

‘Le Vide de ces yeux’:

Consciousness and the Blank Slate in Marie Darrieussecq

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What is the essence of a mind? What is left when we strip away all that is dispensable, memories of past experience, imagination, the complexity and stability of an autobiographical self, even language itself? Are we left with a *tabula rasa*, an absence of anything, which experience must endow with even its most basic parameters? Or would it rather be a kind of universal default self with the fundamental structures in place and only the quirks of individualism to be applied to the template? Marie Darrieussecq’s fiction shows a continuing fascination with states of mind that lack the full sophistication of adult human consciousness. She explores the simpler minds of infants, animals, and animal-human hybrids, as well as the proto-minds of artificial intelligence. Where adult minds are evoked, they are often not quite all there: we see amnesiac, sleeping, comatose or semi-conscious minds; we follow one protagonist in a state of decentred selflessness as she takes her morning run, or witness another losing faculties of thought as she drowns, trapped underwater in her car. Darrieussecq’s latest novel foregrounds the topic more than ever with its focus on a clone woman, woken into the world as an adult after a lifetime of unconscious existence in a medical institution. This authorial fascination might be read as an enquiry into the nature of mind, and a search for what remains once we get down below the variations and elaborations that obscure what is fundamental to, and shared between, us all. Throughout Darrieussecq’s enquiry, front and centre is the question, *how would it feel?* What would it be like to be in a mind without memories, to have an awareness without language? My aim here is analyse the representation of stripped-down minds in Darrieussecq to discover which answer – blank slate or innate pre-

formed complexity – her fiction is reaching towards, and what she imagines the experience of raw, unadorned subjectivity to be like.

The notion of a mind without contents, and speculation as to what it might resemble, is as old as philosophy. The image of the *tabula rasa* itself, a wax writing-tablet scraped smooth and ready to be inscribed, belongs to Aristotle. His *On the Soul* (*De Anima*) presents the idea as follows:

the intellect is in a way potentially the objects of thought, but nothing in actuality before it thinks, and the potentiality is like that of the tablet on which there is nothing actually written. Just the same happens in the case of the intellect.¹

The idea of the *tabula rasa* mind was elaborated by the Stoics, and became an important theme in Persian and Arab philosophy, including that of Avicenna. The central problem to be solved in the doctrine was the question of how a mind initially devoid of all contents, rules, and structures, could acquire not only factual information about the world through the sense-data imported into the mind via perception, but also abstract concepts, such as notions of category, and methods of rational thought. The most famous formulation of the blank slate theory in modern western philosophy comes from John Locke, a thinker with whom Darrieussecq's fiction engages directly. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke sets out his central claim for the viability of the theory:

Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper void of all characters, without any ideas. How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, *experience*.²

In making this case, Locke set out to rebut the theory of innate ideas, counterargument to the blank slate, which has an equally long vintage. Plato suggested we are born with certain items of knowledge, offering the anecdote of a slave boy questioned by Socrates on rules of geometry, who appeared to have innate mathematical knowledge not acquired by experience. Through Descartes, and through Locke's contemporary and rival, Leibniz, innatism developed to posit inherent knowledge from birth of fundamental truths such as the rule of identity, the laws of mathematics, or the existence of God. Locke's empiricist argument against this holds that there are no truths or ideas that are universally agreed on, and that even the most widely acknowledged ideas are absent from certain minds, such as those of children or the mentally disabled. Only the ability to perceive, learn and organize needs to pre-exist.

Downstream of Locke's and Leibniz's debates, Kant attempted to resolve the impasse through his own doctrine of transcendental idealism, which posited that the knowledge derived from our sense perceptions is organised through *a priori* concepts such as substance or causality, which are deducible as the necessary and universal structures of understanding. In our own era, the debate has resurfaced not as metaphysics but developmental psychology and neuroscience. Secularism scoffs at the idea of divinely implanted knowledge, but Darwinian understanding of our evolutionary history renders equally improbable the idea that we might emerge into the world as virgin consciousness. Rather, we appear as survival machines, fine-tuned over generations of natural and sexual selection to thrive our way to maturity, from where we can procreate and pass on our genes to the next generation. Among these genes are those that build the brain on which our mind supervenes, a brain not so much hard-wired as soft-wired to adapt its functioning to the milieu in which it finds itself (as explored notably by Catherine Malabou in her work on the philosophical implications of brain plasticity).³

