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Echoes of Annie Ernaux in Marie Darrieussecq's *Le bébé*

Claire Marrone

Le bébé (2002), by Marie Darrieussecq, a candid and touching portrayal of a mother's first nine months with her newborn son, instantly evokes a sorority of women writers. The depiction of a career woman and writer who suddenly finds herself a "stay-at-home mom" recalls the kinds of career versus family, public versus personal thematics characteristic of so many female authors – some who became mothers and others who did not. While writers from George Sand to Marie Cardinal struggled to combine writing and motherhood, others, like Simone de Beauvoir, renounced maternity entirely. Darrieussecq's focus on the first nine months of the mother's life with her child also recalls other women's texts that portray the maternal-filial bond during the months of pregnancy. These include the Italian Oriana Fallaci's *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* (*Letter to a Child Never Born*, 1975) and the Canadian Nancy Huston's *Journal de la création* (1990). We also call to mind texts that treat abortion, such as Annie Ernaux's *Les armoires vides* (1974) and *L'événement* (2000).

Darrieussecq also associates herself with other female authors because of her style. Her sober, straightforward writing in *Le bébé* differs from the effusive, complicated style of her best-seller about a woman who metamorphoses into a sow, *Truismes* (1996). It is also stylistically distinguishable from many of her early works including *Naissance des fantômes* (1998) and *Le mal de mer* (1999), which, along with *Truismes* owe much to science fiction.¹ This kind of stylistic "transformation" recalls Annie Ernaux, who traveled from the complex, descriptive style of *Les armoires vides* to the sober, uncomplicated style that has characterized her works since *La place* (1983). While Ernaux has maintained her minimalist style in recent publications, Darrieussecq returns to an intricate prose in the futuristic *White* (2003). While several critics have discussed Darrieussecq's debt to Duras, none, to my knowledge, has written of the influence of Ernaux. I posit that with *Le bébé*, the young writer creates a text reminiscent in form, tone, and most importantly, style to many of Ernaux's works since *La place*. I will focus on a comparison of Ernaux's *Une femme* (1987) and Darrieussecq's *Le bébé*, for, studied together, these texts reflect a rich example of stylistic similarity. In addition, they share a thematic bond.

An initial echo of Ernaux lies in Darrieussecq's title. With the simple, unspecified substantive *Le bébé*, we have a general nominal category, similar to those found in Ernaux's titles *La place*, *La honte* (1997), *L'événement*, and *L'occupation* (2002). The latter titles do not refer to people in the literal sense, but they are generally associated with people symbolically – *La place* with the father, for example, and *L'événement* with the lost child. With *Une femme*, we do have a reference to a person, but the indefinite article points to one woman among many – the daughter's way of claiming the importance of not only her mother, but of so many ordinary women forgotten by History. Interestingly, Ernaux's title could serve as an unspoken subtitle for Darrieussecq's text – the "woman" in *Le bébé*, the infant's mother, is a character of equal importance to the baby.²

Both *Une femme* and *Le bébé* employ the journal format and the first-person autobiographical mode, allowing for introspection and observation. Stars divide *Le bébé* into short sections, as if only small pieces of writing could be composed during the writer's few private moments: "*Une écriture structurée par sa propre contrainte*, les

¹ See Narjoux's article on elements of science fiction in Darrieussecq's early works.

² See my article, "Rewriting the Writing Mother in Marie Darrieussecq's *Le bébé*" (under consideration).

ponctifs trouvent leur écho, les appels du bébé découpent ces pages, d'astérisque en astérisque" (34).³ The journal format of the text lends itself to such fragmented writing. It also communicates the day-to-day discoveries the mother experiences and the immediacy of her emotions. Darrieussecq's observations of her baby are penned in quiet moments: "Écrire quand il dort" (12). Olivier Delcroix somewhat patronizingly calls such instances of maternal solitude "[u]n journal intime entre deux tétés" (31). Ernaux's preference for diary writing is apparent in several texts, including *La place*, *Une femme*, *L'événement*, and *L'occupation*, all written within delimited periods specified at the end of each piece. In other texts, such as *Passion simple* (1991), *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* (1997), and *Se perdre* (2001), individual passages are dated.⁴ In *Le bébé*, Darrieussecq, too, indicates the precise time of composition. Her text is divided into two sections, "Premier cahier: Printemps, été" and "Deuxième cahier: Été, automne." The whole corresponds to the nine-month period succeeding her son's birth. This is clear with the concluding two paragraphs that begin "Neuf mois après la naissance du bébé..." (188).

