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Francine at the beach

Restorative meditation in *The Easy Life*

Nothing left to think about now. Nothing. My head is fresh, suddenly empty. In my brain, it's like pouring rain. Let the wind carry this last thought down a path. Tomorrow someone will crush it, in the morning, underfoot. There is no more room in my head except for the sound of my steps.¹

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Newly translated into English, Marguerite Duras' second novel *The Easy Life* (1944) explores thinking processes. The central part of its plot is situated on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean where its protagonist Francine Veyrenatte goes on a holiday. This plot associates travel with a search for quietude, in other words, travel as a therapeutic exercise. Marc Boyer, a historian of tourism, underlines the importance of the theme of therapy in travel discourse in the nineteenth century, a time

¹ Marguerite Duras, *The Easy Life* [1944], trans. by Emma Ramadam & Olivia Baes, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022, p. 159-160.

when “le discours thérapeutique est dominant.”² The notion of the restorative value of travel continues to resonate in the twentieth century, when mass tourism begins, a phenomenon well represented in many of Duras’ works and of which *The Easy Life* is an example. This article explores the representation of the therapeutic aspect of vacations, specifically those at the seaside. We assert that this littoral space advances the protagonist’s attempt to recompose herself through different types of meditation that help her overcome recent trauma.

The initial drama of *The Easy Life* unfolds at a family farm called Les Bugues. The narration begins with an account of an aggression experienced by the character of Jérôme, a young farm hand and uncle of the heroine, Francine. He dies of the injuries inflicted upon him by Francine’s brother Nicolas who is jealous of his wife’s sexual interest in Jérôme. After the death of Jérôme, Nicolas goes on to commit a violent suicide by jumping in front of a train. Francine is implicated in this sequence of brutal events by having reported the love affair to Nicolas. The presence of such violence at the onset of the story, including the details of Jérôme’s agonizing death, contrasts with the title of the novel. The experience of these violent incidents, however, is what leads Francine to grapple with the unpredictable nature of death. She embarks on a seaside holiday to search for peace of mind and to better understand her thoughts and feelings about these traumatic events. “With so much grief it’s hard to figure out what you want or don’t want”, she states.³ Even though the protagonist assures us that there is little to do on the farm in September and that the Veyrenatte family previously led a middle-class existence

2 Marc Boyer, *Histoire du tourisme de masse*, Paris, PUF, 1999, p. 30. The “idea of therapy dominates tourism discourse” (Translations are my own).

3 Marguerite Duras, *The Easy Life*, op. cit., p. 89. The page numbers for citations from *The Easy Life* will henceforth appear in the text in parenthesis with the note EL.

in town, the writer's choice of introducing Francine's journey into the plot contradicts the reality of farm life in France in the 1940s. Farmers, then and now, tend to travel infrequently as agriculture demands daily labour. "Dans les familles d'agriculteurs, le taux de départ est faible", confirms historian of leisure practices André Rauch.⁴ As a social group, "[les] agriculteurs partent le moins."⁵ Duras ignores this social reality in placing her protagonist on the beach, underlining here the importance she places on littoral space and the imperative nature of her heroine's voyage to the seaside. Once she arrives at the beach resort, the grieving Francine is seldom diverted from her mission to reflect and meditate upon the deaths of her uncle and brother.

Our approach to this study of *The Easy Life* is founded on the definition of the term *meditation*. Following an explanation of this term, we will examine the general subject of vacations by the sea before proceeding to an analysis of *The Easy Life* and its oceanside setting, exploring the precise question of how this context impacts the story.

The term meditation generally applies to the text of *The Easy Life*, especially to the central part of the novel in which Francine describes her vacation. Before delving into the definition of the term, it is important to note its presence in the discourse on tourism and in the history of tourist practices. Rauch uses this term, for example, in observing that in "leur quête de sites insolites ou historiques, ces touristes [la noblesse et la bourgeoisie des XII^e au XIX^e siècles], nourrissent une méditation sur le temps ou l'existence."⁶ Sociologist

4 André Rauch, *Les Vacances*, Paris, PUF, 1993, p. 25. "In farming families departure rates are low."

5 *Ibid.*, p. 27. "Agriculturalists travel the least."

6 André Rauch, *Les Vacances*, *op. cit.*, p. 9. "In their quest for unfamiliar locations, tourists of the aristocratic and bourgeois classes of previous centuries found sources for meditation on subjects like time and existence."

Jean Viard repeats this idea: "Prendre soin de soi et [...] se confronter à des lieux qui nourrissent une méditation sur le temps ou l'existence, tels pourraient être les deux axes de ces premiers déplacements privés."⁷ According to the *Petit Robert intégral*, the French term *méditation* indicates the action of "méditer, de se soumettre à une longue et profonde réflexion."⁸ The synonyms suggested for this term include the idea of deepening the study of a subject. Meditation is thus a rumination "qui approfondit longuement un sujet."⁹ The definition of meditation in English according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) comprises this same meaning of "continuous thought or musing upon one subject."¹⁰ The OED notes however that this usage of the term is now rare. Current and common English usage associates the term with religious and spiritual customs and with *mindfulness* in which meditation can be a mental and physical exercise that seeks to eliminate certain types of thought: "In Buddhism, Yoga, and other systems of religious or spiritual discipline: [meditation is] a practice of the mind (and body) aimed at achieving the eradication of rational and worldly mental activity."¹¹ In France the expression "pleine conscience" or "méditation de pleine conscience" refers to this meaning of *meditation* which has been in existence in English since the eighteenth century. The OED cites such an example in a historical reference to customs in Japan. Thus, the same root word has given rise to opposing significations: profound reflection and absence of

7 Jean Viard, *Penser les vacances*, Arles, Actes Sud, 1984, p. 33. "Taking care of oneself [...] and finding sources for meditation on time and existence were the first two focusses of private travellers."

