

Marguerite Duras or the Weight of a Feather by Frederique Lebelley

Two of the most interesting books to come out in the new year have been written by two Francophone writers. The first one is Marguerite Duras ou Le Poids d'une Plume - Marguerite Duras or the Weight of a Feather and is written by French journalist Frederique Lebelley and published by Grasset. It is published by Maren Sell-Calman Levy. The second one is La Femme de Job - Job's Wife by Andrée Chédid.

A new biography of Marguerite Duras has just been written by French journalist Frederique Lebelley. It has been hailed by French magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* (3-9 February, 1994) as a success, not only for its good investigative skills, but for its good observation and understanding of this most controversial writer and film maker.

Who is Marguerite Donnadiou Antelme Duras? She is the author of more than fifty books and theater plays and nineteen films. Born in Indochina on the 14th of April 1914, daughter of a mathematician and a primary school teacher, her childhood in Asia marked her irrevocably and prompted her to write such masterpieces as Un Barrage Contre Le Pacifique - A Dam Against the Pacific, (1950: Gallimard) - and Hiroshima Mon Amour - Hiroshima My Love, (1960: Gallimard) and of the much acclaimed L'Amant - The Lover (1984: Editions de Minuit) and Christine V. (1985).

Duras was never a feminist but she always had a strong inclination for dissent, for questioning the status quo and for protecting victims. She was briefly a communist in the fifties and before that worked in the French resistance in 1943 together with the President of France, François

Mitterand. In these days, Mitterand, code name Morland, headed the National Movement of Prisoners of War. At the same time, Duras worked as secretary for the commission of the control of paper. It decided which authors would be published and how much paper they were allowed to use. Ironically, the commission refused her permission to publish her first book Les Complices - The Accomplices. She did not give up and threatened to commit suicide if her book was not printed. Her husband then, Robert Antelme begged publishing houses to print her manuscript which was entitled Des Impudents (1943: Plon and 1992: Gallimard). Years later she wanted to ban the publication of this book because she considered it an imperfect work.

In 1944, she published a second book La Vie Tranquille - The Peaceful Life (Gallimard). Despite a better reception of this book, she remained insecure about her talents and refused to write anything till 1950, until the effect of the war on her life has diminished. She said "*I found myself facing a phenomenal disorder of thoughts and feelings . . . literature in that context made me feel ashamed.*" She joined the communist party instead.

In 1942, she met a man who was to

change her life, Dionys Mascolo, a reader at Gallimard with whom she set up a "manage a trois" along with Antelme. Even when she divorced Antelme and had a son by Mascolo they remained good friends, they still remained good friends. In fact, in her last book Ecrire - To Write (1993: Gallimard) Duras says *men do not tolerate women who write. It is cruel for the man. It is difficult for everybody, except for Antelme.*

She is a great writer. Her style is sober and unique. She does not write in a traditional way but with a bareness of style. she does not waste time and gets right to the point... She does not need to fill pages ... There is always something unexpected in her writing and something that gives color and movement to it ... what attracts one's attention is an attitude of life ... says Mitterand.

Indeed after the publication of two major books The Story of Lol V. Stein and The Vice Consul (1964 and 1965), Duras became the founder of a new religion among intellectuals. She became the most studied contemporary writer in France and hundreds of theses have been written about her work. The reasons for her importance are her revolutionary and feminine style, that feminists acclaimed.

Job's Wife

by Andrée Chedid

About these two books, Duras says *I often think about The Vice Consul, I never dropped him, whereas I do not think of Lol v. Stein anymore. The Vice Consul is the one I believe in, his cry is the "only politics". It was filmed in my house and all the people of the film were crying ... They were free cries, real cries like those cried by nations in misery.*

The "Duras phenomenon," if it can be called this, has even spread to the US where eighty nine theses have been written about her. Why such an interest? According to French journalist J. L. Del Bono *Its feminism essentially gave her popularity. As early as the seventies, she was taught in women's studies programs on many campuses. within her book L'Amant, winner of the Concourt French Literary Prize, she became even more popular in the United states. Everybody read that slim book talking about her passionate love affair with a China man from the Mekong river. It was also made into a movie, translated in many languages and a new phenomenon was born, that of "Durasmania".*

Of course, not everybody is a fan of Duras. Recently, the New York Times compared her books to 'railway station novels' and since 1985 there is a certain tiredness among intellectuals to study Duras further. As Del Bono would say *we are now in the "post-Durasian style."*

French Critic, Philippe Sollers, attributes the Duras myth to Europe's fascination with three main cultures in the world: Indochina, North Africa and Islam, and Duras spoke of Indochina in a way no one ever did before. For Sollers, Duras, at the end of the twentieth century hold the

continued on last column...

Andrée Chedid is one of the most interesting voices in Francophone literature. Born in Cairo, having lived briefly in Lebanon, then for a long time in Paris, her books on plays are inspired by Middle Eastern culture and women's predicament in it, e.g. Le 6eme Jour - The 6th Day set in the time of Cholera in Egypt - Nephertiti ou Le Réve d'Akhnaton - Nephertiti or Akhnaton's Dream set in Pharonic times - and La Maison sans Racine - The House without Roots set in the beginning of the civil war in Lebanon.

Her latest book, *Job's Wife* is a result of her personal experience and reflection on life. It is the work of a mature woman concerned with men/women relations with each other and with their creator, love, what unites them and what erodes their ties, especially the effect of old age.

Although the Old Testament mentions Job's wife only once in the "Book of Job," Andrée Chedid imagines and creates a woman with a distinct personality, sometime soft and sometimes harsh. Moreover, although history has totally ignored this woman and only focused on her husband, Chedid reckons that this wife must have surely been influenced if not affected by her husband's total devotion and belief in God. Job says to his wife *you are as terrible as Battalion (regiment)*" as well as *"my heart loves you.*

Most importantly, Chedid's book is about old age for men and women alike. It is about the "letting go of

transitory forms and the resistance of the core," the core meaning the soul, or as Chedid puts it *"an impalpable substance that transcends time and that is found in people's gaze."*

Thus, with the passing of time, Job's wife becomes more understanding of her husband and more tender to him. She says *old age is not only ruins, illness and degradation.* Old age can be a time to summon up new forces. And although she admires her husband's resilience to all the calamities that befall him, she does not always support his unconditional acceptance of God's will. In fact, at one time, she encourages him to rebel and deny God. When Job refuses to forsake his beliefs, his wife is left there questioning the meaning of life and waiting for an answer •

Marguerite Duras Continued...

position that Victor Hugo had in France at the end of the nineteenth century, i.e. that of a great writer and spokesperson of a nation.

As for Duras, she says that *writing was the only thing that filled my life and enchanted it. I've done it. Writing has never left me ... I can say what I want, I will never find out why we write and how we don't write.* •