

Café as a Dual Space in Marguerite Duras's *Moderato Cantabile*

Sanaz Saei Dibavar

Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Literature and
Humanities, University of Mazandaran, Babolsar, Babolsar, Iran
Email: sanaz.saei@outlook.com

Sara Saei Dibavar

Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of
Literature and Humanities, University of Mazandaran, Babolsar, Iran
Email: saei_sarah@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article examines the dual role of the café in instigation, development, and termination of the public display of transgressive desire in Margaret Duras's (1958) *Moderato Cantabile*. To approach Duras's narrative this way, we draw on Michel Foucault's (1977) theories concerning Panopticon to bring into light the socially imposed codes and the method of their implementation. Duras's mode of expression, we intend to discuss, brings to the reader's attention the dominance of the silent social gaze in each transgressive scene between the two characters. Despite its laconism, therefore, *Moderato Cantabile* reveals the omnipresent and active bourgeois codes that are interwoven to the very fabric of the bourgeoisie. The effective operation of these codes, set through discourses of truth and power, is guaranteed through the Panopticon present in public spaces like the café, whose dual nature enables it to allow for manifestation of desire on the one hand, and effective inspection and containment of the situation (by imposing norms) on the other.

Keywords: Marguerite Duras's *Moderato Cantabile*, Bourgeoisie, Michel Foucault, Panopticon, Desire

ARTICLE INFO

Research Article

Received: Sunday, August 9, 2020

Accepted: Tuesday, February 19, 2021

Published: Saturday, May 15, 2021

Available Online: Tuesday, February 19, 2021

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22049/jalda.2021.26905.1189>

Online ISSN: 2383-2460; Print ISSN: 2383-591x



© The Author(s)

Résumé

Cet article traite le double rôle du café dans le domaine de l'instigation, du développement, et de la terminaison du spectacle public du désir transgressif dans *Moderato Cantabile* (1958) de Marguerite Duras. Pour aborder le récit de Duras de ce point de vue, on recourt aux théories de Michel Foucault concernant la notion du Panoptique afin de mettre en exergue les codes sociaux imposés et leur mise en œuvre. Le mode d'expression durassien, que nous avons l'intention d'aborder, met sous les yeux du lecteur la domination du regard social silencieux dans chaque scène transgressive entre les deux caractères. Malgré son laconisme, *Moderato Cantabile* révèle les codes bourgeois omniprésents et actifs qui sont en relation dans le cadre de la bourgeoisie. La mise en pratique efficace de ces codes-là, établis à travers les discours de la vérité et du pouvoir, est cautionnée par le Panoptique présent dans les lieux publics ainsi que le café, la nature double duquel favorise d'un côté la manifestation du désir et de l'autre la surveillance efficace et l'endiguement de la situation (tout en imposant les règles).

Mots-clés: *Moderato Cantabile* de Marguerite Duras, Bourgeoisie, Michel Foucault, Panoptique, Désir

Introduction

The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the social worker-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behavior, his aptitudes, his achievements. (Foucault, 1977, p. 304)

“Tout l'œuvre de Duras est une suite de personnages regardés par d'autres personnages”¹ (Rykner, 2000, p. 291).

Cafés have always been popular since their introduction in the seventeenth century: they have served as respectable places for sharing opinion and, later, as places where bourgeoisie and working men could share a drink. In *Moderato Cantabile*, however, it is generally agreed that, “Duras redefines the traditional café in a manner that constitutes it as a place of subversive, rather than respectable, desire (life) and storytelling (art)” (Reid, 1994, p. 46).

A small Café at the other end of the town, near the port, and far from Anne Desbaresdes' bourgeois house, is the location Duras (1958) chooses as the main venue for manifestation of the so called transgressive desire in her short novel, *Moderato Cantabile*. Having entered the café to satisfy her thirst for a drink (and investigate the murder of the woman whose dying scream she heard the previous

¹ All of Duras's oeuvre, this way, feature characters that are watched by other characters. (our translation)

day), Anne engages in conversation with a stranger, Chauvin. Before long, the two form an intimate, transgressive companionship while attempting to reconstruct the love story of the other couple that came to such a sad end. Hereafter, readers witness “the enigmatic, unspeakable character of sexual desire [...] a story of love and desire that is a tale of merging identities but also of irreconcilable differences” (Hill, 1993, p. 56). This relationship does not last long and is terminated once it changes to a scandal. In their final encounter, Anne says goodbye to Chauvin – who wishes her dead – and leaves the café, proclaiming she already is (dead).

James H. Reid (1994) considers the café in Duras’s novels as “less a material than a mental space that her [Duras’s] characters construct and deconstruct in their minds” (p. 45). It is through such a mentality that, he states, Duras dramatizes the mourning of her characters for the death of an ideal inner space of desire. Reid (1994) posits that within this internal space of the café in *Moderato Cantabile*, the male lover helps the female lover “create an atemporal inner space in which her desire for death is satisfied, literally or figuratively” (pp. 45-6). Taking a rather different approach, George Moskos (1984) insists that it is Anne and Chauvin’s “desire to know about their origins [that] brings them back to the café” (p. 37) whose spatial disposition as a “partially dark space, shadows projected on a wall by light coming from behind” closely resembles “the cave of Plato’s allegory” which he then compares to “mother’s womb” (p. 34) to discuss their return to the café to question their origin. A more straightforward explanation about Anne and Chauvin’s affair is provided by Marianne Hirsch (1982) who insists that “Anne’s repeated visits to the lower-class café, her erotic interest in Chauvin [...] and her increasingly heavy and debilitating drinking are steps in the gradual annihilation of her individuated and civilized adult self” (p. 72). This way, the café becomes a place of desubjectivisation for Anne, “[A]s she leaves the café, she has been able to transcend the opposition of *moderato/cantabile* and to accept an existence of *moderato cantabile*: she will neither continue her bourgeois life, nor has she succumbed to the deadly lure of passion” (Hirsch, 1982, p. 84). Likewise, Evelyn H. Zepp (2013) also focuses on the nature of the lover’s relationship and their “fragmented, at times almost incoherent” conversation through which “they probe this crime and, in the end, their own desires” (p. 236), making no more than indirect references to the café which acts as the major scene for staging the affair.

