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# Marguerite

# DURAS

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## Marguerite Duras

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# The Space Where Language Fails

## *Miracle en Alabama*

In the early 1960s, Marguerite Duras and her partner, writer and journalist Gérard Jarlot, began adapting a play written by American playwright William Gibson entitled *The Miracle Worker* (1957). It was the first time Duras had tried her hand at theatre since *Le Square* (1955), which had earned her the approbation of fellow writer and celebrated playwright Samuel Beckett.<sup>1</sup> *Miracle en Alabama*<sup>2</sup> presents the biographical-based story of American legend Helen Keller, who became visually impaired, hearing impaired, and non-verbal at the age of two following an illness in her infancy. During her life, Keller took on legendary status in the United States thanks

- 1 On January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1957, Samuel Beckett wrote to Marguerite Duras, "I had not been to see your play at the Studio. I have just been listening to it on the radio. It is marvellous, marvellous." He would also go on to write to several of his friends, encouraging them to see the play (*The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, vol. 3: 1957-1965, George Craig et al. eds., London, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 10-11).
- 2 Marguerite Duras & Gérard Jarlot, *Miracle en Alabama*, *L'Avant-scène théâtre*, n° 279, 1<sup>er</sup> janvier 1963, p. 7-34.

to the work of her teacher Annie Sullivan, who developed a method to instruct the young girl to communicate by helping her learn to express herself through sign language, accomplishments that were considered impossible at the time for persons with such disabilities. Her story helped to promote disability advocacy, understanding, and literacy programs, changing the fate for many visually and hearing impaired or non-verbal persons in the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

Duras's adaptation, *Miracle en Alabama*, directed by François Maistre and Jean Laroquette<sup>3</sup>, premiered September 11<sup>th</sup> 1961 at the Théâtre Hébertot in Paris, and had a reprise in 1963 at the Théâtre Athénée-Louis Jouvet. Although the production was "a manifest success,"<sup>4</sup> it represented a distinct departure from Gibson's original text. While no translation of any literary text can be considered an exact duplication of its original version in another language, Duras's literary style is markedly evident in the French version. Christophe Meurée highlights how closely its themes parallel those of *Le Square*, noting in the *Dictionnaire Marguerite Duras*:

The play combines two themes important to Duras: the violent savagery of childhood, reminiscent of *Nathalie Granger*, and the stifled intelligence of beings condemned to suffer the relentless grind of the world, in need of an advocate to amplify their voices, themes that are also developed in *The Square* and the legal columns collected in *Outside*.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, far from scrupulously transcribing and translating the original text, Duras instead worked to create a piece that would call into question the essential outcome that

3 Gilles Philippe, "Notice", in Marguerite Duras, *Théâtre III, Œuvres complètes*, vol. III, Paris, Gallimard, "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade", 2014, p. 1830.

4 Christophe Meurée, "*Miracle en Alabama*", in *Dictionnaire Marguerite Duras*, Bernard Alazet and Christiane Blot-Labarrère eds., Paris, Champion, "Dictionnaires & référence", 2020, p. 384.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 385.

Gibson, by contrast, had presented as resolved in his own work.

Indeed, while Gibson's play focused on the "miracle worker" – the very title of the play underscores his attention to Annie Sullivan – Duras's version instead is fixed on Helen herself. Thanks to this shift in the focal point of the play, Duras transforms Gibson's original work into an interrogation of its very means of transmission. Through the lens of Lawrence Venuti's hermeneutic translation model, we will examine how Duras's adaptation seeks to highlight the spaces where language fails, in order to immerse the spectator in the experience of sensorial mutism. From *The Miracle Worker* to *Miracle en Alabama*, Duras redirects the focal point from the instructor, Annie, towards the student, Helen, allowing her to suggest that the "miracle" is to be found not in the educator's ability to bring Helen into a state of self-expression, but rather within Helen herself thanks to her privileged position of intimate understanding of the liminal space before language is discovered.

