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Rewriting the Writing Mother in Marie Darrieussecq's *Le Bébé*

Abstract

This article studies the innovative maternal portrait in Marie Darrieussecq's *Le Bébé* (2002), the autobiographical story of a mother's first nine months with her newborn son. It also examines how Darrieussecq engages in the riveting debate surrounding maternal creativity. On the one hand, *Le Bébé* is a "success story," one that attests to the victories of the feminist movement. On the other hand, the text examines the new challenges of today's writing mothers. Throughout the work, the "mother as scientist" analyzes her developing child while the nurturing "mom" pens her joys, discoveries, and difficulties. The article concludes that because the researcher is also the mother, and because this marriage of roles in relation to one's own child is somewhat jarring, Darrieussecq achieves a striking and truly contemporary maternal portrait.

Keywords

maternal portrait, Marie Darrieussecq, *Le Bébé*, autobiography, motherhood, baby, mother, child

Rewriting the Writing Mother in Marie Darrieussecq's
Le Bébé

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Introduction

A contemporary study of writing and motherhood requires attention to the strides of the feminist movement of the 1960s and the 1970s along with recognition of the pioneering work of contemporary women writers.¹ Gill Rye explains that today's female authors in French are "[d]istanced from the 1970s feminism but read in the shadow of its heritage" ("A New Generation" 3). Indeed, current texts stage the self-realization so ardently sought by our feminist forebearers and at the same time present new struggles specific to our time. In Marie Darrieussecq's *Le Bébé* (2002), the autobiographical story of a woman's first nine months with her newborn son, we meet a protagonist whose successful literary career attests to the victories of the feminist movement. At the same time, she still has a formidable task in combining writing and mothering. Darrieussecq approaches this contemporary problem with a novel twist—she takes the baby as the *subject* of her study. *Le Bébé* portrays the "developing child," "records" (for the author, for her son, for research) those small milestones in the early months of life, an early "biography" of sorts. She writes: "J'écris ce cahier pour éloigner de mon fils les spectres, pour qu'ils ne me le prennent pas: pour témoigner de sa beauté, de sa drôlerie, de sa magnificence; pour l'inscrire dans la vie. . . ." "I write this notebook to keep ghosts away from my son, so that they don't take him from me, to reveal his beauty, his funniness, his magnificence, to write him into life. . . ." (79).² We hear the fearful and proud mother giving her child a place in literature

and history. At the same time, *Le Bébé* analyzes the writing mother's desire to have "a room of her own." Along with this personal drama, Darrieusecq proposes collective endeavors: to understand this complex creature called "baby," to challenge and complicate the meaning of "mother," and to envision a contemporary image of maternal creativity. We read: "Bonheur d'écrire, bonheur d'être avec le bébé: bonheurs qui ne s'opposent pas" 'Happiness of writing, happiness of being with the baby: two kinds of happiness which do not conflict' (99). In another passage, she describes the "liberty" she enjoys of reconsidering traditional definitions of motherhood: "Prendre la liberté, d'inventer, les phrases, l'amour, la merveille, ce programme de vie, de désir: être mère" 'Taking the liberty, to invent, phrases, love, marvel, this program of life, of desire: being a mother' (179). This writing mother revels in the luxury of scholarly pursuits—something only certain working mothers can enjoy. Darrieusecq's text can, in fact, be read not only as creative writing but also as a theoretical piece on the drama of writing and motherhood. Although her study of the human baby is ultimately limited, Darrieusecq does succeed in creating an original portrait of the writing mother.

The style of *Le Bébé*, sober and uncomplicated, communicates the "real" experiences of motherhood and at the same time portrays the "mother as scientist."³ The mother describes herself as "l'entomologiste devant son insecte" "the entomologist in front of her insect" (80). Delcroix confirms the scientific character of the work: "Le 'je' narcissique ajouté à l'anonymat du bébé contribue à l'effet entomologique du livre" "The narcissistic 'I' along with the anonymity of the baby contributes to the entomological effect of the book' (31). Luc Le Vaillant discusses "le ton quasi professoral, une manière de prendre son temps, pour aller au cœur des choses" 'The almost professorial tone, a way of taking her time, to go to the heart of things.' Darrieusecq's unadorned style, reminiscent of many texts by Annie Ernaux since *La Place* (1983), includes several paragraphs of only one sentence, fragments, and lists, all of which produce a record of information gathered on the developing child.⁴ Indeed, *Le Bébé* reflects a particular writing style for Darrieusecq, different from her previous works, including the effusive best-seller *Truismes* (1996), the fantastical *Naissance des fantômes* (1998), or the futuristic *White* (2003). In its plot structure, it also veers away

from *Le Mal de mer* (1999), which, although it portrays a mother-child relationship, is ultimately a story of separation.