Despite the variety of critical viewpoints *Moderato Cantabile* has received, the question that still remains is what active role the café plays in not only stirring but also containing the transgression that is reaching its climax in the relationship between these two lovers? We argue that as an apparently insignificant place for recurrent rendezvous between the two lovers to begin with, physical (as opposed to Reid’s mental) features of this café merit a closer scrutiny. It is so because, we believe, the space of the café is not only meant to serve as a place for manifestation of transgressive desire, but also a regulatory space within the bourgeois society which is capable of detecting, monitoring, and normalizing that desire.

The café is a complex site which features a dual role right from the start. At first sight, it seems to be a liberating space outside the limiting sphere of Anne's life inside "a beautiful house at the end of the Boulevard de la Mer"² (Duras, 1958, p. 27) whose fences separate her – and her bourgeois kind – from the rest of the (working) world. Typography of the city clearly depicts the difference between the two social classes within this stratified social space. The length of the boulevard de la Mer separates Anne's house from the port near which factories are located. At this far end of the town, however, Duras also places the world of the café to create a liminal space where boundaries are dissolved. As such, the café is a site with the unique capability of bringing together characters from various backgrounds into contact with one another.

A closer look, however, reveals the remarkably different role of the café as a codified and regulated space which greatly benefits from the ubiquitous presence of the Panopticon gaze. Indeed, as a social space frequented by people from various backgrounds, the café strongly displays the disciplinary power of the bourgeois society. Despite the sense of freedom it may evoke as "a café at the port"³ (Duras, 1958, p. 103) –situated near the wide sea– the café is a fundamentally repressive social space in which desire is repressed through constant observations and judgments.

The bourgeois society pictured by Duras is a permanent matrix of political power with implicit distinctions between upper class and working class. It consists of bodies that, according to Foucault, are the sites of power, subjected to multiple disciplinary strategies which are exerted by both the State and the self. It is so because to Foucault,

power is conceptualised as a chain or as a net, that is a system of relations spread throughout the society [...] individuals should not be seen simply as the recipients of power, but as the 'place' where power is enacted and the place where it is resisted. (Mills, 2003, p. 35)

This type of power does not aim at killing, torturing or punishing people: it is, rather, after regulating human life through the implementation of policies that concentrate on not only the human body but also what it generates.

It is in this context that Foucault's concept of "governmentality"⁴, which focuses on techniques that render affairs and individuals governable and extends to biopower control of the population, is illustrated. As a non-hierarchical form of government, governmentality includes not only state politics but also a wide range of control techniques, ranging from one's control of the self (self-regulation) to

²"une belle maison au bout du boulevard de la Mer. Un grand jardin fermé" (Duras, 1958, p. 17).

³"un café du port" (Duras, 1958, p.107)

⁴or "art of government," a concept developed by Foucault in his lectures at the Collège de France roughly between 1977 and his death in 1984.

control of populations and is closely linked to concepts like “biopolitics”, “truth and power”, and “panopticism”.

Biopolitics controls systems of biopower which have helped develop capitalism through “controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes” (Foucault, 1978, p. 140-1). Biopolitics entails political interventions that effectively contribute to the disciplining and monitoring of bodies in a society. Within the biopolitical system, disciplinary techniques are not as repressive as they were in the past. Rather, they are more effectively used as means of optimizing the homogenization of the population: modern biopower “exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations” (Foucault, 1978, p. 137). It helps us see power not only in terms of hierarchical power of the State but also in form of social control in disciplinary institutions like schools, hospitals, psychiatric institutions, etc. In order for biopolitics to function smoothly throughout the society, certain forms of knowledge are required to be internalised by subjects because there is “no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (Foucault, 1977, p. 27). The circulatory nature of the relationship between truth and power guarantees the stability of the system through a self-perpetuating process where certain discourses of truth are produced, distributed, and spread as a network of knowledge within the societal body so as to be internalized by individuals. These political regimes of truth entail struggles between what they set as legitimate and illegitimate.

In order for biopolitical governmentality to function efficiently, the governing system is in need of regulatory (monitoring) techniques, referred to as Panopticism. Originally developed by Bentham’s Panopticon in the eighteenth century as a system of prison watch (where prisoners were constantly controlled from a central observation tower placed within a circle of prison cells), Panopticon was later adopted by Foucault (1977) to explain the system of surveillance dominant in modern societies where all citizens have internalized the idea of being constantly watched; “It is this fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection” (Foucault, 1977, p. 187). As the most successful regulatory mechanism at the disposal of the modern State, Panopticon guarantees that no socially aberrant behavior will last long by inducing in the individual “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). It is on this basis that Duras founds the premises of her fictional world. The ubiquity of Panopticon gaze in her fictional café – where the transgressive desire between Anne and Chauvin is not only instigated but also terminated – complicates the role of the café by portraying its transformation from a seemingly liberating space to a codified and regulated (repressive) space where the disciplinary power of the bourgeois society effectively squashes what is judged to be transgressive desire through constant (public) observations and judgments.

