

Marie Darrieussecq: Controversy, Ambivalence, Innovation

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Marie Darrieussecq (b. 1969) has firmly established herself as one of France's leading young writers, producing fifteen full-length works between 1996 and 2011, and demonstrating an erudite interest in time, memory and the subconscious, love, death, familial relationships, and female identity. Her literary career has provoked the intense media scrutiny of a best-seller, two counts of plagiarism, and mixed reviews. She has received praise and criticism in equal measure,¹ but has proved fascinating to both critics and readers for her seeming ability to transgress both intra- and extra-literary categories. Critics have disagreed on readings of her novels as feminist and postmodern. The formation of personal identity through the writing process is a recurring theme in her work although her theoretical work questions the sense and purpose of autobiography.² She is a best-selling author who is nonetheless concerned with "style."³ She demonstrates a fascination for post-structuralist linguistic play while still displaying social awareness. She acknowledges a formal debt to past literary techniques while remaining right on the pulse of popular culture. It is this traversing and disruption of boundaries with which the articles in this special issue are concerned. While contributors focus on a variety of different topics and works, what emanates from them all is Darrieussecq's refusal of categorization, and her ability to expose, challenge, and transgress boundaries and categories of all kinds: stylistic, generic, theoretical, social, and thematic. While articles and book chapters on Darrieussecq's work are numerous,⁴ this special issue of *Dalhousie French Studies* is the first collection entirely dedicated to her work.⁵

Darrieussecq and her *œuvre*

Darrieussecq first tasted a form of literary success when she won *Le Monde's Prix du Jeune Écrivain* in 1988 with her short story *La Randonneuse*, which now appears in her 2006 collection, *Zoo*. She went on to become a high-performing *normalienne* before she found fame and best-seller status in 1996 while still only 27, with the publication of her first novel, *Truismes*. The story of a woman working as a prostitute who metamorphoses into a pig, it was read as an attack on the values and (im)morality of French contemporary society. The novel's enormous success was unexpected both for herself

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- 1 See, for example, J.M.G. Le Clézio in Amette 2003; Sarfati; Loret; Amette 2002; an example of some of the vociferous attacks on her by members of the reading public, largely for her use of onomatopoeia and her choice of subject: "Marie Darrieussecq, l'inénarrable auteur du Bébé ! La passionaria des Pampers ! La spécialiste mondiale des onomatopées ridicules ! La reine du Brr, du Pshit, du Bblblblo et du Flouip ! Normale Sup rencontre la crèche municipale du sixième ! Hervé Guibert meets Playskool !" (<http://vipere-litteraire.over-blog.com/article-27230160.html>)
 - 2 See Gandillot and Busnel. In particular she has attempted to re-define *autofiction* (Darrieussecq 1996b) and commented on the capacity of *autofiction* to blur social and literary codes and reveal the function of literature in general (Darrieussecq 2007c).
 - 3 In interviews and commentaries on her work Darrieussecq has made frequent comments on her use of style and technique. More specifically, she has given a public lecture on "Qu'est-ce que le style?" (Darrieussecq 2000).
 - 4 See in particular Jordan 2002, 2004, and 2005; Rodgers 2002, 2009, 2010; Sarrey-Strack; Marrone 2006, 2008; Kemp 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Rye; Chadderton 2009, 2010a, 2010b, and 2012. See also bibliographies at the end of the individual articles.
 - 5 See Chadderton 2012 for the first monograph to be published on Darrieussecq's work.

and for the small publisher she chose, P.O.L. This choice of publisher is important in her sustained attempt to avoid becoming a media darling:

J'aimais beaucoup cette maison d'édition. À mes yeux, c'était une maison très attractive, très indépendante, qui avait fait des choix audacieux et publiait de la poésie beaucoup plus que les autres [...] on m'a proposé de passer à l'émission *30 millions d'amis*, à faire des photos dans des porcheries; c'était n'importe quoi tout le temps ! (Clouzeau and Le Bricquair 22-23)

