About a Stroll that We Take Every Day – Love

Khalil Barakat has written an essay about love for Tohu's special issue: about the love affairs of the French novelist Marguerite Duras, his love for her, love between men, and love in the shadow of the pandemic.

Essay / Halil Barkat December 31, 2022

In an interview for the French literary magazine Lire in October 1991, the French novelist Marguerite Duras responded to the interviewer's question – whether she preferred to talk about things she wanted to hide: "What I always hide is my love stories. They belong to me and no one else."

For a long while, I used to wish that my family house, where I had spent what now seems like a fast and, at the same time, lazy childhood, had a garden like the one that had surrounded Duras's house after she had moved to the village Neauphle-le-Château.

Marguerite_Duras_1993.jpg



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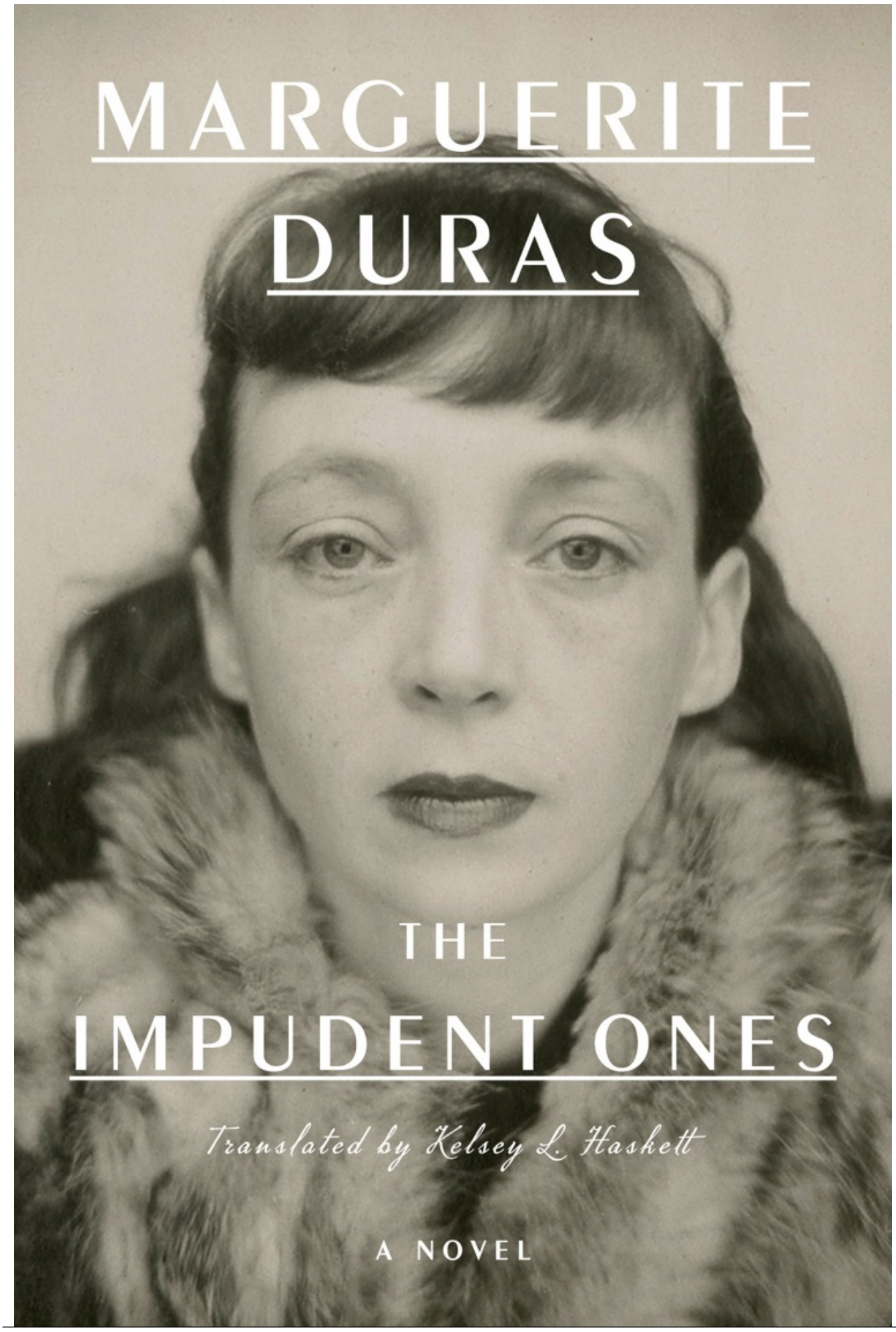
Marguerite Duras [2]

