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Family tragedies: the death of a child in recent French literature

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The death of a child throws a family into disorder, rocks its very foundations. It is what parents fear most. Remember the banner headline after the recent Soham trial when the parents of the murdered 10 year-olds Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman spoke of their own 'life sentence' – sentenced, as parents, to live (or rather survive) without their daughters. Here, I shall be discussing four recent French texts, which suggest a similar kind of 'life sentence', although, here, the tragedy is not murder but the death of a child at birth and from illness. The texts are Camille Laurens's *Philippe* (1995), Philippe Forest's *L'Enfant éternel* (1997) which won the *Prix Femina* for a first novel, Laure Adler's *A ce soir* (2001) and Aline Schulman's *Paloma* (2001). Laurens and Adler write about the loss of their baby sons; Laurens writing in the months following the death of Philippe which occurred just two hours and ten minutes after he was born, and Adler writing 17 years after the loss of her 9 month-old baby Rémi from a respiratory problem. Forest and Schulman both lost their young daughters to cancer; Forest, like Laurens, writing soon after the death of his 4 year-old daughter (called Pauline in his novel) and Schulman's text, in a similar way to that of Adler, written 16 years after the death of her daughter at the age of 8.

In the family and in society more generally, a child's death is almost always perceived as a 'wrongful death'. For the parents, the experience of losing a child is a 'limit experience', an irreparable loss. All too fearfully imaginable, such a loss nonetheless proves *unimaginable* even in the face of its stark and tragic reality. In the wider socio-cultural sphere, the death of a child is so shocking – and, we might add,

given its coverage in the popular media, so compelling – because it is felt to be a reversal of the natural order of things.

Cultural production that commemorates or testifies to the loss of a child is not a new development, of course, but, as Emma Wilson points out in her sensitive study *Cinema's Missing Children*, contemporary Western culture 'has a particular interest in observing, managing and testifying to such losses' (p.159). It is part of the late 20th- and early 21st-century's 'drive towards memorialisation' (p. 159) and is reflected in the interest in and development of trauma studies. In this way, the texts at the centre of my own study intervene in contemporary debates on trauma and loss and the management of grief and mourning.

The notion of a 'life sentence' of parental bereavement, with which I started, although understandable as a rhetorical figure to draw attention to such overwhelming loss, does not sit comfortably with Western models of mourning which require the bereaved person, after a suitable period of mourning, to let go of the lost loved one and to move on, to get on with life. Indeed, all four texts protest at such well-meaning platitudes that work, from the parents perspectives, to deny the import of the child's death and life, Laurens's narrator most vehemently accusing those by whom 'Philippe souffre mille morts' (p.64): those who avoid talking about him, tell her she'll soon get over it, or advise her to have another child.

From Freud, an inability to overcome the pain of loss – the melancholic prolonging of the mourning process – is considered to be pathological. Melanie Klein's work on mourning in which mourning the loss of loved ones, even in adulthood, entails a psychic reworking of the primary processes of infantile loss, arguably allows for a longer period of connection than the Freudian model, but nonetheless Klein still promotes an ideal of 'effective mourning' and thus a sense that it should be completed. Klein's work may be useful, I think though, in appreciating

the particularly complex mourning process in parents who lose a child. The re-working of unconscious infantile anxieties of primary loss (which in Klein involve both love and hate and a sense that the infant has destroyed his or her parents) may in bereaved parents accentuate to an intense degree, at the level of the psyche, feelings of the loss of self as parent. Newer models of grieving, and some non-Western models of grief and mourning, allow more explicitly for what the clinical-psychologist-editors of one collection of essays call ‘continuing bonds’ with, rather than disengagement from, dead loved ones (not only children). This ‘bond’ is not a pathological melancholic longing but, rather, a positive, integrated form of connection that, in order to be most beneficial, especially in the loss of a child, is also socially ratified. I want to keep in mind this notion of a socially ratified ‘continuing bond’ as I continue my discussion.

