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In Uncertain Terms: Mothering without Guilt in Marie Darrieussecq's *Le Mal de mer* and Christine Angot's *Léonore, toujours*

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In *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (1989), Marianne Hirsch exposes the extent of the silencing of the maternal voice in narratives by women.¹ In this study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature from North America and Europe, Hirsch finds that mothers' own stories are mediated and suppressed, particularly by their daughters as authors or narrators. She concludes that mothers themselves must become narrative subjects so that new, different stories of mothering in all their complexity can be inscribed, and, indeed, she points to the beginnings of "a slow emergence of maternal speech" (16) in texts by Black American writers Toni Morrison and Alice Walker.² More recently, however, maternal voices have begun to make themselves heard loud and clear in feminist literature, in, for example, a trio of autobiographical accounts published in the first years of the new century: in the US, Naomi Wolf's *Misconceptions* (2001); in the UK, Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work*; and in France, Marie Darrieussecq's *Le Bébé*.³ The strong narrative voices in these texts testify, between them, to ambivalent experiences of pregnancy and early motherhood, to women being engulfed by maternity – at times joyfully, at other times terrifyingly – to being desperate not only for sleep but also for time and space of their own, to feelings of insecurity

and incompetence, failure – and guilt.⁴ In their different ways, all three writers set out to demystify mothering, to interrogate its myths, to recognize the complexity and ask what it means to (be a) mother today.⁵

Framed chronologically by Hirsch's 1989 study and these new maternal voices at the beginning of the twenty-first century is the literary output of the 1990s generation of women writers in metropolitan France. In socio-political and economic terms, France has some of the most generous state provisions for mothers (and fathers) in contemporary Europe: extensive childcare, a culture in which mothers are an integral part of the paid workforce, maternity and paternity leave, childcare subsidies, career breaks.⁶ Yet, maternal guilt remains a stumbling block for mothers in France, despite all the feminist work over the last thirty years or so which has argued that the maternal instinct is a myth,⁷ which has uncovered a whole range of other guilt-inducing discourses for mothers, from politics, religion, and psychology, to feminism itself,⁸ and which signals the changing face of family patterns and parenthood.⁹

Two literary texts of the 1990s, Marie Darrieussecq's *Le Mal de mer* (1999) and Christine Angot's *Léonore, toujours* (1994), present particularly provocative narratives of motherhood.¹⁰ Both Darrieussecq and Angot have attracted a great deal of attention as well as some controversy for their writing about women's experiences. Darrieussecq's first novel and best-seller *Truismes* (1996) caused a stir with its portrayal of a woman as sow (*truie*).¹¹ Angot's quasi-autofictional life-writing elicits strong reactions: on the one hand, accusations of narcissism and lack of literariness, or criticized for the ways in which she uses real-life people in her texts and for the politically incorrect comments that punctuate her writing; yet, on the other hand, appreciation for doing something really new and interesting, particularly in terms of the play between autobiography, fiction, and performance in her writing.¹² Predictably, then, both *Le Mal de mer* and *Léonore, toujours* offer rather unconventional

portrayals of mothering: the mother in Darrieussecq's novel eventually gives up her daughter, after first taking the child with her when she leaves her home and marriage; Angot's narrator-writer fantasizes her baby daughter as a sexual woman in her writing; and then, at the end of the text, the baby dies (or, one might say, is killed off by the writer(s)). These challenging maternal figures are not being proposed here as role models for motherhood or even as possible loci of identification *tel quel*, although reader identification is of course always a potential element. Rather, their particular interest for a feminist reading lies in their portrayal of what is, arguably, guilt-free mothering.

