, a thief's ploy, a beggar's plea (or perhaps nothing more than the stichomythic back-and-forth of dialogue itself?)—, we are left none the wiser as the curtain falls.

We learn a bit more about the anonymous sparring partners locked in combat in *La Maladie de la mort*, but not much. A young gay man in the mold of Duras's vice-consul of Lahore (and almost certainly a double for Yann Andréa, Duras's muse[2] and companion during the last sixteen years of her life) hires a woman's services for several nights so that he may discover for himself the hitherto uncharted mysteries of heterosexual intercourse. What the man is seeking from this stranger, as the hackneyed but no less apt phrase goes, is carnal knowledge: "tenter la chose, tenter connaître ça" (8). Why the woman, who is not a sex worker, should agree to such a transaction in the first place is never made clear, although readers acquainted with Duras's oeuvre will doubtless be familiar with her unorthodox conception of prostitution as a quasi-mystical offering of the female body.

Regardless of her motivation, the woman consents to being used in the man's experiment, just as an actor proffers his body to the public, or an analyst finds herself thrust into a role not of her own choosing in the slippery process of transference. These comparisons are apposite, seeing as the man (apostrophized in this work, and throughout most of the Yann Andréa cycle, as "vous") directs the encounter much as

[2] Duras's relationship with Andréa inspired a series of essays, novels, films, and *récits* known collectively as the Yann Andréa cycle. In addition to *La Maladie de la mort* (1982), which Duras dictated to Andréa who served as typist, the cycle includes *L'Été 80* (1980), *L'Homme atlantique* (1981), *Les Yeux bleus cheveux noirs* (1986), *La Pute de la côte normande* (1986), *Emily L.* (1987), and *Yann Andréa Steiner* (1992).

he would a play, insisting for instance that the woman sleep under a spotlight and that she stick to a script that consigns her largely to silence.

But be wary of the deceptive power games that masquerade as female vulnerability in Duras's work.[3] In spite of the woman's ostensible and quite ostentatious passivity in a *mise-en-scène* conceived to keep the man's fear of her in check (and for which she charges him a higher rate), she comes to assume the mantle of psychoanalyst, albeit a rather poor one. By virtue of their respective positions in the dynamic, he is thus called to account through the structure of address, whereas she becomes the "Subject Supposed to Know." Her aim is to coax out of the man the truth of his desire, yet she does not so much receive his confession as constitute it for him. If the goal of psychoanalysis is, as Stephen Grosz has argued, to feel oneself "alive in the mind of another" (205), then the woman fails abysmally in her task: when, in the midst of her interrogation, the man is forced to concede that he has never once desired a woman, her terse reply—"C'est curieux un mort" (35)—banishes him outright from the world of the living.

In the light of such inauspicious foreplay, it may come as a surprise to learn that, in the end, intercourse *is* duly performed. But no sooner has their perfunctory coitus been completed than the action, if we can call it that, judders to a halt. For there has been no mystical union, no momentous consummation to speak of, and the characters part without either having the means to grasp what, if anything, has passed between them. The woman vanishes without a trace. The man, meanwhile, reduces the missed encounter to what the heroine of *Hiroshima mon amour* would call an

[3] We get some sense of this in the oxymoronic reference to the woman's "puissance infernale, l'abominable fragilité, la faiblesse, la force invincible de la faiblesse sans égale" (31).

"histoire […] racontable" (110), perhaps turning it into an amusing anecdote or disowning it as a figment of his imagination.

So what we have here, in sum, are two dialogues and two "deals," but just one overarching imperative compelling the other to confess, or as the Dealer puts it, to "rappeler le désir, obliger le désir à avoir un nom, le traîner jusqu'à terre, lui donner une forme et un poids" (29). Given the emphasis placed on ferreting out desires and forcing them into the open through speech, it is tempting to borrow Barthes's description of Racine's *Phèdre* and label these works *tragédies nominalistes*, the chief difference between them being that once Phèdre avows her love for Hippolyte to Oenone, she becomes an unstoppable confessing machine, as opposed to Koltès and Duras's far more intractable confessants.