Jacques Drillon, in his own moving text about the death of his stepson, identifies a literary genre which he terms ‘les récits de mort’ (p. 129). Whether or not the four very different texts I discuss here can be categorised as a genre or sub-genre of this kind is not of particular concern here, although I would argue that, if anything, they all function as memoirs, which, in another context Nancy Miller reminds us, consist of both an act of memory and an act of writing – and thus an intersection of the private with the public. In discussing the four texts, I do not presume to comment on the respective authors’ own personal lived experience of grief, despite the fact that all these texts are in some sense autobiographical. Rather, I want to focus on the very intersection of the private with the public – on the published, public space of the literary text as a narrative of what are very intimate and private experiences. Publication in itself places a text in the public sphere, of course, and, as Emmanuel Bouju emphasises in his article on Forest’s text, ‘dans le champ de l’institution littéraire française’ (p.320), rendering it also an object of interpretation, interrogation,

criticism, and even possibly scepticism and/or suspicion. Texts like these – dealing with tragic loss and overwhelming grief – are thus particularly challenging to the reader – for what is our place here? How or where are we situated in or by the text? Where can we place ourselves in relation to it?

The four texts are quite different from one another in form, in style, and in the circumstances of the child's death, yet there are some striking similarities. All four authors were already writers, and, in each case, these texts took the form of a new departure: Laurens had written a number of novels and *Philippe* inaugurated a more openly autobiographical mode of writing; Adler is a historian and journalist, director of France-Culture and biographer of Marguerite Duras; Forest an academic, who had produced studies of Philippe Sollers and a history of *Tel Quel*, and who with *L'Enfant éternel* and its sequel *Toute la nuit* (1999) turned to writing novels, Schulman is a specialist in and translator of Spanish literature. Each of the four texts retrospectively covers the period up to and including the death of the child. In so doing, they all speak of parenting in the light both of experienced loss and of impending loss, and with the guilt of survival. There is obviously much more that they say – and, of course, that they don't say – about the unbearable experiences which they evoke. Within the confines of this paper, though, in my very brief discussion of the four texts which follows, I shall focus solely on the ways in which parenting is described or suggested, in order to think about what these texts can tell us about the inscription in the public arena of such private tragedy.

Camille Laurens's *Philippe* is a short *récit* of the death of her first child from prolonged foetal distress during birth. The text, constructed in fragments, short paragraphs and sections, giving a rather raw, staccato tone to the account, tells how the narrator returned to France from Morocco, where she had been living, in order,

ironically, tragically, to have her baby safely. Laurens's narrator describes herself at the beginning of the text as a 'mère défunte' (p.14); in losing her son at birth, she feels that her motherhood has died with him: 'J'ai eu deux minutes pour être mère. Enfant défunt, mère défunte [...] Famille défunte' (pp.14-15). Yet, poignantly, she describes how her body asserts its maternity a month after the baby has died: 'malgré une double dose de médicaments, le lait monte. Il déborde, il jaillit tout seul comme des larmes, il coule sur les seins, sur le ventre' (p.19). With this image of the milk tragically flowing from her breasts like tears, the body itself is figured here powerfully – albeit achingly powerless – as a *mater dolorosa*. This very physical – physiological – manifestation of maternity after the baby's death also reflects the fact that, in Laurens's text, memories of motherhood relate almost entirely to its physical experience: the sensations of the baby moving in the womb, the flow of her waters breaking, the pains of childbirth and, finally, the intense feeling of the baby's body as he is born 'des contours de son corps, de ses jambes très longues' (p.47).

The baby is named Philippe at birth – at death – 'pour qu'il existe [...] Le reconnaissant' (pp.26-7), and at his funeral, the father reads a letter to the baby signed "'ton papa, ta maman" pour la joie folle d'en former une fois les syllabes' (p.28). In naming themselves as mummy and daddy in the present, the parents thus lay claim to the parenthood whose future has so tragically been denied them. Laurens's book ends with a moving conflation of the private and the public: 'J'écris pour dire *Je t'aime*. [...] J'écris pour desserrer cette douleur d'amour, je t'aime, Philippe, je t'aime, je crie pour que tu cries, j'écris pour que tu vives. Ci-gît Philippe Mézières. Ce qu'aucune réalité ne pourra jamais faire, les mots le peuvent' (p.75). Here, the book has a role in the *public* assertion of baby Philippe's existence, of his death and of motherhood – parenthood – as, indeed, Laurens confirms in a recent interview: 'Il y avait son nom sur la couverture. C'est banal à dire, mais ça le mettait dans le courant de la vie. Ça le

mettait au monde d'une certaine manière' (*La Matricule des anges*, p.21). Thus, in Laurens's text – in common, as I shall suggest, with the other examples I discuss – writing is itself a maternal (or paternal) act – of the kind that Elaine Tuttle Hansen terms 'nonprocreative maternal practice' (p.226) – an act, practice, which recreates the parenting relationship with the child in the present, in language, in the world.