Hirsch's contention in *The Mother/Daughter Plot* that the complexity of maternal subjectivity needs to find cultural expression makes reference to French psychoanalytically based feminist thinking of the 1970s and 1980s, in particular the work of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, both of whom, in different ways, also identify the need for new discourses and imaginings of maternity: Irigaray, in order to counter the matricide which she, as a philosopher of sexual difference, considers to be at the foundation of (patriarchal) social and psychosocial identity;¹³ Kristeva, in her ongoing concern with the crisis of the contemporary subject. In her 1979 essay, "Le temps des femmes," Kristeva proposes a creative, albeit utopian, version of maternal love – namely, one that is free of guilt:

[Le] lent, difficile et délicieux apprentissage de l'attention, de la douceur, de l'oubli de soi. Accomplir ce trajet sans masochisme et sans annihilation de la personnalité affective, intellectuelle, professionnelle – tel semble être l'enjeu qu'on pourrait chercher dans la maternité déculpabilisée. Elle devient alors, au sens fort du terme, une création. Pour l'instant, utopique?¹⁴

What is at stake in Kristeva's thinking here is selfless love for the child without sacrifice of the mother's emotional, intellectual, and professional self, and without engendering the sense of guilt that Kristeva implies is endemic to the refusal of that sacrifice.¹⁵

While Wolf, Cusk and Darrieussecq's *Le Bébé* make their own interventions into the discourses that police motherhood, and tell us in no uncertain terms what it is like to be a mother in everyday life, Darrieussecq's earlier *Le Mal de mer* and Angot's *Léonore, toujours* engage with them in somewhat different ways. Indeed, what is so striking is the *uncertain* status of the mother's voice in these two texts published in the interim between Hirsch's study of the silencing of the maternal voice and its more recent emphatic expression. However, rather than considering such uncertainty either as diffidence or as prefiguring the stronger textual voices to emerge in the next decade, I argue here that it plays a positive strategic role in the literary expression of new, more complex stories of motherhood that Hirsch identifies as requiring to be told – stories in which mothers indeed live out the tensions between being mothers and being women in their own right and perhaps, I suggest, even triumph – temporarily at least – over maternal guilt.

Le Mal de mer, Marie Darrieussecq's third novel, turns on a mystery: a woman apparently walks out on her marriage, her job, and her Paris home. Taking her young daughter and some cash, she drives south to the Basque coast. Her husband engages a private detective to find the pair, which is achieved without too much trouble once the woman sells her car and the documents reveal her whereabouts. The husband is, however, interested only in retrieving his daughter and when the woman is finally confronted, she hands over the little girl. The end of the novel sees her circuiting Paris as she transfers from one airport to another on her way to board a plane to Australia.

Each of Darrieussecq's novels takes its effects from a different narrative style, and in *Le Mal de mer* the predominantly present-tense third-person narrative parodies that of *le*

nouveau roman, a technique which calls attention precisely to the uncertainty which suffuses the novel. Darrieussecq's pastiche of this once experimental narrative form evacuates the *nouveau roman* style of its original ideological content, but, in line with her previous novels, signals the existence of undercurrents beneath the surface of the fictional worlds she creates.¹⁶ In *Le Mal de mer*, a mystery is set up but, despite the success of the detective in locating the woman and child within the diegesis, there is no attempt to enlighten the reader. No context is given for the events, no psychological insights are provided to the main characters who remain indistinct with no names, no identity. The status of the narrative is ambiguous, the use of free indirect discourse blurring the different narrative positions. Points of view oscillate between that of an apparently omniscient narrator and that of the individual characters, but it is not always possible to identify who is speaking, or thinking. The plot is like a *fait divers* but there is no story provided behind this story: the reader can only guess what lies beneath the surface and speculate about the woman's motivations.

In Western culture, women who leave or give up their children are almost always branded social pariahs, judged negatively as abnormal or monstrous mothers. *Le Mal de mer* is punctuated by three episodes which implicitly invite just such judgement of the woman's actions. At the beginning of the novel, during the journey from Paris to the South, the mother and daughter stop at a supermarket and the woman goes into the shop to buy some food, leaving the little girl alone in the car. The narrative proceeds thus: "Laisser la petite, sortir de l'autre côté, quelqu'un la trouverait, forcément, et elle, dix mille francs, un billet d'avion" (23). The woman then returns to the car and to her daughter, and they continue on their way together. The ambiguity of the narrative here is paramount: it is impossible to tell whether the woman is really tempted to abandon her daughter or whether it is just a fleeting, transitory thought, something that goes through her mind without any real intention. Or, alternatively, it may simply be narrative speculation about what the woman could be

thinking or what she theoretically has the option of doing but chooses not to. Nonetheless, the very fact that the narrative plays with the idea that the woman might consider abandoning the child in this situation implicitly invites judgement of her as a mother even as this passage prepares the ground for what follows – the mother’s eventual relinquishing of her daughter.