Time goes by, we live and die, and Duras is still at her home, sitting at the desk, wearing thick black-framed glasses and silver bracelets. She stares at the blue color disappearing through the window like the veil of noon, and all that can be heard from afar is the sound of the typewriter, clicking and sighing, moaning and listening, halting and rushing.

"How can you describe your relationships with men?" Leopoldina, an Italian journalist who came, on another occasion, to interview her in a house in the suburbs of Paris, asks. "You must love them very much to succeed in supporting their infinite need to lash out, talk about everything that happens to them or around them, and analyze it."

Duras loved men like she loved strolling, following them around, eyes open, hearing and documenting everything, her hand constantly writing. I have never known anyone who loves writing like Duras – with her wildness and vulgarity and the disrupted realms she storms into without blinking an eyelid. Perhaps that was why she had fallen in love, late in life, with a young gay man, 28 years her junior. For five years, Yann Andréa has written long letters to the beautiful and rough Marguerite, after reading all her books and collecting them in his library. And why not? He may have taken her on his trips to Cuba and Argentina, where he had met other men, kissed them, had sex with them, and read them long passages from the books of Duras, the only woman in his life.

duras2.jpg **[3]**


MARGUERITE
DURAS
THE
IMPUDENT ONES
Translated by Kelsey L. Haskett
A NOVEL

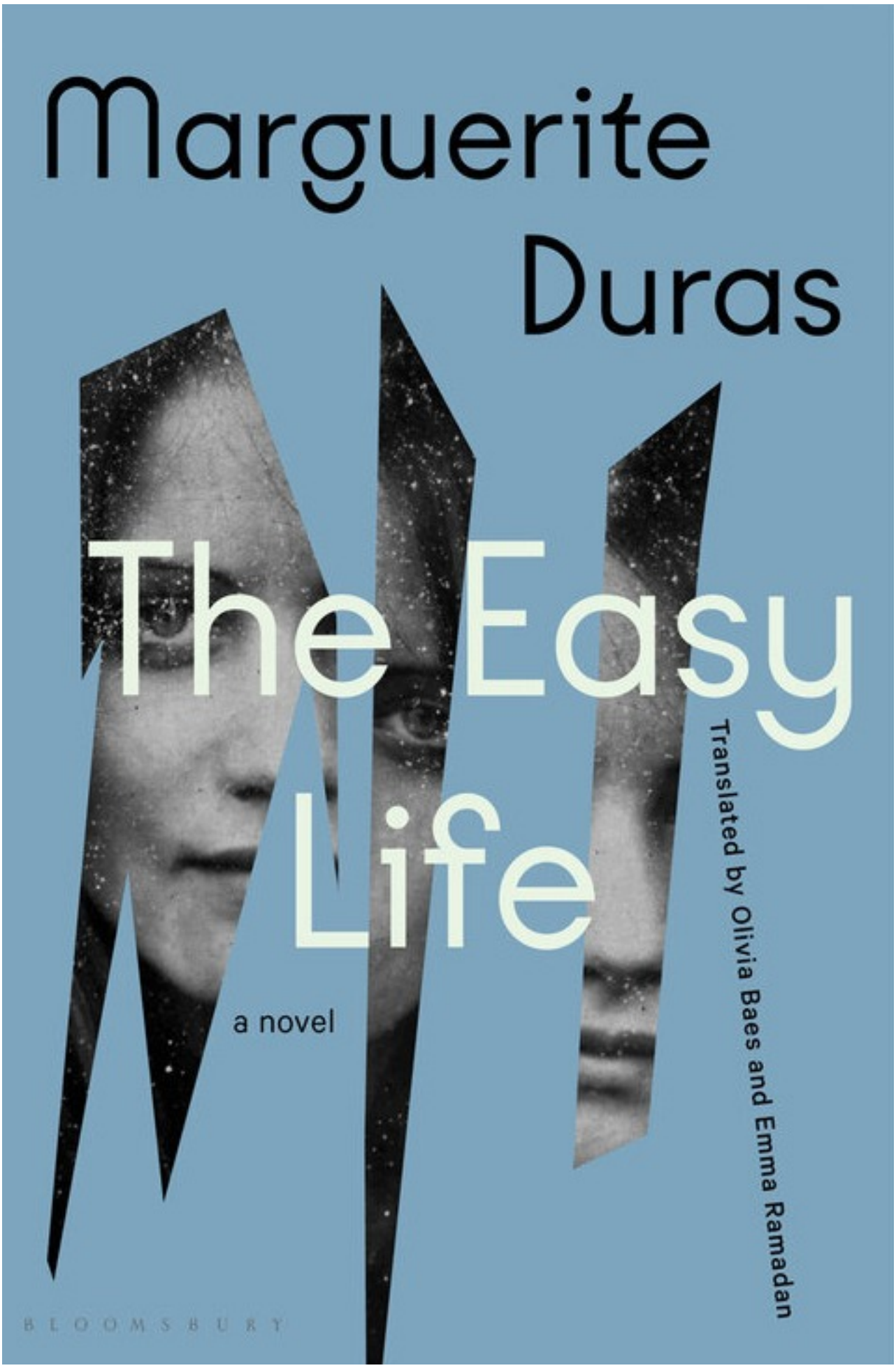
[4]Cover of Marguerite Duras's book The Impudent Ones: A Novel, The New Press, 2021

