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Marie Darrieussecq's Ghost

While it has been argued by proponents of surface reading that ghosts should be "just read," a closer analysis of contemporary French writer Marie Darrieussecq's oeuvre reveals that ghosts cannot be read only in terms of what they may represent; one must rather take into account what they do and how they are produced. Through Darrieussecq's spectral engagement with her own work, and following Jacques Derrida's invitation to consider ghosts as possibility, this article reads ghosts as metafictional figures appearing within the text's own fabric and not external to it; it also questions the reader's involvement in the conjuration of ghosts.

Keywords: *contemporary French, Marie Darrieussecq, Jacques Derrida, ghosts, metafiction, spectrality, surface reading*

– Je ne peux pas vous la vendre.

– Mais pourquoi, Madame ?

– C'est qu'elle est hantée.

– Hantée par qui ?

– Mais elle est hantée par vous, Monsieur.

—Philippe Forest, *Le Chat de Schrödinger*

Invited to the table as an example of ill-advised symptomatic reading, the figure of the ghost finds itself stripped of its most productive aspects in Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's "Surface Reading: An Introduction." Indeed, in their account of "the way we read now" (6), they urge readers and critics to consider the apparition of ghosts in a text not as a symptom of something hidden,[1] "as surface signs of [a] deep truth" (3), but rather something to "just read" (12). Going against symptomatic readings' focus on "absences, gaps, and ellipses in texts" (3) and their meanings, Best and Marcus argue that, in contrast, "[j]ust reading sees ghosts as presences, not

absences, and lets ghosts be ghosts, instead of saying what they are ghosts *of*" (13; emphasis in original).

As a reader of her own spectral universe, contemporary French writer Marie Darrieussecq prompts us to reconsider the relationship between ghosts and reading practices. Using Darrieussecq's engagement with(in) her oeuvre as both a pretext and a cautionary lesson of sorts, I will show here that Best and Marcus's injunction to let "ghosts be ghosts" cannot be achieved by *just* reading. Indeed, the ghost is both *nothing more* than a ghost and *nothing less* than a ghost and, therefore, must be read for all the possibilities and paradoxes it reserves.

Before delving deeper into Darrieussecq, I want to address the question of the ghost's ontology via the spectral scholar *par excellence*, Jacques Derrida. To "let ghosts be ghosts" is indeed only possible if one can agree on what constitutes a ghost. When Best and Marcus argue that we should not read ghosts as ghosts *of*, they mean that ghosts should not stand for anything other than what they are—they are probably following a consensus definition that sees ghosts as "[t]he soul of a deceased person, spoken of as appearing in a visible form, or otherwise manifesting its presence, to the living" (*OED*). As such, to be a ghost means to be the ghost of someone: a presence. However, as can be attested throughout literature (and history), ghosts have appeared:

> as anything from figments of the imagination, divine messengers, benign or exacting ancestors, and pesky otherworldly creatures [. . .] to disturbing figures returned from the dead [. . .] Their representational and socio-cultural functions, meanings and effects have been at least as manifold as theirs shapes. (Blanco and Peeren 1)

As Elaine Freedgood (who has argued for reading ghosts literally and allegorically "both at once" (40)) remarks regarding the ghosts found in Shakespeare but also elsewhere, "we have asked much more about what [they] *mean* than what they *are*" (43; emphasis in original). I would shift the emphasis here slightly: the question perhaps should be about what ghosts *do*. For Derrida, the specter is precisely unknowable, "on ne sait pas ce que *c'est* [. . .] *C'est* quelque chose qu'on ne sait pas, justement" (25; emphasis in original), and as such one could advance that it is always more complex than what its name suggests, precisely because of what it does, what it is able to do. To "let a ghost be a ghost" thus means seeing the results of its doings and this includes, I contend, more than a mere return from the dead, precisely (and paradoxically) because of its ability to return *as* a ghost from the dead, to inhabit multiple spaces and temporalities at once. Derrida, in fact, urged us to think "la possibilité du spectre, le spectre comme possibilité" (34), and it is in heed of this invitation that I write here, to show the possibilities given by the figure of the specter when it is understood not only in its thematic aspect but also very much so in its productive capacities. I will be tracking here, through the work of Darrieussecq, a certain spectral logic, one in which absences may be feigned, where writing may produce ghosts that move the narrative forward even while drawing their life from the reader.

DARRIEUSSECQ'S GHOSTS

Following *Truismes* (1996), her best-selling debut, Darrieussecq was spoiled for choice as to the direction in which she might take her writing career. She elected a less commercial path and surprised those who expected more of the same. "Tous mes livres ont un style différent" (qtd. in Lambeth 809), insists the author whose ambition, by her own admission, is to be read a

hundred years from now and to be recognized for the way she helped literature move forward.[2] If *Truismes* narrated the excessively fleshy transformation of a woman into a sow, the more understated *Naissance des fantômes* (1998) focuses on the unraveling of the narrator and the dematerialization of everything she knows following her husband's disappearance. Written in "a more reflective, intimate tone" (Genova 794), "more sober, more literary and more tightly focused" (Jordan 142), the novel describes the loss of solidity, the becoming ethereal that is attained through the reconfiguration of a world as seen on a molecular level.[3] In fact, Darrieussecq's focus on the spectral has not ceased to develop, and while it is true that the ghosts of dead children abound in her novels,[4] one should note that they are not the only ghosts to figure in her oeuvre—these range from the elusive husband of *Naissance des fantômes* and the narrating chorus of ghosts in *White* (2003) to the most recent disappeared ghost in *Il faut beaucoup aimer les hommes* (2013).