Although Darrieussecq's "professorial" manner of "taking her time" (*Le Vaillant*, my translation) contributes to the methodical character of her writing, the structure of *Le Bébé* reveals that time is limited. The text is divided into two sections, "Premier cahier: *Printemps, été*" 'First notebook: spring, summer' (9) and "Deuxième cahier: *Été, automne*," 'Second notebook: summer, autumn' (107) corresponding to the first nine months of the child's life and the various stages the baby traverses. Stars divide the work into short sections, often lacking transitions, as if only small pieces of text could be composed during the writer's few private moments. Her metatextual musings on creativity include the following: "*Une écriture structurée par sa propre contrainte*, les ponctifs trouvent leur écho, les appels du bébé découpent ces pages, d'astérisque en astérisque" 'A writing structured by its own constraint, clichés find their echo, the baby's calls interrupt these pages, from asterisk to asterisk' (34). In a recent essay, the American poet Stephanie Brown expresses similar sentiments. She explains that motherhood has forced her to write differently. She revises less, tries to "put it down right the first time," and sometimes "talk[s] into a tape recorder or write[s] on post-it notes by the phone" (31). In this way she can produce amidst the continuous struggle for time. She addresses her readers—would-be professional mothers—in a familiar tone: "Time is your enemy, your gift, your wanton desire, and you will never have enough of it" (31). The journal format of *Le Bébé* lends itself to fragmented writing. It communicates the day-to-day discoveries the mother experiences and the immediacy of her emotions. *Le Bébé* functions as both the notepad for observations about the baby and the introspective journal of the evolving self and its relationship to the other. Darrieussecq's portrayal of the professional writer/researcher alongside "the mom" reveals the progress women have achieved since the feminist movement. Both images can be incorporated into this "liberated" woman.

Writing and the legacy of feminism

The legacy Darrieussecq has received from her feminist fore-runners features an extensive corpus of writing on female experiences, including motherhood. In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as*

Experience and Institution (1976), Adrienne Rich embodied the writing mother who was angry at and resentful of her children, but also joyful and awed by their presence. In “Stabat Mater” (1976), Julia Kristeva analyzed her personal experience of pregnancy and motherhood, and the indefinable mother-child dyad, alongside a theoretical critique of the maternal in the figure of the Virgin Mary. In “Le Rire de la méduse” (1975), Hélène Cixous urged women to write themselves into their texts—their bodies, desires, and sexuality. In *Les Mots pour le dire* (1975), Marie Cardinal emphasized writing as a gestational experience.⁵ A brief elaboration of this text will be helpful in situating Darrieussecq’s *Le Bébé*.

In *Les Mots pour le dire*, writing helps the ill protagonist to heal and come to a sense of self-appreciation. Many years of therapy become a period of gestation culminating in the desire to write the life story and share it with others. Through expression and writing, the “new,” healthy woman is “born.” As the narrator reflects back on the beginning of her therapy, she states: “[A] cette époque, je ne savais pas que je commençais à peine à naître et que je vivais les premiers instants d’une lente gestation de sept ans. Embryon gros de moi-même” (21) “[A]t that time, I didn’t know that I had hardly begun to be born again and that I was experiencing the first moments of a long period of gestation lasting seven years. Huge embryo of myself” (Goodheart 13).⁶ We note the double image of the mother/daughter capable of giving birth to herself, a powerful metaphor consistent with the sense of pride women developed during the feminist movement. Toward the end of the *Les Mots pour le dire*, the protagonist marvels at her newfound vocation as a writer and converses with her publisher. At this point, she can clearly differentiate herself from the “madwoman” she once was. We read: “Et s’il avait su qu’il s’adressait à la folle! Je ne pouvais m’empêcher de penser à elle. . . . Je t’ai tirée de là ma vieille, je t’ai tirée de là!” (249–50) ‘If only he had known he was addressing a madwoman! I couldn’t help thinking of her. . . . It was me who pulled you out of there, my friend. I was the one!’ (Goodheart 230). The jovial tone of the direct address to this “other” woman, this former self, underscores how much the protagonist has grown through her emotional journey. The experience of writing has, indeed, constituted that gestational period that has allowed her to become a new woman.

When we consider Darrieussecq's *Le Bébé* as a product of this feminist heritage, we see that the place of "writing" in her text is somewhat different. She does continue the complex discussion of motherhood and writing in which Rich and others engaged—the ambivalent feelings toward the child when the mother yearns to continue creative pursuits, but also the joyful and amazed emotions the mother feels as the child changes and grows. However, unlike Cardinal's protagonist, Darrieussecq's heroine is not reborn through writing. Rather, writing functions in various ways—as the protagonist's livelihood, as a medium of research on the baby, and as a means of exploring the new maternal role she inhabits. Unlike the painfully sought success of Cardinal's protagonist in *Les Mots pour le dire*, the success of Darrieussecq's writer of the new millennium is already established. We read, for example, of her publisher (71), her German translator (14), and the baby gifts and cards she has received from "plusieurs pays" "several countries" (14). Even though writing helps the protagonist to know herself better, writing is not the central theme of *Le Bébé* nor is it solely focused on the self.

Theoretical studies on maternal creativity

To understand Darrieussecq's project in *Le Bébé*, it is important to consider seminal theoretical studies on creativity and motherhood that appeared in the 1980s. These include Susan Rubin Suleiman's "Writing and Motherhood" (1985) and Marianne Hirsch's *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1989). In her piece, Suleiman begins with an analysis of the traditional psychoanalytic view of motherhood from Freud to Helen Deutsch and Melanie Klein, among others. She studies the significance for these theorists of the child in defining motherhood and artistic creation. Briefly, the child must separate from the mother, whose identity as an individual has to be subservient to the child's developmental needs. When the child becomes an artist, artistic activity, including writing, allows for a recuperation of the lost union with the mother. We read: "[P]sychoanalytic theory invariably places the artist . . . in the position of the child. Just as motherhood is ultimately the child's drama, so is artistic creation" (357). Suleiman then questions, "what about the writer who is 'the body of the mother'? . . . Does the mother who writes write exclusively as her own mother's child?" (358).