8 *Le Petit Robert*, Paris, Dictionnaires Robert, 1976, p. 1376.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 1376.

10 *Oxford English Dictionary*, [online], URL: https://www.oed.com/dictionary/meditation_n?tab=meaning_and_use#37554501, consulted July 1st, 2024.

11 *Loc. cit.*

thought. Further to this, according to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, *méditation* is connected to the Indo-European root *med-* meaning “to take appropriate measures” as in the terms *remedy* and *remedial*.¹² The term contains therefore a third branch of meaning, one that suggests the ideas of resolution and cure. This additionally broadens the scope of meanings implied in our analysis of the text. According to our interpretation of the term, the first two meanings of *meditation* are closely linked to this third idea of resolving a difficulty or an inner conflict.

Vacations by the sea

The beach resort is a venue much esteemed by Marguerite Duras.¹³ Maritime geography is an important element in her vast literary and cinematographic production in works to which we will later refer. At the outer boundaries of the continent, the seaside resort occupies a space that is both liminal and multifaceted, determined by the juxtaposition of land, ocean and sky, the outlines of which may be blurred. Along with the geography of this space often appearing to be fuzzy and vague, the concept of *shore* is equally changing depending upon the history, culture and industry of specific regions. The beach is an ever-changing space, a product of cultural and artistic practices. The significant inspiration Duras derives from the sea reflects the course of cultural history of the region, especially the growth of the tourist industry. “[La f]in des années quarante, début des années cinquante est [...] le grand tournant de la balnéarité [...].

¹² *Online Etymology Dictionary*, [online], URL: <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=meditation>, consulted August 14th, 2024.

¹³ Jean Vallier documents Marguerite Duras’ frequent visits to ocean side resorts in his biography (*C’était Marguerite Duras*, 2 vol., Paris, Fayard, 2006-2010).

Au sortir de la Seconde Guerre mondiale le loisir balnéaire [s'est] massifié."¹⁴

In his study of the waterfront as an attraction, *Le Territoire du vide*, historian Alain Corbin documents the varying perceptions about the beach held in western thought since antiquity. The sea has been perceived as having beauty to be admired, especially when it lies still and calm or, variously in response to wind and storms, as a force to be feared.¹⁵ Corbin's research describes artistic and religious interpretations of the sea that go back centuries. As a perpetual source of imaginative creations, the continuously changing conditions of the sea and the mass movement of waters due to tides, hurricanes and earthquakes has long inspired poetry and other forms of artistic production.¹⁶ The western conceptualization of the beach as a tourist destination begins to develop in the eighteenth century. Rauch points out that prior to this time beaches and ocean shorelines were places largely ignored and constituted a space essentially reserved for fishers: the tourist industry acquires "des espaces laissés à l'abandon ou restés jusqu'ici à l'usage des métiers de la mer. Les vacances en bord de la mer ont introduit dès la fin du XVIII^e siècle de nouveaux soins du corps dans les lieux géographiques symboliquement consacrés, où on se sent bien vivre."¹⁷ Rauch affirms here that it is the association between

14 Jean-Didier Urbain, *Sur la plage : mœurs et coutumes balnéaires (XIX^e-XX^e siècles)*, Paris, Payot & Rivages, 1994, p. 159-160. "The 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s mark a great shift in beach tourism. [...] At the end of the Second World War seaside resorts massified."

15 Alain Corbin, *Le Territoire du vide : l'Occident et le désir du rivage (1750-1840)*, Paris, Aubier, 1988, p. 21.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

17 André Rauch, *Les Vacances*, op. cit., p. 58. The tourist industry "gains an abandoned space, used up until then by seafaring occupations. At the end of the 18th century seaside vacations introduced new types of care for the body in geographical regions associated with a feeling of wellbeing."

littoral territory and human health upon which the cultural practice of beach visitation is founded. Further to this, the tourist industry began to promote the idea of the natural beauty and the convivial aspect of this geography: "Sous la Monarchie de Juillet, les plages cotées ont multiplié ces aspects festifs qui ne sont pas sans rapport avec une sensibilisation croissante avec la relation avec la nature."¹⁸ The attractions of the seaside could be in fact presented to tourists without much hyperbole according to the analysis of *Les Guides bleus* made by semiologist Jules Gritti. Established in 1841, *Les Guides bleus* are a series of books, intended for tourists, that describe the geography, culture and history of France. In the texts of *Les Guides bleus* "Pour récupérer l'immense, conjurer l'illimité [de la mer], divers procédés entrent en jeu. Tout d'abord celui d'apparente dénotation ; lorsque l'illimité s'impose avec évidence, il est à peine mentionné ; c'est le cas de la mer."¹⁹ Gritti suggests that the sight of the sea is so magnificent, vast and impressive that it remains indescribable resisting any turn of phrase. The seaside is thus perceived as a space that produces a sense of serenity in the face of its greatness. The conceptualization of the curative aspect of the beach is an idea central to its commercialization, a notion equally present in how Duras portrays the sea.

