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Narratives of mothering in contemporary French women's writing

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My research over the past few years has focused on a new turn in women-authored literature in contemporary France – narratives of mothering. That is to say, texts in which the mother is the narrative subject, and also where the topic of the narrative is mothering itself. Historically, mothers are everywhere to be found in French literature, but, although there are some earlier examples of the kind of narrative I'm talking about here, until the 1990s mothers in French literature were largely objects of other peoples' narratives: daughters, sons, lovers, husbands, and omniscient narrators. Marianne Hirsch looked at this phenomenon – the mother as object of narrative rather than subject of her own – in her seminal *The Mother-Daughter Plot* (1989), in a study of 19c and 20c Western literature, which included some French authors (Colette and Marguerite Duras).

Now, however, a new body of narratives of mothering is emerging in French literature, coinciding with an exciting generation of women writers who came to the fore of the French literary scene in the 1990s and first years of the 21c, and who have been attracting the attention of the media, the book-buying public and literary scholars alike. These new narratives of mothering include both fictional works and autobiographical accounts, but in all cases the mother is either the first-person narrator or hers is the dominant point of view.

What I plan to do is to present a brief overview of the dominant themes in my forthcoming book, together with some examples, and then go on to reflect on the phenomenon of these new literary narratives, and on the contexts of their emergence. I'm assuming most of you don't read French. Unfortunately, not many of these texts have been translated into English, but I hope I can convey a bit of a flavour of this body of work, and I have compiled a handout of relevant texts that have been translated. While these texts are decidedly 'French', many of the situations and issues about mothering that they raise are also applicable beyond the immediate French context, and I hope there will be something of more general interest here. I am looking at texts that have been published since 1990.

If you look at the handout, you will see that Part Two of my study is entitled 'Mothering: Loss, Trauma, Separation'. Now, it may be a truism to say that happiness doesn't produce a good story, but the most striking finding in my reading for this project has been the number of mothering narratives that express loss of some kind, or relate to trauma. Indeed, to a greater or lesser extent, all the texts I have analysed follow this trend: so many of them evoke loss, through texts in which mothers and children are separated for a variety of reasons.

These findings – the prevalence of loss in narratives of mothering – echo the phenomenon that Elaine Tuttle Hansen documents in her study, *Mother without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood* (1997). Hansen focuses on contemporary Anglo-American fiction and not only on narratives by mothers themselves as I do, but she notes the large number of texts in which mothers are portrayed 'without child'. Hansen identifies a number of reasons for this trend. On the one hand, material circumstances, such as loss of custody, poverty, which puts both mothers and children at risk, the demands of a career, the death of a child, adoption,

abortion, miscarriage, and, on the other hand, the feminist critique of motherhood are, according to Hansen, bringing about a reflection in literature on the status of the mother-child bond. Further, she suggests that this same phenomenon may reflect unconscious processes and fantasies. The new narratives of mothering that I have been looking at in the French context reflect a similar set of factors. On the one hand, the presence of loss in so many of the narratives indicates that they are produced in response to a specific experience. On the other hand, it also suggests that loss – or the fear or fantasy of loss – is at the very heart of the mothering experience. Of course, separation is an intrinsic part of mothering, from the very first breath the baby takes through the various stages of the child's route to independence, and beyond, but it was nonetheless quite remarkable to find so much loss and separation in this body of texts.

So... let's look again at the 'Contents' handout, and I'll flesh it out a bit. The themes covered – narratives of death, of birth, of separation, mothering alone, and so on – are the most insistent themes in the corpus, and the texts I have analysed in detail are representative of a larger body of texts on similar themes. My presentation of individual texts today is necessarily brief, and I will skim quite rapidly over the first few examples, in order to spend a little more time on a couple of particularly interesting issues.

The first group – 'Narratives of Death' – consist of autobiographical texts written in response to loss, specifically two examples by writers who have lost young babies. The first, *Philippe* (1995), by Camille Laurens, is on the loss of the author's baby at birth. The second, by Laure Adler, *À ce soir* (2001), has been translated, as '*Until Tonight*', and concerns the death of Adler's 9-month old baby from a respiratory disease. In contrast to Laurens's account, which was written in the months immediately following the death of her baby, Adler's was written 17 years after her

bereavement. Such texts – and not just these two, they are representative of a larger trend – are predictably poignant and painful. They commemorate the authors’ babies’ short lives as well as their deaths, and in doing so, they challenge some of the dominant theories of mourning and also the role of writing in that process (they argue against writing as therapy, for example). They also engender reflection on what happens to mothering after the death of a child; and they invite us to interrogate the reader’s place in relation to accounts such as these.