At the beginning of the play, we meet little Helen, a young girl of about 7 years old who spends her life wandering in her family home in Alabama. Helen cannot communicate and tends to fly into fits of rage, no doubt because she is frustrated at her continual state of isolation due to her lack of language. When she becomes angry, often violently, we see her grab at any object she can get her hands on, forcefully throwing it: destroying table settings at family meals, hitting and flailing at those who try to restrain her. To placate her, the family liberally offers her sweets, the only means they have found to calm the nerves of this little tormented being that they tolerate in desperation. Since Helen cannot speak, she expresses herself through groans and moans, and the authors cannot help but notice that "her instructor, Annie

Sullivan, can only approach by means of physical violence, by touching her, strictly speaking, animally.”<sup>6</sup>

The stage directions of the French version confirm this reference: although Gibson’s play already contained allusions to animality, Duras and Jarlot, in adapting it, inserted many more interactions that emphasize the animal theme and insist on communication by touch rather than speech, due to the absence of language. Already in their introduction, the writers had highlighted Helen’s “otherness”: “Not knowing how to belong to the human species, she discovered [this belonging] at the age of reason.”<sup>7</sup> Such language is also echoed in the text of the play itself, for example when one of the voices that intervenes in Annie’s mind (a sort of reflective, internal voice) can be heard saying, “This child... this child, blind, mute, and deaf... who does not even know she belongs to the human species...”<sup>8</sup>

If Duras and Jarlot emphasize this aspect of Helen’s character in the introduction while also reflecting it within the text of the play, it is because Helen’s unconsciousness regarding her existence as a human being is foundational in the Durassian adaptation of the play... and entirely absent from its English counterpart. In fact, Gibson qualifies Helen, in the

6 “[H]er instructor, Annie Sullivan, can only approach her through the vector of physical violence, touch in particular, animally” (“son éducatrice, Annie Sullivan, ne peut donc l’aborder que par le truchement de la violence physique, la toucher à proprement parler, animalement”, Marguerite Duras & Gérard Jarlot, “Pourquoi?”, *Miracle en Alabama*, op. cit., p. 9). All translations are mine.

7 “Without knowing how to be part of the human race, she discovers it at the age of reason” (“Ne sachant pas appartenir au genre humain, elle le découvre à l’âge de raison”, loc. cit.).

8 “This child... this child, blind, mute, and deaf... who doesn’t even know she is part of the human race...” (“Cette enfant... cette enfant, aveugle, muette et sourde... qui ne se sait même pas appartenir au genre humain...”, Marguerite Duras & Gérard Jarlot, *Miracle en Alabama*, op. cit., p. 24).

same passage in the English version, as a “human spirit,”<sup>9</sup> giving her instead a positive human status rather than highlighting her lack of human characteristics, and never questioning her understanding of her own existence. In making their own version of Helen ignorant of her own being, Duras and Jarlot are able to focus on her privileged ability to occupy a liminal space, which they designate as “her night.” Helen’s “night” locks her in – her existence within space is tantamount to stumbling through night – and yet it also allows her access to a realm of which no other conscious beings had knowledge.

Absent language, Helen can only express herself through her body. Long periods where not a single word is uttered between the two main characters punctuate the play, and the action for the spectator during these scenes is to be found instead in the physical gestures that represent the struggle for control between Annie and Helen. If Annie occasionally reflects aloud during these stalemates, the instructor’s thoughts are the only words that interrupt the physical actions between the two protagonists: Helen throws a tantrum, Annie restrains her; Helen pushes her away, Annie grabs her again. This tension persists throughout the play as renewed attempts by each, the only possibility for communication to take place in spite of the absence of speech. The message relies instead on Helen’s impulse to satisfy a base need, a desire that Annie realizes she must control in order for Helen to feel the need to communicate verbally. To put it one way, without Annie’s restraint of Helen, the child would never be required to push past physical outbursts to find an alternate and more precise means of communication; to put it another way, without Helen’s physical tantrums, there would be no use attempting to get her to communicate any other way. The fact that she lashes out means she is already trying,