Born after the tragic death of her brother, Darrieussecq repeatedly states that this loss wrapped in silence stands at the core of her writing project: "j'ai une tradition autobiographique de silence dans ma famille, à la fois très lourde et très belle, de ce silence où les gens ne disent rien y compris sur des drames qui nous ont tous fracassés. [. . .] Ce silence, il faut trouver sa forme, il faut trouver la forme littéraire du silence et du secret" (Kaprièlian 15, 17). Yet in order to respond to two accusations of plagiarism—one of aping (*singerie*) by Marie NDiaye following the publication of *Naissance des fantômes*,[5] and one by Camille Laurens, who accused her of "plagiat psychique"[6] following the publication of *Tom est mort* (2007)—Darrieussecq broke this silence and disclosed her family history to explain herself. In doing so, she linked the ghosts of her novels to a personal tragedy, thus running the risk of having her readers focus on the people these ghosts allegedly represent rather than what they do and how they function in the novel.[7] Darrieussecq's stance has been arguably paradoxical insofar as she has insisted that she should not have to justify herself in writing something she has not personally experienced,[8] but at the same time, she has repeatedly opened up about her personal life in interviews and lectures, thus contributing to the ongoing controversy. Returning most consequentially to the accusations in *Rapport de police* (2010), her recent book-length essay on plagiarism, she would state that she wrote *Tom est mort* "dans [. . .] [un] esprit d'exorcisme," even while immediately adding: "[s]ur les raisons intimes de mon écriture, je n'ai rien à ajouter. C'est ma sorcellerie à moi" (368). One cannot help but wonder whether this statement, which refuses to return to the personal, comes too late. Since Darrieussecq's extensive metadiscourse is marked by the recurring mentions of her family affair[9] and the plagiarism scandals, she has become something of a specter herself, or as Jean-Pierre Martin put it commenting on writers' mediatized presence, "[l]es livres se lisent à peine, mais on en parle beaucoup" (22). But if Darrieussecq's self-portrayal to the media stresses the importance of this family tragedy, I would like to advance that by frequently revisiting this site of trauma, by weaving a different kind of plot each time she comes back to it, and by directing the reader to a (now familiar) family history, Darrieussecq is making us blind to the presence of other ghosts in her oeuvre.

BRIEF CHANGE OF WORDS

Darrieussecq's fourth novel, *Bref séjour chez les vivants* (2001), which follows a day in the life of the three Johnson sisters—Jeanne, Anne, and Nore—their mother, and their estranged father, has a ghost at its heart. The author even taunts us with the words she carefully crafted for the back cover,[10] an invitation to wonder, to keep watch: "Nous sommes dans leur cerveau. Il y a un

fantôme." Having suggested herself in an interview that all her novels are "habités par Antigone" (Kaprièlian 18), Darrieussecq has noted that this figure (of a mourning of a death without a grave) forms "évidemment [. . .] le centre de la spirale, l'œil de l'ouragan . . . " (Kaprièlian 18) in *Bref séjour chez les vivants*. Indeed, at its heart stands the drowning of Pierre, the third of the four Johnson siblings, and the fact that he has been completely erased, without even a tomb: "les photos, les vêtements, la tombe, ils [les parents] ont pensé à effacer" (188).

Yet if Pierre is indeed the ghost that haunts the narrative, he is certainly not the only one. The novel ends with the death of Jeanne, the oldest sister, who wonders as she drowns: "est-ce qu'on voit défiler sa vie? j'apprends tout ce qu'ils ignorent, maman John Anne et les autres, qui raconte le film de ma vie?" (305). In the paperback edition (Folio) of the novel published some two years after the first P.O.L edition, this sentence appears as: "j'apprends tout ce qu'ils ignorent, maman John Anne et les autres, film de ma vie tu parles" (257).[11] Darrieussecq has spoken of her decision to change "une phrase extrêmement lourde" in the Folio version: "Il a fallu que dans la version POL [*sic*], parce que je n'avais pas assez confiance dans le lecteur, j'écrive la phrase: 'Anne est en train de raconter le film de la vie de Jeanne.' Quand j'ai relu cette phrase, je me suis dit que je prenais le lecteur pour un imbécile. Il n'a pas besoin de ça. Et dans le Folio, cette phrase est enlevée. Comme d'autres phrases" (Terrasse 264). However, the sentence that Darrieussecq claims to have removed does not figure as such in the P.O.L version; instead, it is the sentence I quoted above: "qui raconte le film de ma vie?" (305). Darrieussecq, in her revisiting of the text, essentially removed the question "Who is speaking for me?" While she herself claims that Anne is speaking for Jeanne, in the question originally posed, it is the figure of the author that looms—it is, in fact, Darrieussecq who is writing as if she were Jeanne. It is almost as if the character, on the verge of death, realizing that she is but a puppet, momentarily severs the ties that hold her to the puppeteer and calls her out on it. And the author figure then goes back not only to erase it in the Folio version but also, when speaking of it, puts yet another character in charge of the narration, deflecting from her own role.