Three areas in particular are under renewed scrutiny in the revived discussion of nature and nurture. One is linguistics, where Noam Chomsky's idea of a universal grammar

underlying all languages gave rise to the theory of the ‘language acquisition device’, an innate capacity for language learning that will adapt itself to whichever language environment the developing mind finds itself in.⁴ Another is evolutionary psychology, in which human behaviour is described as adaptive to the ancestral environment of our hunter-gatherer past, the mismatch between which and our current urban, technological lives is supposed to account for many of the ills of modern life. Last, and most heated, is the debate on gender. Beauvoir’s contention that ‘on ne naît pas femme: on le devient’ is under attack by those who claim that some differences between men and women have a genetic component rather than being wholly cultural. In response, the charge of ‘neurosexism’ is levelled at those who might misuse science to prop up preconceived notions of gender norms.⁵

This is the context against which Darrieussecq’s onion-layered minds are brought into being, and, as we shall see, her representation engages directly with several of these ideas, and takes a stand on some matters of continuing dispute. Let us explore some of the minds that appear in her fiction, beginning with those which are conjured by something less than an adult human brain, before moving to the cases in which the adult human brain produces something less than the full sophistication of the adult human mind. Of the animal, infant and electronic brains that give rise to the panoply of minds in the first half this division, it is the animal minds that have garnered the greatest share of readers’ attention. As Anne Simon has argued, Darrieussecq’s evocations of the subjectivity of animals including cats, sealions, basking sharks and pigs construct a ‘mixité charnelle et mentale’ between the humans and animals who populate her fictions.⁶ Certainly, the animal minds evoked are often conceived of as different from human ones. Speculations in *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, for instance, suggest that the differences between cat senses and human senses, and between cat priorities and human priorities, make feline subjectivity an alien phenomenon.⁷ Animal minds are also often imagined as lacking much of the complexity of human consciousness, as can be seen in *Le Mal*

de mer in the dim awareness of the basking shark of its weariness, hunger and the state of its own body, an awareness that leaves open the question of whether such simple mental life can properly be called consciousness at all.⁸ Nevertheless, these minds are conceived as existing on a continuum with our own. In *Truismes*, the narrator's body is frequently represented in transition states between human and porcine form, and her mind appears to follow suit. While the mental transition is never complete – the other pigs in the pig-sty sense that ‘ça continue à penser comme les hommes là-dedans’ (*Truismes* 141) – she nevertheless loses human characteristics in her mentality to a significant degree, while gaining animal traits. While in pig form she is unable to interpret a baby's cries as laughter or terror, and comes close to treating the infant as a food source (*Truismes* 145, 84); in her animal form, as she puns (perhaps unintentionally), ‘je devenais un peu bête’ (*Truismes* 74).

Electronic minds in Darrieussecq's work have received less critical attention than animals, but they also form a distinct presence. In *Le Pays*, the unusual mourning rituals of the narrator's home country, a fictionalized post-independence Basque country of the near future, involve animated holograms of the deceased, endowed with a semblance of consciousness through computer-generated artificial intelligence. The novel presents this artificial intelligence as nothing but a crude travesty of the human mind, however, its limitations exposed when the narrator attempts to go beyond rote niceties in conversation with her hologrammatic grandmother by announcing her pregnancy:

L'hologramme se mit sur pause. Ma grand-mère fumait d'un air absent. Un automate affrontant un trou de sa carte mémoire, plutôt que ma grand-mère cherchant quoi dire, ce qui ne lui arrivait jamais. Quand le logiciel eut calculé une réaction appropriée, l'hologramme de ma grand-mère débita les clichés de la joie familiale.⁹

Far more sophisticated, and more sinister, are the robotic intelligences of *Notre vie dans les forêts*, which are the tools, perhaps even in part the architects, of the dystopian surveillance state in which the novel is set. The rise of the surveillance state has been facilitated by the advantages of the electronic over the human mind, evinced by the superiority of ‘l’œil et la mémoire robotiques’, and ‘le temps infini qu’ont les machines [...] leurs infinies capacités de recoupement’.¹⁰ Now, the remaining areas of human advantage are being quickly eroded as ‘les robots compassionnels’ (*Notre vie* 58) move into therapeutic professions, and as the last bastion of human exceptionalism, associative learning, is placed under siege by the *cliqueurs*, humans employed to explore and record their own mental associations for the benefit of the robots:

Il s’agit d’enseigner aux robots toutes nos associations mentales, pour qu’ils puissent un jour les faire à notre place. [...] On fait à l’infini ce que sait faire l’esprit humain mais devant quoi patauge un robot. Et qui est quand même très difficile à formaliser. La seule solution c’est de multiplier les liens, clic clic clic, jusqu’à fournir aux robots tout ce à quoi on a pu penser jusque-là, tout ce qu’on a pu sentir, tout ce que l’humanité a pu vivre.