Yann had suddenly burst into Duras's life, possibly like a bouquet of roses, a glass of whiskey, or a bottle of wine. Five years of writing letters to this distant woman living in her enormous house, interested only in writing, were enough for Yann to become her little, gentle, gay lover. Yann Lemée, his original last name, has become Yann Andréa, a name given to him by the older, more experienced, domineering woman, who had thought his mother's maiden name was more appropriate for him than his father's. Yann Lemée became Yann Andréa, and then Yann Andréa Steiner, like the title of the book she wrote about him. This love, which has leaked from ashtrays and vases, and the fondness for moist places, could not have been more perfect.

"All men are homosexuals," Duras says, "restricted to life on the edge of desire. Capable of understanding only those who look like them. A real partner in a man's life can only be another man. In this world, the woman hides in some faraway place that the man only visits occasionally."

Christian Bobin writes: "We can give plenty of things to the person we love. Words, solace, or some pleasure. You have given me the most enriching thing – loss. I could not get over you when I felt a sense of loss each time I saw you. My spiritual home and my heart's dwelling were both well-shuttered. You have crushed all the openings, and since then, the chilly or hot air and all the lights could not break free of what had confronted them."

duras 1.jpg **[5]**


Marguerite
Duras
The Easy
Life
a novel
Translated by Olivia Baes and Emma Ramadan
BLOOMSBURY

[6]

In the movie Duras has directed - *Agatha and the infinite readings (Agatha et les lectures illimitées)* - two brothers set up a crucial meeting in an isolated apartment by the seashore, before their inevitable parting. When they talk, the two hardly pay attention to one another. He says: "The shadow falling on your smile, which makes you so desirable;" she says: "I will be purified by the image of your body lost among the sea's shadows;" "I leave so I can go on loving you forever with the same wondrous pain, because I cannot hold you." These are sentences that cannot be casually integrated into a film nor in the memory of the screenwriter/director. Agatha's infinite readings are quiet monologues that love cannot use to pass into the tangible realm, that is, the real *acte*. It is a kind of love that cannot be felt from outside or seen from a distance. It exists, hunkering down somewhere like a wet animal, expressed and tangible. However, Agatha's life can only become real around that loss, just like the character of Lol V. Stein in another novella she has written.