She recalls the yawning gap between their tentative expectation and the astounding reality: “[P.O.L. a dit] on va en tirer 4.000 et si jamais on en tire 10.000, on fait une énorme fête. Et à l’heure actuelle, on en est presque à un million toutes éditions confondues. Un peu pour vous donner l’idée du décalage” (Lambeth 813). Yet following this best-selling début Darrieussecq chose a most unexpected trajectory. The author has a PhD in literature and thus her work is undertaken with the self-consciousness of a critic.⁶ Indeed, despite her commercial success, she has stated her desire to avoid populism: “Je ne suis pas un auteur populaire” (Sauvage 65), and to write novels which are “détachées des modes” (*ibid.*). Thus post-*Truismes*, instead of chasing “le livre de grande consommation,” as Jacques-Pierre Amette (2001) stated in *Le Point*: “elle a préféré l’aventure littéraire.” She produced *Naissance des fantômes* (1998) and *Le Mal de mer* (1999), both short novels which explore the themes of absence and loss via a narrative in which everyday objects take on a hazy strangeness, characters and locations are unnamed, and landscapes are peopled by ghosts and memories. The direct and simplistic narrative voice of *Truismes* is replaced by lengthy descriptions of emotion and sensation. However, Darrieussecq insists on their unity with *Truismes* and considers the three to be a trilogy connected by their tracing of the transformation of female identity (Lambeth 810). Her fourth novel, *Bref séjour chez les vivants* (2001), makes use of innovative narrative techniques to present the everyday thought processes of four female members of the Johnson family as they attempt to come to terms with a tragic family secret. Following her first four novels, Darrieussecq’s work then took an autobiographical turn with the publication of *Le Bébé* (2002), drawing upon her experiences of the first year of her baby’s life.⁷ Indeed, the birth of her first child in 2001 allowed her to explore further the limits and boundaries of her writing as she proclaims the desire to capture more than “l’expérience personnelle et banale de la maternité” (Darrieussecq 2002:138). With *White*, a year later, she returned to the novel form and indulged her fascination for the mystery and wonder of the natural world. In 2004 she published the short stories *Claire dans la forêt* and *Penthésilée, premier combat*. *Le Pays* followed in 2005, and including elements of both fiction and *autofiction*, references and unsettles the concepts of self and text. In 2006 she published a collection of fifteen short stories entitled *Zoo*, while in 2007 two publications appeared: *Mrs Ombrella et les musées du désert*, an illustrated novella in which the drawings depict Darrieussecq herself, and the controversial novel *Tom est mort*. In 2008 she published *Précisions sur les vagues*, a poetic examination of the sea and the seashore which had originally been given away free with the first edition of *Le Mal de mer*, and a translation of Ovid’s *Tristium* and *Ex Ponto* letters entitled *Tristes Pontiques*. In 2009, again two texts appeared: her first a play, *Le Musée de la mer*,⁸ and a

6 She wrote her PhD on contemporary autobiography and the work of Hervé Guibert, Georges Perec, Michel Leiris and Serge Doubrovsky (Darrieussecq 1997b).

7 *Le Bébé* was shortly afterwards adapted for the stage by Marc Goldberg starring the 1980s Belgian popstar, Lio, appearing first at the Vingtième Théâtre, Paris, and then at the Studio des Champs Élysées, Paris.

8 Directed by Arthur Nauzyciel and performed at the National Theatre of Iceland, Reykjavik, March-May 2009 and the Centre Dramatique National in Orléans, May 2009.

children's book, *Péronille la chevalière*,⁹ while in 2010 she published *Rapport de police*, a treatise on literary plagiarism.¹⁰ Her latest work to date is a return to the novel with *Clèves* (2011), capturing the obsessions of small-town adolescent life. Additionally, she has provided a number of texts to accompany the work of artists: "J'écris parfois pour des artistes. Je cherche un équivalent-mots de leur travail plastique, qui ne soit ni critique ni illustratif. Comme si l'artiste avait dû utiliser des mots à la place de son matériau" (Darrieussecq 2006a:250).¹¹ Again reaching out to other disciplines, she has recently trained as a psychoanalyst and, while practising, also leads seminars at the *École Normale Supérieure* which appear to combine her interests in literature and psychology.¹²

Textual politics

Darrieussecq's texts often deal with intense and complex situations, the most well-known being that of *Truismes*, but she has also written on madness, the death of children, unexplained disappearance, the moment of death, acute loneliness, intense cold, rapacious maternal emotions, and the moment of falling in love. She is intrigued by experiences which are not codified by language, or in which everyday expressions become redundant, thereby forcing her protagonists to find an authentic expression of their singular experience, making innovative use of language, and sometimes writing, in order to comprehend their personal relationship with the world. As Shirley Jordan has noted: "The ultimate interest for the reader of her works [...]lies] in the moments of intense identification provoked by the astonishingly original outcomes of her resolve to say the unsayable" (2002:153). Darrieussecq also uses language to transform everyday experiences, striving to reposition daily occurrences, attaining a more intense and physical experience of reality with the hope of changing her reader's perception of the world:

