

UCLA

Paroles gelées

Title

Criminal Discourse in the Theatre: Marguerite Duras's L'Amante anglaise

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4wk8z5c2>

Journal

Paroles gelées, 20(2)

ISSN

1094-7264

Author

Orr, Shelley

Publication Date

2003

DOI

10.5070/PG7202003142

Peer reviewed

Criminal Discourse in the Theatre: Marguerite Duras's *L'Amante anglaise*

Shelley Orr

Doctoral candidate in the Department of Theatre and Dance, UC San Diego.

Claire: *Je sais que plus les criminels sont clairs dans ce qu'ils disent plus on les tue.*

Claire: I know that the more clearly criminals explain themselves the more they execute them.

(Duras, *L'Amante anglaise* in *Théâtre IV* 258)

Marguerite Duras uses the textual figure of the criminal interrogation in her play *L'Amante anglaise*, which was written in response to reports of actual events. Duras positions her character Claire Lannes, the accused, as the subject of this interrogation. Claire has confessed to the murder of her cousin, whose body was found in pieces that were placed on several train cars with destinations throughout Europe. Now just two things are missing from the investigation: the victim's head and Claire's motive. The entire play consists of the interrogation of Claire and her husband, Pierre, by a character known only as the "Interrogator." However, Claire does not participate in the interrogation in the conventional way: Claire confounds the discourse of interrogation by asking her own questions. Interrogation itself comes under interrogation, and the power of the interrogation to establish the facts is questioned. A curious turn of phrase "establish the facts"—the facts seem only to come into being in the necessarily belated and officially authorized investigation, in the "re-construction" of the crime. In other words, when the events are brought into authorized discourse. In fact, the power granted to an investigation and to a representation to accurately imitate reality is questioned in *L'Amante anglaise*. This is a dual questioning on two levels, both a questioning on the diegetic level of the procedure and benefits of investigation, and a questioning on a meta-theatrical level of the process of representation of that investigation (the play itself).

Rather than fulfilling the role of the accused by initially obstructing but then satisfying the inquiry, Claire questions the process. By using a character who does not fulfill the role as subject of the interrogation, Duras challenges the interrogative project. As an audience member, I begin to wonder if it is possible to "reconstruct" a criminal's motive like the victim's body (and what good will come of trying to do so). As Claire conducts her counter-interrogation to find out what the Interrogator wants—or, perhaps more accurately, what he wants to hear—the audience questions whether the Interrogator will accept any motive to fill in the blanks he perceives in Claire's confession. The question of the play becomes not whether the Interrogator will be able to overcome the obstacles and reconstruct the truth of what happened the night Claire killed her cousin, but if he will be able to construct Claire's culpability and thereby determine her sentence. By refusing to participate in the conventions of this discourse, Claire prevents both the

Interrogator and the audience from being able to classify her. Consequently, Claire cannot be fixed into a familiar role, neither in criminal investigation, nor in the theatre. My talk will address three main points: first how Claire interacts with the Interrogator, second how authority relates to language, and third how *L'Amante anglaise* troubles the assumptions associated with both criminal investigations and mimetic realism in the theatre.

Section I: Questioning the Accused / The Accused Questioning

Early in his questioning of Pierre Lannes, the husband of the accused, the unnamed Interrogator states, "As you know, I'm not interested in the facts but in what lies behind them. What matters is what you think about her" (92). When Pierre asks the Interrogator about the evidence that has been gathered against his wife, the Interrogator claims ignorance:

Pierre: [...] You know, it's got to the point where I've wondered if she didn't make it all up. If it really was her that killed the poor girl... But the fingerprints are the same? Aren't they?

Interrogator: I know nothing about it. (94)

The Interrogator wants to *know* Claire, he's interested not in the facts of what she did but *why* she did it. As he puts it: "I'm trying to find out what sort of a woman Claire Lannes is and why she says she committed this murder. She doesn't give any reason herself. So I'm trying to find out for her" (93). He has made it his project to seek out and assign a reason to her actions. To explain her. An attempt on the part of one character to "comprehend" another is a familiar trope in Duras's works. Duras has at times used one character as a narrator for the actions and words of another. *Le Vice-consul* and *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* are two prime examples where we as readers only know the characters of the Beggar Woman and Lol through their male narrators. As Laurie Edson points out (in her *Reading Relationally*) with respect to *Le Ravissement*:

Duras has quite deliberately established a less-than-omniscient narrator named Jacques Hold whose obsession is to 'know' Lol. [...] What Duras has presented in this novel [...] is not the story of a female subject, as many critics have maintained, but a story of gendered mediation, male desire, and, ultimately, of epistemological crisis: the story of the way a male attempt at knowledge, in objectifying a female subject, mediates and determines ('produces,' to use Foucault's term) what can be known. (11)

In *L'Amante anglaise*, Claire is allowed to speak for herself, but the "male attempt at knowledge" which "mediates and determines [...] what can be known" is continually present in the form of the Interrogator. The questions the Interrogator asks seem very familiar to the genre of a *drame policier*, but when Claire responds with her own questions, she circumvents his attempts at "understanding" her. Early in the second part of the play (Pierre Lannes's interrogation forms the first part of the play, Claire Lannes's, the second). Claire asks the Interrogator questions after he has asked her about seeing a man in the street on the night of the murder:

Interrogator: You weren't frightened when you saw him?

Claire: No. Who are you? Another policeman?

Interrogator: No.

Claire: Do I have to answer you?

Interrogator: Why, does it bother you?

Claire: No. (114)

Tellingly, the Interrogator does not answer two of Claire's questions: she does not know who he is or whether she is required to answer him. This last is especially significant, because the Interrogator started his interview with Pierre Lannes by stating that Pierre was not required to answer his questions, and repeated this statement two more times during their interview. The Interrogator does not make Claire aware of her rights at any point during their interview, and yet Claire seems quite aware of what is happening. She comments on or asks about what her sentence will be on ten different occasions during her interview. The English and French word sentence resonates strongly here: it seems that Claire asks questions in order to avoid her sentencing. The Interrogator never gives her an answer, though he seems to be gathering information for that very decision. Claire is quite aware of the process the Interrogator is conducting, as she puts it: "When they get tired of trying, they'll say it's madness. I know. Oh well" (130).

In his questions to Pierre, the Interrogator focuses his attention in on Claire's lies, her imagination, curiosity, and memory, in other words, Claire's fabrications. In trying to "know" her, he looks at the non-factual, the non-evidentiary. But he approaches his questioning of his subject in much the same way as he would if he were trying to get factual information. He is looking for the truth in places where what is true is not absolute. The Interrogator focuses on a dream that Claire had. He asks Pierre to speculate about what Claire thinks about as she sits alone in her garden for hours and hours. However, as the questioning continues, the reasons for Claire's actions cannot be uncovered or re-constructed, which leads an audience to question whether this kind of information is ever possible to uncover or re-construct. Because there is no one truth that Claire and the Interrogator will both accept, it is not possible for Claire to narrate the *reasons* for her actions by telling the "truth," and so turning the questions back on the interrogator is perhaps the only way for Claire to respond truthfully.

During Claire's interview, the Interrogator asks 149 questions and Claire asks 95: Claire asks nearly two thirds as many questions as the Interrogator. Answering the Interrogator's questions with more questions is the only honest response she could give in an inquiry which seeks to "know" her, to name her, and thereby to neutralize the threat that she poses. As Erica Eisinger notes: "Claire sends the parts of the body out as messages, signaling for help. Her very last words are "écoutez-moi," shifting the burden on to the questioner to continue the quest, not for the victim, but for Claire. The plea for an interlocutor reflects the basic need which detective fiction fulfills to talk, to explain, and thereby to impose rationality on a dangerous criminal impulse" (518). However, it seems to me that Duras is using the familiar genre of detective fiction (or *drame policier*) against itself, exposing the project's inaccuracies and the role the interrogator plays in constructing (rather than re-constructing) Claire's motive. And a motive is what the court, the institution, needs in order to sentence Claire. As the Interrogator notes in a response to Claire's asking, "what would they do to me? Int: It would depend on your motives." This is the point at which Claire says the quotation I used at the opening, "I know that the more criminals explain themselves, the more they execute them" (117-18).

The more words the interrogator has from Claire, the easier it is for him to construct her culpability and then to know how to dispose of her. But, to the Interrogator, Claire is being anything but *clair* in her responses to questions.

Section II: The Authority to Name and to Represent

Who has the power to name and classify Claire? The Interrogator and the audience, but Claire resists this project by telling him that she *would* tell him why she did what she did, if only he asked the right question:

Interrogator: You don't know why you killed her?

Claire: I shan't tell.

Interrogator: What will you tell?

Claire: That depends on the question.

Interrogator: You've never been asked the right question?

Claire: No. If I had I'd have found an answer.

[...]

Claire: They've paraded questions past me and I haven't recognized one.

[...]