Crucially, both of these works take the shape of agonistic dialogues. A particular set of assumptions is embedded in this dialectical form *par excellence*, starting with the Hegelian postulate that violent conflict produces truth. As in the Socratic maieutic method, the interlocutor is supposed to act as a kind of midwife in the delivery of insight.[4] By contrast, the type of theater famously theorized by Hans-Thies Lehmann as "postdramatic" and by Jean-Pierre Ryngaert as "théâtre de la parole" proves impervious, if not to dialectical reasoning, then at least to its resolution. Far from seeking to overthrow what Artaud called the tyranny of the text, "théâtre de la parole" willingly embraces its subordination to the script, giving the lie to Barthes's definition of theatricality, in "Le théâtre de Baudelaire," as "le théâtre moins le texte" (41). What passes for action, in the plays of Koltès and Duras, consists

[4] Anne-Françoise Benhamou uses the same metaphor in her presentation of Koltès's play as "une épreuve de vérité où chacun est *accouché* de sa trajectoire profonde et de ses désirs inavoués" (95, my emphasis). Hers is a surprisingly redemptive reading, given that no such 'accouchement' of the truth can be said to occur.

almost exclusively of speech, whose "written" quality is self-consciously displayed in the use of the imperfect subjunctive or the elevated diction of Racinian tragedy. Koltès is said to have created *Dans la solitude des champs de coton* in order to test director Patrice Chéreau's abilities to mount it as a play, whilst the motive force of Duras's project, as she explains in *La Vie matérielle*, is to "faire du théâtre lu, pas joué. Le jeu enlève au texte, il ne lui apporte rien, c'est le contraire […]" (17). So much so that the works' very status *qua* theater is up for discussion.[5]

Seemingly written in defiance of the genre's most basic conventions—as if their perverse golden rule were: *Tell, don't show… but if you must show, show only that something eludes the telling*—, Koltès and Duras's plays lead inexorably to a stalemate. What is missing is the recognition scene, that epiphanic moment when whatever has been secreted in the folds of the plot is all the more vividly unveiled in the denouement. Marking the progression from ignorance to knowledge, the device of anagnorisis forms the linchpin of Aristotelian dramaturgy. In one fateful stroke, it untangles the knots of the story and restores the characters, together with proper names, genders, and classes, to their rightful place. But what happens to the theatrical experience once recognition ceases to be a given, and becomes instead a problem? When drama eschews the cathartic logic of tension and release, the shock and thrill of retrospective understanding, the redemption and consolation that anagnorisis customarily provides? Or to put it another way: now that we know for sure that Godot is not going to show up, why do we still bother with theater?

[5] Critics have devised all kinds of terms to convey the generic instability of modern theater: see for instance Jean-Pierre Ryngaert on "la vogue du théâtre-récit" (*Lire*, 73, 77); Arnaud Rykner on "intergeneric theater" (156-158) or Matthijs Engelbert's term "ambigeneric theater" (247).

Scenes of Misrecognition (Koltès, Duras)

I want to argue that modern theater's displacement of focus from plot onto its self-reflexive form prompts us to transpose questions about characters and their psychological motivations onto our own often complicated wishes and ambivalent responses in relation to what unfolds onstage. Terence Cave, in his masterful study *Recognitions*, detects a shift in twentieth-century poetics whereby anagnorisis is increasingly posited, in the wake of Freud, "as self-recognition" (174), and pertains at least as much to the reader as it does to the character. In the words of the Dealer and his alter ego, the playwright: *If you have come here, to this place and at this time, then you must be after something*. The constitutive duality of the dramatic utterance, which Lehmann pinpoints as "the presentational potential peculiar to theater, and only to theater" (50), always figures the audience as a possible addressee. Capitalizing on this ontological ambiguity, the interpellation of the audience in live performance is what affords theater its unique angle on confessions: we are structurally implicated in the scene of confession, both called to witness *and* made to stand as accused. By the same token, the dual address unmoors the scene from the specifics of time and place, transporting the action onto what Freud, speaking of dreams, called *eine andere Schauplatz*, a stage on which to play out the fantasies and anxieties that we come up against in our interactions with others. It is my contention here that *Dans la solitude des champs de coton* and *La Maladie de la mort* carve out a space that allows the psychic conflict of reciprocal recognition to take center stage. The irresolvable tension between the hunger for acknowledgment and connection on the one hand, and the attendant risks of exposure, alienation and humiliation on the other, is what these plays so deftly lay bare. In that sense one could say that they have everything and nothing to do with economics: on the face of it, money is the catalyst of both encounters; and social interaction, consisting as it does of bartering, bargaining, and

negotiation, appears virtually indistinguishable from commerce. But these plays are equally if not more alert to the fact of our indebtedness to others. Challenging the conceit of the self-sufficient individual, they bring to light the array of strategies and calculations by which we strive to conceal our fundamental dependence on one another. The characters' desperate quest to "faire [le] corps moins seul" (Duras 12) even as they long to be "de simples, solitaires et orgueilleux zéros" (Koltès 52), brings to the fore the perennial problem of how to exist together. It is as if, for recognition properly to count, we had first to reckon with something within us we would much rather discount.