While it may seem obvious that an author is behind a written text, and though we may suspend our disbelief and become engrossed in the story and its narrators, there are reasons nevertheless to sense here that there is a haunting at work, one that is carefully orchestrated to haunt the reader, not the characters. Since the narration (as our only access to the story of Pierre) consists only of their thoughts and (erased or repressed) memories, these characters are not *exactly* haunted by the ghost of Pierre returned from the dead; rather, a ghost is *created* through the family's inability (or refusal) to speak and think of him and through the absence this reticence comes to signify. We finally learn of the drowning through something as innocuous as a riddle attributed to the mother: "Mon premier est Jeanne, mon deuxième est Anne, mon troisième est Nore, mon tout est. Il en manque un: Toto tombe à l'eau. Que reste-t-il ? Les procédés mémo . . . mnémotechniques" (58). We see the impossibility for the mother to address the trauma directly (she uses the famous Toto—the butt of all jokes—to speak of the drowning) and to face the memories—we see her trailing off at *mémo* . . . [12]—she is incapable even of thinking the words *procédés mémoriels* and rather represses them. It is then surely the reader who is at the receiving end of blanks, silences, and missing pieces and who will construct a scene of haunting. When in the mother's mind we learn that she has had "trois filles et quatre accouchements" (21), we the readers realize that one child is missing; throughout our reading of the novel *we* will be haunted—we will look in every corner to see if his ghost is lurking in the not said, looking for clues planted as if on a crime scene. In reading Darrieussecq, one can see how ghosts are no longer only thematic but now are also part of the text's economy. They appear to the reader in a different way than to the

characters, it is the reader who perceives the ghost that has been crafted by the author, and it is up to the reader to identify where the author erases her tracks; to Darrieussecq's description of the novel, "[n]ous sommes dans leur cerveau. Il y a un fantôme," the following sentence could be added: "Et le fantôme, c'est moi, Marie Darrieussecq." Ghosts are willfully assembled or omitted, because they are there "for us," the *we* of the author and the reader: one who makes them, and the other who reads them into the blanks and missing pieces of the text. *We* want and need them there—therefore, they appear.

REPRENONS

In Darrieussecq's subsequent novel, *White*, set in Antarctica and centered on scientists who briefly share the continent with ghosts, we find once more such a furtive irruption. These ghosts—for the most part, unidentified and fused as a collective, "nous, les fantômes" (20)—are purposefully in charge of the narration until, the author tells us, their replacement by another "nous," the one of the leading couple of the novel:

> La narration est prise en compte par un nous collectif qui est celui des fantômes, celui de la névrose et celui de la convention sociale. C'est un vaste nous, celui des morts qui nous pèsent, celui de l'empêchement généralisé, et peu à peu ce nous va basculer—il y a là un attrait théorique—vers le nous du couple en train de se former, pour devenir une espèce de *Nous Deux* [magazine populaire français spécialisé dans les histoires d'amour à l'eau de rose] plus sentimental. (Terrasse 267–68)

However, as Martina Stemberger, in an article titled "We the ghosts or who, when we speak, speaks," has remarked, "it remains open, *who* actually speaks in the name of this *we*. The narrating perspective in *White* is centrifugal like the ghosts themselves" (63; emphasis in original).[13] When the ghosts are rendered silent at the end of the novel, it is precisely through a force described as centrifugal: "Une force centrifuge est en train de nous expulser—ils prennent toute la place, ils veulent faire sans nous! [. . .]—nous résistons : nous pouvons parler pour eux!" (192–93). Centrifugal movement is a movement that moves away from a center (Lat.: *centrum*, *fugere*), and while it can be argued that the force at the center is the couple Edmée/Peter, there is another force that has even more say in this story: the author who is behind this *we*, *the ghosts* and the one who has professed that she would get rid of them, "dans le livre que je viens d'écrire, *White*, je leur tords le cou" (Lambeth 812). In other words, while the ghosts claim that they can speak for the couple, they are not the only ones to do so.

The two protagonists, Edmée Blanco and Peter Tomson, will be conceived as answers to the question posed by Darrieussecq on the novel's back cover: "Jusqu'à quel point faut-il se débarrasser des fantômes pour faire l'amour?" The ghosts in question are made of clichés—commonplace notions of romance we readers may have ourselves thought up in reading Edmée and Peter's story—and old memories that must be expelled: "Cramponnés aux haubans de la tente, un blizzard fantôme déchiquette nos corps sans matière—'*it was love at first sight!*', '*amour avec toujours!*', '*strangers in the night!*'—poulailler de fantômes, caquètement de plumes et de nuées—'*nous! nous!*'—hiboux centrifugés à tous vents, valdinguent dehors, dehors!" (193; emphasis in original). Who will be speaking now that the ghosts are gone? We immediately find another *nous*, manifestly identified with Edmée and Peter: "personne ne frappera à notre porte

[. . .] nous sommes seuls, l'air, l'avenir, l'espace, sont dégagés et libres, nous sommes impeccablement seuls, nous n'avons rien d'autre à faire qu'à chercher, à chercher comment nous allons faire" (194). Yet this *nous* does not prove a sustainable narrating successor to ghosts. This point of view lasts for less than a paragraph, and it should rather be understood as a brief access to one of the main characters' thoughts, who is speaking for the other. The narration, indeed, continues under the guise of another *nous*. It is, however, no longer the *nous* of the ghosts—whose voices since their expulsion are rendered in quotation marks and italics[14]—nor that of the protagonists.