9 William Gibson, *The Miracle Worker*, Garden City, Nelson Doubleday, 1983, p. 288.

using her body – it is proof that she has it in her to express herself. Gibson's play identifies the first reality: Annie's need to restrain Helen in order to get her to submit to the tedious task of learning verbal communication. Duras's play, however, interrogates the second, underlying reality, and prioritizes it – Helen's will to reach out by whatever means available to her, prior to learning language, and what it signals about her innate desire to interact with the world around her.

The verbal breakthrough does not take place until Annie separates Helen from her family, isolating her completely from her comfort zone in an effort to force her to choose to communicate instead of continuing to rely on thrashing gestures and moans to make herself seen and understood. Having found a small carriage house in the back of the family garden, Annie gets the idea to bring Helen there for a period of two weeks. The family will pretend that they are sending her with Annie on a long voyage by bringing her in a carriage on a road and telling her goodbye, but the carriage will return, unbeknownst to Helen, to its point of departure – the family property, where only Annie will live with her in the carriage house. In explaining her method to the parents, who resist before finally agreeing, Annie states,

the food that she eats, the clothes she wears, even the air that she breathes. I must be the only one to make decisions about it. What her mind needs above all is discipline for her body. It's through the intervention of this discipline that we will be able to push into the innermost corners of her brain the instruction common to all mankind. And the person who can force her into this discipline is a new person, a stranger, her teacher. It's me. [...] And not someone who loves her, because Helen drags everyone who loves her into her night with her. She stays there, shut in with them. You all, you have lost your chance at making her come out of that night, and you don't want me to try mine.<sup>10</sup>

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10 Marguerite Duras & Gérard Jarlot, *Miracle en Alabama*, op. cit., p. 25.



A comparison with the corresponding passage in the English version reveals that Duras added the concept of “night” to Gibson’s phrasing. As we highlighted previously, the night theme was developed uniquely by Duras and Jarlot, and does not appear in Gibson’s original script; however, it becomes central to Duras’s interpretation of the story. For example, in another passage, James, Helen’s brother, complains of having to see his sister all day, who does not even know how to practice personal hygiene, and his mother reproaches him for having treated his little sister as a burden. In Gibson’s version, the mother, Kate, asks her son, “Do you dare? Complain of what you *can* see?”<sup>11</sup> However, the Durasian version instead develops this exchange into a rather abrupt shift to the word “night”:

JAMES: My half-sister. And half, that’s saying a lot. You haven’t even been able to teach her to keep herself clean. Do you think it’s fun to have her in my sight all day long?

KATE: In your sight, James? And her, what does she have in her sight all day long?

JAMES: But...

KATE: Night. – Really, you should be ashamed of yourself.”<sup>12</sup>

Defining Helen’s vision as “night” allows Duras to suggest that the young girl occupies a privileged position: she has intimate knowledge of the space between physical and linguistic birth. This involves a liminal space, a critical (usually brief) period within a rite of passage where the subject, having lost her state of being prior to the ritual, has nevertheless not yet assumed her new status. Helen exists in this in-between like an infant, suspended in an equilibrium between her senses and communication, “a night to which she returns and from

11 William Gibson, *The Miracle Worker*, op. cit., p. 257.

12 Marguerite Duras & Gérard Jarlot, *Miracle en Alabama*, op. cit., p. 12.

which she emerges over and over."<sup>13</sup> Annie will try, again and again, to draw Helen out of this liminal state.

Over the course of the play, we observe Annie repeating the letters of the alphabet numerous times to Helen while "writing" them with her index on the palm of the child's own hand in order for Helen to *feel* the form of the letter and also to learn to create it at the same time. But the young girl never seems to understand what she is doing, and she returns over and over to her state of unconsciousness.