In Adler's text, which like Laurens's is written in the form of fragments, the narrator is, from the outset: 'une mère vivante qui a perdu son enfant' (p.50). This reference to a continuing sense of motherhood is not simply because in the intervening 17 years she has had two daughters but rather because the pain of losing her baby son Rémi remains with her all these years later: 'Je sais depuis dix-sept ans que la douleur est et demeura ma compagne [...] rien ne s'efface, rien de s'adoucit' (pp.49-50). The fragments of written text are interspersed irregularly with numerous large blank white spaces as if, on the one hand, to signify the inadequacy of words to express the mother's pain, and, on the other hand, to inscribe – or at least to inscribe a space for – those unspoken, unspeakable, intensely private feelings. In striking contrast to the account of the harrowing weeks, and months, spent in what one reviewer calls the 'insoutenable anonymat' of the hospital (Delorme), unable to hold Rémi as he lay in intensive care wired up to machines, the memories of maternity prior to the baby's hospitalisation are, here, as in Laurens, intensely physical. In Adler's text, what is remembered is the healthy joyful pregnancy and relatively easy birth, and then bodily memories of the baby's early months – evoking his smell of milk, the touch of his skin, his eyelashes, the cuddles and 'petits babillages secrets' of mother and child (p.54). All the texts I discuss speak of parental guilt following the death of a child, but in Adler's text it engulfs the narrator's sense of continuing maternity: guilt for not being there when Rémi was first taken ill (she was at work and the nanny was looking

after him), guilt for feeling she had abandoned him (because of the hospital system which prevented her staying with him, holding him), the shame of being a mother who has lost a child (a social pariah), and of her own continued survival after his loss.

Now, Forest's and Schulman's texts are somewhat different from those of Laurens and Adler in their memories of parenthood. Both relate the long year or so in which the parents accompanied their daughter from the initial diagnosis of cancer to her death, via the tortuous path of their hopes and fears, and of the suffering and periods of respite of her treatment. Forest's narrator speaks of being 'orphaned' by the death of his daughter: 'un père, une mère dont l'enfant meurt se retrouve orphelin. Celui qui perd son enfant se découvre projeté dans le même solitude affolante que celui qui, tout petit, se retrouve privé de ses parents' (*Toute la nuit*, p.202-3). His paternal identity is born from his child: 'Je suis né de ma fille autant que des mes parents, par elle j'ai appris ce que signifiait ma vie' (*L'Enfant éternel*, p.142); losing her means he loses a part of himself – as father.

Although much of Forest's novel is narrated in the first person, some sections of it are written in the third person, with the narrator as 'Papa'. Many sections are devoted to dialogue between father and daughter, and, rather than the purely physical memories of motherhood that we found in Laurens and Adler, in Forest's novel, language and storytelling play a large part. This is storytelling on the level of the novel itself, which constantly asserts its own fiction, while also, as Bouju points out, including autobiographical episodes which identify the narrator closely with the author. Yet storytelling is also prevalent within the diegesis itself, with the story of Peter Pan (J. M. Barrie's *enfant éternel*) operating both as an intertextual framing device to the novel and as Pauline's favourite story within it. On the one hand, the emphasis on language here simply reflects the age of the child – Laurens's and

Adler's babies died too early for language to play a part. On the other hand, it reflects the importance of words – and of writing – both in the commemoration of the life and death – and courage – of Pauline and in the preservation of – reconnection with – the parent-child relationship. The latter is an extremely important element of Forest's novel. The narrator even goes so far as to say: 'La longue année où mourut notre fille fut la plus belle de ma vie' (p.233). Here, he is referring to the closeness of mother, father and daughter during this period, and, indeed, the book focuses more on important moments in the *life* the family has together during Pauline's illness than on her suffering, which, although always present, is not dwelt on or described in detail.