The next group – ‘Narratives of Birth’ – brings together some rather disturbing stories of birth. It is interesting and somewhat ironic that, in what is perhaps the most biological aspect of mothering that I cover, childbirth in these texts is also used as a literary trope. In two quite different accounts – one an autofiction by Christine Angot, a controversial writer, and the other a novel by Leïla Marouane, an Algerian author who fled to Paris in the 1990s from a violent society which prejudices women – the birth narratives are linked to traumatic experiences that are not only that of the birth itself. By means of complex narrative structures, they summon up previous violent experiences – rape and torture, sexual abuse, incest. In this way, the figurative power of the female reproductive body – which has so often been appropriated by male writers – is both problematized and taken to new horizons in this women-authored body of literature.

‘Narratives of Separation’ focuses on mothering daughters in this new generation of narratives of mothering. As Hirsch and others have shown, daughters’ stories of their mothers tend to be highly ambivalent, caught up as they are in the tension between identification with and differentiation from their mothers. So... how do mothers’ own narratives differ? The two examples I have analysed in detail both address mother-daughter separation at the time of the daughter’s adolescence. The

first, *La Sanction* [*Sanction* or *Punishment*] (2004) by Chantal Chawaf, is an account, from the mother's perspective (though told in a mix of first and third person narrative), of her daughter's enforced stay in a psychiatric hospital. Although this is a self-declared autobiographical account, its execution amounts to a modern-day treatment of the Demeter and Persephone myth, in which France stands accused of failing its young people, and the mother and daughter ultimately triumph – or partially so – over the forces of law and order which police both society and mental health.

The other text on mothers and daughters is *La Sorcière* [which would translate as *The Witch*] (1996) by Marie Ndiaye, a half French, half Senegalese writer. This text offers a fascinating new literary figure of motherhood. The witch is a common literary representation of the mother, of course, as powerful, monstrous and, in most cases, bad. In Ndiaye's novel, the narrator-protagonist, a mother of twin daughters, is a witch, but she doesn't represent a bad mother. Neither, though, is she a fairy-godmother-type of good witch. Nor is she a feminist witch-crone (as in Mary Daly's 1970s radical feminist reverse discourse). In fact she is rather mediocre, ineffective; her magical gifts are limited to a kind of weak clairvoyance.

At the start of the novel, she initiates her pubescent twin daughters into the arts of witchcraft, as her own mother did before her. Her daughters' talents, however, soon far outstrip her own and they subsequently fly the nest, literally, by transforming themselves into crows. The novel has perplexed many feminist critics, particularly in relation to the mediocrity of the narrator's self-representation. However, in my reading of this highly original and complex novel as a narrative of mothering, the narrator, Lucie, can be seen to embody, on a number of different levels, the complex tensions of mothers as subjects, and indeed as narrative subjects. I can't go into the detail of that reading here, but the representation of the mother-narrator as a mediocre

or, rather, benign witch suggests a self-defining dynamic – a tension between power and powerlessness. Sara Ruddick calls our attention to this dynamic in *Maternal Thinking* (1989; 2nd edn 1995): ‘From a mother’s point of view, maternal powerlessness is very real indeed. Yet adults are not hallucinating when they remember their mothers as having immense power over their physical activities and emotional lives’ (Ruddick 1995: 35). This sense of powerlessness on the part of mothers is not simply a lack of self-worth, which is how some critics have interpreted it in Ndiaye’s novel, but rather a sense of powerlessness in the face of, on the one hand, the responsibilities, challenges and practicalities of everyday life with small children (and big children for that matter), and, on the other, a sense of powerlessness in the face of the all-pervasive, yet unattainable, stereotypes of the good mother which impact on women’s day to day mothering. The originality of Ndiaye’s benign witch figure as a literary trope of mothering is that it doesn’t represent an opposition between the poles of power and powerlessness but, rather, a kind of resolution, to the extent that the terms co-exist and hold each other in check.

Now to turn to the next section: New stories of mothering. An interest in how mothering in new family demographics is being inscribed into French literature is what prompted me to embark on this study in the first place. ‘Narratives of Mothering Alone’ explores how the figures of the good and the bad mother and also Adrienne Rich’s notion of the ‘institution of motherhood’ impinge on individual mothers who mother alone. In the first example, *Weekend de chasse à la mère* (1996), a novel by Geneviève Brisac, which has been translated as *Losing Eugenio*, the narrator is a middle-class, divorced working mother of a young son. What is incredibly interesting about this text is the way in which maternal ambivalence is written into the very texture of the text (I’m referring to Roszika Parker’s study of maternal ambivalence,