Café as a liminal Panopticon

Filled with an irresistible urge to inquire about the murder of a woman by her lover in the café, Anne enters the café of the crime on the following day. This bold move which results from “Anne's obsessive interest in the scream and the murder” can be accounted for “by the absences in her life,” (Hirsch, 1982, p. 72) a sense of lack that haunts her incessantly: “Just as the music teacher's room separates Anne from the vitality of the town and the ocean, so her entire life is subject to the constraints of routine and the bourgeois social roles she is forced to play” (Hirsch, 1982, p. 72). Desperately entrapped within the binding limits of her conjugal life, “this woman of privilege, doting mother, bored and neglected wife, wonders what it would be like to experience, to command, such passion; she is stirred by longing for similar ravishment” (Schrambach, 2015, p. 91), so she takes it upon herself to investigate the murder of the woman.

Her presence in the café as “[t]he wife of the manager of Import-Export and the Coastal Metalworks,”⁵ (Duras, 1958, p. 26) astonishes the landlady and her customers: “Two customers came in. They recognized this woman at the bar and were surprised”⁶ (Duras, 1958, p. 21) Anne herself is well aware that entering the café is against the upheld decorum, which is why readers witness “[h]er voice trembled”⁷ (Duras, 1958, p. 18) and “the persistent trembling of the hands”⁸ (Duras, 1958, p. 18). Her body language vividly expresses her own agitating awareness of her disobedience of the rules which she has strictly obeyed so far. Anne knows that in her society, women should have a reason to go to a café. Therefore, she states that she is there to quench her thirst: “She went straight to the bar [...] ‘A glass of wine,’ she ordered. Her voice trembled. The landlady looked surprised, then composed herself”⁹ (Duras, 1958, p. 18). However, she is more in need of quenching her thirst for understanding the details of the woman's murder in the café than the thirst for alcohol. At any rate, intoxication helps her move forward along the transgressive path she has chosen. During this process of metamorphosis, the alcohol she drinks in the café plays a big role in easing her conversation with a particular stranger: “The wine must have helped, for her voice had also become more steady”¹⁰ (Duras, 1958, p. 20). Nonetheless, in her society, “[l]a consommation de l'alcool est objet de scandale”¹¹ (Barbérís, 1992, p. 21). This is vividly pictured through the cold reception Anne receives in the café: “A bourgeois woman drinking in a workers' bar elicits the

⁵ “[l]a femme du directeur d'Import Export et des Fonderies de la Côte” (Duras, 1958, p. 31-32).

⁶ “Deux clients entrèrent. Ils reconnurent cette femme au comptoir, s'étonnèrent” (Duras, 1985, p. 27).

⁷ “Sa voix tremblait” (Duras, 1985, p. 24)

⁸ “tremblement persistant des mains” (Duras, 1985, p. 24)

⁹ “Elle alla droit au comptoir [...] – Un verre de vin, demanda-t-elle. Sa voix tremblait. La patronne s'étonna, puis se ressaisit” (Duras, 1985, p. 24).

¹⁰ “Le vin aidant sans doute, le tremblement de la voix avait lui aussi cessé” (Duras, 1985, p. 25).

¹¹ Consumption of alcohol becomes the subject of scandal (our translation).

opprobrium of the woman running the café, and that of the other exclusively male, exclusively working-class patrons” (Cruikshank, 2013, p. 304). As a subject with internalized social norms, Anne herself considers her new drinking habit bad and tries to justify her ways: “It’s just that I’m not used to drinking, Monsieur”¹² (Duras, 1958, p. 21). Duras (1987) explains the reason for such internalized feeling of guilt and need for justification in *La Vie Materielle*:

Une femme qui boit, c’est comme un animal qui boirait, un enfant. L’alcoolisme atteint le scandale avec la femme qui boit: une femme alcoolique, c’est rare, c’est grave. C’est la nature divine qui est atteinte. De mon temps pour avoir la force de l’affronter en public, rentrer seule dans un bar, la nuit, par exemple, il fallait avoir déjà bu.¹³ (p. 26)

At any rate, drinking makes Anne more of a revolutionary figure by facilitating her transgression from social norms. After drinking, “[a] smile of deliverance slowly appeared in her eyes”¹⁴ (Duras, 1958, p. 20). When she drinks, Anne sets herself free by becoming rather indifferent to the omnipresent public gaze that is constantly monitoring her. Ironically, however, by voluntarily turning a blind eye to all the prevalent social norms imposed by the gaze “in the daily exercise of surveillance,” Anne falls prey to “the vigilance of intersecting gazes” (Foucault, 1977, p. 217). The eyes of the silent bystanders that gaze at her (and Chauvin) are all filled with surprise and blame: “The men at the bar still looked at this woman, but distantly, and were still surprised”¹⁵ (Duras, 1958, p. 80).

Anne’s even greater mistake, in the public eye, is her engaging in a conversation with Chauvin – the stranger in the café – about the crime that has been committed there. Anne’s first encounter with Chauvin is no more than an incident. Her frequent, willful returns to him, nevertheless, stir a series of disapproving gazes on her (by the landlady and working class people who frequent the café) in that they initiate a series of conversations between her and Chauvin, who is later revealed to the reader to be one of the former employees of Anne’s husband’s foundry. The point of their conversation – which only happens after she soothes her nerves by drinking alcohol – is the attempt to imaginatively reconstruct the relationship between the lovers and the events leading to the murder of the young woman by her lover. This conversation, which is repeated through several evening rendezvous, takes place because Anne needs to know: “I’d like you to tell me about the very

¹²“C’est que je n’ai pas l’habitude, Monsieur” (Duras, 1958, p. 26).

¹³When a woman drinks, it is as if an animal were drinking, a child. Alcoholism is scandalous in case of a woman, and a female alcoholic is rare, a grave problem. It is the divine nature which is affected. In my time, to have the power to face the public, to enter a café alone, let’s say at night, the woman should already have been drunk. (our translation)

¹⁴“Dans les yeux, peu à peu, afflua un sourire de délivrance” (Duras 1958, p. 25-6).