On Recognition

Yoking together recognition as both a narrative device and a critical concept demands some explanation of how the term has become a kind of shibboleth in modern thought. In a bid to limit the scaffolding of my argument, and at the risk of gross oversimplification, suffice it to say that my reading draws on the work of the "usual suspects" who have reflected on this topic, from G.W.F. Hegel and Alexandre Kojève to Judith Butler, via Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Lacan, Frantz Fanon, Louis Althusser, Jacques Rancière, and Axel Honneth.

From Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) comes the foundational premise that identity is intersubjective, which is to say that it is jointly constituted and staked upon the other's recognition. Others get to dictate the terms of this tussle, insofar as it is their prerogative to corroborate or contradict the account that one gives of oneself. Sartre's theater finds its impetus in this process of reciprocal objectification through which each character is held hostage to the other and their preferred version of themselves is put to the test. But what if, as the word's prefix

suggests, we can only *re*cognize what we already know? In *Peau noire, masques blancs*, his meditation on the anti-colonial struggle and what he dubbed "the fact of blackness," Fanon exposes the thorny problem of recognizability, and the difficulty of securing recognition outside the terms of dominant discourse. More recently, Butler and Rancière have taken up this line of inquiry, pursuing the possibility of bringing into view and voice those subjects and experiences not yet deemed visible, audible or intelligible according to the norms that govern recognition.

A common thread in these various accounts of recognition is the focus on its simultaneously empowering and alienating effects. What psychoanalysis has brought to the party is a greater skepticism about the transparency of one's desires, even and especially to oneself, such that this radical blind spot in self-understanding extends well beyond the realm of Sartrean bad faith. Building on Freud's investigation of the unconscious mind, Lacan's work yields the startling discovery that misrecognition is not so much antagonistic to recognition as it is intrinsic to it. Remember too Althusser's account, in his seminal essay on ideology and state apparatuses, of subjectivity produced in the service of subjection. The advent of the subject is said to coincide with the latter's recognition (which is always also a *mis*recognition) of him- or herself as the addressee of interpellation. It seems to me not incidental that the example Althusser gives of interpellation is that of a shouting police officer, since the process appears to entail a presumption of guilt. To be hailed, it would seem, is to be found at fault. Consider, in this vein, Levinas's point that the *moi* comes into being in the accusative case, or Foucault's thesis, in "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?," that the identity of the author and the very notion of authorship are historically bound up in the threat of prosecution. The complex mechanism of recognition, not unlike that of

confession, thus submits a culpable outcast to the public gaze, but in return can confer the validation that brings that person out of exile and back into the community's fold.

Paramount though it is to his *théâtre de situations*, Sartre dramatizes this struggle for recognition at the surface levels of theme and dialogue; wrapped up in layers of bad faith, the truth is still there just waiting to be uncovered. Koltès and Duras go one step further. Arresting anagnorisis in its tracks, they incorporate the distortions, blind spots and pitfalls that beset the process of recognition into the very form and structure of their works.

Act Two: *The Art of the Deal*

i) Scene One: Koltès

What does Koltès's Client want? Any answer to this riddle must grapple with two competing propositions, for whilst the Client evidently nurtures the fantasy that his desire be divined by the Dealer without his having to articulate it in so many words,[6] he also wishes most fervently not to be taken—or in his view, *mis*taken—for a customer. Unwilling to assume the place the Dealer has assigned him, the Client likens the former's hailing of him to a brazen assault: "ce qui me répugne le plus au monde […], c'est le regard de celui qui vous présume plein d'intentions illicites et familier d'en avoir […]; du seul poids de ce regard sur moi, la virginité qui est en moi se sent soudain violée" (19-20).

[6] "C'était à vous de deviner, de nommer quelque chose, et alors, peut-être, d'un mouvement de la tête, j'aurais approuvé, d'un signe, vous auriez su […]" (32).

In a neat illustration of Freud's famous kettle story,[7] the Client endeavors to prove his "virginité" through a series of excuses that are as convoluted as they are contradictory. He begins by issuing a blanket denial of any desire that would fall foul of norms and regulations: "je n'ai pas, pour vous plaire, de désirs illicites. Mon commerce à moi, je le fais aux heures homologuées du jour, dans des lieux de commerce homologués et illuminés d'éclairage électrique" (18). Implicit in the Client's bold claim that he does not operate in the shadows is the still bolder assumption that he has nothing to hide or repress.