This state of unconsciousness, the liminal space that Duras seems to value so much in Helen, is paralleled in the experience that the writer reproduces in the spectator. According to Christiane Blot-Labarrère,

the theatrical code is mixed, visual and oral. There it is more often a question of gaze: seeing, being seen. And if we don't see enough, we must imagine. [...] On the one hand, in the light, the mysteries of ceremony. On the other, in the shadows, the gaze through which we are able to enter into the mysteries.<sup>14</sup>

The spectator witnesses the violence that develops in the interactions between Helen and Annie, not only the physical aggression that plays out through gestures, but also the moans, groans, and cries that Helen emits as she expresses her frustration and anguish. These scenes of near trance in the young girl interrupt the family's frequent discussions, such that the spectator feels they are "missing" details of the dialogue because it is impossible to focus on the background conversation when Helen is vying for attention. For example,

<sup>13</sup> Marguerite Duras & Gérard Jarlot, "Pourquoi?", *Miracle en Alabama*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> "Le code théâtral est mixte, visuel et oral. Là il est plus souvent question du regard : voir, être vu. Et si l'on ne voit pas assez, reste à imaginer. [...] D'un côté, dans la clarté, les mystères d'un cérémonial. De l'autre, dans l'ombre, le regard par lequel s'aménage une entrée dans les mystères" (Christiane Blot-Labarrère, *Marguerite Duras*, Paris, Seuil, "Les contemporains", 1992, p. 107).

when James and his father, Captain Keller, discuss the reasons the South lost the Civil War, the conversation takes second stage to the drama unfolding between the educator and her pupil. The bits and pieces of the discussion about the war are just enough to pique the listener's curiosity, leading to a parallel frustration and annoyance in the play's spectators as they are unable to follow along with what is being discussed due to Helen's constant tantrums. Duras and Jarlot anticipated this reaction on the part of the public, addressing it in their introduction to the play in *L'Avant-scène cinéma*:

The mutism reigning between Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller thus dominates the entire play. And all language, next to the silence, for example the Keller family's commentaries, are only there to populate in a secondary fashion the arena where the true fight described by William Gibson unfolds.<sup>15</sup>

Yet the play is designed in a way such that the spectator must feel within himself that the language that s.he hears spoken throughout the drama does not contain the key to the plot. The point of the play is in fact continually displaced, always out of reach of the spectators who remain instead invaded by the feeling of mystery that haunts the tense interactions between Annie and Helen – mystery, of course, because absent language, meaning remains obscure for all language-based beings, thus underscoring Helen's privileged and unique position as she is able to communicate beyond this medium, in the realm of liminal, sensory space. Michelle Royer has shown the effects of this sensory experience in the space of the film, thanks to what she calls the "intermediality of the cinema":

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15 Marguerite Duras & Gérard Jarlot, "Pourquoi?", *Miracle en Alabama*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

It is by ridding the image and the sound of all possible grip and solid narrative support that the Durassian film is able to immerse its spectators not only in the corporeal effects of suffering, of madness, of absence, of emptiness, of desire, but also in the density of air, in odors of the sea and of India, and in the foreign and familiar sounds, offering to spectators the experience of fascination and disorientation, of the known and of the mysterious. The Durassian spectator participates in this universe, and is neither a passive receptor receiving narrative information, nor a Brechtian spectator distanced by the film, but rather exists as a body immersed in the acoustic, sensory-motor, somatic and affective universe.<sup>16</sup>

While the setting of the theatre is necessarily different from film, the two spectacles can share many similarities for the viewer, such as the immersion in a dark, enclosed space (the cinema or the theatre), the use of light, voice, music, and sound effects to simulate corporeal experience, and the spectator's unique position of existing between the "real" world and the fictitious world into which s.he enters for the brief duration of the play/film. The very privileged position that the Durassian viewer holds allows them to balance between these two spaces, immersed in the Durassian universe and interacting with it sensorially, all the while maintaining their presence in the "real" world. This unusual position parallels the intermediary role that Helen Keller finds herself in as she