¹⁵“Des hommes au bar regardèrent encore cette femme, s’étonnèrent encore, mais de loin” (Duras, 1958, p. 84).

beginning, how they began to talk to each other. It was in a cafe, you said ...”¹⁶ (Duras, 1958, p. 41). By asking Chauvin to narrate the love story of the other couple, Anne is immersed in a similar love story, thereby creating the forbidden connection between herself and Chauvin: “Avec Duras, l’amour se définit nécessairement commere doublement d’un autre amour [...] extérieur, étranger à son proper vécu”¹⁷ (Bajomee, 1989, p. 30). Passionate scream and subsequent death of the woman which is the trigger point for their forbidden love also builds the foundation for the much forbidden conversation between the two about the crime of passion. Hence, Anne who started as only a witness to the aftermath of a forbidden love turns to the doppelganger of the murdered woman. It should, however, be noted that from the beginning, this conversation is accompanied by the looming shadow of death and annihilation over it, and, hence, its imminent termination is foreshadowed right at the start.

It is at this point that the dual role of the café rises to prominence. On the one hand, it provides an in-between space for the interaction between these two people from two very different social classes, and grants them the chance of self-exploration and companionship, even if temporarily. In this sense, the café becomes a sanctuary for Anne where she can drink “to tear away the mask imposed on her and to show her real face, with all its emotional intensity” (Günther, 1996, p.179). On the other hand, being an exposed public space, the male dominated café benefits from the omnipresent existence of the public gaze: an active, relentless Panopticon whose open space facilitates observation: “The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that makes it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately [...] Visibility is a trap” (Foucault, 1977, p. 200). The corrective gaze spots, monitors and before long, sets right the aberration that is taking place within its boundaries.

The importance of café as a place for manifestation of desire becomes so significant if Anne’s life as a bourgeois wife is taken into consideration. Anne is totally devoted to her son as her sole companion – emphasized through portrayals of their long walks in the town – to fill her time while her husband is away. This fact is also indirectly highlighted in the narrative through the many references Chauvin makes to her isolation and loneliness in her big walled garden: “Whether you were asleep or awake, dressed or naked, they passed outside the pale of your existence”¹⁸ (Duras, 1958, p. 55) or “[n]othing happens there, nothing at night”¹⁹ (Duras, 1958, p. 44). Chauvin’s companionship is the reason that Anne understands the void in her life. She, thus, transgresses bourgeois normalizing strategies she has internalized as its subject in order to take shelter in the café and to liberate herself by sitting beside Chauvin and talking about the other couple in order to take refuge in love and forget the futility of her own life. By so doing, just like her child who feels liberated after having gotten rid of his music class, Anne momentarily leaves her social environment and the

¹⁶ “Je voudrais que vous me disiez le commencement même, comment ils ont commencé à se parler. C’est dans un café, disiez-vous” (Duras, 1958, p. 45).

¹⁷ For Duras, love necessarily defines itself as a duplicate of another love [...] outside, alienated from its own being. (our translation)

¹⁸ “Endormie ou éveillée, dans un état de veille ou de sommeil, on passait outre à votre existence” (Duras, 1958, p. 59).

¹⁹ “Rien ne s’y passe, rien, la nuit” (Duras, 1958, p. 48).

enclosed space of her walled garden to enjoy the sense of freedom.

Implicit in the narrative is also the fact that “she is ‘lacking’ any ambition of her own; she is defined solely in terms of her husband” (Gorton, 2003, p. 112) whose shadowy presence as a figure of authority regulates Anne’s life. In this regard, Roland A. Champagne (1975) explains:

the controlled force (*moderato*) is exemplified by Anne, her husband, and the child. This trio incarnates the themes of possession, reason, and construction - all within the domain of the explicable M. Desbaresdes, the owner of the foundry [*sic*] who represents authority and ownership to his employees and is also Anne’s husband. He lives a life of complete control and possesses the fidelity of Anne in a marriage wherein the relationship of the husband and wife is bonded by the incarnation of their child. (p. 982)

Nonetheless, Champagne (1975) adds the Desbaresdes as a family are not united within this narrative. A main reason for this, he argues, is the absence of the father/husband: “Anne and her child are being controlled by a force which is not present - Desbaresdes himself” (p. 982). Extreme loneliness despite having access to material possessions drives Anne toward her temporary transgression. Her attachment to Chauvin, therefore, is not “a consequence of sexual desire but rather as a way of working through an emotional desire” (Gorton, 2003, p. 112) in an attempt to fill the void in her life:

a lyrical force (*cantabile*) intervenes in this fragmented domain of control [in Desbaresdes’ household]. Irrationality, dispossession, and the inexplicable threaten the Desbaresdes with the destruction of the relationship between husband and wife, mother and son. The murder in the café ... the budding friendship between Anne and Chauvin, and Anne’s alcoholic stupor begin to cause havoc in the well-ordered Desbaresdes household. (Champagne, 1975, p. 982)

Nonetheless, this potentially destructive transgression – which threatens the foundations of the normalizing bourgeois social distinction – does not last long enough to destabilize the foundation of this well-ordered bourgeois household. Anne’s temporary transgression/liberation is soon contained. In this regard, the role the café plays is indispensable. In fact, once this anomaly is exposed through the Panopticon gaze of the community, all the communally required measures are taken to ensure that the aberrant individuals are put back on track and social health is restored as the result of the urge to conform to what is considered legitimate – as dictated by discourses of truth. A closer scrutiny of the way the Panopticon operates – even though it is briefly portrayed in Duras’s narrative – will help elaborate this point further.