But as anyone who has ever purchased a carpet at the bazaar will tell you, the disavowal of desire[8] is also the obligatory first step in any bargaining ritual. It is certainly hard to shake the impression that the Client is withholding something. He even admits as much: "Car des désirs, j'en avais, ils sont tombés autour de nous, on les a piétinés" (51). Whether his reticence stems from the fear of cheapening his desire were he to utter it, or of revealing himself to be a humiliated "débiteur" (55) in the Dealer's eyes instead of the wholly conscious and autonomous individual he purports to be, one can only surmise. He does hint that in different circumstances, had the Dealer's mind not been mired in the gutter, his desires might have lent themselves to expression, "mais vous les avez laissés rouler vers le caniveau, parce que même les

[7] The Client relies on the same faulty logic as the borrower of a kettle in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. In this oft-quoted comic anecdote, a man returns a damaged kettle to his neighbor, claiming at one and the same time that he returned the object intact, that it already had a hole in it, and furthermore, that he never borrowed it.

[8] "Alors que si vous me les montriez, si vous donniez un nom à votre offre, choses licites ou illicites, mais nommées et alors jugeables du moins, si vous me les nommiez, je saurais dire non […]. Car je sais dire non et j'aime dire non, je suis capable de vous éblouir de mes non, de vous faire découvrir toutes les façons qu'il y a de dire non, qui commencent par toutes les façons qu'il y a de dire oui" (26-7). For a discussion of the reversibility of affirmation and negation, always subject to further scrutiny in psychoanalytical discourse, see Freud's "Constructions in Analysis" (1937).

petits, même les faciles, vous n'avez pas de quoi les satisfaire" (51). Ever mindful of hedging his bets, the Client coyly refers to "[m]on désir, s'il en est un" (15), testing the waters with such falsely casual asides as: "et si—par hypothèse—j'avouais" (41)… Rather in the manner of Phèdre's admission to Hippolyte in act 2, scene 5, dramatized as pure fantasy in the twists and turns of Daedalus's maze, the Client's labyrinthine confession is bracketed by endless concessive clauses and indefinitely suspended by a rhetoric of preterition and circumlocution. Desire may well be the sole topic of conversation here, but it is placed very firmly under erasure.

Even so, the Client's efforts meet with middling success. In his essay on the uncanny, Freud relates how, while walking in an Italian town, he found himself inexplicably looping back time and again to its red-light district. Likewise, the Client's apparently chance meeting with the Dealer soon takes on the air of unwitting design, much to his own dismay: "je souffre, ignorant, ignorant de ma fatalité, ignorant si je suis jugé ou complice, de ne pas savoir ce dont je souffre, je souffre de ne pas savoir quelle blessure vous me faites et par où s'écoule mon sang" (33). So much for the unswerving line that structuralist critics liked to draw between the protagonist who forms an object of desire, overcomes a series of obstacles in pursuit of it and finally reaps his reward. The opacity of the Client's desire fatally undermines any such notions of causality and teleology, diverting our man from his course: "la ligne droite, censée me mener d'un point lumineux à un autre point lumineux, à cause de vous devient crochue et labyrinthe obscur dans l'obscur territoire où je me suis perdu" (20). In the clutches of an all-too-nebulous "désir que je ne connais pas et ne reconnais pas, que vous êtes seul à connaître, et que vous jugez" (33), the Client —however much he resents feeling beholden to his interlocutor—nevertheless looks to the Dealer to identify what he himself cannot perceive or recognize.

By turns analyst, father confessor, judge, jury, and even witness for the defense[9] (everything, in short, but a vendor), the Dealer's role keeps shifting from one moment to the next. In the end, we are left to ponder whether the Client does not enlist the Dealer as his potential executioner too. For the play's hanging conclusion surely begs the question as to whether it is not *death* that the Client, much like the character of Koch in *Quai ouest*, has yearned for all along. Or is it yet another sign, as Stanley Cavell observed with reference to *King Lear*, of the astonishing lengths one will go to in order to avoid confessing, that is to say, to avoid being seen?

ii) Scene Two (Duras)

Although the AIDS crisis had yet to be widely understood at the time of *La Maladie de la mort*'s publication in 1982, it is difficult nowadays to read Duras's text, let alone its forbidding title, without at once making that connection. Written just one year after homosexuality was decriminalized in France, and two years after its 66-year-old author met Yann Lemée (*alias* Yann Andréa, then a student in his twenties), this anxious *récit*-cum-play of what amounts to a doomed experiment in gay conversion therapy makes for rather uncomfortable reading and viewing. Denounced and extolled