The *nous* that interests me is implied in an imperative, a simple "Reprenons" (196). In this one-word sentence, the author betrays her presence, her taking over of the ghostly *nous* (and her inclusion of the reader in the process).[15] Through this one word, we are reminded who is in charge, who does to ghosts, and to the couple, what she wants. Darrieussecq's objective in this story was to test a theory—but perhaps not the one she first intended. Rather than merely a story about haunting,[16] this is the story of an experiment in narratology: Who, when ghosts no longer speak, speaks?[17] Or to put it differently: How long can the narration be sustained when its narrators are rendered silent? The novel, by getting rid of its narrators, adopts the cold eye of a scientist—the author—observing impassively, signaling its presence only through a "*reprenons*"—"let's continue with this."[18] The novel ends with the (scientific) description of the conditions needed for a pregnancy to be sustained: "En terme de nourriture, de chaleur et d'oxygène, les conditions sont réunies: *une indifférence souveraine* est opposée à toute autre forme d'événement" (222; my emphasis). The word *indifférence* is used in chemistry to explain "the state of a body whose chemical affinities are satisfied" (*Littré*), which will remain as is, without any future coupling with other elements. The end of the experiment is reached when Peter and Edmée shut the ghosts out (of their tent, of their heads) and finally make love; the ghosts are no longer needed; they are locked out, irrelevant. The point of the experiment was to get rid of them; now that all the "chemical affinities are satisfied," and the coupling of those who should be together, we are left exactly where we started, with the beautiful sea where we first meet Edmée:[19] "la mer est belle [. . .] tout est calme et blanc" (222). Once the experiment is over, the tools are all put away, the ghosts are eradicated, and it may seem as if nothing has happened. However, there remains a tiny reminder, the new ghost signified by conception: "comment distinguer parmi nous qui a vécu, qui est resté dans les limbes?" (184), the ghosts pondered earlier in the novel, invoking the category Derrida calls "les fantômes de ceux qui ne sont pas encore nés" (16). More importantly, though, there are some other ghosts that remain, ones that were already there, ones unlike the narrating ghosts of *White*, which are "evident, perceptible, apprehensible" (Best and Marcus 9). From the first page of the novel, these narrators readily identified themselves as "nous, les fantômes." But in this "nous" one cannot forget to include both author and reader who played a part in getting this story to conclusion and who remain long after the narrating ghosts have been shut out—we who have been included in the innumerable ghostly "nous" from the very beginning of the novel, the only inhabitants of the space of the plot: "Et nous bien entendu, mais comment nous compter?" (9).

WRITING AND READING GHOSTS, *MODE D'EMPLOI*

The point is that ghosts for Darrieussecq are, then, not only ghosts but also pawns of a sort, carefully crafted and thought out, whether as paradoxical signifiers of "absence" or as a way of experimenting with form. This can be seen quite literally in *Le Pays* (2005),[20] Darrieussecq's only autofiction to date. Marie Rivière, the narrator and a writer who has returned to her native

country after living in Paris, is obsessed with visiting "la Maison des Morts," likening it to an addiction (247). Resisting what has become "la névrose du pays" (202)—filming one's loved ones and oneself in anticipation of death and "resurrection" through holographic technology—Marie is more concerned with crafting the hologram of her brother Paul, who died as a month-old infant (214). Marie's reflection and her design of the hologram echo the manner in which other Darrieussecqian ghosts function, hinting at a way of reading them. What also transpires is Darrieussecq's writing process, or the ways in which she inscribes her ghosts within her fiction.

The novel's alternating narrations are clearly demarcated and separated by a star, save for three instances.[21] It is the third instance that interests me, for it shows the appearance of the ghost in the very fabric of the text. When Marie hears her father on the phone saying to someone, "[o]n nous l'a pris" (105),[22] she begins to weave a fiction of her own to answer the unsaid, "[d]e quoi parlait-il? Ça avait commencé là, sa fiction, son fantasme" (105).[23] The next section alternates between paragraphs in the first person and paragraphs in the third person. In the novel, Marie is writing a book also titled "*Le Pays*" (79), which could plausibly be composed of the fragments in the third-person narration. It is in order to face the hollowness of Paul's absence that fiction is needed to speak about the unsaid. Indeed, we find out about him only in the third-person narration: "Tout ce qu'elle savait, c'était son prénom, Paul, et qu'on en parlait pas" (104).[24] It is thus by means of fiction, by way of writing fiction, that the ghost of Paul can be created. Marie concedes, "[i]l se trouve qu'écrire vous tient à une table, dans une grande disponibilité aux fantômes" (83), but far from being separated from such ghosts, she makes it clear that she is their very source: "Mon souffle, et les mouvements de mes yeux les faisaient naître" (83). It is through writing that the ghost is inscribed, and through reading that it appears. By writing her questions about Paul in the third person, Marie also fictionalizes herself and is able through the back and forth to break the silence that her parents are so desperate to preserve. It is following her fictionalized theories about what happened to the boy[25] that Marie begins to go to *La Maison des Morts* to finally give his absence another form.