Within the fictional world of *Moderato Cantabile*, characters live in a society run by traditional conformists guided by bourgeoisie. In such a codified society, characters’ every move should follow the rules (the norm) ordained by

bourgeoisie. On this basis, all actions which are not within the approved framework are considered to be “les act de refus²⁰” in that they perturb the dominant social rules. Anne’s “ritualized crossing of society’s descriptive boundaries,” therefore, “transgresses the rules with which social discourse constructs an unchanging social space” (Reid, 1994, p. 49). As aforementioned, Anne’s temporary transgression is attributed to her sense of unfathomable loneliness. Within the restricted framework of her personal life, she is constantly haunted by the sense of solitude and isolation. She has been immobilized and trapped as a result of her own social status and the need to observe the decorum assigned to that status. She sees herself immersed in a hell where she does not belong. She is trapped in her monotonous conjugal life. The illusion of happiness that she might have once attributed to social status has gradually forsaken her, leaving her with the feeling of utter loneliness and the need for breaking out of unseen chains through social denunciation of conformity, even at the cost of disrupting the standard – and much favored – *portrait of a lady*.

The space of the café within which Anne and Chauvin meet is implicitly shown, through brief descriptions of people’s gestures and reactions, as a perfect instance of a Panopticon. The effect is particularly conveyed through silent gestures and facial expressions. Insignificant as it may be at first, this gaze gradually becomes too important to be ignored. While it is true that Anne and Chauvin are not barraged by any audible comments, at least not explicitly, the social gaze concentrating on them by no one other than Anne’s husbands’ workers is meticulously presented during each meeting. Take for instance, Anne’s second return to the café. She is busy talking to Chauvin when the narrative records: “The first men came in, were surprised, gave the landlady a questioning look. The landlady gave a barely perceptible shrug, indicating that she herself didn’t much understand what was going on”²¹ (Duras, 1958, pp. 45-46). Still, at other times, their being inspected is shown to the reader through indirect descriptions of apparently ordinary events: “The man at the bar recognized Chauvin, and nodded to him in a slightly embarrassed way. Chauvin didn’t see him”²² (Duras, 1958, p. 60) or “A dozen or so workers burst noisily into the cafe. Some of them recognized Chauvin. Again Chauvin didn’t see them”²³ (Duras, 1958, p. 61), or “Some of them tried to make a sign of recognition to Chauvin, but to no avail. He was looking at the dock”²⁴ (Duras, 1958, p. 62). Before long, word about Anne and Chauvin’s meetings has spread, leading to a scandal, a bitter effect of which is seen in the cold reception that awaits Anne upon her third entrance to the café: “She was served with obvious

²⁰ the acts of refusal (our translation)

²¹ “Les premiers hommes entrèrent au café, s’étonnèrent, interrogèrent la patronne du regard. Celle-ci, d’un léger mouvement d’épaules, signifia qu’elle-même n’y comprenait pas grand-chose” (Duras, 1958, p. 49-50).

²² “L’homme qui était au bar reconnut Chauvin, lui fit un signe de tête un peugéné. Chauvin ne le vit pas” (Duras, 1958, p. 64).

²³ “Unedizained’ouvriers firent irruption dans le café. Quelques-uns reconnurent Chauvin. Chauvin ne les vit encore pas” (Duras, 1958, p. 65)

²⁴ “Certaintentèrent de faire à Chauvin un signe de reconnaissance, mais en vain. Il regardait le quai” (Duras, 1958, p. 66).

disapproval”²⁵ (Duras, 1958, p. 50). During this and later visits, the café customers’ growing sense of surprise when silently looking at Anne is noticeable: “The men at the bar still looked at this woman, but distantly, and were still surprised”²⁶ (Duras, 1958, p. 80). Indeed, as Anne and Chauvin’s relationship grows more intimate, so do the inspection and disapproval of the social gaze to the point that the need for action is felt: “The panoptic regime strikes out at any departure from ‘normal’ behavior” (Paternek, 1987, p. 104). The objective of normalization (i.e. discipline) is achieved by making the body docile:

Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an ‘aptitude’, a ‘capacity’, which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection. (Foucault, 1977, p. 138)

Besides the gaze at the café, there is only one other instance of Panopticon inspection through public gaze directed at Anne. In the episode which depicts the high society reception by the Desbaresdes, Anne’s transgression reaches a climatic point for someone in her position – a bourgeois wife/hostess. Anne’s noticeable tardiness, her obvious drunkenness, and lack of appetite, followed by her failure in treating her guests well and observing her manners is meticulously observed and silently reprimanded. “Her blond hair is mussed, and she runs her fingers listlessly through it ... Her lips are pale. Tonight she forgot to make herself up”²⁷ (Duras, 1958, p. 97). Anne is unable to engage in conversation with people around her: “She puts her fork down, looks around, tries to grasp the thread of conversation, fails”²⁸ (Duras, 1958, p. 97). She cannot participate in discussions. Neither can she share their interest in food: “Tonight one of them does not share the others’ appetite”²⁹ (Duras, 1958, p. 99). Just like in the café, her refusal of food at the party is observed by silent looks of reprimand,

Anne Desbaresdes has just declined to take any of the duck. And yet the platter is still there before her - only for a brief moment, but long enough for everyone to notice. She raises her hand, as she has been taught to do, to emphasize her refusal. The platter is removed. Silence settles around the table³⁰. (Duras, 1958, p. 104)

²⁵“On le luiservit dans la disapprobation” (Duras, 1958, p. 54).

²⁶“Des hommes au bar regardèrent encore cette femme, s’étonnèrent encore, mais de loin” (Duras, 1958, p. 84).

²⁷ “Elle passelégèrement la main dans le désordre blond de sescheveux [...] Seslèvrissentpâles. Elle oubliesoier de les farder” (Duras, 1958, p. 101).

²⁸ “Elle pose safourchette, regardealentour, cherche, essaye de remonter le cours de la conversation, n’y arrive pas” (Duras, 1958, p. 101).

²⁹ “L’uned’entreellescontrevientcesoir à l’appétit general” (Duras, 1958, p. 104).