[9] The Client calls upon the Dealer to testify in his defense: "reconnaissez du moins que je n'ai point encore agi ni pour ni contre vous, que l'on n'a rien encore à me reprocher, que je suis resté honnête jusqu'à cet instant. Témoignez pour moi que je ne me suis pas plu dans l'obscurité où vous m'avez arrêté, que je ne m'y suis arrêté que parce que vous avez mis la main sur moi" (34). This chimes closely with a scene from *Quai ouest*, the play Koltès wrote just one year before *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*, in which Koch pleads with Charles to vouch for his innocence: "Croyez surtout que je suis innocent de tout ce que vous pourriez imaginer, de tout ce que tout homme imaginerait forcément, à voir un homme ici, dans cet état et à cette heure, et avec un but que personne ne peut deviner; je sais bien qu'on pense alors à dix mille choses, dix mille raisons dont aucune n'est la bonne. Je vous demande de croire cela" (15).

in equal measure—frequently by the same critics[10]—, *La Maladie de la mort* seems to have lost none of its capacity for provocation.

Duras was always a keen curator of readers' responses to her work, and this text proved no exception. It is fair to say, as a rule, that her more peremptory pronouncements in the public sphere were also the ones she was most likely to recant. Her comments on *La Maladie de la mort* constitute a compendium of such about-faces. Compare for instance her categorical assertion that "contrairement à ce que l'on croit, il n'y a pas de procès dans *La Maladie de la mort*" ("Dans les jardins," 783) and her subsequent reversal of that position in *La Vie matérielle*, using the very term she had disavowed: "Mais *La Maladie de la mort* c'était un procès et ici [in *Les Yeux bleus cheveux noirs*], il n'y a rien de pareil, en aucun sens" (42). Evolving in fits and starts as Duras repeatedly attempted (and repeatedly failed) to move it from page to stage, *La Maladie de la mort* is a work about, and born out of, the experience of frustration.

In his searching analysis of the cultural contexts and discourses that inform Duras's text, Michael Lucey does not hesitate to condemn it as homophobic. He is certainly not the first reader to note that in the female character's rush to exalt the desire between men and women, and bemoan the sterility and narcissism of male homosexuality, the work glosses over "her own failure to imagine a sexuality that would be outside heterosexuality" ("Contexts," 370). And yet, for all of the work's shortcomings, Lucey does not dismiss wholesale Duras's attempt to get to grips with the problems her relationship with Yann Andréa posed to verbalisation and

[10] There is a tendency to make allowances for the style of a text that is, in the words of René de Ceccatty, "*fabuleusement beau*," "*le plus cruel et le plus franc que Duras ait osé écrire"* (139). "Ce qui distingue Duras de tout ce bavardage homophobe," maintains Didier Eribon, "c'est son talent" (138).

conceptualisation. He coins the expression "misfit sexuality" to characterize partnerships such as theirs that do not conform to existing taxonomies or readily recognizable social arrangements.[11] Such is the confounding mystery of love, manifesting itself as "une faille soudaine dans la logique de l'univers" (52), that Duras sets out to apprehend in *La Maladie de la mort*.

This most unsettling of texts commands our attention precisely because of the way it never quite manages to *settle* on its object. It is messy, to be sure, but intriguingly so, not least because Duras conceives of the theatrical experiment as a kind of wishful thinking that just about avoids falling into its own trap. Making conscious use of illusion, *La Maladie de la mort* highlights its dubious status explicitly and insistently. Inasmuch as the work can be read *extra fabulam* as a revenge fantasy in which the spurned author gets the upper hand and puts the man who does not desire her back in his place, the putative triumph it stages is an entirely futile one. In the absence of a miraculous "conversion," the encounter between man and woman is abruptly cut short by their mutual *mis*recognition and shared *dis*avowal of what has taken place.

But disowned knowledge, as Cavell astutely remarks in his collection of essays on Shakespearean drama, "is not ignorance, not an absence, but the presence of something, say of the undone, of one's hand in one's undoing" (xv). In the scrutiny it brings to bear on the questions of knowledge and acknowledgment, *La Maladie de la mort* displays some awareness, however grudging, of this malaise. Indeed, I would

[11] Duras's comments in *La Vie matérielle* exemplify this "misfit"sexuality: "Nous avons fait fi de tous les compromis, de tous les 'arrangements' habituels entre les genres, […], c'était un amour qui venait de très loin, qu'on ne pouvait pas imaginer, il était si étrange, nous nous moquions, *nous ne le reconnaissions pas* et nous l'avons vécu comme il se présentait, impossible […]" (103, my emphasis).

venture to suggest that the text "knows" far more than its author was perhaps able or willing to acknowledge at the time.[12] The disjunction between its form and content makes plain this state of cognitive dissonance via two key estranging techniques: the addition of a narrator onstage, and the casting of the text in the fiction of the conditional mood.