Love is everywhere, haunting us like Hamlet's ghost. It bides its time, then pounces, lurking in corners, watching. In public parks, lovers sit together on benches, holding hands; at the movies, they kiss. They joke in the street, stare at each other in cafes, smile, and send steamy air kisses. The writer Josefina Vicens has written: "Only in the body of a person we've loved for a long time the marks of passing time become invisible, and aging next to that person turns into a way of not getting old at all."

I open the list of contacts on my phone. Many guys I've had sex with and kissed during tender nights. The etymology indicates that the word "desire" in French and English originates in the Latin word "Desiderare." It has evolved over hundreds of years, in the course of which people had stared at the moon, been enchanted by its light. Its original meaning is "a thirst for light." In these languages, to desire someone is to thirst for the light emanating from them. Let us imagine this scene: Ahmad loves his friend, Samer, like Samar loves her friend Suad, and Assad loves his friend Deema. These are three perfectly adequate stories, in which love turns in different directions because the basic experience is always pure, even when, far from the daylight, it is groped by various hands in a world that is so fragile and damaged. That is why the intimacy in these love stories will never be lost. I find it difficult to understand why people hate these stories so much, since in a world like ours, the most people can hope to do is to love and be loved.

I tend to doubt my private intimate experiences. I do not know what kind of confusing and misleading world I live in. Everything seems false, like when Marcel Proust changed the names of the lovers in his novels so that they are not about a love story between two men. And so Albert became Albertine, and the possible had again become impossible.

What muddy waters of kitschy tenderness are we walking into? In the end, we will surely discover the answer. "I'll try to call you tomorrow," Duras writes to her Yann, and suddenly the world is a little more beautiful and a little less sad. It seems to be the exact point when Goethe's Faust shouts: "Stop, moment, you are wonderful!"

People love over a long time. They love until their eyes turn red and blood flows from their white hands. But love itself does not last long. It fails, scatters in all directions, and gets completely lost among the side lanes. In Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film *the Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant (Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant)* the eyes of the protagonist, Petra, redden because of that love. Suddenly, Karin enters her bolted, closed life, and, in a minimalist scene, the two women look into each other's eyes, and that is enough for their souls to become intertwined forever.

"The world has changed, as have customs and values, but the fear of love, of not being loved, and the will to save the other are constants in human lives," Fassbinder has written in a preface to his film.

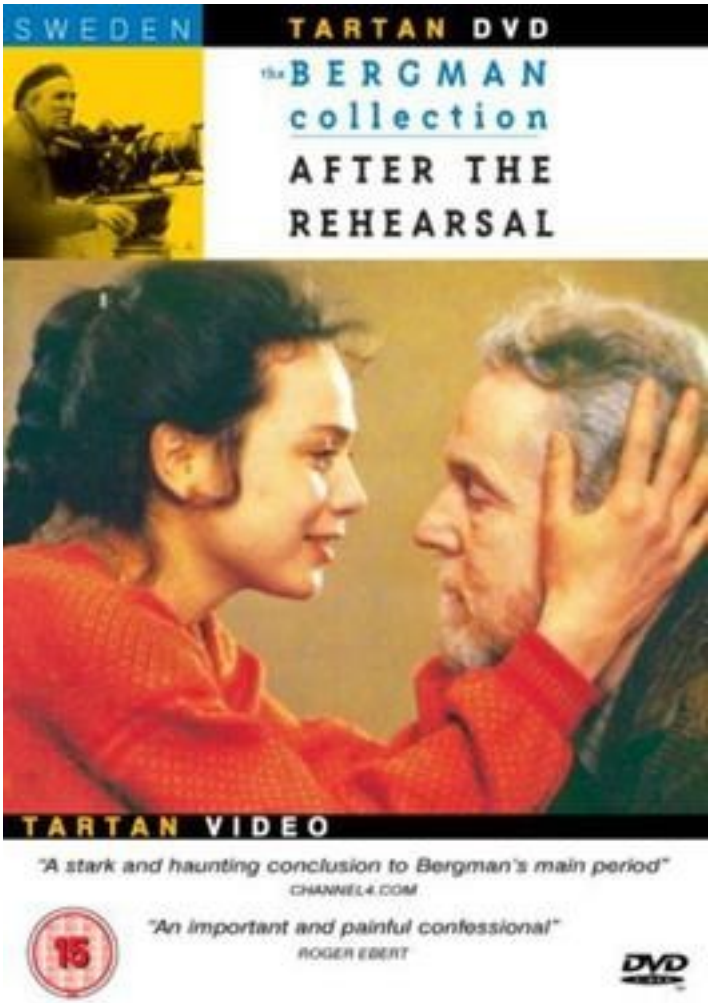
Perhaps the world has changed. The corona pandemic has created new distances, built rooms between people, separated parents from their children, brothers from friends in some other city, and lovers from their beloved. However, the pandemic has given a new significance to balconies, which,