Duras uses the maritime space to evoke the themes of quest, existential void and rebirth. In an interview published in *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras*, the writer confirms that

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59. "The convivial appeal of coastal beaches increased during the July Monarchy along with a growing awareness of nature itself."

¹⁹ Jules Gritti, "Les contenus culturels du *Guide Bleu* : monuments et sites 'à voir'", *Communications*, n° 10, "Vacances et tourisme", 1967, p. 57. "To express immensity and limitlessness certain writing processes come into play. However, when the sense of spatial infinity is so remarkably apparent, it's hardly mentioned; such is the case regarding the sea."

she has “toujours été au bord de la mer dans [ses] livres.”²⁰ Demonstrating a fascination for the sea, the text of *The Easy Life* foreshadows Duras’ film *La Femme du Gange* (1974).²¹ Speaking of this film interviewer Michelle Porte notes that “[la] mer est complètement présente [...] c’est comme la respiration du film.”²² The inner dramas of her characters “sont des mouvements de marée.”²³ The writer states that “regarder la mer, c’est regarder le tout.”²⁴ Maritime locations constitute the setting in several of Duras’ stories, in for example *The Little Horses of Tarquinia* (1952) and *The Sailor from Gibraltar* (1953). These novels reflect of course the western conceptualization of the beach in the 1950s. Later, Duras situates other intrigues at oceanside inns, those for example of *L’Amour* (1971), *Blue Eyes, Black Hair* (1986) and *Emily L.* (1987). The conclusion of *The Vice-Consul* (1966) takes place in this very setting allowing us to conclude that Durassien characters are generally drawn to the ocean.

The Durassien text that eminently depicts the salutary qualities of maritime space is *The Sailor from Gibraltar*. This novel convenes several associated themes: waterside resorts, yacht travel, coastal sojourns, thereby contrasting the reassuring but limited lifestyle of a Paris office worker with his adventure in the infinite space of the ocean. Patrick Vayrette

20 Marguerite Duras & Michelle Porte, *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras* [1977], *Œuvres complètes*, t. III, Gilles Philippe ed., Paris, Gallimard, “Bibliothèque de la Pléiade”, 2014, p. 231. Duras has “always been by the sea in her books.”

21 *La Femme du Gange* was filmed at the resort town of Trouville-sur-mer where Marguerite Duras purchased, in 1963, a hotel apartment overlooking the sea (Jean Vallier, *C’était Marguerite Duras*, t. I, op. cit., p. 437-438). Photographs of her Trouville property have been published by her friend Hélène Bamberger in *Marguerite Duras de Trouville*, Paris, Minuit, 2004.

22 Marguerite Duras & Michelle Porte, *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras*, op. cit., p. 232. “The sea is completely present [...] it is the breath of the film.”

23 *Ibid.*, p. 233. The inner dramas “are tidal movements.”

24 *Loc. cit.*, “To see the sea is to see everything.”

notes that a focus on marginal space gradually eclipses the starting point of the journey in Duras' work. Subsequent texts begin with characters already engaged in their vacations. The author retains "une fascination perceptible, une attirance pour les lieux côtiers, à l'écart."²⁵ In addition to this inclination toward spatial isolation Monique Pinthon notes how, at the social level, Durassien characters demonstrate a tendency to exist at the margins of society often living in hotels.²⁶ Duras' fascination with marginal space gives rise to a collection of works that not only bear witness to the growth of the travel industry during the post war period, but that use the seaside space to examine social and philosophical questions such as violence and death. These seaside landscapes are not benign. The sudden death of another beach goer in *The Easy Life* reminds Francine of the contingency of death and of the power of the sea. This drowning greatly influences the outcome of the heroine's beach vacation. The characters in this and other stories by Duras nevertheless profit from being in the proximity of the sea. The more compelling aspects of the ocean inspire Francine to meditate for example.

The depiction of the beach in *The Easy Life* conveys most importantly a perfect place for the protagonist Francine to both contemplate her life and put it out of her mind. Her holiday reflects a need to distance herself from her farm Les Bugues, stricken by tragedies of murder and suicide. She seeks a faraway space to where she can temporarily escape her domestic situation, that allows her to take a step back

25 Patrick Vayrette, "Sur les lieux marginaux des premiers romans durassiens", in *Marguerite Duras : marges et transgressions*, Anne Cousseau & Dominique Denès eds., Nancy, Presses universitaires de Nancy, 2006, p. 41. The author retains "a visible fascination for distant coastal locations."

26 Monique Pinthon, "Les personnages dans l'univers romanesque de Marguerite Duras : un destin en marge", in *Marguerite Duras : marges et transgressions*, op. cit., p. 63-64.

from these tragic events. This aspect of the plot of the novel is therefore founded on the idea of voyage as remedy.

Upon arriving for the very first time at the coastal village of T., Francine, the narrator, clarifies her plan: "I'm on vacation, I came to see the sea" (EL, p. 91). As we shall describe, this vacationer will certainly appreciate many aspects of the ocean. Be that as it may, she has also come to "see" herself. In effect, "[v]oir, c'est se voir", as Rauch so succinctly states,²⁷ underlining the idea that the tourist's thoughts are often inwardly focussed. A few steps away from the train station, enroute to her hotel, Francine observes for example her shadow cast by the streetlamps. She notes that "[i]n the streets, it's really me, feeling tightly confined by my shadow, which I watch lengthen, topple, return to me. I feel tenderness and gratitude for the me who has brought me to the sea" (*loc. cit.*). Acknowledging her travel project, her self-examination thus begins. In her room in the hotel, Francine objectifies herself while observing her reflection in the armoire mirror: "I am only this girl who looks at herself and nothing more" (p. 98). The vacation affords her a paring down of distraction and a growing awareness of herself in the immediate moment. The narration of this story in the first person contributes to the introspective and meditative mode of the text.