Torn in Two (1995 and 2005) here). The narrator is proud of her creative mothering – her accounts of storytelling, games, jokes, smiles and cuddles abound – but these successes are juxtaposed with descriptions of grey, rainy days, nasty smells, pets that die, and the ungrateful demands of her young son. So the reader is party to something of the narrator’s ambivalence. In this novel, this ambivalence is ‘managed ambivalence’ (in Parker’s formulation). In the passage quoted on your handout, you can see how this works. This is a point in the novel where Nouk, the mother, momentarily loses control. She has just been to McDonald’s and bought a takeaway meal for her son, and he calls her, jokingly, a slave. (Quote) She lashes out, but then immediately regrets her reaction. (Quote) Nouk’s narrative here demonstrates how she manages her ambivalence by reflecting on what has happened between her and her son, not only in relation to the smack but also in respect of her mothering more generally. It is telling also, given Parker’s recognition that maternal ambivalence arises out of the mismatch between individual experience and the ideals and ideologies that mediate mothering, that Nouk’s thoughts are shown here to be in dialogue with prescriptive opinions on mothering, which are contradictory and impossible to conform to. In common with the general trend of the texts I’m looking at, Brisac’s novel ends with Nouk losing custody of her son, the result of a plot engineered not only by her ex-husband but by her best feminist friend...

The second example of a narrative of mothering alone is by Véronique Olmi (*Bord de mer* (2001)), and is an example of what Parker’s notion of ‘unmanaged ambivalence’ can lead to. This text is a fictional treatment of a real news story about infanticide. It is a short but intense narrative in the form of an internal monologue, in which the poor, single mother of two boys (each by different fathers) herself recounts the events, from taking a coach to the seaside where she takes her sons for a last treat,

through to and including their murder by suffocation in their hotel room. A similar confrontation between mother and son to that in the last novel takes place, but this mother's dialogue with the forces and institutions that police mothering are not so confident and ultimately she goes over the top, not in anger, but by committing premeditated murder. Olmi's novel may portray a classic 'at risk' mother, but the narrative does not provide a clear reason for the infanticide and the text ultimately resists the reader's judgement of her.

If lone mothers are harshly judged by both state institutions and interfering friends, as they are in these novels, lesbian mothers are arguably even more in the firing line. Despite the fact that, since the mid-1990s, same-sex parenting in France has been on the increase, the struggle for its legal and social recognition is still critical in a state which does not recognize identity politics. A great deal of sociological and anthropological work, and some in psychology and psychoanalysis, is, however, being carried out in France now on same-sex parenting, but literary treatments of the theme are still rare, especially in mainstream literature. The examples that I have found all focus on the whole complicated process of choosing to become and then subsequently becoming a parent, rather than on the practice of mothering per se. They document the obstacles, the prejudices, the laws, where the rights of lesbian mothers are not recognized, and the expense – of travelling to Belgium, for example, to receive artificial insemination as it is not available to lesbian women in France. In short they chart at once the banality and the adventure, the pitfalls and the achievements of becoming a lesbian mother in France. As such, they invite reflection on changing family patterns and roles, and on what mothering means in families where there may be two mothers on a daily basis.

The final group of texts confronts what seems to be a constant issue throughout the history of mothering, that of guilt. The two narratives I have analysed here of what is arguably *guilt-free* mothering portray mothers who refuse to compromise their own needs. The first Marie Darrieussecq's novel *Le Mal de mer* (1999) [translated into English as *Breathing Underwater*] follows a mother as she leaves her home and work, without notice, taking her young daughter with her. Her husband hires a private detective to find her, which he ultimately does, and she hands her daughter over without fuss, the novel ending as she arrives at the airport to catch a flight to Australia and presumably a new life. The narrative is, however, much more complex than this brief summary would suggest; it is full of uncertainty, and ultimately, although tempting the reader to try to judge the mother, it resists that very judgment. The other novel, Christine Angot's autofictional *Léonore, toujours* (1994) [*Léonore, for ever*] takes the form of a diary written when the narrator's daughter is a baby. It controversially combines narrative of both the daily drudge and enormous pleasures of primary caregiving with narratives of sexual fantasies where the baby is cast as a desiring adult woman. This text is in part about the tensions between being a mother and being a writer, in which the writer does not compromise herself to mothering.