In the second such episode, the woman leaves the little girl asleep alone in their rented apartment at night while she pursues a new love affair. The child wakes and, searching for her mother, wanders out of the apartment and upstairs to where the male estate agent lives. Here again, she emerges from a potentially dangerous situation safe and sound, but the threat is clearly signalled in the narrative with a reference to “l’interdiction d’accepter des bonbons” (78) as she tucks into the bowl of ice cream the estate agent gives her.

In the final episode, towards the end of the novel, the woman hands over her daughter, apparently without any struggle or emotion: “Le type a pris la main de la petite. Ils s’en vont tous les deux. Il y a eu un baiser, une poignée de main, la femme reste là” (123). This episode is, however, narrated from the point of view of a character who is observing from a distance and who has no clue as to what is actually happening, and he thus functions as an alter ego of the reader who similarly only has a superficial knowledge of the events and characters. It could be that, in selling her car and thus allowing herself to be traced through the documents, the woman actively wants to be found – and absolved of responsibility for her daughter. Yet, on the other hand, there is more than an indication in the text that she acts under stress, without thinking things through: “Elle aurait pu réfléchir une seconde, une seconde à ce dont elles avaient besoin, ne serait-ce que de l’eau” (23); “Elle a complètement oublié la cartable, il est parti avec l’auto” (62). So, is Darrieussecq’s character the ultimate “bad mother,” a mother who is tempted to abandon her six-year old daughter in a busy car park, who leaves her to wander alone in an almost empty apartment block at night, who

hands her over without a fight? In inviting the reader to judge her, is the novel simply performing a critique of her behaviour, of her mothering?

The uncertainty that pervades the novel and that is integral to the narrative style is, given the tradition of the *mer/mère* association in French literature, reinforced by the ambiguity of the novel's title. "Le mal de mer/mère" may, then, connote either the suffering *of* the mother or the hurt caused *by* her. Overall, the uncertainty of the narrative viewpoint could perhaps reflect that of the child and her alienation from the events.¹⁷ On the other hand, as I suggest here, the very use of uncertainty functions rather to exculpate the woman, or, at least, to offer her the benefit of the doubt: in providing so little information about the causes, the motives, the psychology, and the context of the woman's own journey, the narrative ultimately works against a negative judgement. The reader simply does not know enough about the woman's circumstances or motivations to be able to judge. Indeed, reviews of the book in the French press confirm this reading: rather than a monstrous mother, she has generally been interpreted as a woman in crisis.¹⁸ Moreover, on publication, Darrieussecq's novel was accompanied by a short 25-page poetical text, *Précisions sur les vagues*, which complements and emphasizes the many descriptive passages of the sea that occur within the main novel, and provides a clue to the woman's predicament: confrontation with the void; a search for space – a space of her own.¹⁹ Importantly, there is also more than a suggestion in *Le Mal de mer* that the daughter will be just as happy returned to her home environment as she would with her mother away from it – marked not so much by the trauma of being abducted by her, but more positively and lastingly with the experience of having seen the sea: "Elle a vu la mer maintenant. Son visage en est comme lavé, détendu, élargi, et cela sa mère le croit, qu'on le voit, sur le visage des gens, et particulièrement des enfants, ceux qui ont vu la mer et ceux qui ne l'ont pas vue" (11). Whatever the reason the woman has for taking her daughter away – whether out of love, guilt, or a sense of maternal duty – she has

nonetheless given her something lasting, and is, therefore, now able to let her go – without guilt, perhaps.

In Darrieussecq's novel, the multiple and uncertain narrative perspectives include that of the woman – the mother – but she does not tell the readers very much. When implicitly invited to judge her, it is impossible to do so. However, in precisely holding up her actions for judgement and then confronting readers with their inability to know anything about her motivations, in withholding information, the text is not, in Hirsch's terms, silencing the maternal voice once again but rather challenging readers to recognize their own prejudices and calling into question those all powerful stereotypes of good and bad mothers.