She gives several examples of writers who have penned their anxieties as well as their joys about motherhood, and looks to more recent theorists, such as Julia Kristeva and Chantal Chawaf, for expanded views on the connection between maternity and female artistic creation. Suleiman concludes that “there remains a great deal of space to explore—in fiction and in life” (377), highlighting the complexity of the issue and the impact our changing lives have on literature.

Hirsch takes up similar questions of maternal creativity in her book. In her concluding chapter, she underscores the need to write in “two voices,” giving expression to the traditionally silenced mother and voicing the daughter’s newfound identity as an artist—who may also be a mother.⁷ The daughter is defined by and connected to her female ancestry and at the same time associated with her own (potential) daughter’s future. Hirsch is optimistic in that she “believe[s] that feminists are in the process of inventing new theories and new fictions that might be maternal without falling into essentialism, that might act out the mother’s contradictory double position” (198). She cites several black American women writers, such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, who have a significant cultural connection to mothers and, simultaneously, a complex relationship to the power structures at play within (white) feminism and the writing establishment. As such, they voice the writing mother’s issues in a particularly poignant fashion.

After reading *Le Bébé*, one questions whether Darriessecq’s project is a way of rectifying the type of writing/motherhood split that Suleiman and Hirsch discuss. Does this text communicate that “I’m a ‘good mother’ because, even though I write, I write *about* my child”? By portraying the mother-child relationship in her “story,” Darriessecq dramatizes the specific pressures faced by the mother who writes. At the same time, she becomes “the researcher”—not just the artist, but the scientist whose subject is the baby and whose results constitute a contribution to the current “literature” on maternal creativity. Therefore, in its own way, *Le Bébé* functions as a contemporary continuation of the debates surrounding writing and motherhood raised in the studies of Suleiman and Hirsch.

Writing mothers today

One might question whether issues of maternal anxiety, guilt,

and fear about combining motherhood and career are still pressing in the new millennium. Are not many women actively engaged in their professions today and raising children successfully at the same time? I would venture that these issues are still valid. Several contemporary women writers treat such themes in France and the Francophone world, including Christine Angot and Nancy Huston. They draw on a tradition in French of authors and theorists who have lamented the career versus motherhood bind, whether or not they have had children themselves—Sand, Beauvoir, and Kristeva, to name a few. Yet literature today witnesses an evolution in the writing mother's plight. Although the challenges of a mother working in a factory are different than those of a mother writing literature, things are, for some, getting better. The useful anthology *The Grand Permission* makes this point. The collection features contemporary women poets who write of the "dynamic connections between motherhood and creative achievement" (ix). In her Foreword, Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes the "major shift in consciousness and institutions" over the past thirty years which "not only makes motherhood and writing possible to do in the same life but proposes motherhood as a source of deep and enriching meditations on the nature of poetry and the writing vocation" (x). Women's ability to balance writing and motherhood may be imperfect, fraught with sleep deprivation, or, more importantly, reduced productivity or unwanted career modifications, but many women are beginning to express a selfhood that is full, vibrant, and dynamic. Texts in French, such as *Le Bébé* or Christine Angot's *Léonore, toujours* (1993), enter into this innovative corpus. Although Angot's autofictional maternal diary ventures uncomfortably into the realm of fantasy, its focus on the impact of the developing child on the writing mother and her sense of self foreshadows Darrieussecq's *Le Bébé*.⁸ As evidence of Darrieussecq's interest in her peer, she has her protagonist read Angot shortly after giving birth (115–16). Darrieussecq's originality stems from the fact that her analysis of the baby in *Le Bébé* goes beyond the individual child and endeavors to theorize more generally about the early months of a baby's life.

The maternal portrait in *Le Bébé*

Darrieussecq continually demonstrates how the intimate moth-

er-child world and the outside world of work separate and merge. She cites the mother's career early on: "Ecrire quand il dort" 'Writing when he is sleeping' (12). Interestingly, she writes while she mothers, the professional activity of the outside world already a part of that intimate mother-child sphere. These two aspects of the mother's identity are again intertwined as the baby wakes from a nap: "Il s'agite dans son sommeil, et tout de suite, je me lève, cahier ouvert . . ." 'He fidgets in his sleep, and right away I get up, my notebook still open' (13). By way of another example, we read: "Taches d'huile, de lait premier âge et de thé sur ce cahier, écrit dans la cuisine comme souvent" 'Oil, formula, and tea stains on this notebook, written as usual in the kitchen' (94). Not only do we have the mix of baby's formula and mother's notebook, but this happens in the kitchen, that charged space of traditionally female authority. We see a similar phenomenon in Angot's *Léonore, toujours*, in which the mother writes and cares for her baby simultaneously: "Il faut que je m'arrête toutes les trois secondes de taper, pour lui laver et lui remettre sa sucette" 'I have to stop typing every three seconds to wash him and give him his pacifier' (19–20). Importantly, Darrieussecq does not question whether the protagonist will write and mother, but rather she exposes how she does it. She fully expects writing to be part of her future. This is clear by the fact that she outlines several new writing projects, from novels to children's books (147). Interestingly, these professional plans are followed by future "life projects," including "Avoir un autre enfant avec le père du bébé. En adopter" 'Having another child with the baby's father. Adopting some' (147). We see, then, that writing and mothering—even more than one child—are far from exclusive. She realizes, too, that as her child becomes more independent, his individuality and hers will be emphasized. The fact that the child will enter a *crèche* at a particular date marks the distinction between home life with the baby and society at large: "[La crèche] le prenait en octobre. Le temps se réorganisait autour de cette date: celle où je rejoindrais le monde du dehors" '[The daycare center] would take him in October. Time reorganized itself around this date: the time I would become part of the outside world again' (12). Later, we read: "Selon la théorie, *je suis lui*: il ne différencie pas son corps du mien. J'attends la crèche pour, justement, lui signifier que non, établir la frontière entre nous" 'According to theory, *I am*