When she decides to make her brother's hologram, she has nothing with which to start; he does not even figure among the family holograms. And even though the prospect of seeing an empty hologram is terrifying, because of its sinister familiarity, its uncanniness ("Une forme humanoïde debout, translucide, animée d'une lente oscillation. Un pantin quadrillé d'abscisses et d'ordonnées. Prêt à l'emploi, prêt à être nourri d'informations pour devenir le spectre de quelqu'un" [207–08]), Marie begins crafting the ghost of her brother, because a mere translucent form will not do. A ghost needs to be worked on, nourished with information—it has no life of its own; unsatisfied with the hologram of a generic baby that she created using scanned pictures from magazines (248), Marie will attempt to make the hologram more personal using a memory of an encounter with what she claims was Paul's ghost.

The encounter is retold in the first-person narration, but, interestingly, it is retold as a story, where the end is known right at the beginning.[26] Marie recalls an event ten years prior, in the Eurostar coming back from London, where she believes she saw Paul as an adult. Marie wonders whether this encounter is due to the fact that she was a little drunk or tired, or that Paul had wanted to communicate something to her, but, most importantly, she wonders whether it has to do with his absence needing a form: "Quelque chose que je portais depuis longtemps, une impression profonde, *la forme en creux d'un disparu*, allait projeter dans l'espace une sorte de corps" (236; my emphasis). Paul's ghost, understood in these terms, is not so much a ghost returning to haunt Marie as Marie's creation, the filled-out, inverted, phantasmic projection of something missing.

When Marie endeavors to give the hologram the features of the man seen on the train, she at first fails to realize that Paul's ghost cannot assume its own visual substance, but can beget only a more and more unworldly double. As she combines and recombines the options, "[l]es yeux de mon père, la bouche masculinisée de ma mère, le nez de ma grand-mère" (250), all she achieves is the crafting of another creature, a monstrous one, which is her poor double: "je les recombinai, je cherchais quelqu'un mais des monstres naissaient. Quand l'ordinateur, dans son infinie patience, me fournit un hologramme de moi en homme, un pathétique travesti à côté duquel Pablo [Marie's other brother] lui-même gardait un certain sex-appeal, découragée je me déconnectai" (250). It is the last time in the narration that we have a glimpse of this hologram, the failed experiment. As Marie attempts to materialize the ghost of Paul, she is left with her own monstrous reflection, and a truth about ghosts perhaps who are not in their own likeness when represented: they are meant to be developed neither narratively nor visually, because they do not belong to the order of *representation* but precisely appear in writing and reading.

I dwell on these details because, tellingly, the last revelation, the last paragraph of the text—which may well be the other epiphany of the book—can seem incongruous if one does not consider it in relation to the making of holograms, the making of ghosts. At the end of the novel, Marie gives birth to a daughter, Épiphanie, but ends up reflecting on the nature of ghosts. She writes:

> Les fantômes ne rôdent pas dans les limbes. Ils n'existent que dans la rencontre. Ils n'ont d'autre lieu que leur apparition. Quand ils disparaissent, c'est totalement. Ils n'ont pas de vie intérieure, ils n'ont pas de vie quelque part, ils n'ont ni psychologie ni mémoire. Ils ne souffrent pas. Ils naissent de notre hantise, qui les allume et les éteint, oscillants, pauvres chandelles. Ils ne sont que pour nous. (297)[27]

Unsettling a more traditional conception of ghosts, where ghosts actively and purposefully return to haunt the living, here it is our own volition, our own revisiting that brings them forth—we haunt them, the way that Marie has willed her brother Paul to age, if only for a moment. These ghosts are a complete creation, a (technologically enhanced) fiction.

In a lecture delivered in Italy in 2007, Darrieussecq would return to *Le Pays* and stress that the reason that this book is an autofiction is not the obvious one: "Si *Le Pays* est une autofiction, ce n'est pas parce que la narratrice me ressemble, c'est parce que, tout en me ressemblant, elle parle à des hologrammes" ("Je est unE autre" 113). If Darrieussecq's interest is in emphasizing the "fiction" part of "autofiction," what she says also points to the inherently hologrammatic or holographic nature of fiction—from the Latin *fingere*, to shape, form, feign. Ghosts are as such a metafictional figure, a reminder that behind fiction—and behind them—there is nothing. They are not an external presence haunting the text: they are the text.

ANOTHER CHRISTMAS CAROL

This ghost-making is best illustrated with one of Darrieussecq's *nouvelles à chute* found in the fifteen-story collection *Zoo: Nouvelles* (2006). "Noël parmi nous" is a Christmas ghost story, which, unlike one English Christmas classic, does not assert right away that the character, who will appear as a ghost, is dead.[28] Quite to the contrary, readers of Darrieussecq's story find out only in the last sentence that the adult first-person narrator actually died when she was eleven years old. Though there are hints throughout the story that the narrator is ignored or not seen by

others, that her body is imperceptible (207), that she was run over by a bus in a tragic accident (213), nothing prepares us for the ghost of an adult. Instead of the ghost of the young girl, which would be the ghost expected, we have a ghost that claims to have aged, married, found a job, and even (though unsuccessfully) tried to have children of her own (206). As Simon Kemp has put it, "the narrator [. . .] is the ghost of the adult who would have existed had her childhood self not been killed" (70). We could also suggest that the narrator is the ghost of someone who has never existed or, more precisely, the ghost of a ghost. Rather than seeing this merely as a surprising ending, and a choice in line with the short story genre, close attention to grammatical choices reveals another possible reading.