until then, have been exotic sites separating the familiar and friendly space (home) and the strange, alien place (the street, the next building, the distant city). From the balconies, we heard people singing to one another, and love stories were born, a little like minefields. "I am here," says the lover to the beloved, "I see you, hear you, care about you, but today we cannot touch one another. From here, from this distance, I will make sure you are alright and watch out for you. It might increase our intimacy."

Under the shadow of the corona, I remember spending the night with a young man who arrived at my apartment wearing a hat and mask. I could only see his eyes and his glasses. The desire for me to be with him shone in his eyes. At least we could touch each other, if only with hand gestures, and we laughed about the foolishness of existence, diseases, life, and the whole world, which has changed at some moment, like an orange falling to the ground during a rainy sunset.

If I tried to translate the French word l'abri, its meaning would be "haven." If I tried to use this word to make an intimate sentence, I could say, "I find a haven with the person I love, my beloved" (*j'suis à l'abri de mon amour*). The word *Abri* originates in Latin, from *apricari*, which primarily means a person's exposure to the sun or warming oneself in its heat. If we elaborate on this meaning, I could say that when I use this word in a sentence – even if it has lost its original meaning due to the great developments over time in language and other fields – I am saying, in a poetic form no speaker of these languages has ever intended, that I warm myself in the heat of the person in whose arms I find a haven, just as I warm myself up in the place where I find shelter.

Efter_Repetitionen.jpg **[7]**



[8]Bergman's After the Rehearsal promo cover

Language has always been intimate when addressing such issues.

In love, as in hate, language is our motivation. We write long letters when we are in love, but also when we suffer because of our loved ones and when we raise "a final glass," like Anna Akhmatova.

In Ingmar Bergman's film *After the Rehearsal*, the protagonist, playwright Henrik Vogler, says in some marginal scene: "Love's temperature can be measured only by the temperature of the previous one." The hand is sticky and full of water; thus, it will likely disappear from the coat pockets of other people and their backs because love for a person is also a bicycle ride.

We may need to re-learn how to love in a world with different life forms, even if many of them are embedded deep in the fabric of history and humanity's anthropological memory. Today we are building many worlds in changing circumstances, knocking on new doors that lead us to the preoccupation with questions of identity and intimacy, and wondering what it means to love in such times. We are not out of fuel yet; the festive lights are still in full blaze, even if their glow dims occasionally, and we live, dream, and examine our relationships. Acceptance of a relationship between two men or two women should no longer be an academic question. Above all, it is a question of intimacy. Early humans, our first neighbors, under all their names and definitions, created paintings on cave walls to understand their environment, and express something in some way as they cleared their way through forests and shadows. These days, we display our paintings everywhere – on the refrigerator in our tiny kitchens, our bedrooms, the living room, but also in museums, which I prefer to mention only at the bottom of the list. The world changes because time passes and we precede history and position ourselves ahead of it.

We create our narratives and distort them, just like when we love someone in any country, because we seek to create our story, develop it, and live the pleasure that life is.

We shall never forget the haven of the first love we've experienced, where everything started with an easy gaze, a gentle caress, a soft touch, like a rose placed among the pages of a magical book. Let us believe that roses planted with care will not fade on the beds of others and in their courtyards. Let us believe that beautiful stories will continue to live even when the book has been destroyed, its pages lost.

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