Darrieussecq's pensive, calm, and subdued tone also echoes Ernaux. While there are moments of elation, *Le bébé* also communicates observation and analysis of the growing child. Luc Le Vaillant discusses "le ton quasi professoral, une manière de prendre son temps, pour aller au coeur des choses... Toujours ces oscillations entre la normalité du vécu et le discernement de l'analyse." While *Le bébé* expresses bonding, *Une femme*, because it treats a fundamental loss, communicates sorrow and does so in the same type of straightforward voice. Such a tone works for both authors because it expresses the most basic of sentiments – love. In countless literary works, it is an emotion adorned with hyperbole, but it is also one that can well be communicated plainly, as exemplified in Ernaux's and Darrieussecq's stories. In *Le bébé*, we read: "C'était un amour dont je n'avais, littéralement, pas idée" (39). And then: "Je l'ai aimé tout de suite: ça n'est pas une formule, ç'aurait pu être autrement" (42).

Both works thematize the power of familial love and the bond of generations. For Ernaux, writing enables her to document her mother's life and write this working-class woman into History and literature. One could say the same of its companion text, *La place*, Ernaux's homage to her father. It also allows the daughter to grieve the loss of her beloved mother. For Darrieussecq, writing serves as a testimony of the first nine months of her child's life, as well as a record of the mother's bond and growth through her attachment to her newborn. But to these thematic connections, I shall return in my conclusion. It is on the stylistic level that Darrieussecq most obviously approaches Ernaux, as I shall illustrate below.

Several critics have commented on Ernaux's characteristic sober, simple style. Danièle Mazingarbe describes "le style Ernaux... Le mot précis, la phrase claire, au plus juste. Sans émotion."⁵ We need not read past the first page of Darrieussecq's *Le bébé* to find a similar style. Darrieussecq's first five paragraphs consist of merely one sentence each, a technique which she employs continuously throughout the work. Her sentence structure is often uncomplicated and straightforward. Many sentences begin quite simply, with the first-person pronoun.⁶ In addition to an unadorned sentence structure that recalls Ernaux, Darrieussecq flees superfluous description in favor of realistic images, focusing

3 All quotations shall be taken from Darrieussecq's *Le bébé* (Paris: P.O.L., 2002) and cited by page number.

4 It is important to note that *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* and *Se perdre* form a unique category because of their intentionally unpolished style. See my chapter, "Annie Ernaux's Auto/biographies: Unfinished Stories?" in *Female Journeys*.

5 Several critics comment on Ernaux's unadorned style. See, for example, Fau, Mall, and Tondeur.

6 It is interesting to note that although *Naissance des fantômes* employs a more intricate style than *Le bébé*, we see a similar simplicity in its opening sentence, one that also places the work within a recognized literary tradition. We read: "Mon mari a disparu" (9). This unfettered declaration evokes the opening of Ernaux's *Une femme*: "Ma mère est morte..." (11). The latter phrase, in turn, recalls the first line of Camus' *L'étranger*: "Aujourd'hui, maman est morte" (21).

on the “real” baby, just as Ernaux emphasizes the “real” mother in *Une femme*: “Faisceau de données. Verbes. Descriptions. Densité. Inadéquation de certains synonymes, de certaines images. Il me serait désagréable d’enrubanner mon fils de phrases superflues” (34). Further stylistic similarities between the two authors include the frequent use of fragments, lists, parenthetical remarks, and spaces rather than developed transitions. We find all of these devices in *Le bébé*, all quite characteristic of Ernaux.

First, fragments are quite common to Ernaux’s writing. Through her skillful use of fragmentation in *Une femme*, Ernaux creates a collection of images so that readers receive a mental picture of the mother’s youthful life. She writes, for example, a recollection of her mother’s childhood: “un appétit jamais rassasié... la chambre commune pour tous les enfants, le lit partagé avec une soeur, des crises de somnambulisme où on la retrouvait debout, endormie, les yeux ouverts, dans la cour,” (27-28).⁷ Ernaux avoids traditional punctuation as she concludes the previous quotation with a comma and then shifts to the next paragraph without resorting to capitalization or a new sentence. In another example, she uses fragments to frame an historical moment, much like a dramatist presents a scene in a play: “1952. L’été de ses quarante-six ans” (59). Similarly, Darrieussecq evokes particular dates through fragmentation. She introduces a newspaper story of violence against a mother and child as follows: “*Libération*. 22 août 2001” (87). With the inclusion of such historical “data,” she also lends authenticity to her autobiographical account. In another passage, Darrieussecq uses fragmentation to conjure up a mental image of her own father and her child: “Autre vignette: le grand et gros corps de mon père portant le petit corps du bébé, et leurs profils sur la mer en fusion, photo mentale, été” (120). Like Ernaux, Darrieussecq often steers clear of punctuation. She begins a segment on her baby and his father, for instance, without capitalization: “un bruit de clé dans la serrure, arc électrique entre le bébé et son père” (161). At other moments, she introduces a quotation with a fragment rather than the typical tag (“she said,” “he claimed”). We read: “Une amie, mère de deux enfants: ‘Je ne peux pas écrire, parce que je suis incapable de faire mourir les enfants’” (53). We see, then, that both authors evoke historical moments, memories, feelings, and images unconventionally, through few words and punctuating “accessories.” Importantly, however, when Ernaux began stretching the limits of traditional style, with texts as early as her first publication, *Les armoires vides* (1974), she was at the forefront of women writers’ search for innovative style. Darrieussecq, on the other hand, educated by the women’s texts of the 1970s and beyond, emerges as less avant-garde in *Le bébé*. This is perhaps one reason that the text has received less critical attention than her thematically exciting and stylistically complicated *Truismes*.