Bleu = ciel = vague à l’âme = musique = contusion = sang bleu = noblesse = décapitation.

Clic clic clic clic clic. (*Notre vie* 18)

According to the narrator, the advent of ‘le premier robot humain’ (*Notre vie* 18) is still fifty years away, but the countdown to the obsolescence of the human race is underway, and the gap

between human and machine is narrowing in the other direction too, as humans become cyborgs through electronic brain implants and are reduced to the status of repetitive, mechanical drones in their working lives. More striking even than the continuum posited in Darrieussecq's fiction between human and animal brains, then, is this suggestion that sufficiently complex computer circuitry might mimic the human mind to the extent of replicating our thought processes, perhaps even our desires, our imagination, and our sentience.

These non-human minds, animal and electronic, are presented as situated *not* on the far side of an unbridgeable gulf from human consciousness, but rather at points on the lower end of a smooth continuum of complexity. Some varieties of human consciousness even share their place on the scale. Child and animal mentality is shown as related, almost indistinguishable in the case of the chimpanzee and the infant. The trained chimpanzee in the short story 'Connaissance des singes' eats, plays and even talks like a child, for which it acts as surrogate in its owner's life, while in *Bref Séjour chez les vivants*, the chimpanzee in the zoo, with its 'yeux humains pathétiques, et des mains humaines', can sit and grasp objects better than the toddler outside of its cage, and might well be 'mieux lotie' in reasoning and dexterity.¹¹

Neither the child nor the animal is a blank slate, however. Sensation, thought and awareness are attributed to the foetus *in utero*: 'ça commence par quoi, par rien, et puis... ne serait-ce que le sentiment d'être ici, d'être ici plutôt que rien, chaleur, présence... et le fracas de locomotive, battement, pas encore d'oreille, juste les vibrations du cœur de la mère' (*Bref séjour* 231). The babies in Anne's experiments on language acquisition in *Bref séjour* distinguish the sounds of their mother tongue from other spoken sounds long before they can speak it.¹² The familiarity with mother-tongue phonemes comes from experience, of course, from language heard through the uterine wall and in earliest infancy, but the implication is that we are innately primed to attend to and absorb language, to be the 'petite éponge à mots' (Darrieussecq 2005 143) that Darrieussecq elsewhere labels a young child. And the author

herself, in her non-fiction memoir of and reflection on babies and motherhood, declares her firm belief that basic conceptual categories such as ‘fin’, ‘début’, ‘continu’, ‘discontinu’, ‘séparé’, ‘ensemble’ are present in her baby’s mind long before the words that will come to denote them.¹³ These are not divinely implanted concepts, but attest to a mind that comes into the world attuned by evolution to understand and manipulate the environment into which it is born. She expresses strong scepticism at the psychoanalytic idea that the infant’s failure to recognize its image in the mirror implies it has no concept of self, and argues that it differentiates between its own body and its mother’s. The sequence ends with a summing up of her belief on early-infant mentality:

J’essaie d’imaginer sa pensée, un continuum de sensations et d’images, commençant peut-être à peine à s’agencer autour des quelques syllabes qu’il a pu isoler – mais existant: existant nécessairement avant les mots; et teintée d’une nuance qui n’est qu’à lui. Il réfléchit, il scrute, il organise, il songe: c’est un être humain. (*Le Bébé*, 114)

Crucially, these lines are both an argument and an evocation. Darrieussecq’s claims about what is present in her baby’s consciousness are accompanied by a curiosity to share the subjective experience of this infant mind. Infantile amnesia – the inability of adults to recall episodic memories from before the age of two to four years – separates all of us from our early existence. Darrieussecq is not just arguing the case for innate mental structures and early mental sophistication through her discussion of infant mentality: she is reaching back towards this former existence which all of us have had and none of us remember, in order to wonder with us what it must have been like for us at that time inside our own head.