J'écris les livres psychologiques contre la psychologie. Je ne me satisfais pas de phrases du type "Je me sentais très angoissée" ou "Elle était très heureuse" [...] Je veux savoir ce que c'est, l'angoisse, le bonheur, la mer, un bébé, ce que c'est de l'intérieur, comme si c'est la première fois que j'abordais ces parages. Je veux dire au lecteur: "Voyez, sentez, entendez: ceci est une vague; ceci est une femme qui se perd; ceci est un cerveau qui pense." (Miller and Holmes)

This self-proclaimed preoccupation: to bring together the concrete nature of words and the fleeting, fluid nature of experience, recalls Nathalie Sarraute's presentation of consciousness, as Darrieussecq acknowledges:

Nathalie Sarraute m'a donné la force de ne pas écrire "Elle se sentait très angoissée" [...] Elle, son truc, c'était les sous-conversations, ce qui se passait autour, et moi, ce n'est pas exactement cela, ça serait, comment définir ça, ça serait l'absence à soi-même, c'est-à-dire, on n'est pas où l'on croit qu'on est, non plus. J'essaie de décrire ce vide qu'on est et qui est rempli par des tas d'autres choses qui ne sont pas nous mais qui le deviennent, des aller-retour entre la personne humaine et le non-dit, si vous voulez. (Lambeth 109)

9 The book, which subverts the still powerful myth of the damsel in distress, has its heroine completing a number of challenging tasks to reach her prince. When she gets there, however, he is a disappointment, and she leaves, alone and proud of her solitary achievements.

10 This was written in response to the two accusations of plagiarism brought against Darrieussecq which will be dealt with below.

11 Her collaborations with artists include texts written for Louise Bourgeois, Annette Messager, Philippe Rahm, Bernard Faucon, Juergen Teller, and Edouard François.

12 "Écrire: qu'est-ce que c'est ?" (2008-9); "De la plagiomnie : accusations de plagiat et autres modes de surveillance dans la fiction" (2009-10), <http://www.ihep.fr/psychanalyse/Seminaires/Seminaires>.

Echoing Sarraute's "gangue d'idées préconçues et d'images toutes faites" (Sarraute 141), Darrieussecq rails against cliché, or, as she calls it: "le prêt-à-penser," le "déjà dit," and "truismes," echoing the title of her first novel.¹³ The project of both writers is to attempt to strip away the labels, the words, and bring the reader as close as possible to reality as it is experienced. Darrieussecq employs textual strategies which embody rather than represent, made up of the visceral relations of the text: rhythm, blank space, listing, font changes, sometimes even pictorial images. These strategies succeed in capturing authentic, unnarratable experience, yet they also disrupt systemic linguistic conventions and implicate the text itself in the representation process. Darrieussecq's texts thus constantly remind us of the complex relationship between text and "reality." Alongside this aesthetic concern, however, Darrieussecq's novels remain accessible and socially relevant. Social and political questions are addressed: the definition of identity, the significance of gender and nation, the role of women, the construction of the family, the role of society and institutions, and globalization. Indeed, outside her novel writing, the author has involved herself in a number of political campaigns, both literary and non-literary.¹⁴ She is often asked to comment on subjects as wide-ranging as politics, culture, and sport. Darrieussecq asserts that she is "féministe dans la vie" (Concannon and Sweeney) and indeed has become something of a social commentator in this guise.¹⁵ She has made a number of public condemnations of the banally sexist usage of the French language, continuing the work of Simone de Beauvoir who commented that "Ordinary sexism starts at the level of grammar when the masculine always comes before the feminine" (Schwarzer 70). In a paper she gave in January 2007, Darrieussecq declared her distaste at the inequality expressed in the French language, a topic which is dealt with in Michèle Schaal's article in this special issue:

je suis face à une langue qui m'oblige souvent à parler de moi au masculin [...] J'ai la sensation récurrente de devoir imposer à mon corps de femme une langue d'homme [...] En français, le masculin domine toute la phrase. Si le

13 The metamorphosis in *Truismes* is apparent not only in the narrator's physical transformation, but also in the use of language and developments in narration. As Darrieussecq has claimed: "Au début elle [la narratrice] a un vocabulaire très pauvre et, peu à peu, la syntaxe et le vocabulaire s'enrichissent [...] Il y a une évolution de la parole, de la prise de parole, qui va vers plus de liberté" (Gaudet 109). The author has described *Truismes* as her "*manifeste littéraire*" (*ibid.*), and her texts continue this theme of finding signifying practices which express and authenticize the uniqueness of the individual.