he: he does not differentiate his body from mine. I am waiting for the daycare center, in fact, to tell him that that is not the case, to establish a boundary between us' (31). Furthermore, as the child grows and gradually separates from the mother, the protagonist is able to measure her developing self: "[J]'apprends qu'hors de ma vue, il continue à exister. . . . La réalité—son existence—dessine peu à peu ma place, me sépare peu à peu de lui" 'I learn that away from me he continues to exist. . . . Reality—his existence—establishes my place little by little, separates me little by little from him' (133). As the mother and child become distinct beings in the protagonist's mind, she realizes that she will be able to write about other topics. As he adjusts to daycare and displays learning that his parents could not have imagined, she understands: "Il s'adapte mieux que moi. Je vais bientôt pouvoir écrire sur autre chose" 'He is adapting better than I am. Soon I'll be able to write about something else' (154).

The new maternal profile Darrieussecq offers, in which creative endeavors and mothering go hand in hand, is not without critics. Whereas feminists of the past angrily refused discrimination and boldly demanded equal opportunities, today's women deal with the challenges of their newfound choices. Those who take advantage of the chance to juggle career and family are met by both men and women who raise an eyebrow at the woman who tries to "do it all." Many individuals are threatened by this new fluidity between professional and personal spheres. Olivier Delcroix somewhat patronizingly labels *Le Bébé* "[u]n journal intime entre deux tétés" 'a diary between two feedings' (31). Eric Loret reviews a text "[e]n deux cahiers écrits '*dans la cuisine*' . . . un essai de '*sentimentalité*' pas trop niaise. . . ." 'made up of two notebooks written "*in the kitchen*" . . . an essay of "*sentimentality*" that is not too silly.' Why do these comments sting? Perhaps because the nurturing activities of infant care, such as breastfeeding and teaching a newborn, are, if not undervalued (in economic terms, they certainly are), at least taken for granted. Darrieussecq argues that women are underestimated, that home life does not exclude work, and that motherhood does not negate writing:

On m'a demandé ce que je ferais, si je devais choisir entre le bébé et l'écriture. . . . cette question qu'on me pose, c'est celle, proférée ou

muette, à laquelle se heurtent toutes les femmes. . . . La trivialité qu'on prête aux femmes, leur côté 'terre-à-terre'—bouffe, couches, mamelles, harcèlement du quotidien—, les questionneurs la liront aussi dans mes pages. (80)

I was asked what I would do if I had to choose between the baby and writing. . . . this question I'm asked, it's the one uttered or silent that all women come up against. . . . The triviality that people attribute to women, their 'mundane' side—food, diapers, tits, daily exhaustion—the questioners will also read about this in my pages.

This author, Darrieussecq seems to say, will render the writing versus motherhood question moot for the everyday activities of mothers are, in part, the stuff of which she writes. As such, she elevates such nurturing activities. The "work" of mothering is compatible with a "prestigious" professional life.

Julia Kristeva suggested years ago that motherhood in and of itself was a creative endeavor. In "Le temps des femmes" (1979), she writes: "[L]e nombre des femmes augmente qui considèrent leur maternité comme compatible avec leur vie professionnelle. . . . De surcroît, elles la trouvent indispensable à la complexité de l'expérience féminine" (323) '[T]here is a growing number of women who find maternity to be compatible with their professional careers. . . . Furthermore, women are finding that maternity is vital to the richness of female experience' (Guberman 218).⁹ The challenge for women, Kristeva continues, is to live through the experience of pregnancy, the arrival of a child, and the loving relationship one has with a child without losing hold of oneself. We read: "Accomplir ce trajet sans masochisme et sans annihilation de la personnalité affective, intellectuelle, professionnelle—tel semble être l'enjeu d'une maternité déculpabilisée. Elle devient, au sens fort du terme, une création. Pour l'instant négligée" (325) 'If maternity is to be guilt-free, this journey needs to be undertaken without masochism and without annihilating one's affective, intellectual, and professional personality, either. In this way, maternity becomes a true *creative act*, something we have not yet been able to imagine' (Guberman 220). It seems that we can now, in the new millennium, "imagine" a truly creative maternity. Texts like *Le Bébé* attest to not only the

inspiration of the maternal experience, but to innovative ways of recording this drama and of participating in the debate on maternal creativity. The negative remarks of critics like Delcroix and Loret perhaps reveal how strongly we cling to roles which govern our lives in a fundamental way and how resistant we can be even today to mothers' creative ventures.