It is admittedly rather late in the proceedings to mention that *La Maladie de la mort* is not strictly speaking a duologue, although more than a few critics have seemed happy to treat it as such. In a move that should by rights spell the end of dramatic tension, Duras introduces a reader/narrator into the mix, whose perspective is aligned and allied with the woman but who is kept crucially separate from her. So far, so Duras. Third parties are, after all, a permanent fixture in her imagined universe: imbued with insight, they play a pivotal role in the constitution of couples, serving to bear witness to, and thereby consecrate, the power of their bond. What is more unusual, in the case of *La Maladie de la mort*, is that this mediating figure is given the task of testifying to the radical incongruity and fundamental inadequacy of their pairing, whilst at the same time undertaking to convince "vous" (and therefore us) that something of genuine import has transpired in their failed exchange. In the epilogue, it falls to this reader/narrator to wager what might seem like a Jesuitical distinction between what has occurred (*ce qui s'est passé*) and what has happened (*ce qui est arrivé*),[13] a distinction which makes room for the possibility of an intangible but

[12] Martin Crowley writes of "the belated working-out of the doubt about the necessity of heterosexuality" (674).

[13] This distinction effectively forms *Emily L.*'s frame story, in which the female narrator strives to prove to her younger male companion that there is indeed an "histoire" about them worth telling. It also crops up in Duras's comment in *La Pute de la côte normande*: "Quand j'ai écrit *La Maladie de la mort*, je ne savais pas écrire sur Yann. C'est ce que je sais. Ici, les lecteurs vont dire: 'Qu'est-ce qu'il lui prend? Rien

nonetheless significant connection between the man and the woman. In more ways than one, *La Maladie de la mort* could be said to "perform"—and be about performance—, *despite* itself.

All so-called "live" action is thus transmitted by a delegated third party who transmutes it into narrated action. Lest one presume that this shift relates solely to the work's *récit* form, it should be pointed out that the retrospective narration that one usually finds in novels characterizes nearly all the works Duras wrote for the stage, including *L'Éden-cinéma* (1977), *Savannah Bay* (1985), *La Musica deuxième* (1985) and *Agatha* (1991), prompting Daniel Sack to observe that Duras's plays "act like spoken novellas or installations more than dramatic works" (52). The strangeness of *La Maladie de la mort* is compounded, moreover, by the reader/narrator's continual recourse to the conditional mood. Forestalling the action further by relegating it to the hypothetical realm of the make-believe, this pre-ludic conditional sets up the text as an extended exercise in doublethink:

> Vous devriez ne pas la connaître, l'avoir trouvée partout à la fois, dans un hôtel, dans une rue, dans un train, dans un bar, dans un livre, dans un film, en vous-même, en vous, en toi, au hasard de ton sexe dressé dans la nuit qui appelle où se mettre, où se débarrasser des pleurs qui le remplissent. (7)

The failure of the encounter is crystallized in the juxtaposition of the characters' contrasting points of view, with their respective blind spots and mutually exclusive frames of reference. From this clash of competing subjectivities emerges something like a Lyotardian *différend* that sees the feminist critique of misogyny pitted against the defense of gay male desire. To get the measure of this *dialogue de sourds*, it is worth bearing in mind that *La Maladie de la mort* takes as its broader target

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ne s'est passé, puisque rien n'arrive.' Alors que ce qui est arrivé est ce qui s'est passé" (303).

patriarchal homosociality, construing it, alongside male homosexuality, as a hostile and concerted rejection of women. Duras's argument fastens specifically on the age-old fear of female sexuality and contempt for the female body, "la forme suspectée depuis des siècles" (35-36). *La Maladie de la mort*'s depiction, in this vein, of the man using a lamp to peer at the woman's genitalia while failing utterly to see this "sex which is not one," is very much in keeping with French feminist discourses of its time. Akin to the distinction between "arriver" and "se passer," the difference between looking on the one hand, and seeing (and recognizing) on the other, is folded into a single word: *voir*. In an Irigarayan reversal of the memorable opening sequence of *Hiroshima mon amour*, in which the Japanese man contests the Frenchwoman's account of what she believes to have seen at the museum in Hiroshima ["Tu n'as rien vu à Hiroshima" (22, 23, 25)], on this occasion it is *La Maladie de la mort*'s reader/narrator who drives the point home: "Vous ne voyez rien. Vous voudriez tout voir d'une femme, cela autant que puisse se faire. Vous ne voyez pas que cela vous est impossible" (39).