Darrieussecq’s representation of minds stripped back to their essentials also extends to adults, as mentioned, and this aspect of her work has become increasingly prominent. *Le Pays*

examines in detail one particular mental state, the evaporation of self that the protagonist experiences during her morning run:

Peu à peu, en courant, je m'évaporais. Les coureurs le savent, au bout d'un moment on se détache de soi-même. [...] J'étais suspendue. Tout ce qui courait en moi me tenait debout, me portait. Je devenais j/e. Avec le même soulagement que lorsqu'on glisse vers le sommeil, j/e basculais vers d'autres zones. (*Le Pays*, 11)

Thoughts continue while the protagonist is in this mental state, but they escape her control, and vanish beyond memory as soon as they appear. The 'j/e' which represents the runner's state of mind seems to be not simply a divided self, nor is it exactly the complete absence of self, such as is suffered by Sartre's Roquentin in *La Nausée* during a mental crisis.¹⁴ It is, rather, a *suspension* of self, in which the protagonist is present within a kind of rolling consciousness, and aware of the transient thoughts and perceptions which impinge upon it, yet neither engaging with nor controlling the flow. The structures of memory, desire and control that maintain a stable sense of identity in our everyday life are unmoored, with the result that the mind is detached from the autobiographical self that we usually feel ourselves to be.

This mental state of the suspended self is familiar to most of us, runners or not – an earlier appearance of the 'j/e' in Darrieussecq's novels links it to the experience of driving a car, for instance – and it functions as a part of the writer's project to evoke for us related states of mind that are emphatically beyond our experience. *Bref séjour* has several of these, from the failed attempts of the sisters in their youth to achieve a mental state in which they are thinking of nothing (attempts which inevitably spiral into reflexivity), to darker considerations on lobotomy, which would result in the loss of anxiety and mood swings from mental life, but also the loss of forward planning and concentration, leaving only 'une totale, agréable et insouciante

distraction', and finally to vivisection, and the subjective experience of losing part of your brain, and with it perhaps colour vision, proprioception, the sense of self (*Bref séjour* 30, 11, 183–84).

A particular thought experiment on consciousness that Darrieussecq returns to on several occasions in her novels is the question of what it would be like to open your eyes onto the world for the first time as an adult. The idea appears in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, when Locke's fellow philosopher, William Molyneux, posed the question of whether a blind man, suddenly regaining his sight, would be able to distinguish visually a cube from a sphere. Molyneux and Locke agreed that he would not, because, in Molyneux's words:

Though he has obtained the experience of how a globe, how a cube affects his touch, yet he has not yet obtained the experience, that what affects his touch so or so, must affect his sight so or so; or that a protuberant angle in the cube, that pressed his hand unequally, shall appear to his eye as it does in the cube.¹⁵

Locke glosses the thought experiment as a vindication of empiricism:

This I have set down, and leave with my reader, as an occasion for him to consider how much he may be beholden to experience, improvement, and acquired notions, where he thinks he had not the least use of, or help from them. (Locke 144)

The Molyneux question sees Darrieussecq's fiction engaging directly with Locke's philosophy, as Anne in *Bref séjour* cites and considers the problem. Considering the medical advances that have turned the thought experiment into reality, she notes the disappointing outcomes:

Un aveugle-né ne verra rien. Il verra des couleurs, des lignes, tout un bazar de stimuli optiques, mais sans relief, ni principe organisateur. Son cerveau ne saura pas décoder ce que l'œil capte et que le nerf transmet. Pour voir il faut avoir déjà vu. Les deux cas étudiés se sont 1) suicidé 2) suicidé. Car la lumière promise était indéchiffrable. (*Bref séjour* 140)

However, on closer examination this outlook refutes Locke rather than supporting him. Although neither a new-born infant nor the newly envisioned adult can interpret their visual stimuli, only the adult fails to develop the faculties to order and interpret the data. Modern understanding of neuroplasticity shows us that the malleability of the brain declines with age. Thus, unlike the child, the adult struggles, and is finally unable, to develop the ability to see, in a distinction that is not dissimilar to the difficulty of adult language-learning compared to childhood language acquisition. Rather than being blank slates, we are born with the neural architecture in place that will enable us to build a visual system, and will either use this potential or lose it.