16 "C'est en débarrassant l'image et le son de toute accroche possible et d'appui narratif solide que le film durassien parvient à immerger les spectateurs non seulement dans les effets corporels de la souffrance, de la folie, de l'absence, du manque et du désir mais aussi dans la densité de l'air, dans les odeurs marines et celles de l'Inde, et dans des sonorités étrangères et familières, offrant aux spectateurs l'expérience et la fascination du dépaysement, c'est-à-dire du connu et du mystérieux. Le spectateur durassien participe à cet univers, il n'est ni un récepteur passif qui reçoit des informations narratives, ni un spectateur brechtien mis à distance par le film, il existe en tant que corps immergé dans l'univers acoustique, sensori-moteur, somatique et affectif [...]" (Michelle Royer, "Le cinéma de Marguerite Duras : art, synesthésies et sensorialité intermédiaire", in *Marguerite Duras à la croisée des arts*, Michelle Royer et Lauren Upadhyay eds., Brussels-Bern, PIE-Peter Lang, "Marguerite Duras", 2019, p. 55-72).

navigates a world in which she is uniquely placed between her “night” and the world which those around her inhabit. Seen through this lens, the struggle to bring Helen out of this “night” is not heroic – the focus shifts off of Annie Sullivan and back on to Helen.

Indeed, Duras and Jarlot problematize the goal of Annie’s combat in the context of Helen Keller’s story:

What is at stake between Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller? For Annie Sullivan, a heroic civic example of American collectivity at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it goes without saying: guiding the child to leave the deep and solitary night into which she is plunged. For Helen Keller, her resistance escapes all historicity. She is eternal. Helen Keller ardently wishes to stay in this uterine night where already her habits are familiar, her comfort is assured and where, most of all, she draws from the sovereign arguments that she exerts on her family.<sup>17</sup>

As such, the playwrights highlight a potentially unresolved aspect of Keller’s story, a certain satisfaction with her liminal state. The comfort of this position and her retreat from the world remains in question even at the end of the play when, in a culminating scene, Annie helps Helen to draw water from the pump in the garden and next spells “eau” (water) on the child’s hand who, finally, repeats, “O O O” in her own voice. Helen finishes by spelling in her hand all sorts of words that allow her to express herself – Mother, Father, pump, bell, step. At last she discovers language, understanding finally what each thing in the world around her signifies: things that she cannot see, but whose existence she comprehends at long last. And yet, according to Duras and Jarlot, “She takes

17 “Quel est donc l’enjeu entre Annie Sullivan et Helen Keller ? Pour Annie Sullivan, héroïque civique exemplaire de la collectivité américaine de la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, cela va de soi, c’est amener l’enfant à sortir de la nuit profonde et solitaire où elle se trouve plongée. Pour Helen Keller, sa résistance échappe à toute historicité. Elle est éternelle. Helen Keller désire ardemment rester dans cette nuit utérine où déjà ses habitudes sont prises, ses aises assurées et où, surtout, elle puise les arguments de la souveraineté qu’elle exerce sur sa famille” (“Pourquoi ?”, *Miracle en Alabama*, op. cit., p. 9).

to this effort, speaks to beasts and to things and to herself, and then rejects this clear world with horror, returns to her night and re-emerges again towards this fascinating light.”<sup>18</sup> The playwrights call into question the very imposition of reason that represents, in Gibson’s version, the resolution of the play: “The unique story of a transfer of powers from the head to the body, rounds of box of an unspeakable cruelty and from which the only escape is not the glory of exceptionality, but instead, sharing in common rationality.”<sup>19</sup>