14 She is the patron of two organizations: *Bibliothèques sans frontières*, www.bibliosansfrontieres.org, "qui vise à faciliter l'accès au savoir dans les pays en développement," and *Réseau DES France*, www.des-france.org, which describes itself as "une association d'aide et d'information aux victimes du Distillène et aux parents d'enfants nés prématurés à cause de cette hormone de synthèse," of which she is herself a victim. In November 1999, she led a group of prestigious authors in writing a letter of protest to *Libération* against the withdrawal of passages condemning Jean-Marie Le Pen from Mathieu Lindon's novel *Le Procès de Jean-Marie Le Pen*. She has written a number of pieces for charity such as her piece in the collection *Va y avoir du sport* for "Sports sans frontières," an association which develops educational programs in the third world. In September 2006, she joined a number of celebrities in sponsoring illegal immigrant children, a group nicknamed the "petits Africains du gymnase de Cachan" by the press, who were threatened with expulsion from France.

15 On feminist grounds, she actively supported Segolène Royal in her campaign to become the first female French president. During the presidential campaign, Darrieussecq attacked France's low numbers of female politicians, commenting on a general under-estimation of the abilities of women: "Moi-même, je vis cette condescendance au quotidien: on est toujours sous-estimée quand on est femme. La France donne des leçons au monde, alors qu'elle a beaucoup de retard par rapport aux pays scandinaves, à l'Inde ou aux Philippines. Cette élection représente à cet égard une chance historique" (Darrieussecq 2007d). Again in *Libération*, she criticized a number of sexist tendencies which became apparent during the presidential campaign: the continued claim of Royal's incompetence, the interest in her appearance, and the ubiquitous use of her first name: "'Voter Segolène' [...] L'expression même est curieuse. L'appelle-t-on par son prénom parce que c'est une femme? Un petit nom, pour une femme qu'on minorise, qu'on veut puériliser dans sa puissance? On ne dit pas voter 'Nicolas,' encore moins voter 'François'" (Darrieussecq 2007e).

sujet comprend un seul élément masculin et plusieurs éléments féminins, ce n'est pas le nombre qui prime, c'est le genre [...] S'il y a un homme et trois femmes dans une phrase, la phrase s'accorde au masculin. (Darrieussecq 2007c)

In spite of these political concerns, in her writing Darrieussecq does not consider her role to be that of social commentator: "Mon métier, mon arme, mon plaisir, mon rôle, c'est d'écrire : pas plus et pas moins. Ce serait en ce sens une erreur et une faute de m'isoler, de cesser d'observer le monde, mais mon métier n'est pas exactement de le commenter" (Miller and Holmes). Critics have disagreed over the validity of feminist readings of Darrieussecq's work. While only commenting on her first three novels, Colette Sarrey-Strack believes they are feminist texts, chiefly as a result of their preoccupation: "Le principe de composition et la distribution des personnages de ces trois romans révèle, au-delà de la parodie virulente qui présidait à l'écriture de *Truismes*, que l'interrogation centrale de Marie Darrieussecq a trait à la (et à sa) condition féminine" (Sarrey-Strack 184). However, Shirley Jordan and Catherine Rodgers have concurred on the problematic nature of Darrieussecq's feminist message. Jordan considers Darrieussecq's representation of feminism to be ambiguous, something she deems to be only partially a deliberate stance, and which she claims to be symptomatic of the writer's generation. Collating her with fellow contemporary female writers in French of a similar age, Amélie Nothomb and Virginie Despentes, Jordan claims that their work "develops a fictional universe which points to the necessity for renewal of feminist thought and action, but remains steeped in the experience of protagonists who are unable to formulate a coherent political position" (Jordan 2007:145).¹⁶ The confused position to which Jordan is referring is displayed most clearly in *Truismes* and *Le Bébé*, which she treats together, as both "rais[ing] the idea of collective – and essential – feminine identity" (136) and yet equally dismissing a number of first-wave feminist principles. Certainly, Darrieussecq's portrayal of the experience of motherhood is ambiguous, often combining the protagonists' personal embrace of traditional roles with the concurrent problematization of the social *devoir* and extensive treatment of the complexity of the mother's social role. Rodgers claims that despite the repeatedly feminine perspective of Darrieussecq's texts, her representation is not simple or clear enough to be labelled feminist (Rodgers 2002:84). Rather, she considers Darrieussecq's texts to be subversive in their refusal of any kind of "normality" (92), and in fact sees the feminist message as being "brouill[é]" as a result of the texts' "attirance pour l'entropie et la non-signification" (93). Instead, Rodgers highlights the breadth of Darrieussecq's project: "L'écriture de Darrieussecq m'apparaît plus une écriture de questionnement des limites qu'une écriture féministe" (102), something which becomes increasingly clear in the articles which make up this special issue.