While Darrieussecq's novel may indeed suggest a degree of guilt-free motherhood, the woman does not, however, wholly conform to Kristeva's utopian model since, in order to live her own life, she is required to give up her child. In a somewhat different vein, Angot's *Léonore, toujours* similarly suggests the possibility of guilt-free maternity, but raises a rather different set of issues. As in Darrieussecq's novel, uncertainty is an important factor. Here, though, it rests on the ambiguity of genre. Indeed, it is both a requirement and a condition of Angot's work that her readers can never know exactly what they are reading.²⁰ After her first two novels in 1990 and 1991, the prolific Angot published a series of texts all overtly labelled as novels but peopled by herself and her family (i.e. Christine Angot, the writer, her husband Claude, her daughter Léonore, her mother, friends, publishers, etc.). They tell of her writing, how her books are received, and of interviews with journalists, as well as being concerned with the fluctuating state of mind of "Christine," with her marriage and separation, with motherhood, with sex and with her fantasies, and with an incestuous relationship with her father. Yet the very ambiguity of Angot's work – its clever maintenance of uncertainty – renders the relationship between the extra-textual author and intra-textual narrator (both named Christine Angot) always impossible to determine.

Léonore, toujours (first published in 1994) is a pivotal text: with it, the form, style and content of Angot's writing changes from that of her first two, more formally conventional, novels.²¹ *Léonore, toujours* takes the form of a diary lasting three weeks, written apparently while the narrator's daughter Léonore is a baby. The text is, above all, about the ambivalence of motherhood – both the pleasures and the pains: Léonore's first steps, her first words, the joy of her smile, the banality of everyday life, interminable feeds and dirty diapers, the unending tiredness, the conflicts of being both a mother and a writer. The writing conveys the tension between motherhood and writing at the same time as it is apparently produced by it:

Elle ne dort plus. Elle est devant moi sur sa chaise transformable, position basse. Il faut que je m'arrête toutes les trois secondes de taper, pour lui laver et lui remettre sa sucette [...] J'ai arrêté d'écrire des romans, heureusement, avec elle qui m'interrompt je ferais comment? Je me lève pour aller chercher le biberon, en avance sur l'heure... j'ai apporté le biberon, elle le voit, elle se calme, et je tape debout. Pas longtemps, ça repart, j'arrête, je vais lui donner. (21)

The immediacy of the present tense, “je tape debout [...] j'arrête, je vais lui donner,” which lends this passage some of the qualities of theatrical performance, conveys the compromises that have to be made in the frantic life of a working, writing mother. Within the world of the text, the book is supposedly being written even as the narrator/writer attends to her child's needs, while, at the same time, her attention to her child's needs is the very stuff of writing.

In common with other Angot texts, *Léonore, toujours* also consists of the narrator's intimate thoughts and fantasies, and this is one of the reasons that Angot's work is so controversial, especially when the boundaries between fantasy and reality *within* the text

become blurred. In *Léonore, toujours*, the narrator graphically visualizes her baby as a sexually desiring adult woman, having orgasms and violent sex. These descriptions go on for pages and are interspersed with comments on the writing of them as the baby wakes and interrupts her mother's writing time:

Elle fait papapa depuis huit jours, je l'entends. En même temps je la vois grande. Un homme s'approche [...] Il se jette sur elle. Il la couvre de baisers passionnés. La main de Léonore plonge dans la braguette [...] Elle se met à jouir à n'en plus finir avec des grognements de goret qu'on égorge... Elle m'appelle, je n'ose pas y aller, avec en ce moment ce que je pense d'elle... J'y vais pour voir... Pas moyen de l'endormir, je l'ai mise dans son parc, elle rit avec des poussées de cris... Sa bouche grande, large, lascive. [...] L'instant après, à quatre pattes, elle le supplie de la prendre à revers. (31-32)