Helen, in her acceptance of the means of communication imposed on her by the world around her, loses her qualities of uniqueness and singularity. It is precisely Helen’s liminal status that attracts the playwrights: “We know next to nothing of the awakening of consciousness, of this birth and of these evils. A being lived it between six and seven years of age.”<sup>20</sup> Helen Keller had allowed the exterior world to enter into this night, to glimpse its boundaries, to lose reasoning and to live through the senses, and this exceptional being fascinated Duras and Jarlot. The resolution of the play, if we follow the logic of the playwrights’ presentation, can only end with the loss of comprehension of the ‘other’, and yet this other is within ourselves. It is an ‘other’ that resides within every human being, and that holds the key to unlocking the ignorance of our own “night” – but it is an “other” that we lose once we enter the state of reason, a process that is set off by the acquisition of linguistic expression. Thus the story of Helen Keller’s acquisition of language is, for Duras, essentially a tragedy, the loss of a uniquely other human experience.

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<sup>18</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> “Nous ne savons presque rien de l’éveil de la conscience, de cet accouchement et de ces maux. Un être l’a vécu entre six et sept ans” (*loc. cit.*).

For a writer who said of herself in 1963, "I never had a desire to adapt anything,"<sup>21</sup> Marguerite Duras did a lot of adaptations. At the time she made this remark, she had already adapted *The Aspern Papers* (*Les Papiers d'Aspern*) for the stage, based on the novella by Henry James, and she had just published her adaptation of another novella by the same author, *The Beast in the Jungle* (*La Bête dans la jungle*), also for theatre. If she admitted to having "made some James with some James"<sup>22</sup> in the case of these two plays, she never laid any further claim to her interpretive work concerning Gibson's play, proclaiming in 1964, "[...] I had success with an adaptation, that, by the way, I did to earn some money – only for that reason, it was to feed myself – of an American play that was called *Miracle in Alabama*. It was a crazy success!", adding finally, "oh and anyway it wasn't even by me!"<sup>23</sup> And yet, an analysis of the play shows Duras's unmistakable imprint, and that the work of interpretation was in fact quite important in the development of a drama that presents a situation which is particularly "Durassian." In their presentation of the play in *L'Avant-scène théâtre*, Duras and Jarlot write that they wanted the playgoers to "[see] in *Miracle Worker*, above all, the development of a situation that cannot at any

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- 21 Marguerite Duras, interview with Claude Cézan, "Le vertige de l'absurde", *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 21 février 1963 (Marguerite Duras, *Le Dernier des métiers : entretiens (1962-1991)*, Sophie Bogaert ed., Paris, Seuil, "Entretiens", 2016, p. 15).
- 22 Marguerite Duras & Gérard Jarlot, "Pourquoi?", *Miracle en Alabama*, op. cit., p. 9.
- 23 "J'ai eu un succès avec une adaptation, d'ailleurs, que j'ai faite pour gagner de l'argent, uniquement, c'était alimentaire, d'une pièce américaine qui s'appelait *Miracle en Alabama*. Ça a été le succès fou ! [...] Oh puis ce n'était pas de moi !" (Marguerite Duras, "Visiteur d'un soir : interview avec Antoine Livio", Radio télévision Suisse, 13 Oct. 1964, in *Le Dernier des métiers*, op. cit., p. 36-37).

single moment be resolved through language, even though language is, quite paradoxically, the only escape."<sup>24</sup>

Did Duras "make some Gibson with some Gibson"? No, because every adaptation implies a transformation of the work in question – a transformation that, most of the time, remains practically subconscious and involuntary. Adaptation begins as a reading, after all, and reading is unique and subjective, entirely dependent upon whatever the reader brings to the experience and takes from it. Translating, according to translation theorist Lawrence Venuti (quoting occasionally the essay, "The Process of Translation," by writer William Weaver), is "a largely unreflective process, where the grounds for the translator's choices remain not merely unarticulated, but unknown to him, 'unconscious,' with decisions taken 'in some corner of his mind.'"<sup>25</sup> These decisions cannot then lead to a text that would be a faithful reproduction of the original, because so much of what goes into them are not just subjective, but indeed, unknown. The very act of adaptation involves a certain liminal state.