Fiercely defensive of the right to individuality, Darrieussecq is reluctant to associate her work with any particular group, and adamant that it does not in fact express any overt political position, expressing a desire to "écrire hors de tout système" (Miller and Holmes). In common with many contemporary French female writers she has rejected the concept of *écriture féminine*, calling it "dangereuse, ghettoïsante, minorisante" (Concannon and Sweeney), while in *Le Bébé* her narrator baldly states: "il n'y a pas d'écriture féminine évidemment" (90). Be that as it may, in her positing of a female language, Christiane Rochefort talks of avoidance of "le mode régnant," words and phrases which are "manufacturé, usiné" (Rochefort 132, 134), a description which is similar to Darrieussecq's refusal of cliché. Emphasis on the role of language in the formation of female identity suggests that she is in fact attacking the choices available to

16 See also Jordan 2004:75-111.

women and the way in which they are portrayed, rather than any particular lifestyle choice. Not only does Darrieussecq reject limited social models, she equally rejects limited ways of representing these models, and draws attention to the interaction between society and textual representation. Her insistence that she is not a “social commentator” and her simultaneous belief in the novel as a site for social change (Bacqué and Chemin) in fact suggest the complex relationship she draws between text and society. It is thus through the process of language and through the production of meaning that Darrieussecq continues to present a challenge to social construction:

En ce sens toute écriture exploratrice, novatrice, est politique : même apparemment éloignée du “réel,” des “événements,” elle fournit le langage moderne, elle bâtit les outils verbaux et mentaux qui permettent de penser le monde. Elle corrode les clichés, elle fait rendre gorge au prêt-à-penser, au déjà dit. (Miller and Holmes)

Critical responses

Following the phenomenal success of *Truismes*, Darrieussecq’s refusal to play into the hands of the media and her desire to fulfil her self-defined writing project meant that *Naissance des fantômes* was translated into half as many languages as *Truismes*, and *Le Mal de mer* into even fewer, as she herself reasons: “Je crois qu’il en aura de moins en moins parce que ce sont des livres de moins en moins ‘grand public,’ de plus en plus poétiques” (Gaudet 117). Her fourth novel, *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, considered to be her most formally demanding,¹⁷ still sold 15,000 copies in France however, “ce qui est exceptionnel pour un roman de cette qualité littéraire” (Terrasse 253), a novel which, in its innovative combination of narrative models: “[agrandit] les territoires romanesques” (Amette 2001).¹⁸ Nevertheless, Darrieussecq continues to be P.O.L.’s best-selling author, along with Emmanuel Carrère (Terrasse 253). Yet since *Truismes* and despite her prolific output, only her latest novel, *Tom est mort*, was nominated for a literary prize: both the Goncourt and the Femina, in 2007. Indeed, Darrieussecq has never won a major literary prize and she positions herself outside this *système littéraire*: “Quant au “système littéraire,” Goncourt ou autre, je suis hors de prix. J’ai eu très tôt du métier d’écrivain le pire et le meilleur, l’encensement et la curée, les lettres d’amour et de haine, la calomnie et les demandes en mariage, les adorations et les jalousies” (Miller and Holmes).