The adult opening their eyes on the world for the first time recurs several times in Darrieussecq's work, including in *Notre vie dans les forêts*, which centres on a kind of 'Molyneux clone'. The clones of *Notre vie dans les forêts* wake as adults in a clinic with minds empty of prior experience: their life to date has been spent in a state of induced unconsciousness, awaiting the harvesting of their organs when required by their genetic original. The protagonist's acquaintance, Romero, maintains that the unconscious clones 'ne sont que des containers', less human than a corpse, since corpses are at least 'des corps qui ont contenu des personnes' (*Notre vie* 97–98). The protagonist herself, though, sees the flickering of REM sleep behind the clone's eyelids and is convinced that the absence of experience does not equate to the absence of inner life:

À quoi rêvait-elle? À être allongée là? À dormir? À des froissements de drap? Ou à sa naissance, probablement sa seule expérience éveillée? À un vécu strictement organique, rouge et humide, intérieur, au battement de son cœur, au gonflement de ses poumons?
(*Notre vie* 98)

Once the clones are awoken and liberated, the focus changes to the representation of a mind without a past, a healthy adult consciousness with none of the experience from which a self is usually constructed. The protagonist's external perspective, and the clone's lack of communication skills, leave this evocation deliberately sketchy: the narration does not take us inside the new-born adult consciousness (which in any case has no language with which to express itself), but leaves us to observe and speculate from the outside. The clones are explicitly compared to animals ('plus bêtes que des chiens', 111), and to infants, with whom they share many traits, including their helplessness and adaptability:

Le grand avantage des moitiés, c'est leur flexibilité. Elles s'adaptent à tout. Leur plus grand défaut c'est qu'elles ne comprennent rien. La mienne il a fallu tout lui apprendre. Vraiment tout. Je vous raconte: elle ne savait pas marcher. Et ça, ce n'était que le début.
(*Notre vie* 11)

When lifted upright, the clone opens her eyes, and her shared gaze with the narrator-protagonist is the closest the reader comes to accessing what lies behind it:

On verticalisait nos moitiés en s'y mettant à plusieurs. On leur tenait les jambes et les épaules en les calant contre un arbre. Qu'est-ce qu'on ne leur a pas fait de toute façon. Eh bien la mienne ouvrait les yeux. Systématiquement. Et elle m'interrogeait du regard.

C'était touchant mais pénible. Le vide de ces yeux. L'angoisse, pas d'autre mot. Par quoi commencer? (*Notre vie* 12–13)

As with Molyneux, the slate is not as blank as it might seem: the clone's eyes are empty, but also filled with anxiety. There is a question in her gaze. The narrator speculates that some awareness of their surroundings may have slipped into the clones' minds during their long sleep; in particular, their rapid speech acquisition once awake hints that words spoken at their bedside may have penetrated their unconscious. Whether or not this minimal prior life experience took place, the awakened clones appear primed to develop basic life skills: 'Ça allait vite, à croire que leur genre de vie les avait quand même informés d'un certain *data* humain, la marche debout et plus tard, la parole' (*Notre vie* 13). The narrator is vindicated in her belief that the *moitiés* have, and have always had, true personhood, perhaps even more so than herself, as, in the final pages, her losing battle with the electronic implant in her brain leads her to describe herself as 'robot comme les autres' (*Notre vie* 185).

Darrieussecq's representation of minds that are, even in their barest state, already equipped with primal instincts and developmental pathways is in tune with the views she expresses on the subject in her own voice, as we saw in her remarks in *Le Bébé*. However, she has no truck with those who would include gender difference among the innate characteristics of the newborn mind, asserting that 'L'écriture est sans sexe, de même que le cerveau', and elsewhere, 'ce que j'aime dans le féminisme, c'est pour moi que le cerveau humain n'est pas sexué. Pour moi, on a tous le même cerveau'.¹⁶ This is not to say, of course, that her adult characters, after a lifetime of gendered experience in a patriarchal and heteronormative society, are free of gendered characteristics, nor that she disregards the role of embodiment in the construction of the self. Helena Chadderton, in a detailed study of gender representation in Darrieussecq, notes the prevalence of traditional roles among the adult characters, combined