The Easy Life is comprised of three parts. The second part of the novel is entirely devoted to Francine's voyage. This creates an impression of discontinuity, a suspension of her quotidian life, and an abandonment of her life on the farm. According to critic Noelle English, the text is different in the second section of the novel, by being less analytical and more rhythmic and lyrical than the other two sections.²⁸

²⁷ André Rauch, *Les Vacances*, *op. cit.*, p. 17. "To sightsee is to see oneself."

²⁸ Noelle English, "A Happy Ending but an Unhappy Fate: Marguerite Duras' *The Easy Life*", *Neophilologus*, vol. 94, no 1, 2010, p. 47.

This stylistic distinction also serves to demarcate Francine's trip from the rest of the story, with the first section devoted to the unfolding drama at the farm and the last depicting the recommencement of Francine's life there.

Francine's voyage is described by literary critics in varying ways. For example, Christiane Blot-Labarrère states that the character of Francine is "jet[é] vers une fugue déguisée en vacances sur une plage de l'Atlantique",²⁹ thus designating the voyage as an escapade or a flight of escape disguised as a vacation. The notion of an escape (from traumatic events) well describes Francine's sojourn on the Atlantic coast. Noëlle Caruggi mentions two other characteristics of Francine's voyage; firstly, it comprises a retreat, meaning specifically the action of withdrawing from "[le] monde séculaire, le calme et l'inactivité étant des conditions essentielles pour que l'attention puisse être dirigée entièrement vers l'intérieur."³⁰ Secondly Caruggi suggests that Francine's voyage constitutes a "périple initiatique",³¹ an initiatory journey. What characterizes this kind of rite is the requisite solitude: "Dans les récits de rites initiatiques le héros doit toujours affronter seul l'inconnu",³² for example, in the way Francine distances herself from the other vacationers. She thus confirms her desire to be alone: "laboriously I construct my solitude, the largest palace of solitude anyone's ever seen, the most impressive. And I both fear it and marvel at it" (EL, p. 133). She compares

29 Christiane Blot-Labarrère, "Notice", in Marguerite Duras, *La Vie tranquille* [1944], *Œuvres complètes*, t. I., Gilles Philippe ed., Paris, Gallimard, "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade", 2011, p. 1435. Francine is "engaged in an escape disguised as a vacation on an Atlantic beach, therefore defining her voyage as a flight."

30 Noëlle Caruggi, *Marguerite Duras, une expérience intérieure : « le gommage de l'être en faveur de tout »*, New York, Peter Lang, 1995, p. 29. The expression means "withdrawing from the secular world, with calmness and inactivity being the essential conditions for one's attention to be inwardly directed."

31 *Loc. cit.*

32 *Ibid.*, p. 30. "In initiatory rites the hero must always confront the unknown alone."

herself to a nun: "I will enter into the Orders of Solitude" (p. 135). The narrator is determined to eliminate any outside interference with this project. Francine succeeds in emptying her environment; indeed, the vast appearance of the sea and the sky—not cluttered with things and people—contribute to the impression of vacant space.

The notions of emptiness and vacuity are etymologically linked to the term *vacation*. Viard notes for example that the Japanese term *vacuncus* (developed from the French lexicon) expressly indicates empty time, the absence of productive activity.³³ *The Easy Life* notably illustrates the impression of such empty time associated with a vacation. In speaking generally of Duras' characters, Jean Pierrot notes that "les protagonistes de Marguerite Duras [...] vivent dans l'inaction, volontaire ou forcée, dans la vacance, un temps vide et indéterminé."³⁴ Accordingly, Martine Jacquot suggests Duras creates empty space by often developing "une structure [qui réfute] l'espace, temps, personnages et instance narrative."³⁵ Such conditions are certainly present during Francine's stay at the beach, where space and time are unencumbered by activity: "Three days I've been here, and nothing is happening" (EL, p. 98), affirms Francine, who experiences little diversion. Her holiday consists of the daily repetition of a minimum of activity: "I do the same thing here every day (invariably I go from the sea to the hotel and from my room to the sea)" (p. 142). She insists on repeating this: "For

33 Jean Viard, *Penser les vacances*, op. cit., p. 52.

34 Jean Pierrot, *Marguerite Duras*, Paris, Corti, 1986, p. 189. "Marguerite Duras' protagonists live inactively, voluntarily or by force, in a vacant state, in an indeterminate time frame."