Although Darrieussecq writes of the challenges of combining work and family, the limits on the mother's freedom, and the guilt she experiences when she takes time for herself, she simultaneously offers a success story. She exemplifies guilty feelings, for example, when the child hinders the mother's productive endeavors: "Le bébé m'empêche d'écrire, en se réveillant" 'The baby keeps me from writing by waking up' (14). When the baby is sick, we read: "Pas une ligne depuis deux jours" 'Not one line in two days' (131). Imagining the child at daycare, the mother considers the remorse she would feel while taking time to relax and nurture her intellect by going to the cinema (134). In another anecdote, she cancels a series of presentations in Africa to do research at the Louvre. We see her guilt when her partner witnesses a significant moment in the baby's development—the child's joy in discovering ducks at the park while she is working: "pour la première fois—me raconte son père—il est sensible à la présence d'autres êtres que les humains. J'aurais donné Afrique et Louvre pour ce moment" 'for the first time—his father tells me—he is sensitive to the presence of other beings besides people. I would have given Africa and the Louvre for that moment' (173). In addition, she longs for the freedom to pick up and go in the morning—off to work and out into the world. Despite her writing, she at times feels like the "mère au foyer" 'housewife' (94). Occasionally, she is outraged by physical limitations, such as those imposed by a stroller (35). When she is severely ill and cannot care for her child, she, in fact, enjoys the rest: "Huit jours sans lui: rien et beaucoup. . . . Il ne m'a pas manqué. Je me suis reposée de lui" 'Eight days without him: nothing and a lot. . . . I didn't miss him. I took a break from him' (169). Gill Rye notes that the "strong narrative voices" of such works as *Le Bébé*, and other current texts thematizing maternity, including Naomi Wolf's *Misconceptions* and Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work*, "testify to ambivalent experiences of pregnancy and early motherhood, to women being engulfed by maternity—at times joyfully, at other

times terrifyingly—to being desperate not only for sleep but also for time and space of their own, to feelings of insecurity and incompetence, failure and guilt” (“In Uncertain Terms” 5). Indeed, early in *Le Bébé* Darrieussecq communes with Annie Ernaux, evoking *La Femme gelée*, a text that portrays a writer drowned by the demands of home life and motherhood, indeed “frozen” by the conventional expectations that accompany these roles, expectations that hinder her life as an individual and a professional. And yet importantly, although Darrieussecq’s protagonist experiences ambiguous feelings, she is not overwhelmed to the point of being unproductive. Because she *continues* to write, this contemporary mother proves that she can nurture her child *and* develop herself as an artist. When a Basque television crew comes to interview her, for example, the child is present during this professional exercise (144). The fact that the crew amuses the child “dans cette langue de mon enfance” ‘in my childhood language’ (144), evokes again the coexistence of the professional and personal realms. French is the language of writing, but Basque takes her back to her earliest family utterances.

Regardless of the challenges that writing brings the mother, the overwhelming feeling that *Le Bébé* communicates is one of curiosity, indeed, awe at the developing child and her newfound role as mother. The opening sentences of *Le Bébé*, for example, evoke the maternal-filial connection, the astounding bodily bond that remains with mother and child throughout life: “Ces petits pieds qui gigotent, ils cognaient dans mon ventre. Je ne peux pas croire qu’il soit sorti de moi” “These little feet that wriggle about, they kicked in my stomach. I cannot believe that he came from me (11). Both the child’s presence and the fact that the woman is a mother are “incompréhensible[s]” ‘incomprehensible’ (13). At another moment we read of the mother’s feelings for her son: “Je suis folle de lui” ‘I am crazy about him’ (123). At the same time, the protagonist is the observer, the realist writer who details the child’s physiognomy, his emotions, and his actions in minute fashion. We read: “[A]près la tétée, il a son visage de nourrisson: écrasé et rougi par le sein, barbouillé de bave et de lait, ridé au coin des lèvres, yeux fermés comme des poings” ‘After a feeding, he has his nursling’s face: flattened and flushed by the breast, smeared with drool and milk, wrinkled at the corner of his lips, eyes closed like fists’ (17). Such precise description, *à la Zola*, brings us closer to

the actual baby, rather than the “pretty baby” of photographs and lullabies. The mother resists frilly language, as if no metaphor could capture her son: “Faisceau de données. Verbes. Descriptions. Densité. Inadéquation de certains synonymes, de certaines images. Il me serait désagréable d’enrubanner mon fils de phrases superflues” ‘Bundle of facts. Verbs. Descriptions. Density. The inadequacy of certain synonyms, of certain images. I wouldn’t want to decorate my son in superfluous phrases’ (34). As she discovers her child, she learns love as she had never known it before. It is a fundamental emotion, devoid of ornament: “C’était un amour dont je n’avais, littéralement, pas idée” ‘It was, literally, a love I knew nothing about’ (39). Later, we read: “Je l’ai aimé tout de suite: ça n’est pas une formule, ç’aurait pu être autrement” ‘I loved him right away: that’s not a turn of phrase. It could have been different’ (42).