The story opens with the narrator being told by her mother to take a few days off and to go enjoy a little vacation in her childhood home: "Tu sais où sont les clés, m'a dit ma mère. Sous la deuxième marche du perron." This is followed by the narrator's comment, that her mother is "toujours très précise dans ses indications" (205). When the narrator finally arrives there, she once more recalls what she was told and methodically completes the tasks that were required of her: "« Je suivis la longue liste des instructions de ma mère. Tu enclencheras le compteur électrique, tu te rappelles où il est ? » J'enclenchai le compteur électrique. « Tu allumeras la chaudière », j'allumai la chaudière toute neuve" (208).[29] On Christmas Eve as her entire family comes to the house, the narrator's niece, pointing to the narrator's picture on the mantel, asks who it is. The narrator's mother responds with the sentence that ends the story: "« J'ai rêvé qu'elle était vivante, dit ma mère en baissant la voix, mariée à Paris, que nous parlions au téléphone et qu'elle venait passer Noël parmi nous »"(217). Quotation marks in this story are exclusively dedicated to recalling the mother's instructions, while the utterances of many characters (the father, the husband, even the mother, in other instances) are marked only by the dash and the italics. The quotation marks also share the distinction that each instruction is followed by the actual doing of this task: "« Tu allumeras la chaudière », j'allumai la chaudière toute neuve" (208), except in the final sentence, which ends the story, and which is not, at first glance, directly followed by a completion of the task. One should note that in these instructions, the mother uses the future tense, more precisely the "futur injonctif,"[30] while the narrator reports what she did in the *passé simple*. The particularity of this *futur injonctif* is that it involves specifically two people: "Le locuteur doit s'adresser explicitement à la personne concernée: c'est surtout la deuxième personne qui est en position de sujet du verbe et d'agent du procès exprimé" (Riegel, Pellat, and Rioul 551–52). While this future is bound by the moment of utterance—there needs to be a specific person addressed in the present regarding a future time—the *passé simple* is not bound by such logic, "le passé simple n'est pas formellement mis en relation avec le moment de l'énonciation [. . .] Il est donc plus apte à rapporter des faits passés coupés du présent de l'énonciateur" (Riegel, Pellat, and Rioul 538). In these sentences, on the one hand we have the mother who is explicitly addressing her daughter, and on the other hand we have the daughter's action that is not put in relation with the moment of utterance. This is further complicated by the use of quotation marks, which indicates that the narrator is recalling the moment of utterance. This temporal disjunction between the utterance, the recalling of the utterance, and the moment of action opens up another space, a space where the ghost can live and age.

It could be said, then, that it is the future tense that enables the aging of the ghost; the mother by giving her daughter tasks to complete ensures that she will be around to do them—in the future. While the last sentence—"« J'ai rêvé qu'elle était vivante, dit ma mère en baissant la voix, mariée à Paris, *que nous parlions* au téléphone et qu'elle venait passer Noël parmi nous »"(217; my emphasis)—is neither an instruction nor in the future tense, the fact that it is in the imperfect

makes it possible, through a grammatical slippage, to read the sentence as a subjunctive, which places it thus in the realm of potentiality. The verb *parler* conjugated in the first person in the imperfect (*nous parlions*) shares its form with the subjunctive (*que nous parlions*). In this particular sentence, the clause introduced by *que* can be read in the subjunctive—it expresses a desire, a wish for something to happen (in the future). In the same way that the instructions in the future tense grammatically produce the possibility for the actions to be completed, the dream in the past (*j'ai rêvé*) can be seen as wishful thinking, wishful dreaming, which begs the subjunctive and outlines another possible unfolding of lives. The grammar here works as possibility, as that which enables a ghost to appear and to exist as if in time. Yet what also transpires in this story is that the ghost—even a ghostly narrator—has no autonomous agency. Instead of the ghost haunting her mother, it is the mother who, through a dream and a desire to be reunited with her daughter, makes the ghost appear, age, have another life, if only briefly. In the end, it is the mother who is the author of the ghost, who gives it life through words spoken on the telephone in a dream.