35 Martine Jacquot, *Duras ou le regard absolu*, Toulon, Presses du Midi, 2009, p. 143. Duras develops "a structure that refutes space, time, characters and narrative."

fifteen days I had done only that, go to the beach, return to the hotel, then go back to the beach" (p. 144). At the time of her departure, she reiterates that "two weeks I've been here, and nothing has happened" (p. 149). Francine's declaration that nothing has happened during her vacation ignores the idea that thinking itself, in the manner she does, is a substantial activity. Indeed, the act of examining her past and current situations occupies a great deal of her time. In the physical and temporal space stretching out before her, she will spend her time in three distinct ways: first, reflecting upon the past; secondly, absolving her thoughts while focussing on physical sensation; and, lastly, formulating ways to approach her future, notions all contained in the meaning of *meditation*. Francine is not unlike those inaugural tourists of previous centuries that André Rauch speaks of who "nourrissent une méditation sur le temps ou l'existence."³⁶

A time for both reflection and the abolition of thought

The first notion comprised in the term *meditation* –that of profound reflection– qualifies the way in which the character Francine initially spends her time. With her regular working life suspended, she is free to both think at length and to further cease all thought. By stepping away from the sad events of her life at Les Bugues, Francine will benefit from her journey. Travelling–creating distance in time and space–is thought to encourage the process coming to terms with life events. This view of travel plays out in this and other works of Duras. Judging the resort, Francine observes that "[i]t's calm here. In Les Bugues I was restless" (EL, p. 99).

36 André Rauch, *Les Vacances*, *op. cit.*, p. 9. Early tourists "found sources for meditation on time and existence."

The serenity of the empty beach allows Francine to think about several subjects. In this calm space she delves into her interconnected problems: her rapport with her parents, the ambiguous situation with her lover Tiène, her relationships with her brother Nicholas and uncle Jérôme, and their subsequent deaths. Caught up in her thoughts, Francine begins to imagine her own death (p. 110). In coming to terms with the death of a loved one, it is not uncommon for the bereaved to contemplate their own passing. Francine attaches a maritime symbol to the idea of death, that of the lighthouse. This nautical structure and its beacon represent both literally and symbolically the idea of safe passage. "White beacon of my death, I recognize you, you were hope. Your light is good for my heart, fresh to my mind" (p. 136). The beam of light also represents to the narrator an awakening of new thoughts and feelings as she discovers the simple grace of being. Confronted with the idea of death, Francine is not unhopeful. In the next stage in the resolution of her grief, Francine explores the nature of her very presence in the world. Blot-Labarrère suggests that *The Easy Life* represents the ontological problem of existence.³⁷ Francine addresses this ontological problem when she observes for example "[b]efore me there was nothing in my place. Now there is me in place of nothing" (p. 113). Francine's sense of self is dissimulated and contingent. She describes this sense of emptiness as *ennui*, the very concept spanning Jean-Paul Sartre's 1938 novel *Nausea*, and equally explored in Albert Camus's *The Outsider* (1942). Like the protagonists of these two novels, Duras' heroine Francine observes the empty nature of her existence and thus enters the philosophical dialogue of the era. In writing about one of Duras' next novels *The Little Horses of Tarquinia*, Robert

³⁷ Christiane Blot-Labarrère, *Marguerite Duras*, Paris, Seuil, 1992, p. 21.

Mazzola points out the connection that Duras establishes between vacations and *ennui*. Mazzola states that during vacations where nothing happens, and where time is given to thought, little by little a character will consider the vacuity of their own existence.³⁸ Susan Cohen affirms that *Rien*-nothingness-informs this writer's entire enterprise and that "il s'agit moins de nommer le Rien que de le montrer."³⁹ Akiko Ueda also delves into the question of nothingness in the work of Duras basing her analysis on zen principles derived from Buddhist philosophies concluding that nothingness in the works of Duras, especially in *The Ravishing of Lol Stein* constitutes the basis for regenerative experience. "[C]hez Duras, de même que la tradition extrême-orientale, le néant ou le vide est inséparable de l'être. Ici le vide est un commencement, constitutif des identités."⁴⁰ In his reading of *The Ravishing of Lol Stein* and *The Vice-Consul*, Olivier Ammour-Mayeur notes how these novels are inscribed with shortcomings, blankness, ellipsis and lack.⁴¹ Ammour-Mayeur advances the perspective of Eastern philosophy in which *le Vide* structures thought and art; 'being' necessarily arises out of nothingness.⁴²

38 Robert Mazzola, "Le Schéma de la disparition : *Les Petits Chevaux de Tarquinia*", *Dalhousie French Studies*, vol. 94, 2000, p. 47.

39 Susan Cohen, "La présence de rien", *Cahiers Renault-Barrault*, n° 106, 1983, p. 17. "It's less a question of naming nothingness as it is of showing it."

40 Akiko Ueda, "Le Ravissement : l'absolu vide de Duras", in *Orients(s) de Marguerite Duras*, Florence de Chalonge, Yann Mével, Akiko Ueda eds., Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2014, p. 102. "In Duras, as in Eastern tradition, nothingness and void are inseparable from being. Here nothingness is a beginning, where identities are formed."

41 Olivier Ammour-Mayeur, "Duras et l'esthétique asiatique du Vide et du Plein, ou du ravissement des genres dans *L'Amour*", in *Duras femme du siècle*, Stella Harvey & Kate Ince eds., Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2001, p. 258.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 259. Ammour-Mayeur goes on to suggest that Duras, having spent her childhood in Vietnam, forming a close to connection to the culture, has been influenced by Eastern philosophies, at an unconscious level perhaps, p. 261.