That concludes the quick overview of the kind of texts I have been looking at. I now want to reflect more generally on this phenomenon – this body of new narratives of mothering. At the workshop on literature at the last MaMSIE event in Cambridge, we discussed how writing about mothering may be the ultimate taboo. We were looking at Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work* (2001), among other texts, and at Cusk's astonishment at the vitriolic reception of that text: 'My anxiety was that people would

find it trivial. I was surprised they found it so offensive [...] I was surprised that people didn't want to hear the dissenting voice. It seemed to threaten them to the core. I never encountered my separateness from others more intensely than in the experience of people reading this book' (Anon. "Spirits of the Ages," *Source* [2007]). Such reluctance suggests an underlying fear that narratives of mothering may explode the myths and fantasies – and fears – of the mother that are part of our own emotional investment and subjectivity. Suzanne Juhasz suggests that mothers who are writers are reluctant to reveal the complexities of maternal subjectivity and that readers of such texts, 'who come to the text as daughters, or as mothers, or as sons or fathers, have their own vested interests for not wanting to encounter the multiplicity of maternal subjectivity', and this may account for the sort of reception that Cusk talks about.

It is thus interesting to speculate why so many narratives of mothering have emerged in France in a relatively short period, since this is not always the case in other national literatures. In the French context, the trend coincides with the emergence of a new generation of women writers, who voice many different aspects of women's lives and experiences in controversial new ways. It also coincides with the weakening of psychoanalysis (especially Lacanian) as the dominant French theoretical paradigm – a paradigm that hitherto had offered little space for the mother's voice. That is not to suggest that psychoanalysis is a redundant theoretical model, but rather that a post-psychoanalytical time and space has emerged in France in which narratives of mothering are finally able to seek recognition.

Insofar as mothering in these texts is situated, on the one hand, in the biological functions of pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding, and, on the other, in the intimate and social roles of nurturing and nourishing, loving and caring, socializing and educating, the new narratives of mothering are to a certain extent fairly

conventional. However, they also situate mothering, more controversially – and yet quite normally – in loss and separation, in ambivalence and guilt, in power and powerlessness, in violence and aggression, in self-assertion and *jouissance*. As such, they express experiences of mothering that society has denied and, indeed, largely still denies. These narratives together lay claim, not to monstrosity, nor to the rejection of mothering, but to the everyday experiences of women mothering in the face of life's challenges, adventures, disappointments, and tragedies.

As we have seen, however much the concepts of the good and bad mother change over time and across cultures, they still throw their dark shadows over today's mothers. However, in their different ways and to different degrees, most of these new narratives of mothering in French literature subvert normative discourses and modes of mothering. Nonetheless, the subversive nature of many of the mothering narratives here is offset by the fact that, in these texts, so many mothers lose their children. Yet why do *so many* of these new narratives of mothering end in the loss of the child? As Hansen remarks, loss and separation have been common themes of mother-child stories through the ages, but mostly they have been told from the point of view of the child. Told from the mother's perspective, there may also be underlying, unconscious issues as to why mother-writers (and most of the writers I have covered are mothers) writing about mothering also write about loss and separation. The prevalence of loss in fictional texts may, for example, signify the sublimation of the excesses of maternal ambivalence, in which love and the joys and pleasures of mothering children exist in tension with mothers' feelings of blame, guilt, tiredness, boredom, isolation, aggression, their experiences of material difficulties or of the demands of their career, or, simply, their need for some time and space of their own. The loss of the child in the text, then, suggests a literalization of unconscious, unacceptable desires. It may

also relate more specifically to maternal guilt, to the conflicts between being a mother and being a writer, and to the very taboo of writing about mothering. The loss of the child would, then, suggest here either a form of self-punishment – or, alternatively, triumph – on the part of the mother-writer, or even a form of ‘touching wood’, of superstitiously imagining the worst thing that can happen to a child in order, magically, to protect one’s own – a marker between text and life.

While these texts indicate that loss is central to mothering, they also suggest that maternal ambivalence is normal. Yet the ambivalence detectable in these new narratives of mothering is not the same as the ambivalence that characterizes mother-daughter relationships as represented from the daughter’s point of view, as in Hirsch’s study. There, ambivalence arises from the structural, formative role that the mother plays in the daughter’s psyche and self-identity, the stakes being determined by the dynamics of identification and individuation. From the point of view of the mother, ambivalence arises, rather, from the tensions between mothering and the woman’s self – between love for her child and her own needs. It also arises from the gaps between women’s expectations and experiences of mothering, and between the powerful stereotypes of the good and bad mother and women’s own practices of mothering. It is likewise part of the power/powerlessness dynamic which also emerges here as a common factor of mothering (the benign witch figure thus becoming a maternal trope *par excellence*).

These new literary narratives of mothering are part of an ongoing body of writing. In that, they are just a beginning, a new start, and they constitute a re-mapping of the themes of contemporary French literature. It will be interesting to see how such narratives develop over the *next* two decades as science and society progress, as issues such as same-sex parenting and reproductive cloning become more

mainstream, and as the broader factors of ongoing globalization and increasing immigration challenge and change both women's experiences and our understandings of mothering.

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