DARRIEUSSECQ'S GHOST

In one last reflection before concluding, I would like to turn to a ghost that, unlike the others previously mentioned, has been (almost) completely and purposefully erased. In Darrieussecq's latest novel, *Il faut beaucoup aimer les hommes*, a French actress named Solange[31] lands the much-coveted (by her) role of the ghost-like fiancée ("La Promise") in a film adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. At the premiere, after she has flown in her entire family to see the film, she realizes that she has been purged from the final cut: "Elle aurait dû être là. Maintenant. Apparaître. Robe blanche et mains tendues. [. . .] Elle n'apparaissait pas. La forme blanche qu'elle aurait dû être. 'Ce loquace fantôme.' Le fantôme, personne. Sa voix, perdue" (305). As Solange wonders where her three scenes have gone,[32] she realizes that she has set up everything in vain: "elle les avait convoqués, elle avait organisé, pris des billets d'avion, elle les avait tous assis, là, d'autorité, pour assister à son absence" (306). Yet this is not even correct, because Solange finally grasps that her absence is not even felt or noticed in the film; we can even say that she is deprived of her own ghost, one that would produce, if not its presence, then at least its absence: "Et elle était ce fil qu'il [le réalisateur] avait défait, un personnage détricoté du film, facilement, qui ne manque pas, un spectre qui ne laisse pas le creux de son absence" (307). Indeed, in Solange's thoughts we find the definition of a ghost *selon Darrieussecq*, one that is signified, however paradoxically, through its absence, not in its haunting presence. Darrieussecq, throughout her oeuvre, much like the *réalisateur*, the one who makes the film come to life, has woven her plots and inserted her specters sometimes "en creux,"[33] sometimes not, and what Solange's story clearly shows is that Darrieussecq can very well do away with her,[34] just as she did with the ghosts in *White*. In showing her ghost(s) sometimes, Darrieussecq makes us aware of where the very work of (writing) fiction takes place, where the scene has been wiped clean, with no traces of its author.

While Darrieussecq's family trauma is certainly central to her personal life and perhaps extends to her writing choices, to claim that her writing is haunted, as she has ("Tous mes livres sont hantés. Le manque, l'absence, le deuil" [Busnel and Gandillot n.p.]), is to forget who revisited the stories, who carefully demarcated the blanks, calculated the omissions, and removed her traces. To Darrieussecq's claim one could, indeed, reply: "Mais elle est hantée par vous."[35]

Notes

[1]Best and Marcus note that a symptomatic reading would consider the occurrences of closets and ghosts to be signs found on the surface of something hidden deeper—for instance, of "a homosexuality that cannot be overtly depicted" (3).

[2]"Je ne vois pas à quoi ça sert d'écrire si on n'a pas l'ambition d'être lu dans cent ans! Moi, je l'affirme, ça ne regarde que moi, j'écris pour rester, laisser des traces, faire avancer la littérature. Je ne suis pas un écrivain de loisirs" (Lamberterie 102). Darrieussecq was recently awarded the *Prix Médicis* for her latest novel: *Il faut beaucoup aimer les hommes* (2013).

[3]"Tous ces atomes se mélangeaient dans l'éprouvette du salon, une chimie audacieuse combinait de nouvelles matières: d'un nanomètre de cil maternel et d'une mole de canapé (de poisson, de silicone, de conseiller) naissait une hypothèse minuscule, un potentiel de quelque chose en suspension dans l'air ou enfoui dans la moquette, les flagelles frétillant virtuellement d'espoir" (*Naissance des fantômes* 137).

[4]A fact stressed by her editor, Paul Otchakovsky-Laurens: "[i]l y a des enfants morts dans tous les livres de Marie Darrieussecq" (Lançon 3).

[5]Marie NDiaye claims that *Naissance des fantômes* takes (spectral) elements and themes from two of her novels: *Un temps de saison* (1994), and *La Sorcière* (1996). See Gaudemar (35) and Kéchichian (28).

[6]See Laurens.

[7]Darrieussecq explains: "Je connais moi-même très bien le sujet, mes parents ayant perdu un enfant" (Laurin F5); "La hantise que j'ai que mon mari me quitte, meure, disparaisse, je sais d'où elle vient. Elle vient d'un deuil que j'ai vécu petite, et qu'un jour je saurai contenir dans un livre" ("La réponse" n.p.).

[8]She remarks: "Je ne veux pas me légitimer d'une expérience vécue par mes parents. On a le droit, comme écrivain, de prendre en compte ce qu'on n'a pas vécu personnellement" (Laurin F5).

[9]To give but a few examples to underline the extent to which she returns, time and time again, to this subject: "Il y a un fantôme dans ma famille," she says, "un deuil dont on ne parle pas. Moi, si. Ecrire c'est ma façon de parler" (Lamberterie 102); "Le silence de mes parents [. . .] a été très longtemps pesant pour moi [. . .] Mais, après en avoir souffert [. . .] j'ai appris à le respecter, et même à l'aimer [. . .] J'aurais été incapable de raconter leur histoire de façon directe, j'ai eu besoin de décaler la réalité, par amour pour eux, mais aussi pour mieux la voir, pour taper dedans. C'est ce 'pas de côté' [. . .] ce besoin de recourir à la métaphore" (Crom n.p.); "Ce secret tourne autour de la mort d'un enfant [. . .] Il a une histoire très particulière que je ne suis pas encore prête à dire, d'ailleurs, je ne sais pas si je le pourrai un jour. Mais la chose particulière, c'est qu'il n'a pas de tombe. On ne l'a pas enterré. Et je suis complètement hantée par ce non-passage, j'ai fait une psychanalyse pendant six ans" (Lambeth 811–12) and also: "Il me faut tous mes romans pour déplier ça" (Darrieussecq, "Les 7 minutes" n.p.).