Claire: Listen. I can't say fairer than this: if you find the right question I swear I'll answer it. (129-130)

This interaction between Claire and the Interrogator inverts the interrogatory relationship: it is not Claire who is "uncooperative," but the Interrogator. Claire reverses the standards for discourse: it is up to the Interrogator to find the "right" question, rather than putting the burden on Claire to provide the "right" answer. Rather than merely refusing to supply the "missing" information (from the point of view of the Interrogator and the genre of the *drame policier*), Claire asserts that by not asking the right questions, the Interrogator's discourse is "missing" what she has to say.

Pierre Bourdieu explores the way that naming and classifying construct social reality in his *Language and Symbolic Power*. He asserts that: "[...] the social sciences must take as their object of study the social operations of *naming* and the rites of institution through which they are accomplished. But on a deeper level, they must examine the part played by words in the construction of social reality and the contribution which the struggle over classifications, a dimension of all class struggles, makes to the constitution of classes [...]" (105). By naming Claire the accused, a criminal, the state is enacting its power over her through its representative, the Interrogator. Now the Interrogator is trying to further name Claire (Is she mad? Remorseless?) in order to fit her into a recognized (i.e. safe) category. Bourdieu goes on to relate the power of naming in the construction of social reality to individuals who have the power and the authority to name: "By structuring the perception which social agents have of the social world, the act of naming helps to establish the structure of this world, and does so all the more significantly the more widely it is recognized, i.e. authorized. There is no social agent who does not aspire, as far as his circumstances permit, to have the power to name and to create the world through naming [...]" (105).

The authority the Interrogator possesses is made clear in his reference (i.e. his access) to proceedings that took place when Claire appeared before the Magistrate, but his authority perhaps most evident in his complete anonymity. He is free to ask any

questions pertaining to Claire, and just as free to avoid answering any of her questions about his identity or his “findings” about her. Bourdieu notes that authority comes from the discourse associated with an institution, a discourse in which Claire does not participate:

It is access to the legitimate instruments of expression, and therefore the participation in the authority of the institution, which makes all the difference — irreducible to discourse as such—between the straightforward imposture of masqueraders, who disguise a performative utterance as a descriptive or constative statement, and the authorized imposture of those who do the same thing with the authorization and the authority of an institution. (109)

However, even if Claire doesn’t have “access to the legitimate instruments” to participate in the discourse of the institution (in this case, the criminal justice system), she is still subject to it, as Bourdieu notes: “The specificity of the discourse of authority (e.g. a lecture, sermon, etc.) consists in the fact that it is not enough for it to be understood (in certain cases it may even fail to be *understood* without losing its power), and that it exercises its specific effect only when it is *recognized* as such” (111-13). Even if Claire does not recognize this authority, the rest of her community does (her confession apparently took place in the neighborhood café, the Balto), so she is subject to the interrogation and the sentence handed down by the court. However, as Winnie Woodhull notes in her “Marguerite Duras and the Question of Community”: “By preventing the police and the narrator from reconstituting the illusion of closure and completeness with regard to the victim and the crime, Claire identifies their attempt at mastery as a form of mutilation to be resisted” (10).

The question of authority as constructed in language and the structuring of the social world is made manifest by the title of this piece. *L'Amante anglaise* can have several very different meanings when *spoken*. The printed title of the piece opens the question by choosing one of the written versions which has no direct connection to the play. As Sanford Ames notes in his “Mint Madness: Surfeit and Purge in the Novels of Duras”: “The title, *L'Amante anglaise*, is spelled to read in French: the English mistress. It is a suspended or subverted title in that a veritable plethora of non-homographic homonyms can be declined underneath it. Thus, pronounced the same way, it could mean mint in clay, or English mint, or the praying mantis (*mante*) in clay, the English praying mantis, or the lover (masculine) in clay” (38).

If one were to approach this work expecting an English mistress, one would be quite disappointed. But that would be to approach this work with authorized discourse in mind. It would also be an approach from a literary (written) point of view, and not a theatrical (spoken) one. This play depends on an associative, spoken, and unauthorized language. In a similar way, if one were to approach this work expecting a *drame policier*, one would likewise be disappointed. Duras subverts the audience’s expectations by using the conventions of *title* and *genre* in unconventional ways.

Section III: Representation, Mimesis, and Reality

In *L'Amante anglaise*, Duras produces the mirror processes of interrogating the truth claims of the interrogation and interrogating the truth claims of mimetic

representation in the theatre. Representation and *mimesis* are closely related. Ricoeur, in his essay "Mimesis and Representation," asserts:

For contemporary philosophy, representation is a great culprit. Some philosophers even speak of a representative illusion [...]. This representative illusion allegedly stems from the impossible claim of uniting the interiority of a mental image in the mind and the exteriority of something real that would govern from outside the play of the mental scene within a single entity or "representation." [...] Representation, accordingly, it is said, should be denounced as the reduplication of presence, as the re-presenting of presence. (15).