³⁰“Anne Desbaresdesvient de refuser de se servir. Le plat restecependant encore devantelle, un temps très court, maiscelui du scandale. Elle lève la main, commeillufutappris, pour réitérer

What adds to the gravity of the situation is her immoderate and excessive drinking, which still meets the silent stares of the guests. Only in the kitchen, do the maids find the opportunity to verbally comment on the situation:

In the kitchen, now that the duck is ready and put into the oven to keep warm, they finally find a moment of peace to put their thoughts into words, saying that she is really going a bit too far. Tonight she arrived later than the night before, well after her guests had arrived³¹. (Duras, 1958, p. 96-97)

The society which devours Anne and her loneliness becomes all the more obvious in the party. She does not engage in conversation with her guests: "Silence moves in again around the question, and the fixed smile returns to her face"³² (Duras, 1958, p. 98). Her intoxication makes her alienation and loneliness all the more obvious. Physically, she attends the party but mentally, she is longing for Chauvin:

The opposing forces between which Anne is hopelessly caught, defined by the terms moderato and cantabile, interact most brutally during the dinner, making Anne's predicament unbearable. The mansion (inside) is opposed to the beach (outside); the formal dinner guests to Chauvin, who roams on the beach. Anne wears a magnolia between her breasts as a reminder of the vital and potentially destructive forces that the civilized bourgeois society suppresses and displaces. (Hirsch, 1982, p. 80)

Despite her desperate attempts to pretend she is enjoying their company, Anne's face reveals her true feelings. Desperately "caught between two incompatible worlds, that of her husband and that of Chauvin" (Young, 2008, p. 63), she wants to escape from the community that has held her tight, and to avoid the illusive sense of happiness. "Her body's rejection of this 'nourritureé trangèrequesocialefutforcée de prendre' is an explicit symbol of Anne's rejection of the concomitant life style" (Bishop, 1974, p. 224). Nonetheless, the more she tries to save her face by smiling, "[a] fixed smile makes her face acceptable"³³ (Duras, 1958, p. 97), the more agitated she becomes.

In the party, everyone, except Anne, sticks to etiquettes as artificially as possible. It is only by so doing that the bourgeois society can persist. Though intoxicated, Anne gets the chance to become an observer of all the superficiality of social relationships within an environment where everyone is wearing the mask of

son refus. On n'insiste plus. Autourd'elle, à table, le silence s'est fait" (Duras, 1958, p. 108).

³¹"À la cuisine, on ose enfin le dire, le canard étant prêt, et au chaud, dans le répit qui s'ensuit, qu'elle exagère. Elle arrive ce soir plus tard encore qu'hier, bien après ses invités" (Duras, 1958, p. 100-101).

³²"Le silence se reforme sur la question posée. Elle, elle tourne à la fixité de son sourire" (Duras, 1958, p. 102).

³³"Un sourire fixe rend son visage acceptable" (Duras, 1958, p. 101).

pretense. Everyone is hiding behind a mask to save her face. This mask is the only acceptable code of behavior for the society which seeks blind obedience:

The women will devour it to the last mouthful. Their bare shoulders have the gloss and solidity of a society founded and built on the certainty of its rights, and they were chosen to fit this society. Their strict education has taught them that they must temper their excesses in the interest of their position. They stuff themselves with mayonnaise, specially prepared for this dish, forget themselves and lap it up. The men look at them and remember that therein lies their happiness³⁴. (Duras, 1958, p. 100)

Reid (1994) postulates that the two spaces of the café and the dinner party at Anne's mansion have specific features in common, "Host and guests construct a social space in which society's dominant upper-class inside, although socially superior to the working-class inside of the café, nonetheless repeats the rigidity [*sic*] of the implicit discourse of the latter on a fixed social space" (p. 48). We would like to add that these two regulatory spaces also feature the role Anne's husband plays as a controlling figure. While in the café, his disapproving workers compensate for his absence, and naturally inform him through the unnarrated gossip in town about his wife's transgression in public, in the party, his presence and gaze are all the more obvious:

A man, facing a woman, looks at her as though he does not recognize her. Her breasts are half exposed again. She hastily adjusts her dress. A drooping flower lies between them. There are still flashes of lucidity in her wildly protruding eyes, enough for her to succeed in helping herself to some of the others' salmon when it comes to her turn³⁵. (Duras, 1958, p. 96)

This scene is completed by narrative's description of husband's inner contemplation: "It will be a successful party. The women bask in their own brilliance. The men have covered them with jewels according to their salaries. Tonight one of them suspects he may have made a mistake"³⁶ (Duras, 1958, p. 99).

Accustomed to bourgeois ways and demands in her society and her conjugal life, Anne can easily predict the aftermath of the dinner party and the scandal she has caused. Having taken refuge in her son's room "at the foot of the

³⁴«Les femmes le dévoreront jusqu'au bout. Leurs épaules nues ont la luisance et la fermeté d'une société fondée, dans ses assises, sur la certitude de son droit, et elles furent choies à la convenance de celle-ci. La rigueur de leur éducation exige que leur excès soit tempéré par le souci majeur de leur entretien. De celui-ci on leur inculqua, jadis, la conscience. Elles se pourlèchent de mayonnaise, verte, comme il se doit, s'y retrouvent, y trouvent leur compte. Des hommes les regardent et se rappellent qu'elles font leur Bonheur» (Duras, 1987, p. 103-104).

³⁵«Un homme, face à une femme, regarde cette inconnue. Ses seins sont de nouveau à moitié nus. Elle ajustahâtivement sa robe. Entre eux se fane une fleur. Dans ses yeux élargis, immodérés, des lueurs de lucidité passent encore, suffisantes pour qu'elle arrive à se servir à son tour du saumon des autres gens» (Duras, 1958, p. 100).