Maintaining her reputation for controversy, the publication of *Le Bébé* saw Darrieussecq criticized for its clearly autobiographical content, but also her chosen subject matter: the developing relationship between a mother and her baby.¹⁹ Jacques-Pierre Amette, who had previously highly praised her work, doubted the “literariness” of the text:

Le critique abandonné de tous devant le nounours d’un bébé qu’il ne connaît même pas [...] Peut-on lire quelque chose d’aussi plat ? vide ? creux ? autosatisfait ? [...] On voit un auteur qui perd les pédales et croit que l’autofiction façon Angot consiste à emplir un livre de ce qu’il y a de plus ennuyeux et de plus inévitable : écouter un enfant dire “Euh... euh...” si on lui passe son père au téléphone [...] Si les éditeurs publient aujourd’hui ce genre de livre sous l’étiquette littéraire, c’est qu’il y a une mutation cérébrale effrayante dans le milieu. (Amette 2002)

17 See Darrieussecq’s own words in Clouzeau and Le Bricquière 42; also Samoyault : “Avec *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, Marie Darrieussecq signe son livre le plus expérimental.”

18 On this subject, see Jordan 2005 and Kemp 2008, 2010.

19 See, for example, Quiriny: “Marie Darrieussecq est probablement la seule femme au monde à qui changer des couches donne envie de citer Montaigne.”

Criticism of her chosen topic in fact functions to strengthen her argument in a text which attempts to valorize the mother and the baby as literary subjects. The challenge for Darrieussecq in *Le Bébé* was precisely that of mixing the conventionally literary with the non-literary, attempting a serious philosophical and linguistic examination of her new baby.

Further controversy takes the form of two accusations of plagiarism brought against Darrieussecq. The first time, in 1998, Marie Ndiaye accused her of “singerie,” of stealing the narratological elements of two of her novels, *La Sorcière* (2003) and *Un temps de saison* (2004), for her own *Naissance des fantômes*. Darrieussecq defended herself against Ndiaye’s accusations, listing in *Libération* her numerous influences (Darrieussecq 1998b:6), and blamed the charge on her runaway success with *Truismes*: “C’est toujours un peu comme ça en France. Après un tel succès, il fallait que je me défende” (Gaudet 116). Secondly, in 2007, Darrieussecq was accused of “plagiat psychique.” On the publication of her latest novel, *Tom est mort*, a first person *récit* which relates the death of a four-year-old boy told by his mother ten years later, Camille Laurens, a fellow author at P.O.L., claimed a number of similarities with her own text, *Philippe*, written after the death of her newborn son in 1995. In an article in *La Revue Littéraire*, she accuses Darrieussecq of “piratage” and “usurpation d’identité”: “J’ai eu le sentiment, en le lisant, que *Tom est mort* avait été écrit dans ma chambre, le cul sur ma chaise ou vautrée dans mon lit de douleur. Marie Darrieussecq s’est invitée chez moi, elle squatte” (Laurens 1). Both Darrieussecq and the authors’ shared publisher, Paul Otchakovsky-Laurens, launched an attack on Laurens’s accusations: Darrieussecq defending her right to explore whichever subject she pleased in her writing, whether or not she had personally lived the experience (Lançon), and P.O.L. accusing Laurens of failing to distinguish between the individual and the universal, and declaring his refusal to publish her further (Otchakovsky-Laurens 2). Patrick Kéchichian rightfully points out the numerous literary issues raised by this dispute: the function of fiction, the limits of the novel and of plagiarism, and whether or not the novel has a moral duty, in this case, presumably, to respect private grief. As Darrieussecq previously declared: “‘mensonge’ est une catégorie morale, pas littéraire” (Darrieussecq 2007c). In a lengthier and less direct response to these accusations, Darrieussecq’s 2010 publication, *Rapport de police : accusations de plagiat et autres modes de surveillance de la fiction*, expresses the complexity of the relationship between life and fiction, as discussed by Colette Trout’s article in this special issue. In fact there is a concerted effort throughout Darrieussecq’s work to partake in intertextual practices, and to address issues of the expression of identity and authenticity.

Darrieussecq’s eclectic output and ambivalent public persona thus place her in an interesting position with regard to the crisis-narrative currently facing the contemporary French novel. Firstly, the success of *Truismes* significantly improved the French novel’s status abroad, with over a million copies sold worldwide and translations in forty languages, a feat which had not been achieved since Marguerite Duras’s *L’Amant* in 1984 (Valéry 67). Secondly, Darrieussecq’s penchant for storytelling and the social relevance of her works co-exist with metatextual explorations of language, representation, and the workings of the text, making her work difficult to quantify with regard to the current discourse on the “retour du récit.”²⁰ Darrieussecq’s works, it seems, have the simultaneous capacity to be both human and social but also technical and theoretical.