Ricoeur goes on to describe how he intends to use the term *mimesis* to "extricate representation from the impasse to which it has been relegated" (15). He then outlines the ways in which both Plato and Aristotle made use of *mimesis*. Ricoeur first sketches out Plato's view of *mimesis* as "weakened copies of things," then he outlines Aristotle's view of *mimesis* as bringing "about an augmentation of meaning in the field of action, which is its privileged field. It [*mimesis*] does not equate itself with something already given. Rather it produces what it imitates, if we continue to translate *mimesis* by imitation" (15-6, emphasis added). One distinction Ricoeur posits between representation and *mimesis* is that the term *mimesis* is "applied just to works of art, and to its privileged application to such verbal arts as Greek epic, tragedy, and comedy; that is, to those modes of discourse which today we discuss in terms of the theory of narrative" (16). Ricoeur's discussion of the specific use of "*mimesis*" as applied to theatrical art and "representation" as a more general term is helpful. Perhaps theatre can borrow back some of the generalized scope of representation as a term for things standing in for other things, in other words, for the more general construction of a *relationship* between things in the world and things on stage. *Mimesis* is more specific, as a term for the particular imitation of *reality* on stage. My formulation of the two terms looks for the possibility in representation that something could be more abstractly represented, for example, and not limited to a strictly imitative relationship.

Representation, in my usage, acknowledges its artifice: these things on stage are not the real things, rather we are using them to stand in for the real things, *mimesis*, on the other hand, is engaged in the imitation of the real, in hiding the frame. As Auerbach's *Mimesis* defines the term as "the interpretation of reality through literary representation or 'imitation'" (554). The imitation at work in *mimesis*, while acknowledged to be an imitation, is engaged in simulating the real as closely as possible. Shakespeare's often-quoted lines from Hamlet's advice to the players illustrate the method and goals of the project of *mimesis*:

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for any thing so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature. (1209)

The underlying premise of *mimesis* is the accurate *reflection* of reality. The image of holding a mirror up to nature points to the fact that *mimesis* should do as little distorting of "nature" as possible. The resemblance to reality should be so close that the process of representation should be *invisible*, like the workings of a mirror: we look at a mirror and see ourselves, rarely do we ask, "how did I get over there?" or "how does this thing

work?" In fact, if the audience of a mimetic performance forgets that they are watching an enactment of events and not the events themselves, this is regarded as a mark of the performance's success. *Mimesis* is a form of representation that strives to conceal its own artifice. While it is clear that it is an art, practiced by many artists, *mimesis* is calculated to *appear to be* that which it is representing and not art at all. But, not all forms of representation follow this model. As Hamlet states, *mimesis* "was and is" intended to replicate reality as closely as possible; Duras interrogates the project of *mimesis* by questioning the imitative link that is presumed to exist between the past and its representation in *L'Amante anglaise*.

So we have two layers (at least) of representation: the representation of the events of the crime in the investigation, and the representation of the investigation in the performance of the play. As Woodhull states: "Like the police, then, the narrator falls prey to the lure of a factual solution, that is, to a representation of the event which would be 'understandable in itself.' And in doing so, he necessarily adopts the stance of an omnipotent God demanding 'que toute la lumière soit faite'" (p. 142)—a stance which seeks to obliterate the question of the relation between representation and event by positing an equivalence between them" (5). *L'Amante anglaise* explores that question, that relationship between event and representation. For Duras and her audiences, the representational frame is never invisible and the relation between event and representation is never an equivalence. In fact, the subject of Duras's theatre is often making her audience especially aware of the processes associated with representation, those processes in which her plays and her audiences are constantly engaged when her play is performed. The answers to the riddles are not provided, for the audience to appreciate and admire, rather the answers are only partial and contingent, with each audience member forming her own.