[10]Darrieussecq, like the rest of P.O.L's catalogue of authors, writes each of her back covers: "L'une des caractéristiques de Paul [Otchakovsky-Laurens], c'est qu'il veut que ce soit les auteurs qui écrivent la quatrième de couverture. [. . .] C'est un exercice très difficile. [. . .] La quatrième c'est du marketing : le texte doit attirer l'attention des lecteurs et leur donner envie de lire le livre" (Clouzeau and Le Bricquir 43–44).

[11]This sentence ends without any marks of punctuation in the original.

[12]Which could also be read as "mes mots," another trace of the author drawing itself in.

[13]"[E]s bleibt offen, *wer* nun eigentlich im Namen dieses *Wir* spricht. Die narrative Perspektive in *White* ist zentrifugal wie die Gespenster selbst" (Stemberger 63; emphasis in original; my translation).

[14]"'*Cette femme est trop bien pour toi*', braillent à tue-crâne les fantômes dans la sirène de la centrale, '*ça ne marchera jamais!*'" (195; emphasis in original).

[15]The following sentence features a direct object pronoun ("pronom personnel complément d'objet direct") in the third person plural ("les") rather than the first ("nous"): "Reprenons. Ici, personne ne viendra *les* déranger" (196; my emphasis), if the "Reprenons" were the one of the couple, the next sentence would logically read: "personne ne viendra *nous* déranger."

[16]Even though there are traumatic events both characters are running away from and hoping (but unable) to forget: the death of Peter's sister (120) and the deaths of Edmée's young neighbors, drowned by their mother (142).

[17]To borrow Stemberger's title.

[18]Notice the similarity with the ending of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Huis Clos*: "Eh bien, continuons" (95), which signals the unresolved/unresolvable situation of the characters. Here, much like Sartre's Garcin, Estelle, and Inès, Edmée and Peter have no choice but to continue Darrieussecq's experiment.

[19]The novel opens with a paragraph narrated by the ghosts on the Antarctic continent; we first meet Edmée as she is making her way to the base in the second section of the opening pages: "La mer est belle, c'est-à-dire (Edmée Blanco l'apprend dans le manuel de bord) presque plate, avec un petit clapot tranquille." (10)

[20]*Le Pays* is composed of two alternating narrations: the first one in the first-person singular (printed in bold font), the second in the third-person singular (printed in normal font). Quotes from the narration in the first-person singular for ease of reading have been changed here to normal font; quotes in the third-person singular will be indicated in a footnote.

[21]The first two instances are as follows: one where the narration in the third person (normal font) begins a new paragraph following the first-person narration (bold font) but still within the same section (14), and one where the switch happens mid-sentence (39).

[22]This quote is from the narration in the third person.

[23]This quote is from the narration in the third person.

[24]This quote is from the narration in the third person.

[25]"[L]'été l'avait pris, les arbres l'avaient pris, la lumière l'avait mangé [. . .]" (107; narration in the third person).

[26]The entire London trip is recounted and punctuated from the perspective of the encounter: "Dans moins de cinq heures j'allais apercevoir mon frère dans l'Eurostar" (235); "Dans trois petites heures j'allais rencontrer mon frère" (241); "Dans moins de trois heures j'allais tomber sur mon frère" (242).

[27]This quote is from the narration in the third person.

[28]Note the incipit of *A Christmas Carol*: "Marley was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that" (Dickens 9). Regarding the coupling of Christmas and the appearance of ghosts, Michael Newton notes that "it was very likely Dickens who established for Victorians the connection between Christmas and ghost stories [. . .] The festive ghost is a curious conjunction, though one that expresses the central paradox of the genre: that is, the intertwining of cosiness and terror. The bond between Christmas and ghost stories would in time become a cultural cliché" (xvii).

[29]I have retained the French quotation marks (« ») in these quotes to emphasize the difference between the types of reported speech in this story.

[30]"Comme une injonction porte sur l'avenir, le futur peut en exprimer, avec différentes forces, les diverses nuances: règle morale, ordre strict, suggestion, consigne pour un devoir, etc. [. . .] Le futur simple permet d'expliciter l'époque où doit se réaliser l'ordre, qui est généralement moins strict qu'à l'impératif, à cause de la part d'incertitude inhérente au futur" (Riegel, Pellat, and Rioul 551).

[31]The very Solange seen as an adolescent in *Clèves* (2011) is now a young woman.

[32]A similar story was told in *Le Pays* as a *fait-divers* that Marie Rivière was to keep to put in another novel: "L'acteur a convoqué sa famille, sa fiancée et ses amis, pour assister au spectacle de sa disparition" (229).

[33]In *Naissance des fantômes*, the narrator describes her becoming ghostly as the dissolution of her being, which could then be preserved in "un musée d'absences comme les corps en creux de Pompéi" (85), signaling that there is a form to absence—the form constitutive of a ghost.

[34]In the last chapter of the novel, titled "*Bonus*," in a wink to the reader, Solange receives the DVD with the extended version of the film, where her cut scenes are to be found only in "la partie *bonus*" (311) and not incorporated in the filmic narrative. Furthermore, since they are available in their "entirety" to the reader only in the descriptions of the filming of her scenes earlier in the novel, "la partie bonus" only emphasizes how irrelevant they—and her presence in the film—actually are.

[35]To which the author herself might justly retort: "*Et par vous*, hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère"!

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