20 This narrative began in the 1990s with a revival in France of novels which were seen as being socially and historically anchored to reality. This was summarized by Davis and Fallaize (2000) as three notable returns: of the subject, of history and of storytelling. More recently, in March 2007, the campaign “Pour une littérature-monde en français” was launched in *Le Monde* and followed by a book which championed both a literature which looks outwards to other places and other people, and a literature which is penned by francophone writers from outside l’*Héxagone*. The manifesto claims the need to reinstate “le monde, le sujet, le sens, l’histoire, le ‘réfèrent’” in French literature (Le Bris and Rouaud). More articles and books have followed on

This special issue combines five single-text articles with six cross-œuvre studies and an original interview with Marie Darrieussecq based around questions raised by these very articles. The social and political implications of Darrieussecq's work are apparent in the articles collected together here, as is her concentration on questions of representation. The collection opens with three articles which deal with the body. Firstly, succinctly summarizing previous debate surrounding *Truismes* in order to pinpoint Darrieussecq's specific contribution to feminist theoretical argument, Amaleena Damlé emphasizes the fluidity and multiplicity of Darrieussecq's model of femininity, as opposed to its being a binary in relation to masculinity. Next Julie Rodgers's highly original article reads *Truismes* as the treatise of an eating disorder and shows how Darrieussecq comments on the enforced normalization of women's bodies. Equally focussing on representation of the body, although this time in *Le Pays*, Brenda Garvey uses Henri Lefebvre's concept of rhythmanalysis to analyse the recurrent Darrieussecq-ian themes of space and the body and chart the oscillating search for self apparent in the novels.

The formal and stylistic quality of Darrieussecq's texts has largely been overlooked in scholarly discourse, which makes it all the more refreshing that the following grouping of articles focuses explicitly on this. Again on *Truismes*, Michèle Schaal's wide-ranging article testifies to the novel's richness and complexity, showing how the combination of Darrieussecq's choice of genre, language, and narrative voice forms a stinging attack on established narrative and social concepts. Next Morag Young brings together the author's style and her feminist concerns, revealing how innovative use of pronouns highlights Darrieussecq's thoughts on identity, gender, and the creation of the self through the writing process. Simon Kemp develops his work on Darrieussecq's narrative model of the mind to investigate her simultaneous use of both rationalist and supernatural currents in order authentically to capture the experience of loss. Finally in this grouping, Anne Simon reveals the author's ability to write animality and monstrosity, her interest in the human-animal continuum, and her capacity to examine both thematically and linguistically what it is that makes us human.

The third grouping sees the focus shift to a consideration of motherhood. Catherine Rodgers's article considers *Le Bébé* on a continuum of writing about motherhood in French literature. Darrieussecq's position is shown to be once more *between*, demonstrating that the roles of mother and writer are not mutually exclusive, presenting them as opportunities which in fact enrich each other. Second, Colette Trout looks at the relationship between Darrieussecq's most obviously child-focussed texts, *Le Bébé* and *Tom est mort*, to show how the author mixes autobiographical and fictional features in order to complexify the acts of writing and living, and intensify the reading experience. Third, Gill Rye traces the trajectory of Darrieussecq's handling of motherhood, charting the movement in focus from mother as object of narration to mother as narrative subject. Bringing the issue up to date and revealing exceptionally detailed knowledge of Darrieussecq's œuvre, Marie-Claire Barnet focuses on the author's only play to date, *Le Musée de la mer*, revealing the hybridity in its production, characterization, and themes, and suggesting theatre to be the perfect setting for her challenging work. Shirley Jordan's April 2011 interview with Marie Darrieussecq closes this special issue, providing insights into the writing experience, the position of women in contemporary society, the author's now published novel *Clèves*, and her future literary plans, and also gauging her opinion on the readings of her own work presented here. All of these articles reveal the ambivalence apparent in Darrieussecq's work: the oscillation between metaphysical states, the destabilizing of signifying practices, the blending of psychological models, the

the subject, including Tzvetan Todorov's *La Littérature en péril* (2007) and Nancy Huston's *L'Espèce fabulatrice* (2008).

co-existence of social roles, and the transgression of societal norms. The result is a simultaneous evocation and problematization of human experience.

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