³⁶«La soirée réussira. Les femmes sont au plus sûr de leur éclat. Les hommes les couvrent de bijoux au prorata de leurs bilans. L'und'eux, ce soir, doute qu'il eût raison» (Duras, 1958, p. 103).

bed [...] she will vomit forth the strange nourishment that had been forced upon her”³⁷ (Duras, 1958, p. 108). This is when her husband appears in the doorway to punish her through silent disapproval, “[a] shadow will appear in the doorway leading into the hall, deepening the shadow of the room. Anne Desbaresdes will run her hand through her dishevelled hair. This time she will offer an apology. The shadow will not reply”³⁸ (Duras, 1958, pp. 108-9). This would be the end of her reckless adventure.

The following chapter in the narrative follows Anne’s solo return to the café to meet Chauvin one last time. The non-intervening gaze is still omnipresent: “The landlady, seated in the shadow behind the counter, did not lift her eyes from her knitting when she came in”³⁹ (Duras, 1958, p. 112). Anne informs Chauvin of her family’s arrangements to have somebody else bring the child to his piano class and that this is the last time they meet. In this last meeting, Anne desires to hear the story of the first couple’s passion for the last time. There are still onlookers who try to avert their eyes, pretending not to see them: “A group of workers, who had already seen them there before, entered the cafe. Like the landlady and everyone else in town, they knew what was going on, and avoided looking at them”⁴⁰ (Duras, 1958, p. 121).

The nature of this last encounter reveals that things have radically changed since the dinner party. Anne has been denied any pretexts she might have had to travel to that part of the town. This means that Anne is condemned to isolation in her beautiful, walled garden – more alienated from the larger social world than ever – as fit punishment for her transgression. She has accepted to do all this because she has agreed to put an end to her transgression as she is afraid not to conform:

‘I’m afraid,’ Anne Desbaresdes murmured. Chauvin moved closer to the table, searching for her, then gave up.

‘I can’t’

[...]

‘I’m afraid,’ Anne Desbaresdes said again. Chauvin did not reply. ‘I’m afraid,’ Anne Desbaresdes almost shouted. Still Chauvin did not reply. Anne Desbaresdes doubled over, her forehead almost touching the table, and accepted her fear⁴¹. (Duras, 1958, pp. 119-20)

³⁷ “au pied de son lit [...] elle vomira, longuement, la nourriture étrangère que ce soir elle fut forcée de prendre” (Duras, 1958, p. 112).

³⁸ “Une ombre apparaît dans l’encadrement de la porte restée ouverte sur le couloir, obscurcira plus avant la pénombre de la chambre. Anne Desbaresdes passera légèrement la main dans le désordre ételet blond de ses cheveux. Cette fois, elle prononcera une excuse. On ne lui répondra pas” (Duras, 1958, p. 112).

³⁹ “La patronne ne leva pas les yeux sur elle, continua à tricoter sa laine rouge dans la pénombre du comptoir” (Duras, 1958, p. 114).

⁴⁰ “Un groupe d’ouvriers entra, qui les avaient déjà vus. Ils évitèrent de les regarder, étant au courant, eux aussi, comme la patronne et toute la ville” (Duras, 1958, p. 122-23).

⁴¹ – J’aie peur, murmura Anne Desbaresdes. Chauvin s’approcha de la table, la rechercha, la

As a bourgeois wife, Anne definitely has more to lose than Chauvin. In her pursuit of passion, she risks no less than her social position, which is her defining feature as her social identity. The dilemma she is facing here then, caught up between passion and social status, is either to uphold desire at the expense of losing everything else or to subordinate and repress desire for the prize of finding her way back, albeit with great difficulty, to this society. Therefore, once Anne's persistence in following her passionate adventure receives a blow from the biopolitically-oriented system through the ever present Panopticon (and its active agent, i.e. her husband), she accepts to be re-territorialized and re-coded, even if it means separation from her most beloved son, and withdrawal to –and confinement in– the regulated space of her walled garden, more detached and lonely than ever. Her true feelings about this arrangement, however, are put to words in her curse reply to Chauvin who wishes her dead:

“‘I wish you were dead,’ Chauvin said” (Duras, 1958, p. 121).

“‘C’est fait,’ dit Anne Desbaresdes”⁴² (Duras, 1958, p. 123).

Despite her decision to submit to rules, Anne finally undergoes not one, but two types of annihilation. On the one hand, she forcefully represses the flames of passion in her heart and dies symbolically and, on the other, she loses her social status and symbolic respect. Nonetheless, this short-lived experience of passion, at the cost of transgression and subsequent punishment by her husband, the authorial figure in her life, leaves its mark on her: she has initiated and ended a quest, even if bitterly, and has come to certain knowledge of her true being.

On public level, a more severe punishment awaits her in the café where she was monitored and silently criticized since the beginning of her transgression. There, she is ultimately disciplined through silent excommunication by the public gaze as an adulteress: “The men still kept their eyes turned away from this adulteress”⁴³ (Duras, 1958, p. 121). This way, the café fulfills its public role as the place where the transgression that had started is squashed bitterly, condemning Anne to even bitter loneliness and isolation.

Conclusion

recherchant, puis y renonça.

– Je ne peux pas.

[...]

– J’aimeur, dit de nouveau Anne Desbaresdes. Chauvin ne répondit pas.

– J’aimeur, criapresque Anne Desbaresdes. Chauvin ne répondit toujours pas. Anne Desbaresdes se pliaendexpresquejusqu’àtoucher la table de son front et elle accepta la peur (Duras, 1958, p. 121-122).

⁴² “‘I already am,’ said Anne Desbaresdes” (Our translation).

⁴³ “Les hommes évitèrent encore de porter leurs yeux sur cette femme adultère” (Duras, 1958, p. 123).