Another stylistic similarity between the two authors is the use of lists. In *Une femme*, for example, Ernaux recalls her mother in mid-life:

Images d’elle, entre quarante et quarante-six ans:...
un été, au bord de la mer, elle pêche des moules...
à l’église, elle chantait à pleine voix...
elle avait des robes vives et un tailleur noir en “grain de poudre.” (48-49)

By the time Ernaux writes *Passion simple* (1991), this technique has become one of her signature tools. In that text, the protagonist recounts the various tasks she undertakes to prepare for her lover’s arrival as follows:

changer les draps du lit et mettre des fleurs dans la chambre...
acheter du whisky, des fruits, diverses petites nourritures pour
la soirée ensemble
imaginer dans quelle pièce nous ferions l’amour à son arrivée. (14)

7 All quotations shall be taken from Ernaux’s *Une femme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987) and cited by page number.

Darrieussecq similarly employs listing, as in one example in which she communicates the anxious parental search for the reason for the baby's tears. She accumulates a list of eighteen sentences, each reflecting possible motives for the child's discomfort. I shall cite the first three:

Il a de la fièvre.
C'est la nouvelle Lune.
Il a faim. (21)

Darrieussecq includes listing frequently throughout the work, as she delineates future writing project (147), or when she communicates others' suspicions of her mothering. To exemplify the latter, I include below the first three of eight sentences:

Il est gros.
Il est pâle.
Il est petit pour son âge. (25)

With this type of list, we hear the choral voice of conventional society overwhelming the young mother with "advice." Medical professionals, too, comment on the woman's capacity for mothering. In the following example, a session with a nurse on the art of breast-feeding creates another guilt-inducing chorus for the mother. I cite the first three of eleven sentences:

Vous ne dormez pas assez.
Vous ne buvez pas assez.
Vous pensez trop à votre travail. (65)

Ernaux is equally concerned with questioning conventional wisdom. However, the "choral voice" in *Une femme* often appears through the use of internal quotation. When she comments on child-rearing practices during her youth, for example, Ernaux writes: "Personne ne 'poussait' ses enfants, il fallait que ce soit 'dans eux'" (29). With these internal quotations, we hear both the mother's views and echoes of provincial France in the 1940s and 1950s. Finally, both Ernaux and Darrieussecq incorporate lists within a sentence, separated by commas or semicolons. In *Une femme*, we read: "Elle désirait apprendre: les règles du savoir-vivre..., ce qui se fait, les nouveautés, les noms des grands écrivains, les films sortant sur les écrans... les noms des fleurs dans les jardins" (56-57). In *Le bébé*, we have a similar structure: "J'aimais déjà beaucoup le matin: l'odeur du pain et du café, l'air piquant, les idées claires; la perspective immédiate d'écrire; le bruit de fond de la radio, les oiseaux dans le peuplier, le temps qu'il fait à la fenêtre" (176). Darrieussecq again employs listing within sentences to define terms: "*Mère*: infantilisation, culpabilisation, castration. Gnognoterics, gnangnandises, rôtoto. Repli. Névrose. Autisme" (178). As with fragments, lists provide a type of shorthand for these authors – a means of quickly stating a point or painting a scene that moves the narrative along unencumbered.