Here, the baby Léonore and the fantasized adult Léonore co-exist. The juxtaposition of violent sexual fantasies with the real-life demands of a young baby, who is precisely the source of the fantasy, is challenging to read.²² But is it so problematic for a mother to imagine her baby daughter as a sexual woman? In Angot's text, these fantasies suggest flashes of images going through a mother's mind: threats, hopes, fears, wonder, wondering, the working through of things that can happen... What is at the same time both most problematical and interesting about Angot's writing is precisely this transposition of mental images, of a flash, to an extended passage of written text. What in real terms takes a millisecond to go through one's mind needs several paragraphs if not pages of text to describe. And that prolongs and heightens the image, taking a situation to the extreme. Thus,

a flash becomes a fully developed and narrated fantasy and both are transformed in and through the process of writing.²³

Léonore, toujours ends with the death of the baby Léonore, after falling off a chair, although in subsequent texts, which are almost all dedicated “A ma belle Léonore,” Léonore continues to live and to grow up... perhaps, then, to read her mother’s books – about her... about her death. Importantly, the death of Léonore, which – very calmly, as in fantasy – is allowed to take its course at the end of the text, has already been prefigured time and time again throughout the book: “Dans l’appartement de Nice, elle a roulé par terre sur la moquette. Elle a hurlé, ça aurait pu être l’hémorragie interne. Rien d’apparent tout de suite mais mort dans la nuit” (29). This particular scenario, which takes place early in the text, directly pre-figures its closing passages, which, in turn, then, literalize a previously imagined and explicitly feared death. Angot’s writing is like a stream of consciousness narrative, which concretizes intimate thoughts, working them through: flashes, fantasy, situations taken to logical, if problematical, extremes, between them, betray a fear of loss, a fantasy of loss, a rehearsal of loss, a rehearsal of the worst thing that can happen – the death of a child. If the baby does not wake at her normal time, fear seeps in: what if she is dead? And then the internal camera rolls and the scenario is followed through...

Léonore, toujours is, at least partly, a *mise en scène* of the conflict between being a mother and being a writer, in which the writer is not sacrificed to motherhood. On the contrary. And this is not simply because the baby dies. Rather, it is because the narrator is so uncompromising and seemingly free of guilt in what she writes: “Je sais que ça va la [Léonore] mettre dans la merde mais je le fais” (123).²⁴ The ever-present uncertainty that is inscribed into Angot’s text works, as in Darrieussecq’s *Le Mal de mer*, on the one hand, to invite, and on the other, to complicate, the reader’s judgement. Thus, Léonore is set up as a future reader throughout the text even as it is being written: “Ces pages la détruisent mais

qu'est-ce que j'y peux?" (68); "Bien sûr elle le lira. Même tard, ça la détruira, c'est comme ça" (72). The reader is implicitly invited to judge. Yet, at the same time, the sheer provocation of such statements is tempered by the always uncertain status of anything Angot (writer or narrator) says.

Although Léonore is arguably "killed off" at end of Angot's novel, the narrator's overwhelming love for her daughter is emphasized throughout, even to the extent of describing it in terms of incest, and this notwithstanding the nonetheless crucial context of Angot's (or at least of Angot's narrator's) incestuous relationship with her father: "Je ne veux pas faire d'inceste avec elle physiquement. Mais dans la tête, ce n'est pas possible autrement" (12); "Elle me regarde intensément. Avec les autres ça finirait au lit. Toutes les deux, Dieu sait qu'on s'excite pourtant toutes les deux [...] C'est plus fort que l'orgasme avec vous, les autres. On se suçote. Si ça devenait sexuel, ça serait fou" (95). Here the narrator inscribes her maternal *jouissance*, which, in Kristevan terms, relates to the openness of the psyche to the sensual quasi-sexual pleasure of the mother-baby relationship.²⁵ Kristeva posits maternal *jouissance* as a transgressive, albeit usually sublimated, element in the (patriarchal) symbolic social order. In *Léonore, toujours*, however, this *jouissance* is made explicit and subtended into writing itself, as the separate – and here guilt-free – *jouissances* of writing, mothering, and sexual fantasy coincide. Yet, the style and form of *Léonore, toujours* are equally important. The immediacy of the diary format offers access to the intimate terrain of the narrator where unconscious desires are made conscious – acted out – confronting, on the one hand, the most fundamental taboos and, on the other, concretizing their transgression.