In *Moderato Cantabile*, Duras (1958) puts on display a vision of modern fatality shaped by existing social limitations and controlled through the dominant social gaze. The world that Duras portrays is a horrifying world within which mankind feels imprisoned. The individual struggles to free herself from this suffocating situation only to find herself more deeply immersed in it. Within the borders of such a stratified space, strict rules, social and familial frameworks, and impossible desires are the main sources of the tragedy. Facing such limitations, Duras's heroine drowns in the boredom and monotony of mundane life until she defies social order and familial tragedy which have made her the victim of the situation. This revolutionary spirit takes her toward revolt against principles of her living environment. Her transgression, however, is soon contained. Effective control and monitoring of her short-lived transgression are rendered effective through Panopticon, the major tool at disposal of the bourgeois society. In this regard, the dual role of café in which love is manifested, developed, and contained becomes significant. As a place for the never-failing disciplinary gaze, café is a proper venue for Anne's transgression because it is capable of containing it as well. Café encompasses a circular path of initiation, self-exploration, and reterritorialization. Within its limits, a very private affair takes place on too public a level. Therefore, public gaze takes care of the private transgression. Panopticon inspection results in Anne's excommunication by the intolerant society portrayed through working men who were once described as merely surprised onlookers when facing their boss's wife at a café, but later turn to very disapproving people who don't even like to look at the woman whom they now dare to judge an adulteress.

In the society created by Duras, every crime and every transgression will bring about certain punishment and blame. Taboos are not approved because the powerful majority is always after dissolution of the social gap which is created by the minority. The homogenous society cannot exist unless at the expense of public obedience. In such a society where the majority rules, neither Anne nor her child, not even the dead woman in the café, is exempt. Disobedience of any kind is disapproved and exposed to social wrath. Transgressors are victimized by the rigidity of bourgeois rules and are forcefully guided toward obedience. In Anne's case, obedience entails the sacrifice of her much admired desires and ideals. Re-territorialized to obey social rules, Anne turns to a living dead within the limits of her monotonous life, knowing that there is always a power that controls us, a power that is beyond human will.

References

- Bajomée, D. (1989). *Durasou la douleur*. Paris: Boeck-Wesmael.
- Barbérís, D. (1992). *Moderato Cantabile / L'Amant*. Paris: Nathan.
- Bishop, L. (1974). Classical structure and style in *Moderato Cantabile*. *The French Review. Special Issue, Studies on the French Novel*, 47(6), 219-234.

- Champagne, R. A. (1975). An incantation of the Sirens: The structure of Moderato Cantabile. *The French Review*, 48(6), 981-989.
- Cruikshank, R. (2013). Eating, drinking and re-thinking: Margurite Duras's Moderato Cantabile (1958). *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 49(3), 300-312.
- Duras, M. (1958). *Moderato Cantabile*. Paris: Minuit.
- Duras, M. (1987). *La vie Matérielle: Marguerite Duras parle à Jérôme Beaujour*. Paris: P.O.L.
- Duras, M. (2017). *Moderato Cantabile* (R. Seaver, Trans.). London: Calder Publications (Original work published 1958).
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York: Vintage Books (Original work published 1975).
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: An introduction* (Vol. 1) (R. Hurley, Trans.). New York: Pantheon Books (Original work published 1976).
- Gorton, K. (2003). Critical scenes of desire: Marguerite Duras's *Le ravisement de Loi V. Stein* and *Moderato cantabile*. *Dalhousie French Studies*, 63, 100-119.
- Günther, R. (1996). Alcoholism, melancholia and transgression: Marguerite Duras' *Moderato cantabile*. *Modern & Contemporary France*, NS4 (2), 171-181.
- Hill, L. (1993). *Marguerite Duras: Apocalyptic desires*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hirsch, M. (1982). Gender, reading, and desire in *Moderato Cantabile*. *Twentieth Century Literature*, 28(1), 69-85.
- Mills, S. (2003). *Michel Foucault*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Moskos, G. (1984). Women and fictions in Marguerite Duras's 'Moderato Cantabile.' *Contemporary Literature*, 25(1), 28-52.
- Paternek, M. A. (1987). Norms and normalization: Michel Foucault's overextended Panoptic machine. *Human Studies, Foucault Memorial Issue*, 10(1), 97-121.
- Reid, J. H. (1994). The café Duras: Mourning descriptive space. *French Forum*, 19(1), 45-64.

- Rykner, A. (2000). *Proles Perdus*. Paris: José Corti.
- Schrambach, B. B. (2015). Telling makes it so: Memory, narrative, and identity in *Moderato Cantabile*. *Journal of Language, Literature and Culture*, 62(2), 89-99.
- Young, M. (2008). Shifting perspectives: Innovative narrative tense usage in Marguerite Duras's *Moderato cantabile*, Patrick Modiano's *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* and Marie Darrieussecq's *Naissance des fantômes*. *Journal of Romance Studies*, 8(2), 59–72.
- Zepp, E. H. (2013). Language as ritual in Marguerite Duras's *Moderato Cantabile*. *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures*, 30(3), 236-259.

Author's Biography



Sanaz Saei Dibavar is a French Language and Literature PhD, University of Tabriz, Iran. Her interests include Literary Theory, Cultural Studies, and Modern/ Postmodern Fiction/ Theater. Her most recent (published) contribution is “Marguerite Duras et le tragiquemodernedans *Moderato Cantabile* et *L'Amant*” by Éditionsuniversitaireseuropéennes (2020).



Sara Saei Dibavar is an English Literature PhD, University of Mazandaran, Iran. Her interests include Literary Theory, Cultural Studies, and Modern / Postmodern Fiction. Her most recent contributions are “Dr(e)amatic encounters: The role of embedded narratives in J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*” in *English Text Construction*, July 2020, and “The Metaphorical Stage of J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*” in *Research in African Literatures*, January 2020.