Hours spent at the beach advances Francine's recognition of quietly 'being'. Without any distractions Francine becomes conscious of the act of simply thinking, of having thoughts; she begins to view these thoughts as material objects that she will eventually banish from her realm. This dismissal occurs in stages. Firstly, Francine conceives of thoughts as entities situated outside of herself: "The thought of my person is also cold and distant. It is somewhere outside me, peaceful and drowsy like one of those things under the sun" (EL, p. 106). Francine becomes increasingly comfortable in dealing with the onslaught of thoughts to the point of considering them in a lighthearted way. "My thoughts. The more I set them aside, the more deafening they return, those chatterboxes" (p. 127). Becoming aware of their comings and goings, Francine stops distinguishing her thoughts from each other, rendering them all equal and undifferentiated:

Two hours of stillness under the sun, doing nothing, just looking at the sea, always the same: then my head can no longer do anything, it can no longer choose one thought over another and retain it. Thoughts float at the same level. They appear and disappear: wrecks out there on the sea. They have lost the appearance and the meaning that usually make them recognizable, all while keeping their form in a manner at once absurd and unforgettable. (EL, p. 186)

Francine notices here that her thoughts detach themselves from their meaning. She compares them to shipwrecks, objects destroyed by the action of waves. Following this obliteration, her thoughts nonetheless take on new life. Francine imagines her thoughts personified, operating in an independent manner as she notes while swimming:

But quickly, suddenly: thought. It returns, chokes on fear, bangs its head, now so large (so large that the sea could fit inside it); suddenly it's scared to be inside a dead skull. And so you move your feet and your hands, which are back to being your friends. You slide intelligently with the sea until it casts you onto the beach. (EL, p. 115)

In response to the “scared” thought, the heroine moves her body, swims through the water, and embraces her living self, her living mind which provides the home for assailing thoughts. While she doesn’t claim any of these thoughts, she insists upon their presence in her mind. In a similar way, she becomes conscious of her heart and of other parts of her body:

On the beach, alone, in the sun, it’s so different. You can feel your heart beating all the way to your fingers, a filling and unfilling of this density between the ribs, shut inside. My bare leg, lying on the sand, I don’t recognize it, but I recognize my beating heart. (EL, p. 104)

She makes an inventory of her body, focussing finally upon the beating of her heart.

Like the pulsation of her heart, the rhythmic action of the waves has a calming effect on the troubled Francine. This soothing effect is perceptible both in the content of the text and in its style; the sounds and repetition of words function as a mantra: “The waves arrived in regular rows before my eyes. Perpetually they arrived. I saw only them, the waves. Soon they were my breath, the beating of my blood. They visited my chest and left me, withdrawing, hollow and resounding like a cove” (EL, p. 139). In this passage, so lyrical in the French version, Francine compares herself to an ocean inlet that harbours the reverberation of waves.⁴³ Her consciousness of the rhythmic movement of water contributes to the effacement of her thoughts. The following passage from the French text, presented here as verse provides a demonstration of lyricism:

J’aurais pu mourir
d’une des milles façons dont on meurt
et pourtant j’ai réussi à parcourir

⁴³ Marguerite Duras, *La Vie tranquille*, op. cit., p. 248. “Les vagues arrivaient toujours par rangées régulières à fleur de mes yeux. Sempiternellement, elles arrivaient. Je ne voyais qu’elles, les vagues. Bientôt elles étaient ma respiration, les battements de mon sang. Elles visitaient ma poitrine et me laissaient, en se retirant, creuse et sonore comme une crique.”

vingt-cinq années de vie,
je suis encore vivante,
pas encore morte.
Je respire.⁴⁴ (EL, p. 219)

Like song and poetry, these lines are pleasurable to read aloud with the repetition of interior and end sounds of the words. While the rhyming sounds of “mourir” and “respire” echo each other at the beginning and end of this segment, they are vastly separated in meaning in a semantical movement from the idea death towards that of life and vitality. In addition to evoking breath, constituting a natural rhythmic pattern contained within the body the passage goes on to speak of the equally important beat of the heart.

In considering Duras’ attraction to the waterfront, we would like to point out the writer’s interest in French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose influence can be seen in the middle section of this novel. Not only was Rousseau equally drawn to the water, he, like Duras values non-thinking moments and recognizes how the waterfront setting leads to this desired state of mind. In tracing Rousseau’s influence on Duras, Françoise Barbé-Petit establishes a parallel between their texts. The passages from *The Easy Life* mentioned above echo lines from *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* in which the narrator is walking along a riverbank. This text corresponds to Francine’s account of her experience at the edge of sea, in which a similar notion of appeasement exists:

There, the noise of the waves and the tossing of the water, captivating my senses and chasing all other disturbances from my soul, plunged it into delightful reverie in which night would often surprise me without my having noticed it. The ebb and flow of its water and its noise continual but magnified at intervals, striking my ears and eyes without respite, took the place of internal movements which reverie extinguished within

44 Olivia Baes and Emma Ramada translate this passage as follows: “I could have died in one of the thousand ways people die, and yet I managed to cover twenty-five years of life, I am still alive, not yet dead. I breathe.” (EL, p. 97)

me and was enough to make me feel my existence with pleasure and without taking the trouble to think.⁴⁵

The dissipation of thought created by the regular rhythms of water, noted in the texts of both Rousseau and Duras, produces a tranquilizing effect: “the uniformity of the continual movement which lulled me and which, without any active assistance from my soul, held me so fast”, Rousseau adds.⁴⁶ In comparing the two authors, Barbé-Petit insists on their mutual tendency to resist thinking. The two writers both appreciate the “*plaisir d’exister sans le tourment des pensées.*”⁴⁷

[Rousseau] semble éprouver un plaisir infini à l’extinction de l’activité mentale, savourant en lui le silence de la pensée discursive – ce qui n’est pas pour déplaire à Duras dont les textes coïncident souvent avec la seule présence première des sensations, dans une quasi-dissolution de l’activité physique.⁴⁸

At the beach Francine is indeed oriented towards reduced mental activity, and a calm physical state, with her body stretched out on the sand or floating upon the ocean.