What is utopian or transgressive in life can of course be explored in the "elsewhere" of literature, and the texts discussed here stage, with different degrees of success, models of guilt-free maternity. They also go further, as any literary representation must if it is to avoid

simply re-fixing and re-enclosing identity. In this respect, the strategic uncertainty of the mother's voice in the two texts is crucial. In Hirsch's conventional mother-daughter plot, the maternal voice is silenced; in *Le Mal de mer* and *Léonore, toujours* the mother's voice is inscribed but the status of that voice is always left in doubt, and yet this works in a positive way. Rather than simply allowing space for the reader's imagination to fill in the gaps – to flesh out the undercurrents in Darrieussecq's novel, or to attempt to pin down the veracity of Angot's writing – these two texts at once tempt our judgement and confound it. This is a precarious venture for the writers, however, as the texts (like any transgressive art and literature) thus run the risk of being safely re-contained by and within the very norms they attempt to call into question. In this, Angot's life-writing, in which she herself is always already implicated, is perhaps the more courageous of the two. Yet, it is precisely because of the uncertainty of the maternal voice, coupled with provocative representations of mothering, that these two literary texts are so potentially meaningful: in confounding our judgement, they confront us with our own prejudices and invite us to think about – indeed, they encourage us to rethink – the multiple possibilities of what it means to mother – to be a mother – in these challenging, changing times.

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Notes

¹ Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1989).

² Hirsch suggests that Black American women writers define themselves as writers through connections with a maternal genealogy (176-77).

³ Naomi Wolf, *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001); Rachel Cusk, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (London: Fourth Estate, 2001); Marie Darrieussecq, *Le Bébé* (Paris: P.O.L., 2002).

⁴ This is not to say that the autobiographical element is uncomplicated in these texts; Darrieussecq and Cusk are novelists and Wolf is a polemical feminist writer.

⁵ Their effectiveness on a broad scale may be limited though; Cusk herself makes the point that texts about children and motherhood are only significant to other mothers (and perhaps fathers) and not to the general reader (3).

⁶ See Abigail Gregory and Ursula Tidd (eds), *Women in Contemporary France* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2000).

⁷ See Elisabeth Badinter, *L'Amour en plus: histoire de l'amour maternel (XVIIe-XXe siècle)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980).

⁸ See Shari L. Thurer, *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994); Diane Eyer, *Motherguilt: How our Culture Blames Mothers for What's Wrong with Society* (New York: Times Books, 1996). In psychoanalysis, the Freudian superego renders guilt part of the structure of the psyche and therefore of normal development: see D.W. Winnicott, "Psycho-Analysis and the Sense of Guilt (1958)," in *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (Madison, CT: International UP, 1994 [1965]), 15-28, in which guilt is connected to feelings of ambivalence. This could usefully inform the notion of maternal guilt, but Winnicott's text is itself a good example of guilt-inducing discourse, in its laying of blame for so-called anti-social behaviour firmly at the door of failure in primary (maternal) childcare (28).

⁹ See Elisabeth Roudinesco, *La Famille en désordre* (Paris: Fayard, 2002).

¹⁰ Marie Darrieussecq, *Le Mal de mer* (Paris: P.O.L., 1999); Christine Angot, *Léonore, toujours* (Paris: L'Arpenteur Gallimard, 1994; Fayard, 1997).

¹¹ Marie Darrieussecq, *Truismes* (Paris: P.O.L., 1996). For discussion of the polarity of responses to *Truismes*, see Catherine Rodgers, “‘Entrevoir l’absence des bords du monde’ dans les romans de Marie Darrieussecq,” in *Nouvelles écrivaines: nouvelles voix?* ed. Nathalie Morello and Catherine Rodgers (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2002), 86.

¹² See my “‘Il faut que le lecteur soit dans le doute’: Christine Angot’s Literature of Uncertainty,” in *Dalhousie French Studies* (edited special issue, “Hybrid Voices, Hybrid Texts: Women’s Writing at the Turn of the Millennium”), 60 (Fall 2004):forthcoming.