And yet the woman too fails signally to address the symbolic violence she perpetrates by pronouncing the man's death sentence. At issue here are *both* partners' petitions to be acknowledged in their difference, petitions which seem paradoxically to foreclose the possibility of each recognizing the other. Duras herself tends to overlook the brutality of a literary enterprise that rests on the repudiation of the man's homosexual desire and his capacity for love. The anaphoric rhetoric with which her reader-narrator refutes the gay man's ability to recognize the woman is exaggerated to such a degree as to render it positively suspect:

> Peut-être vous la chercheriez […]. Mais vous ne pourriez pas la trouver parce que dans la lumière du jour vous ne reconnaissez personne. Vous ne la reconnaîtriez pas. […] La pénétration des corps vous ne pouvez pas la

> reconnaître, vous ne pouvez jamais reconnaître. Vous ne pourrez jamais. (55-6)[14]

In a work so preoccupied with the failure to recognize the other, perhaps it is inevitable, if not a little ironic, that its author should also be complicit in some of the misrecognition.

Act Three: *Deal or no Deal*

Let us consider, by way of conclusion, how readers, audiences and critics alike are necessarily implicated in the double-dealing processes of misrecognition and disavowal that Duras and Koltès explore. To analyze or stage any piece of theater is at the best of times to take a speculative gamble. These interpretive risks are magnified tenfold in the plays of Koltès[15] and Duras,[16] which systematically gesture towards, but ultimately resist, the lure of anagnorisis. Trafficking in what the Dealer calls "le

[14] There can be no question but that Duras's insistence on the male character's sterility, in her note on adapting *La Maladie* for the stage, arouses readers' suspicion. The man is in fact so thoroughly divested of agency that he is placed at an even greater remove from the events: the actor is enjoined simply to read out the text rather than recite it from memory, as the actress does.

[15] Chéreau staged the play three times: in its original 1987 run at the Théâtre des Amandiers-Nanterre, with Laurent Malet as the Client and Isaach de Bankolé as the Dealer; the following year at the Avignon Festival, with Malet reprising his role and Chéreau himself taking on that of the Dealer. In 1995 Chéreau returned as the Dealer opposite his partner Pascal Greggory. Working in conjunction with the Théâtre des Célestins, Roland Auzet provided spectators with a set of headphones and moved the play to Lyon's Part-Dieu shopping center in 2015, casting two actresses, Anne Alvaro and Audrey Bonnet, in the roles of Dealer and Client. His immersive production moved to the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord the following year.

[16] Famous productions of *La Maladie de la mort* include Peter Handke's film, *Das Mal des Todes*, (1985), and Robert Wilson's 1997 play with Michel Piccoli (in a black cassock) and choreographer Lucinda Childs dressed up as Marilyn Monroe. Alice Birch's 2018 adaptation, staged by Katie Mitchell at the Bouffes du Nord in Paris and then at the Barbican theater in London, relegated the reader-narrator, played by Irène Jacob, to a sound booth onstage. It also used video clips to give the woman (played by Laetitia Dosch) a back-story, in which a childhood trauma—her father's suicide by hanging—is supplied to shed light on her participation in the man's experiment.

langage de celui qui ne se fait pas reconnaître" (21), they are structured around voids devised to defeat one's best efforts to fill them, simultaneously galvanizing and jeopardizing any attempt to pin them down. And yet we might ask to what extent it is possible to engage with such works *without* becoming embroiled in the parsing of their unspoken desires, in other words, without wrestling first-hand with the challenges they present to our ability to "recognize" them. Therein lies the rub.

In fact, one of the most remarkable features of the exegesis of *Dans la solitude des champs de coton* is that for so many of its commentators, there seems to be rather little doubt as to the deal's true object. Whether because the play was written during the tumultuous *années sida*, just three years before Koltès himself succumbed to the disease in 1989; because his Dealer speaks in a code that recalls Polari, the cant slang of gay subculture; or simply because the word "desire" has long since operated as a shorthand for sexual desire, several critics (including director Patrice Chéreau, the playwright's closest collaborator) have assumed that the deal has to do with gay cruising. Every bit as skittish and evasive as his characters, Koltès expressed perpetual dissatisfaction with critical interpretations of his play, and with this reading in particular.[17]

Still other readers sift through the dialogue's imagery in search of strategically scattered clues that would reveal in disguised form that which they suppose lies buried deep within the text. In this version of the return of the repressed, metaphors and similes are made to stand in for the scars, caskets, and tokens of classical tragedy.