Although we have frequent images of “the good mother,” Darrieussecq allows “the bad mother” to appear as well. The negative mother emerges, for example, when she chooses writing over the child’s needs: “Pour prolonger de quelques minutes l’écriture de cette page, je l’ai retourné sur le ventre: il se rendort profondément. Cette position, de nos jours, est déconseillée par les médecins: elle favoriserait la ‘mort subite du nourrisson’” ‘To write this page a few minutes longer, I turned him on his stomach: he falls fast asleep again. Today, doctors advise against this position: it could cause “sudden infant death”’ (14–15). In this quotation, we have hints of the psychotic mother who commits infanticide and also the guilty mother who potentially hurts her child because of her career.¹⁰ She associates herself with alcoholics when she drinks and smokes in private, knowing that a breastfeeding mother needs to limit such habits (14). Yet the fact that the mother, at times, has negative impulses, only renders the character more human. In keeping with the realist aspect of the text, Darrieussecq pens a mother whose uncomfortable feelings have been shared by other women. In this way, *Le Bébé* rings true. She pursues the notion of good/bad mother by questioning the very terminology that categorizes mothers as such: “Une ‘bonne mère,’ saurais-je l’être? Voilà une question qui ne m’aurait pas effleurée si ‘mère’ et ‘culpabilité’ n’étaient toujours proposés ensemble” ‘A “good mother,” would I know how to be one? That’s a question that would not have crossed my mind if “mother”

and “guilt” were not always associated’ (104). Through such interrogation, she challenges traditional expectations of mothers and pursues new definitions of the maternal.

By questioning conventional wisdom—a traditional voice that disassociates profession and motherhood—Darrieussecq reveals its limits. In place of an increasingly outdated maternal image, Darrieussecq puts forth an innovative image of the writing mother, one that goes beyond the professional female images offered over the past decades. For example, while the protagonist is still in the hospital after giving birth to her premature child, a nurse sees her writing in her room. Symbolic of traditional society at large, the nurse comments: “ça va empêcher la montée de lait” ‘that’s going to stop your milk from coming in’ (64). Darrieussecq concludes the segment without comment, allowing the reader to interpret the prejudice behind the remark. In this way, we understand her quiet rebellion. At the same time, readers have an image of a mother who loses no time in getting back to her professional activity. The period of rest after childbirth coincides with productivity, a sign of the determination and confidence of this modern woman. In another hospital scene, we see cleaning women actively trying to dissuade the mother from writing: “Quand je travaillais au lieu d’être près de [mon enfant], elles ouvraient ma porte et ma fenêtre, ‘pour aérer,’ et restaient dans ma chambre” ‘When I would work instead of being with [my child], they would open my door and window “to get some air” and stay in my room’ (66). Though such actions may leave the protagonist speechless, the writer has found her rebuttal through her text: “On écrit aussi par rumination, comme on trouve, des jours après, la répartie à une vexation” ‘One also writes after mulling things over, just as one finds days later the retort to a hurtful remark’ (66). Finally, Darrieussecq questions the conventional assumption that babies need their mothers more than their fathers (21). In *Le Bébé*, we meet an aware, modern father, who participates in the traditionally female activities of caring for the child—changing, feeding, and bathing him—and accompanies the mother to visits with the pediatrician. Although he is not as active in the child’s early life as the mother is, or as present as a character in the text, he is a far cry from the traditional father of the 1950s. Mother and father share nurturing activities, just as both assume active professional roles.

Mother's focus on baby

As Darrieussecq gets to the crux of her project foreshadowed in her title—to study the meaning of “le bébé”—she continues to assert an intriguing maternal image. She notes the minimal presence of babies in literature and the negative impact of much of the commercialized, canned information on babies in magazines and manuals (43–44). She, instead, seeks “new definitions,” a new understanding of mother and baby: “j’écris pour définir . . . pour mettre à jour les liens. . . . J’écris pour renouveler la langue, pour fourbir les mots comme on frotte des cuivres—*le bébé, la mère*: entendre un son plus clair” ‘I write to define . . . to update connections. . . . I write to transform language, to furbish words like one shines copper—*baby, mother*: to hear new meanings’ (44). She claims that the limits of already existing literary representations of babies spur her to write: “Ce n’est pas la naissance du bébé qui déclenche ces pages, c’est l’existence d’autres livres et d’autres phrases—toutes faites ou étincelantes” ‘It’s not the baby’s birth that triggers these pages, it’s the existence of other books and other phrases—sparkling, or stock phrases’ (44). She quotes learned authors, canonical and popular—Montaigne, Joyce, Toni Morrison, and Stephen King—focusing on their depictions of babies or commentaries on childhood (47–53). She mentions Sarraute, Woolf, and Duras, and the lack of children in their works (51). She also notes the stupidity of critics who require such a discourse on children in women’s texts (51). Not only does Darrieussecq discuss early and modern authors and have a critical perspective, she also refutes an *écriture féminine* (50), positioning herself within now classic theoretical debates surrounding women’s writing. What is interesting in her discussion is that within the space of a single segment delineated by stars, Darrieussecq moves from a generalization (“Le bébé n’est pas l’enfant. N’en déplaise aux ressasseurs d’étymologie—*infans*, ‘qui ne parle pas’—l’enfant commence avec ses premiers mots. Le bébé, lui, pour se faire comprendre, dépense de tels efforts qu’il finit par pleurer” ‘The baby is not the child. With all due respect to etymological thinkers—*infans*, “he who does not speak”—the child begins with his first words. *The baby*, to make himself understood, expends such an effort that he ends up crying’ [46–47]) to a particular author’s observation (“Montaigne II-12: ‘Notre pleurer est commun à la plupart des autres animaux’”

‘Montaigne II-12: “Our cry is shared by most other animals”’ 47) to her private consideration of her own child (“Je me demande s’il comprend qu’un jour, il ne sera plus bébé; le processus de ‘grandir,’ quand le conçoit-il?” ‘I wonder if he understands that one day he won’t be a baby anymore; the process of “growing up,” when will he understand it?’ 48). In the last quotation, the use of the first person pronoun along with uncertainty of the interrogative construction creates a personal tone, distinguished from the detached voice of the preceding passages. In this way, first the analyst and then the mother appears. Importantly though, both perspectives are valid—that of scholarship and that of personal experience. Clearly, Darrieussecq’s vacillation between the objective and the subjective creates a narrator/protagonist who is difficult to classify.