The use of parenthetical remarks by both writers also allows for interpretation or exemplification in a rapid, uncomplicated manner. In *Une femme*, the daughter chronicles her own maturation using examples of conversations with her mother. We read: "[S]i je lui parlais de désirs qui n'avaient pas trait aux études (voyages, sports, surbours) ou discutais de politique (c'était la guerre d'Algérie), elle m'écoutait d'abord avec plaisir... et d'un seul coup, avec violence: 'Cesse de te monter la tête avec tout ça, l'école en premier'" (64). The parenthetical remarks allow for elaboration on youthful activities, such as parties and sports, and political happenings without the need for lengthy explanations or digressions. Further, we note that the Algerian War is secondary – in parentheses – to the daughter's intellectual evolution or her discussion of politics. I shall return to this phenomenon of the collective versus the personal shortly. In *Le bébé*,

Darrieussecq uses parentheses similarly. In the following example, the narrator questions her child's ability to perceive his physical environment: "Que voit-il?... Notre visage (la tache des yeux, de la bouche). Des lignes, des formes, peut-être des reliefs" (66). Not only does the use of parentheses condense the narrative, but it allows for a familiar, conversational manner of communicating with readers.

The preferred style of these authors, such "bare bones," unfettered writing, is also apparent in the lack of transitions from one section to the next and in the use of spaces. Neither text uses traditional chapter divisions. Instead, spaces divide sections temporally or thematically. In *Le bébé*, sections divided by spaces may be delimited even further by the use of stars. In each work, such divisions add a postmodern touch. When one reads either text, one has the sense that one experiences the narrator's thoughts as they unfold, in keeping with the immediacy that typifies diary writing.

The notion that these are personal stories allowing the reader to glimpse private events is reinforced by the fact that the authors' inclusion of historical events is secondary to the individual "histories" at hand, as we saw with the Algerian War. Toward the conclusion of *Une femme*, Ernaux also mentions the recent death of Simone de Beauvoir. She validates her mother's life in comparison to that of this leading feminist and thinker. Even an ordinary woman, we understand, can have the same forceful will and an equally important impact on another woman's life, in this case the daughter's. Toward the end of *Le bébé*, Darrieussecq evokes the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. This appears shortly after a meditation on the child's future, and places this individual baby within a social, historical, and political context. In both works, however, it is the personal that prevails, that remains the focus. In her discussion of the abuse episode featured in Ernaux's *La honte*, Nancy K. Miller aptly observes that the personal trauma experienced by the adolescent daughter is far more important than that of the recent Sarajevo bombings that the narrator evokes. While the Sarajevo events are "forgotten by newspaper readers the next day... intimate horrors remain embedded in memory. History, with a capital H, fades; personal history remains" (45).

The prominence of these women's intimate stories is linked to the fact that both *Une femme* and *Le bébé* are tales of growth and self-discovery.⁸ Here, I return to the thematic resemblance that links these works beyond their very clear stylistic affinity. Ernaux's narrator begins to learn – I stress the ongoing nature of maturation in Ernaux's texts, evident in her continual return to significant themes – through grieving, remembering, and writing, what her mother meant to her. She also comes face to face with her own mortality. To confirm this idea, one can point to the numerous women's life stories that place the mother's death shortly before the end of the autobiography. As such, the work underscores the daughter/writer's inevitable death.⁹ In fact, the mother's death both opens and closes *Une femme*. Darrieussecq, through discovery, teaching, and also writing, starts to understand who her new baby is and who she has become as a mother. The experience emerges as a significant passage along the road of continued maturation. The learning process also includes for both authors leaving a written legacy of their own lives and of the lives of these significant others: Ernaux writes her mother into History and literature; Darrieussecq leaves a published "record" of her son's infancy.

Does Darrieussecq write *Le bébé* in a form, tone, and style so reminiscent of *Une femme* because the texts share this thematic bond? Is it a tribute to the mature author's text? She does, indeed, mention Ernaux's *La femme gelée* (1981) early on, in a reference to the difficulty of writing while raising a small child (14). First, I believe that Darrieussecq, still a young writer, is giving herself the time and the experience to "try on" different styles and techniques with each publication. Like the actress who does not

⁸ See my *Female Journeys* for a discussion of women's autobiographical writing as *bildungsroman*.

⁹ Consider, for example, George Sand's *Histoire de ma vie* and Marie Cardinal's *Les mots pour le dire*.

want to be limited to one type of role, she has the talent and the luxury to outfit each publication differently. This notion of change echoes Ernaux as well in her evolution from the hyperbolic *Les armoires vides* to what has become her signature style – that of the sober *La place*, *Une femme*, and beyond. Additionally, Darrieussecq captures in *Le bébé* the crucial theme of growth through connection, of learning through love. This is, of course, a central idea in *Une femme*. This notion is not new to women writers or to life writing, but cloaked in the calm and measured exterior of these two texts, such self-discovery rings true. Ultimately, Darrieussecq has found in her stylistic “imitation” of her senior colleague a means to express a very basic idea. In her wish to communicate her obvious and unquestionable love for her child, and the learning that emerges from that relationship, the sober, authentic “Ernaux style” becomes the perfect choice.

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