¹³ See Luce Irigaray, *Le Corps-à-corps avec la mère* (Montreal: Editions de la pleine lune, 1981).

¹⁴ Julia Kristeva, “Le temps des femmes,” 3444, 5 (Winter 1979):16.

¹⁵ See also Susan Rubin Suleiman, “Writing and Motherhood,” in *Risking Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 1994), 13-37, which concerns the “struggle” of the mother-writer against maternal guilt.

¹⁶ Indeed, the US translation of *Le Mal de mer* is entitled *Undercurrents: A Novel*, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: The New Press, 2001). Interestingly, given the thrust of this article, the Italian translation of *Le Mal de mer* is *Una buona madre [A Good Mother]*, trans. Francesco Bruno (Parma: Guanda, 2002); thanks to Anne Simon and Christine Détéz for this information.

¹⁷ This possibility among others is suggested in Guylaine Massoutre’s review of *Le Mal de mer*, “Femmes sur un paysage: les nausées de Marie Darrieussecq,” in *Le Devoir* (1-2 May 1999).

¹⁸ Although this interpretation to some extent reinforces the opinion that a mother who gives up her child cannot be acting “normally,” the notion of crisis is also emerging as a clear

theme in Darrieussecq's fiction, see Shirley Jordan, "Saying the Unsayable: Identities in Crisis in the Early Novels of Marie Darrieussecq," in *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s*, ed. Gill Rye and Michael Worton (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002), 142-53.

¹⁹ Marie Darrieussecq, *Précisions sur les vagues* (Paris: P.O.L., 1999). For a different reading, which emphasizes danger and risk in the sea imagery, see Tiphaine Samoyault, "Mer cannibale," in *Les Inrockuptibles* (17 March 1999). Likewise, Jordan suggests that the sea "embod[ies] the mother as ambiguous, fearful force" (Jordan 151).

²⁰ "... il faut que le lecteur soit dans le doute. Dans la littérature, on part avec l'idée que tout est mensonge et une fois plongé dans le livre, on prend tout pour acquis. Moi je fais le contraire: je dis, tout est vrai mais ne prenez rien pour acquis" (Thierry Guichard, "En littérature, la morale n'existe pas," (Interview with Christine Angot) in *Le Matricule des Anges*, 21 (November-December 1997):www.lmda.net/mat/MAT02127.html).

²¹ Angot's first two novels were *Vu du ciel* (Paris: L'Arpenteur Gallimard, 1990) and *Not to be* (Paris: L'Arpenteur Gallimard, 1991).

²² See, for example, the review of Angot's work by psychologist Denise Vincent: "Il est difficile de supporter ses extravagances à propos de sa fille. L'amour maternel justifie-t-il n'importe quoi?" ("Christine Angot *L'Inceste*," http://www.epsyweb.com/regard/angot_regard.htm (accessed 23 July 2004)); with thanks to Keith Reader for bringing this article to my attention and for discussion of Angot's work.

²³ In Freud, fantasy is largely associated with wish-fulfilment as the staging of desire; however, it may also be a function of the working-through of anxiety, "a complex articulation [...] in a shifting field of wishes and defences" (Victor Burgin, "Fantasy," in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*, ed. Elizabeth Wright [Oxford: Blackwell, 1995], 87).

²⁴ Interestingly, Winnicott posits the creative artist who is able to “[obviate] the need for guilt-feeling” (Winnicott 26) as, according to Adam Phillips, an “ego-ideal [...] [who] has the courage of his perversions” (Adam Phillips, “On Risk and Solitude,” in *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1993), 36-37). See also Suleiman’s “Writing and Motherhood,” in which writing as maternal aggression in a story by Rosellen Brown is a “momentary triumph” of “aggression” (the writer) over “tenderness” (the mother) – momentary “because the anguish and guilt that inevitably attend the real-life mother’s fantasy of writing as aggression against her child are absent” (34). In *Léonore, toujours*, Angot’s narrator does, more conventionally, express guilt the first time she leaves her baby daughter with her mother (76).

²⁵ Julia Kristeva, “Maternité selon Giovanni Bellini,” in *Polylogue* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), 409-35.