Francine has entered a world in which “you are present in this present” (EL, p. 133). Her mindfulness (*pleine conscience*) allows her to develop a new perspective. She recognizes the advantage of having “[n]othing left to think about now. Nothing. My head is fresh, suddenly empty” (p. 159).

45 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* [1776], trans. by Charles Butterworth, New York, New York University Press, 1979, p. 67.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 67

47 Françoise Barbé-Petit, *Marguerite Duras au risque de la philosophie : Pascal, Rousseau, Diderot, Kierkegaard, Levinas*, Paris, Kimé, 2010, p. 48. The two writers appreciate “the pleasure of existing without the torment of thoughts.”

48 *Loc cit.* “Rousseau seems to experience infinite pleasure in the extinguishing of mental activity, savouring the silence of discursive thinking- which does not displease Duras whose texts often solely feature sensations in a quasi-dissolution of physical activity.”

The state of having nothing further to think about, provides impetus to move forward with her life. Similarly, Rousseau prescribes the following cure. "What is needed is neither absolute rest nor too much agitation, but a uniform and moderated movement having neither jolts nor lapses."⁴⁹

The Easy Life thus represents the dissolution of mental activity which leads Jacquot to perceive in this work of Duras a reflection of the practice of yoga. The description of Francine's activity "rejoint étrangement la définition du yoga : 'la substance de l'être mental est tranquille, si tranquille que rien ne la trouble'."⁵⁰ Jacquot describes yoga as being "un ralentissement du cours des pensées, le silence intérieur, l'observation intérieure."⁵¹ As we have seen, the nonthinking meditative aspect of yoga is powerfully illustrated in Duras' representation of Francine's activity on the beach.

The sea as remedy

"I am a certain form in which a certain history that is not mine has been poured" (EL, p. 106) says Francine, indicating a certain detachment from her life events. The remedy to Francine's suffering occurs not only when she objectifies her own history but also when she perceives her personal story to be a part of a far larger one. This process is linked to having travelled to the littoral site and to the way in which she perceives the sea: she makes it the centre of her associations. She connects the sea to her life story and to the history of the world: "[w]hat has passed and what will come is entombed in the sea, which

⁴⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, op. cit., p. 69.

⁵⁰ Martine Jacquot, *Duras ou le regard absolu*, op. cit., p. 155. Jacquot is citing here Hindu philosopher Sri Aurobindo, *Le Guide du yoga*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2007, p. 29. Francine's activity "strangely matches the definition of yoga in which the mind is calm, so calm that nothing is troubling it."

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

is dancing, dancing, right now, beyond all things past, beyond all things to come" (p. 108-09). The sea has lifted the weight of the heroine's sadness. She observes that the ocean waters both stimulate her senses and conjure up memories. These memories derive from multiple associated images:

this scent of the sea that reaches me on the beach in a sharp, fresh breath, I recognize it. It's a scent of elsewhere. It's the scent of deprivation, of being deprived of Tiène, who sleeps and dreams and pays no mind to me. The wind that comes from the edge of the horizon comes from Tiène's chest, more wind than before, after touching something like his blood. I recognize this wild sound, the taste of salt and steel, the scent of war. (EL, p. 105)

The noises and sounds of the sea encourage varying ways of thinking about the past. They remind Francine of her personal story and more broadly of world events, which at the time of publication of this text, were those of the Second World War. The narrator of *The Easy Life* thus invests the sea with significant meaning, designating it as the repository of the history of the world and of all its aspects large and small, from the sorrowful absence of her lover to the wretched brutality of the war.⁵²

Francine identifies with the sea, appropriating the metaphors the sea confers upon her, such as the image of dance: "Some mornings by the sea, I feel that I too, as I walk, am dancing" (EL, p. 109). When Francine swims she feels herself to be a part of the natural biological order, to be living but not entirely conscious of this existence. She notes to herself:

52 The narrator of *The Little Horses of Tarquinia* equally observes that the sea contains the history of the world. On the Ligurian coast, she observes her resort "was a little village beside the sea, the ancient western sea, the most closed in, the hottest and the most history-charged sea in the world, a sea on whose shores the war was still going on" (Marguerite Duras, *The Little Horses of Tarquinia*, trans. by Peter de Berg, London, John Calder Publishers, 1960, p. 8).

You are a peaceful beast with breathing lungs, with sliding eyes that smooth the sky from one horizon to the other without ever looking at it. [...] You are but a peaceful beast with breathing lungs. Little by little, that which thinks gets wet, soaks itself in opacity, an opacity always more wet, more calm, more rhythmic. You are seawater. (EL, p. 114)

The heroine of *The Easy Life* graciously and joyously abandons herself to the realm of nature in which she is merely a specimen. "You're in the hand of the sea. You are the pleasure of breathing it in. Within an order that does not feel, we are this insignificant disorder that feels. A thing to witness the sea" (EL, p. 133). For Francine the sea represents a force stronger than her own disoriented thoughts. Her perceived connection to nature resolves the uneasiness she feels amid tormented thoughts. A part of this resolution occurs when she accepts her contingent place in the world, as a living creature who will die. The acceptance of her proper death is an aspect of Francine's healing. Thus, she proclaims: "Oh! I could finally die in a scream. Without thought, without wisdom, I would be nothing but that scream of joy at having found death in a scream" (p. 127). Francine affirms here the idea that wisdom is not a determining factor in the healing process; her evolution is instead more closely connected to *non-savoir*, and precisely to meditation, which involves the abolition of thought and reason.