In a similar vein, but quite differently treated, the move to hold on to parenthood that is evident in the writing of Forest's text is also to be found in Schulman's *Paloma*. At the end of the book, the narrator tells how she responds – as a mother – a year after her daughter died, to another child's cry of 'Mamaaan' (p.174); but this poignant episode ends positively with a feeling of renewed connection and the sense of the continuing presence of the lost daughter. Indeed, the story that is told in this text is addressed to the dead child. The narrator refers to herself as a 'conteur', creating 'cette histoire vécue' (p.14) 16 years after her daughter's death. As in Forest's novel, storytelling also plays a large part in their relationship: here, it is the mother's stories which entertain the daughter during the long hours in hospital and which accompany her in her illness. Storytelling is also the way in which the narrator re-connects not only with the lost daughter but also with the lost mother-daughter relationship: 'c'est toi, c'est nous, que je veux sauver' (p.32). This is clearly evident towards the end of the book when the narrator admits that the child's father was also present throughout the events narrated, although he is scarcely mentioned in the account: 'Mais je l'ai voulue, notre histoire, comme un dialogue à huis clos, de toi à moi, comme une élégie

à deux voix. Et autour de nous j'ai fait le vide. Pour mieux te voir, mon enfant. Pour mieux te serrer, mon enfant. Pour mieux te garder, mon enfant' (p.163).

In the face of unimaginable loss, then, those who are already writers have turned to writing – perhaps precisely in an attempt to imagine it – yet none of the four texts I have brought together here suggest that writing has a healing role. Indeed, they all categorically deny it. Above all, what they say very simply is that maternity and paternity do not disappear with the loss of the child. In each case, parenting is remembered in the past and recreated – claimed – in the present.

In the volume *Continuing Bonds*, Dennis Klass suggests that bereaved parents can begin to let go of pain (their own pain and the pain their child has suffered) by constructing an inner representation of the loss that is characterised by life, energy and love. This is of course part of the normal work of personal grieving and mourning, but, for Klass who works with self-help groups of bereaved parents, this process is, importantly, 'partly a social activity' and it is ongoing (p.17). What these parents want most is public recognition and acceptance of, on the one hand, their loss and feelings of grief and, on the other, the continuing connection that they, as parents, have with their lost children. Thus, the 'life sentence' of bereaved parents – the continuing connection with the loss – can go beyond the melancholic to become integrated. For Klass, it enables them to let go of pain but to hold on to the child and to themselves as parents.

There are of course many ways to read each of the four texts I have discussed and there are undoubtedly many things they don't or can't say about parents' feelings and experiences of loss, but what they *do* say is important and it requires that we listen. The texts operate to inscribe into the public, cultural, social sphere not only loss and death but also life – the life of and love for the child and, above all, the parents'

continuing self-identity as parents. Following Klass, then, the reader can be cast as having a role in the social ratification of the accounts whose publication precisely asks for public recognition – for social acceptance – of lives lived, of deaths died and of a continuing sense of parenthood. I'll end with a passage by Hélène Cixous, yet another writer who has recently written about maternity 30 years after the death of a year-old Down's syndrome baby, and whose poetical language so sensitively expresses something of the complexity of the still ongoing maternal bond:

Comment penser cela. Mon fils celui qui est mort, mon ancien fils mon fils qui n'est plus mon fils. Et celui que j'appelle mon fils est mon fils le vivant [...] Comment répondre à la question: combien avez-vous eu d'enfants, sans lente et longue réflexion, en remontant les jeunesses et les vieillesse, sans mettre en question chaque mot de cette question qui me met en question de toutes parts comme si je pouvais compter et rassembler en somme ce qui est toujours plus enfant qu'enfant ce qui est moins enfant qu'enfant? Vous avez eu des enfants?, oui oui oui, combien? Ah, ça! cela dépend. [...] Il est plus vrai que je n'ai jamais eu ni perdu mon fils aîné. Ce qu'il en est de ce cas n'est ni reconnaissable ni pensable, ni séparable de moi. Il est rustique, il est mêlé à ma circulation, il est tressé à mes racines.

(Le Jour où je n'étais pas là, pp.50-1, 64)