Pierre tells the Interrogator: "Leave her in peace, can't you? It's pointless. Just words. What's done can't be undone" (103). Pierre sets up a distance between the events and the investigation, perhaps he views the latter as too much, a surplus, a "re-presenting of presence" (to invoke Ricoeur's discussion). However, the interrogator immediately closes up this gap between event and representation by criticizing Pierre's choice of words: "What you've just said: 'Just words. What's done can't be undone.'—those are habitual expressions with you, aren't they?" (103). In order to preserve his authority, the Interrogator turns his questions on Pierre, calls his terms cliché, and continues on. While the Interrogator seems calm and disinterested in his questioning of Pierre and Claire, he never answers any of the significant questions from either of them. He constantly preserves his position of authority, associated with the institution of criminal justice. But the distance between representation and event is continually kept open in *L'Amante anglaise*. Claire, in her refusal to abide by the rules of the interrogation, refuses to participate in the Interrogator's construction of her motive. In much the same way, Duras refuses to follow the conventions of the genre she seems to be invoking, and thereby resists the closure of the distance between event and representation in *mimesis*. Claire never gives the Interrogator her reasons and he is left to ponder how Claire could suddenly kill someone that she had lived with for over twenty years. He is also left to wonder where the victim's head has been hidden. On the level of the narrative, the head is never uncovered, the body never fully reconstructed. On the level of the performance, we as audience members do not know the outcome, either for Claire or the Interrogator.

In both the case of the Interrogator and the Audience, Claire and Duras provide questions to those who are used to getting all the answers.

Works Cited

- Ames, Sanford. "Mint Madness: Surfeit and Purge in the Novels of Marguerite Duras." *Sub-Stance* 20, (Fall 1978): 37-42.
- Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1953.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Ed. John B. Thompson. Trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.
- Duras, Marguerite. *L'Amante anglaise*. In *Playscript 69: Suzanna Adler, La Musica & L'Amante anglaise*. Trans. Barbara Bray (London: John Calder, 1975): 85-140.
- . *Le Théâtre de L'Amante anglaise*. In *Théâtre II*. (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1999): 201-287.
- Edson, Laurie. *Reading Relationally: Postmodern Perspectives on Literature and Art*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000.
- Eisinger, Erica M. "Crime and Detection in the Novels of Marguerite Duras." *Contemporary Literature*, 15.4 (Autumn, 1974): 503-520.
- Ricoeur, Paul. "Mimesis and Representation." Trans. David Pellauer. *Annals of Scholarship*. (New York: Annals of Scholarship, Inc., 1981): 15-32.
- Woodhull, Winnie. "Marguerite Duras and the Question of Community." *Modern Language Studies* 17, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 3-16.

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT IN LITERATURE AND THE ARTS



Paroles Gelées

UCLA French Studies

SPECIAL ISSUE

Volume 20.2

Spring 2003

Selected Proceedings from
the UCLA Department of French & Francophone Studies
Annual Graduate Student Conference

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT IN LITERATURE AND THE ARTS



Paroles Gelées

UCLA French Studies

SPECIAL ISSUE

Volume 20.2

Spring 2003

Selected Proceedings from
the UCLA Department of French & Francophone Studies
Annual Graduate Student Conference

Editor-in-Chief: Alison Rice
Assistant Editor: Vera Klekovkina
Editorial Board: Christine Thuau
Edwin Hill

Sponsors: UCLA Graduate Students Association
Albert and Elaine Borchard Foundation
UCLA Campus Programs Committee
UCLA Center for European and Russian Studies
UCLA Center for Modern and Contemporary Studies
UC Transnational & Transcolonial Studies Multicampus Research Group

Paroles Gelées was established in 1983 by its founding editor, Kathryn Bailey. The journal is managed and edited by the French Graduate Students' Association and published annually under the auspices of the Department of French and Francophone Studies at UCLA.

Information regarding the submission of articles and subscriptions is available from the journal office:

Paroles Gelées
UCLA Department of French and Francophone Studies
212 Royce Hall, Box 951550
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1550
(310) 825-1145
gelees@humnet.ucla.edu

Subscription price (per issue):
\$12 for individuals
\$14 for institutions
\$18 for international orders

Back issues available. For a listing, see our home page at
<http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/parolesgelees/>

Cover illustration by Benay Furtivo who also designed the Conference programs.

Copyright © 2002 by the Regents of the University of California.
ISSN

CONTENTS

Blurred Borders: Acknowledgements	4
Alison Rice	
Introduction for Hélène Cixous	6
Françoise Lionnet	
The Devil Without Confessing Him	8
Hélène Cixous	
The Profound Complicity of George Bataille's Blue of Noon	30
David Fieni	
Double enquête sur La Fille aux yeux d'or	36
Stéphanie Boulard	
Le bijou dans l'œuvre de Baudelaire : une mutilation symbolique	45
Laura Pondea	
Criminal Discourse in the Theatre: Marguerite Duras's L'Amante anglaise	51
Shelley Orr	
Speaking the Unspeakable: The Creation of a New Caribbean Identity	60
Claire Gallou	
Conference Program	67