In addition to her literary considerations, Darrieussecq analyzes various milestones in the baby’s development. She theorizes, for example, that language is what distinguishes a human baby from animals (72) and tracks the son’s language learning. We read: “Il a compris que le langage s’échangeait. . . . —Je te parle. —Tu me parles. . . . Le langage lui est une activité parmi d’autres, entre mordre sa girafe, manger ou se retourner” ‘He understood that language was exchanged. . . . —I talk to you. —You talk to me. . . . Language is one activity among others for him, just like biting his giraffe, eating, or turning over’ (122). She also studies the baby’s ability to imitate, citing examples of children raised in the wild who assume animalistic appearances and habits (72–73). She concludes: “Je suppose que le bébé ne devient humain que par imitation” ‘I suppose that the baby becomes a human being only by imitation’ (74). In addition, Darrieussecq observes the baby’s ability to understand opposing concepts: “‘Fin,’ ‘début,’ a-t-il une idée de ces concepts? Son biberon commence, il est excité et content, son biberon se termine, il s’évertue et proteste” “‘End,’ “beginning,” does he have an idea of these concepts? He starts drinking his bottle, he is excited and happy. He finishes his bottle, he struggles and protests’ (110–11). Finally, she comprehends the difference between the newborn and the baby: “Cela prend deux à trois mois pour que le nourrisson devienne le bébé: le temps de trouver un mode de garde, de reprendre le travail, de cicatrifier le corps, pour se tourner soi-même à nouveau vers le monde, pour être joyeuse à nouveau” ‘It takes two to three

months for the infant to become the baby: time to find child care and go back to work, time for the body to heal, time to face the world again, time to be joyful once more' (86). We note the connection in this passage between the baby's growth and the mother's development, evident throughout the work. Later, we read: "Quand on lui tend sa girafe il l'attrape à deux mains. . . . Quand on lui parle de loin il cherche du regard. . . . Quand on propose un jeu . . . il éclate de rire. . . . Ce n'est plus le nourrisson, ce n'est pas encore l'enfant: c'est le bébé, le bon gros bébé, le vrai bébé" "When we hold his giraffe out for him, he takes it with two hands. . . . When we speak to him from a distance, he looks over. . . . When we suggest a game . . . he bursts out laughing. . . . He's no longer an infant, he's not yet a child: he's a baby, a nice, chubby baby, a real baby' (109). Alliteration and repetition create balance in these lines, as if to echo a certain rhythm that the parents have obtained in their life with their child and a certain understanding of this phase of the baby's life. With the inclusion of the types of analyses outlined above, Darrieussecq communicates the seriousness of her project. We do not merely have a mother observing her own child, writing about him, but an analyst attempting to theorize about "le bébé." As such, Darrieussecq offers a unique image of the writing mother; here, we have the "writer/researcher." Whereas other professional mothers can no longer write because of lack of time or inspiration—"depuis que ma fille est née je ne peux plus écrire" 'since my daughter was born, I can't write anymore' (53) says an English writer she once met—Darrieussecq's child provides not just inspiration, but "data."

Contemporary contradictions

Such "scientific" discourse in *Le Bébé* often seems at odds with the new mother dazzled by the fact that her child smiles. Indeed, Darrieussecq's desire to be *avant-garde* in *Le Bébé* derives from the seemingly incompatible images of the intellectual, learned, researcher who is also "the mom." Luc Le Vaillant fittingly summarizes this juxtaposition: "Toujours ces oscillations entre la normalité du vécu et le discernement de l'analyse" 'Always these oscillations between everyday life and analysis.' We recall the condescending tone of other critics writing on *Le Bébé*, seemingly uncomfortable with the flu-

idity of boundaries between “mother” and “professional.” And yet it may be readers’ malaise with this new maternal image that Darrieussecq wants to incite. If she can successfully highlight society’s limited vision of “mother,” new definitions can emerge. With the baby as “subject of study,” she presents a novel type of mother, one who nurtures her child and also serves the reading public by engaging in new research. As she theorizes on the baby, she adds something unique to the question of maternal creativity. Here, I return to the notion of the “good mother” bridging the motherhood/writing divide by writing about her child. Why, then, is Darrieussecq’s seemingly scientific analysis of the baby “in general” disappointing, while her personal portrayal of this baby “in particular” and the mother-child relationship in the text remain engaging for the reader?