Venuti goes on to describe the translator's psychoanalytic relationship with the work itself (a model of hermeneutic translation as originally elaborated by Schleiermacher), which imagines translation as the immersion of the translator in the act of interpretation, as opposed to an attempt to reproduce the exact conditions of the source text.<sup>26</sup> Fatemeh Parham's explanation further illuminates this notion:

Translation in this model performs an interpretive act or a set of multiple interpretations that render it relatively autonomous from the source materials it interprets. Thus, a translation can support varying

24 "[Ils voient] dans *Miracle Worker*, avant tout, le développement d'une situation qui ne peut à aucun moment se résoudre par le langage, bien que le langage contradictoirement en constitue la seule issue" ("Pourquoi?", *Miracle en Alabama*, *op. cit.*, p. 9).

25 Lawrence Venuti, "The Difference That Translation Makes," in *Translation Changes Everything: Theory and Practice*, Oxford, Routledge, 2012, p. 32.

26 *Loc. cit.*



interpretations, depending upon the ideas and views that the reader brings to it.<sup>27</sup>

Jane Elizabeth Wilhelm notes the danger of this transaction: “the risk, if we practice a criticism of identification, is to appropriate the object for oneself under the aspect that our desire lends it and to only find within the text that which we brought to it.”<sup>28</sup>

The difficulty, then, is that of finding an intermediary between a faithful translation of the author’s work, and a version that imposes too much of the translator’s own subjective choice. On the other hand, there is greater freedom involved for a writer such as Duras who is adapting, not translating, a piece of literature, but this freedom also provokes yet more dilemmas – each choice in the adaptation will constitute interpretation, potentially leading farther and farther away from the source.

Duras was ever so conscious of this risk. In an interview on adaptation of novels to film, she expressed her opposition to adaptation:

I see that everyone is doing this now, it’s like an epidemic [...]. Let’s imagine a young man who has never read *Moby Dick*, who sees the film and then reads *Moby Dick* afterwards, his relationship with the narrative will automatically be impure from the beginning. It’s for that reason that I am against adaptations of the great literary works into films. It’s that it destroys, it distances, it corrupts the phenomenon of reading... which is a very important phenomenon, maybe the most important.<sup>29</sup>

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27 Fatemeh Parham, “A Postmodern Study of Venuti’s Translation Hermeneutics”, in *Translation Studies and Postmodernism: From Theory to Practice*, proceedings of the National Conference on Translation and Interdisciplinary Studies, University of Birjand, May 2016, p. 353-359, online: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344397382\\_A\\_Postmodern\\_Study\\_of\\_Venuti's\\_Translation\\_Hermeneutics](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344397382_A_Postmodern_Study_of_Venuti's_Translation_Hermeneutics). Accessed 13 Dec 2021.

28 Jane E. Wilhelm, “Herméneutique et traduction : la question de l’appropriation’ ou le rapport du ‘propre’ à l’‘étranger’”, *Méta: journal des traducteurs*, vol. 49, n° 4, décembre 2004, p. 773.

29 “Je vois que tout le monde fait ça maintenant, c’est comme une épidémie [...]. Supposons un jeune homme qui n’ait jamais lu *Moby Dick* et qui le lise

If Duras was so against adaptation, why did she do so many of them, from novels to films, novels to plays, American plays to French plays, etc.? It seems that at the very least, in the case of *Miracle en Alabama*, the subject of the play allowed her to express this tension that ran beneath the surface of the work – one that, it may be argued, had never been set free in the American version, because it remained undetected, even though it has always been latent in the actual story of Helen Keller. Christiane Blot-Labarrère describes Duras's works, noting:

Her texts could never be fixed into concepts, nor even reassembled into a closed sum. They constitute an open body of work, never suspended in silence unless temporarily. [...] Love and writing lead back to the first state of being and to the beginning of language, there where the body remains blended with the flesh of the world. They are thus brought to conspire with utopia.<sup>30</sup>

We may take this example as illustrative of Duras's perceptive power, of yet one aspect of what can be sensed in her work: an ear to the silences of human experience, an attentiveness that surpasses average understanding, such as her minute vigil over the death of a fly.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the subject of the play allowed Duras to probe a question of translation embedded within the play itself. This question concerns the very translation of human sentiment necessary to pass

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après avoir vu le film, il sera gêné par le film – sa relation avec le récit sera forcément impure dès le départ. C'est pour ça que je suis contre les adaptations des chefs-d'œuvre au cinéma. C'est que ça détruit, ça éloigne, ça corrompt le phénomène de la lecture... qui est un phénomène très important, peut-être le plus important" ("Marguerite Duras à propos des adaptations cinématographiques de roman", Colette Djidou ed., INA, 29 Sept. 1966).

30 Christiane Blot-Labarrère, *Marguerite Duras, op. cit.*, p. 109.

31 "I remained there to watch her, in hopes that she was going to recommence to hope, to live" ("Je suis encore restée là à la regarder, dans l'espoir qu'elle allait recommencer à espérer, à vivre", Marguerite Duras, *Écrire, Œuvres complètes*, vol. IV, Gilles Philippe ed., Paris, Gallimard, "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade", 2014, p. 859).

through ritual – through a liminal state – into an actualized phase. Cultivating this return to the origin is therefore the first preoccupation of Duras’s works, which seek to make the spectator feel the mystery of a language that cannot resolve anything, but that constitutes the only escape from a state of incomprehension of everything which, at a visceral level, is still trying to be expressed.

Could it be that through the very act of adaptation, Duras saw a parallel for the situation of Helen Keller? If the attempt to bring Keller out of her “night” would lead her to a standardized, uniform means of expression shared by all around her, it would also eliminate that which made her unique. We find an interesting comparison between linguistic expression, writing, and society in Roland Barthes’ essay, “The Utopia of Language”:

There is thus a deadlock in writing, and it’s the deadlock of society itself: for [writers], the search for a non-style, or an oral style, a ground zero or a spoken degree of writing, is in short the anticipation of an absolutely homogenous state of society; most understand that there cannot be universal language outside of a concrete universality, and no longer mystical or nominal, of a civil world. [...] There is therefore in all present writing a double proxy: there is the movement of a rupture and that of an advent, there is the very outline of every revolutionary situation, whose fundamental ambiguity is that it is necessary for the Revolution to draw from that which it wants to destroy, the very image of that which it wants to possess.<sup>32</sup>

32 “Il y a donc une impasse de l’écriture, et c’est l’impasse de la société même : pour [les écrivains], la recherche d’un non-style, ou d’un style oral, d’un degré zéro ou d’un degré parlé de l’écriture, c’est en somme l’anticipation d’un état absolument homogène de la société ; la plupart comprennent qu’il ne peut y avoir de langage universel en dehors d’une universalité concrète, et non plus mystique ou nominale, du monde civil. [...] Il y a donc dans toute écriture présente une double postulation : il y a le mouvement d’une rupture et celui d’un avènement, il y a le dessin même de toute situation révolutionnaire, dont l’ambiguïté fondamentale est qu’il faut bien que la Révolution puise dans ce qu’elle veut détruire l’image même de ce qu’elle veut posséder” (Roland Barthes, “L’utopie du langage”, *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture* [1953], Paris, Seuil, “Points essais”, 1972, p. 64).

The acceptance, therefore, of a universal code – a code which cannot exist, in any case; a true utopia – would annihilate the mystery and the individuality of expression. Much like Keller, writing must necessarily exist in this liminal state, and the risk of any attempt to impose uniformity is to destroy the ambiguity and mystery of pure expression.

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