with a narratorial insistence that ‘gender is learned and performed through action and language’, and that household and childcare tasks are neither masculine nor feminine in themselves.¹⁷ Darrieussecq’s male characters are often less emotionally literate than her female characters, more career-oriented or scientifically minded, less introspective and more shy of commitment. Kouhouesso of *Il faut beaucoup aimer les hommes*, for instance, is introduced with the detail of his displeasure when his lover opens her eyes during sex, and closes the novel with the less-than-romantic declaration to this same, now ex-lover, ‘pendant TROIS ans, aucune femme ne m’a plu comme toi.’¹⁸ Kouhouesso is supremely ambitious and self-confident, ‘un homme avec une grande idée’ (11), with none of the doubt or self-reflection that characterizes Darrieussecq’s women. Darrieussecq’s narration grants the reader access to the moment-by-moment consciousness of all her female protagonists, but only two of her major male characters, Peter Tomson in *White* and John Johnson in *Bref séjour*. (The minor character of the private detective in *Le Mal de mer* is a possible third character in this regard.) Both are in the broad strokes of their personality quite different from the women in Darrieussecq’s fiction. Taciturn and scientifically minded, the two men are more comfortable discussing heating systems or wind-farm voltage than feelings or relationships. John Johnson rarely communicates with his three daughters, and aborts a telephone conversation with his eldest after some strained well-wishing; Peter Tomson barely communicates at all with the woman who will become his lover in the Antarctic research base. But beneath this awkward and antisocial public carapace, both men exist in a private consciousness that is almost indistinguishable from that of the female characters. Both men’s minds are a chaotic stream of half-formed thoughts, interrupted by perceptions, memories and mental associations. Both are haunted by bereavement, and both appear to experience desire, love and sorrow as deeply as the female characters, even if they do not express them as openly. John, for instance, thinks but does not speak of his desire for a grandchild as he talks to his daughter, and, like his daughters,

suffers involuntary associative flashes to the memory of his drowned son whenever his mind strays into related territory. In his case, the image of migrants washed up on beaches and the (English) words ‘bloated, drowned, betrayed’ (*Bref séjour* 257) show the persistence of his guilt and grief.

The mental kinship between male and female characters suggests that none of the gender-typical traits in their public personas was anyone’s genetic destiny from the moment of their birth. This impression is reinforced by the representation of children in Darrieussecq, who have not yet been socialized into gender roles. Tiot in *Le Pays* likes poking at sea-creatures in rock-pools and also likes making necklaces out of pasta. Neither his nor the other childhoods evoked in Darrieussecq’s novels are specifically boyhoods or girlhoods in the activities the children engage in, nor in the characteristics of the children themselves. The same applies, unsurprisingly, to the clones of *Notre vie dans les forêts*, who have skipped the socializing process and entered adulthood with no knowledge of gender norms. Marie’s clone is a nearly forty-year-old tomboy. She enjoys playing in the woods with the other clones, sulks at curfews like a teenager, and obediently performs the tasks that the true adults instruct her to carry out, unconcerned in her behaviour or appearance to espouse traits considered feminine or avoid those seen as masculine: ‘Les cheveux en bataille, toujours pleins de foin ou de je ne sais quoi. Un sourire désarmant. Les lèvres un peu gercées par le grand air et le froid’ (p. 166). None of these representations conclusively refutes the existence of innate gender characteristics in Darrieussecq’s fictional worlds, but they are clearly in line with the author’s stated belief in the unsexed brain, and they strongly suggest that any gendered traits not imposed by nurture or culture must be slight and inessential.

Minds in Darrieussecq, we have seen, appear to be rich and structured even before experience begins. While gender roles may not be programmed in, complexity and subjectivity infuse our mental life even where there are no memories on which to found a sense of identity

or language with which to express concepts of thought. Non-human minds share in our richness, and form a continuum of subjectivity, rather than being qualitatively different. We humans are different animals, but we are still animals, and our common heritage underpins a commonality of mental life with other primates, other mammals, and perhaps even more remote cousins on the Darwinian family tree. Artificial intelligence, too, has the capability to mimic the thought processes of the human mind, which opens up the question of whether it might also come to share our feelings, our desires and our awareness. But as we have also seen, Darrieussecq's fiction offers more than just an argument about the nature of mind. It is an experiment in representation. In the lineage of Proust's representation of the semi-conscious state between sleeping and waking, or, more directly, Nathalie Sarraute's exploration of the twilight zone of quasi-autonomous responses underlying conscious awareness, Darrieussecq gestures towards an evocation of consciousness without content, or with nothing but itself for object. Through her clones, hybrids, infants and absent minds, Darrieussecq shows us what is most fundamental to our conscious existence, and what is most universal. She speculates on what it might be like to be inside a mind without language or experience. Animal and animalistic consciousness is evoked directly, as are states of minimal consciousness that may remind us of moments in our own lives when we were less than our full, complex selves, such as the hypnotic state of the habitual runner. Less familiar human states of mind are more often viewed from the outside – a mother observes her own infant, or a woman who has a lifetime of experience gazes into the eyes of her identical twin who has none – and the observer is enthralled by the inaccessible subjectivity in front of them, speculating on what it might have in common with their own. From inside or out, the conclusion drawn is the same: we are more than the sum of the data we have absorbed through our senses. The human mind is not and has never been a blank slate. Even in its most denuded state, it reveals to us its richness, its order