We are left wanting because what she provides as material for research is haphazard, lacking in rigor, and often anecdotal. Rather than a developed argument leading to new knowledge about “le bébé,” her presentation seems to follow her thoughts as they come to her, her discoveries as they emerge. For example, we read: “Les hurlements de la femme qui accouche, *quelque part* chez Rilke” “The screams of a woman in labor” *somewhere* in Rilke” (51; my emphasis). Such lack of specificity appears amateurish. When discussing critics’ expectations of women writers, we read: “*Je ne sais quel journaliste se scandalisait, à la mort de Duras, que jamais son enfant n’eût de place dans ces livres, comme si une femme devait nécessairement . . .*” ‘*I don’t know which journalist was scandalized, when Duras died, that her child never appeared in her books, as if a woman really had to . . .*’ (51; my emphasis). Again, she remembers the snippet, and decides that this is enough to make a point. If we return to the example of the baby’s ability to imitate, we note that the analysis is limited to only three pages (72–74). In addition, Darrieussecq’s conclusion appears weak: “*Je suppose que le bébé ne devient humain que par imitation*” ‘*I suppose that a baby becomes a human being only by imitation*’ (74; my emphasis). When discussing her resistance to child psychologists’ theories on separation, she reveals her uncertainty: “[M]on incrédulité est tenace quant à leurs théories sur la séparation. . . . J’ai envie de dire [que le bébé] n’est pas idiot. Ou peut-être est-ce moi qui mélange tout” ‘I’m tenacious in my disbelief as to their theories on separation. . . . I feel like saying [that a baby] is not stupid. Or maybe I’m getting it all mixed up’ (113).

Darrieussecq seems to anticipate criticism of disorganization in her method and superficiality in her conclusions and offers some brief responses to it in *Le Bébé*. She not only jumps from literary analyses to personal observations, but she interjects other types of information into her text as well. For example, we find current events, such as that of the death of a three-month-old child in an attack (48) or the image of a fleeing mother and infant in a war-torn land (49). Now, a mother herself, the protagonist understands these kinds of suffering. She feels sympathy for the father who lost his young child and worries for the mother who cannot feed or diaper hers. In exposing these kinds of parental connections, she comes to understand the maternal role better. At the same time, she is aware that such news items and her reaction to them constitute a different kind of discourse than her analysis of Montaigne. In the paragraph following the description of the first news item presented previously and the protagonist's reaction to it, we read: "Je laisse ces phrases en désordre et telles quelles, comme symptôme. Qu'est-ce qu'une mère?" "I leave my random sentences as they are, as a sign. What is a mother?" (48). Indeed, her "disorderliness" in *Le Bébé* is "symptomatic" of a unique kind of discourse, one that goes beyond a purely scientific or solely personal exposé.¹¹ Instead, she creates a text that both analyzes the human baby and shares intimate moments of the mother's experience at the same time. In this way, she questions whether science alone is capable of producing new knowledge and promotes "maternal wisdom."

In conclusion, because the analyst is also the mother, and because this marriage of roles in relation to one's own child is somewhat jarring, Darrieussecq achieves a striking maternal portrait. Her contemporary mother embodies contradiction—she simultaneously nurtures and writes, loves and scrutinizes. The fullness of this modern persona reflects the rich inheritance of her feminist precursors as well as the multiple alternatives of modern-day motherhood. Although she does not succeed in providing a new definition of "baby" or theorizing convincingly on infancy, her novel writing mother gives the reader pause. With this success story, Darrieussecq pens a contemporary woman liberated enough to face the challenges of combining career and motherhood and the criticisms of those uncomfortable with such a mix. Through it all, she keeps on writing.

Notes

1. My thanks to Sacred Heart University for an Arts and Sciences Research/Creativity Grant which gave me the time to conduct research for this study and write the article.
2. All quotations from *Le Bébé* shall be taken from the 2002 POL edition and cited by page number in the article. All translations are mine unless indicated otherwise.
3. In my article, “Echoes of Annie Ernaux in Marie Darrieussecq’s *Le Bébé*,” I discuss Darrieussecq’s simple, straightforward style as reminiscent of much of Annie Ernaux’s works since *La Place* (1983).
4. Again, see my article “Echoes of Annie Ernaux” for an elaboration of these narrative techniques.
5. See my chapter “Creativity and Community in Marie Cardinal’s *Les Mots pour le dire*,” in *Female Journeys* for a thorough discussion of this text.
6. Subsequent translations from Cardinal’s text are taken from Pat Goodheart’s version *The Words to Say It*.
7. See, in particular, pages 176–99 of *The Mother/Daughter Plot*.
8. See Gill Rye’s engaging study of potentially “guilt-free mothering” in Darrieussecq’s *Le Mal de mer* and Angot’s *Léonore, tousjours*.
9. This is from Ross Guberman’s translation of “Le Temps des femmes” entitled “Women’s Time,” found in *New Maladies of the Soul* (218). Subsequent translations from “Le Temps des femmes” are from Guberman’s version.
10. See Suleiman’s interpretation of Rosellen Brown’s short story “Good Housekeeping,” in particular her reading of scenes of maternal work that “hurts” the child (372–74).

11. I have already noted Darrieussecq's sober style, reminiscent of several of Annie Ernaux's writings. These include as *La Place* (1983) and *Une femme* (1987). In its "disorderliness," however, *Le Bébé* also recalls, to a certain degree, Ernaux's "*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*" (1997). In this daughter's diary of a mother's battle against Alzheimer's disease, a "rewriting" of sorts of the mother-daughter narrative in *Une femme*, Ernaux takes issue with accepted literary style. Despite her straightforward writing in *Une femme*, Ernaux achieves a polished "story." On the other hand, "*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*" offers "notes," often random and incoherent, penned in the heat of distress. See my chapter "Annie Ernaux's Auto/biographies" in *Female Journeys* for a fuller discussion of *Une femme* and "*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*."

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