As we have already mentioned, Francine's confrontation of her own death constitutes an important step in the grieving process. Other stages in this process include of course remembering and reflecting upon the manner of death of the loved one, actions effectively taken by Francine. The grieving process, as we have seen in this text, also includes the affirmation of one's own life,⁵³ which Francine achieves while afloat on the sea. The moments on the beach where Francine

⁵³ Elizabeth Kübler-Ross & David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving*, New York, Scribner, 2005, p. 25.

gives her full attention to the beating of her heart and to her breathing also serve to affirm that her own life force is intact and continues. The acknowledgment of her material being plays a key role in her recovery from trauma.

One of Francine's major successes is to have learned how to control her thoughts by concentrating on the physical dimension of her being. She masters her thoughts through a specific process: "I know how to escape them [thoughts]. I look at my knees or my breasts that lift my dress and immediately my thought curves and returns to me, obedient. I think of myself. My knees real knees, my breasts real breasts. An observation that counts" (EL, p. 141). Francine provides here the prescription for success in calming herself by resting quietly on the beach attuned to her physicality.

If the goal of Francine's voyage is to address her trauma, the objective is attained. Towards the end of her stay, still engaged in reflection, she announces her recovery by referring once again to the lighthouse: "With the little beacon to the left now out, I could no longer see anything, neither the rocks nor the houses. I no longer had parents or a place to return to, I awaited nothing. For the first time I stopped thinking of Nicolas. I was at peace" (EL, p. 139). This reference to the lighthouse evokes once again a feeling of well-being in the protagonist. In this instance, the lighthouse beam is extinguished as if to mark the end of the exercise in self-reflection.

At the end of her voyage, Francine thinks optimistically about her future at Les Bugues. "*We'll have the easy life. I've been around my head*" (EL, p. 164). In the original French version of this passage Duras uses the term *tour*: "J'ai fait le tour de ma tête."⁵⁴ We draw attention to this in order to insist on the idea of 'tour' or 'trip' through her mind which corresponds

54 "*On l'aura la vie tranquille. J'ai fait le tour de ma tête*" (Marguerite Duras, *La Vie tranquille*, op. cit., p. 262).

to Rauch's idea presented at the beginning of our study, stipulating that travelling is often a voyage inside of oneself. For Francine, going around her head or "the tour" of her mind required a physical displacement, specifically a retreat to the seaside to consolidate the plan to alleviate her suffering. Her escape to an ocean resort is a movement towards stabilizing her life. The maritime geography as presented in *The Easy Life* thus comprises a therapeutic space.

Duras' representation of seascape connects well-being to the silence of the outlying space in which the protagonist finds herself. The depiction of Francine's character emphasizes the idea that silence does not signal the absence of thought, even though it can indicate this as well. Silence given over to meditation in this case enables Francine to resolve what's troubling her. To better understand the significance of Francine's search for silence and inactivity, it is important to mention the evolution of Duras' writing and cinematographic styles. Future works by Duras feature the absence of development, analysis and description of settings and characters. Furthermore, plots also become minimal as we see in her representations of an Atlantic beach in film *La Femme du Gange* for example, or its related text *L'Amour*. When details concerning plot, action and development of character are absent—in just such texts where characters spend long hours on the beach looking at the sea for example—the text itself, whether written or cinematographic, creates a meditative opportunity for the reader or spectator, a moment for becoming absorbed by the resonance of the words or the rhythmic sound of ocean swells. The reader/spectator thus participates in the meditative endeavour by either thinking about the meaning of the work or by simply appreciating the chanting words and vast images of sand, water and sky. The idea of meditation is thus expressed in Duras' texts and films through both form and content. Over time, her writing distinguishes itself by its brevity, slowness and repetition

of words. In *The Easy Life* we have found examples of explicit and reasoned thought—the first type of meditation according to our definition. By contrast, Duras establishes in this novel a foundation for future writing in which the absence of profound thought prevails over reasoned sentences. We have shown here how *The Easy Life* proposes the absence of reasoning as a necessary step in the therapeutic mending of the heroine.

One of Duras' earliest works thus presents an appreciation for the act of meditating, comprehensively and at length in the two opposing senses of the term. The emphasis on different aspects of meditation manifests itself clearly in the representation of long empty hours spent observing the sea, sitting ocean-side, thinking, conversing and ultimately no longer thinking at all. *The Easy Life* shows that the process of grieving is a long one, and can appear to embody total inactivity—complete passivity. According to this representation, the maritime setting encourages what Stéphane Patrice calls, in relation to Duras, "[une] patience du concept",⁵⁵ a long and slow reasoning, a gradual process, hesitant and non-urgent. We have highlighted here that this lengthy and patient reasoning found in Duras' characters moves forward in correlation with their leisure time and 'vacant' space. Starting with Francine, who is strongly drawn to silence, Duras' work evolves into embracing a 'style blanc', a text that is largely vacant, minimalist, emptied of descriptive detail, and as expansive and open as the maritime horizon itself.

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55 Stéphane Patrice, *Marguerite Duras et l'histoire*, Paris, PUF, "Question actuelles", 2003, p. 96.