and its potentiality, along with, in its essence, something unmistakably familiar, which allows us to recognize our shared humanity.

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Notes

¹ Aristotle, *De Anima (On the Soul)* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), ed. and trans. by Hugh Lawson-Tancred, §429b–430a, p. 203.

² John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), ed. by Roger Woolhouse, Book II, Chapter One, §2 (p. 109).

³ See, for instance, Catherine Malabou, *Que faire de notre cerveau?* (Montrouge: Bayard, 2011).

⁴ Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965), p. 25.

⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), II, p. 13; the term ‘neurosexism’ is particularly associated with the work of Cordelia Fine, such as *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society and Neurosexism Create Difference* (New York: Norton, 2010).

⁶ Anne Simon, ‘Marie Darrieussecq ou la plongée dans les « mondes animaux »’, *Dalhousie French Studies* 98 (2012), 77–87 (p. 81).

⁷ ‘Il verrait quoi, une étendue hostile et pas d’ombre. Le sable, mou sous les pattes. Les algues à odeur de poisson.’ Marie Darrieussecq, *Bref séjour chez les vivants* (Paris: P.O.L., 2001), p. 206.

⁸ ‘La fatigue a remplacé la faim. Le vide ouvert sous ses fanons usés semble s’être clos peu à peu, la mer ne le traverse plus, elle rencontre un obstacle au fond du ventre, un calme. Les muscles n’ont plus à se mouvoir pour échapper à cette faim, le corps se laisse porter comme une bouée.’ Marie Darrieussecq, *Le Mal de mer* (Paris: P.O.L., 1999), pp. 125–26.

⁹ Marie Darrieussecq, *Le Pays* (Paris: P.O.L., 2005), 201–202.

¹⁰ Marie Darrieussecq, *Notre vie dans les forêts* (Paris: P.O.L., 2017), 34.

¹¹ ‘Ça s’asseyait mieux que Nore, ça saisissait entre pouce et index mieux que Nore, à se demander si au jeu du triangle dans le triangle elle aurait été, question méninges, la mieux lotie...’, *Bref Séjour chez les vivants*, 202.

¹² Quand les yeux bleu foncé une seconde s’immobilisent, s’ouvrent en grand, quand les doigts cessent de tripoter le hochet, et que la bouche, une seconde, cesse de chuquer, on la voit, là, l’idée, sans mots, l’idée grande ouverte, qui les atteint, les occupe à fond, déferle une seconde, *JE CONNAIS ÇA, J’AI DÉJÀ ENTENDU ÇA, ÇA ME DIT QUOI*, au son de la langue maternelle’, *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, 226.

¹³ Marie Darrieussecq, *Le Bébé* (Paris: P.O.L., 2002), 112.

¹⁴ Sartre describes the loss of self as follows: ‘Le Je pâlit, pâlit, et c’en est fait, il s’éteint. Lucide, immobile, déserte, la conscience est posée entre des murs; elle se perpétue. Personne ne l’habite plus.’ Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), p. 200.

¹⁵ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, Chapter Nine, §8 (p. 144). In both Locke and Darrieussecq, Molyneux is referred to as ‘Molineux’.

¹⁶ Marie Darrieussecq, Amy Concannon and Kerry Sweeney, ‘Interview’, March 2004, <<https://mariedarrieussecq.com/entretiens>>, accessed 23 June 2020; Marie Darrieussecq and John Lambeth, ‘Entretien avec Marie Darrieussecq’, *The French Review*, 79 (2006), 806–18 (815).

¹⁷ Helena Chadderton, *Marie Darrieussecq’s Textual Worlds: Self, Society, Language* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012), 76.

¹⁸ Marie Darrieussecq, *Il faut beaucoup aimer les hommes* (Paris : P.O.L., 2013), 312.