[17] "Là, *Dans la solitude*, on vous branche tout de suite sur une histoire de pédés. Alors je me dis: quand est-ce qu'on m'épargnera à la fois le désir et l'amour, au sens le plus banal du terme? Non, non, il y a d'autres choses, et beaucoup plus les autres choses que ça! parler du désir, ou parler de ce qu'on appelle l'amour, c'est les choses les plus banales, les plus dépourvues d'intérêt qui puissent exister!" ("Entretien avec François Malbosc" 76-7.)

Here too, one cannot but notice critics' compensatory assertiveness in the matter, as they marshal the full force of hyperbole to paper over the gaps. Hence Anne Quentin argues that "[l]a métaphore est à peine voilée" (48), the play's horse motif constituting in her view a blatant cipher for heroin, whilst Anne Ubersfeld holds that the "identité vraie" (9) of the Dealer is none other than the Angel of Death. And this is to say nothing of those readers, like the actor and director Charles Berling,[18] who fix upon the issue of race relations, on the grounds of the play's titular reference to cotton fields[19] and Koltès's instruction (not always respected) that a black actor be cast in the role of the Dealer.

But where Koltès, following his characters' lead, refused point blank to be pigeonholed and "confess" his desire, Duras, as we have seen, dedicated much of her energy to stamping her own interpretation onto her work.[20] In both cases, the pseudo-confessional encounters staged by Koltès and Duras, and their stubborn refusal to "get to the point" (not to mention the maddening doubt they cast onto what that point

[18] In Berling's production, which ran in October 2017 at the Théâtre des Quartiers d'Ivry, he took on the role of the Client alongside the Ivoirian actress Mata Gabin as the Dealer.

[19] Koltès borrowed the title from Carson McCullers' description of "lonesome cotton fields" (380) in her 1946 novel *The Member of the Wedding*.

[20] Duras's tight grip on her work makes the reception of *La Maladie de la mort* all the more baffling when one considers the silence of some of the work's most celebrated commentators, Maurice Blanchot and Peter Handke among them, on the topic of male homosexuality. Several readers have made a note of this omission, including Duras herself (see Udris 27-41).

Add to this the uncanny repetition that haunts the critical responses to both works, if we are to judge by the uncommon frequency with which they cite Lacan's definition of love: "*Donner ce qu'on n'a pas à quelqu'un qui n'en veut pas*." Initially quoted by Blanchot to describe the "communauté des amants" in *La Maladie de la mort*, Lacan's maxim also shows up in discussions of *Dans la solitude des champs de coton* by Anne Ubersfeld (149), Dominique Rabaté (43) and Christophe Bident. In Bident's iteration, the form is ever so slightly altered: "Ne pas recevoir ce que l'autre n'a jamais eu" (25). As it happens, Lacan's maxim is also a rather fitting summation of our predicament as interpreters.

might be), seem specially designed to frustrate us. Frustration is not without its uses. Koltès believed that hermeneutical impasses provide an opportunity for reflection, by enabling us better to discern "dans quelles limites on se trouve, par quels obstacles la vie se voit cernée […]—c'est cela que raconte le théâtre" ("Entretien avec Véronique Hotte" 135). For Duras, frustration spurs us to expand our capacity to hold a position of uncertainty. The topos of *non-savoir* so central to her writing project values *not* knowing as a particular, and particularly bracing, mode of understanding that divests us of our fantasies of power, transparency and omniscience even as it acknowledges the irresistible appeal that such delusions have for us.

Why is it, then, that plays which contrive to block our satisfaction should be such compelling heuristic instruments for working out what we want, and what we might get, out of theater? For Koltès's Client, the question already contains the germ of its answer: "si par hypothèse je vous disais que ce qui me retient ici était l'incertitude où je suis de vos desseins, et l'intérêt que j'y prends?" (42). That the denial of anagnorisis should pique and sustain our interest in these works is obvious. What may be less obvious is what this failure reveals about the act of recognition itself, be it the blind spots and resistances that occlude our perception of ourselves, the shadowy nature of desires that keep slipping out of view, or the warping effects that our fantasies, anxieties and wishfulness cannot help but have on our relation to others. Theater offers us a chance to glimpse our unknowingness. Forgoing the reassuring comforts of anagnorisis, the works of Koltès and Duras seek to enact a different kind of transaction, one that might move us from an illusory mastery to a "knowledge" that recognizes above all its own precariousness.

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