

Marie Darrieussecq
Rapport de police.
Accusations de plagiat et autres modes de
surveillance de la fiction (2010)

My son
my only son,
the one I never had,
would be a man today.

He moves
in the wind,
fleshless, nameless.

.....
I think of the innocent lives
Of people in novels who know they'll die
But not that the novel will end. How
different they are
From us.

(Mark Strand, *My son* and *Fiction*)

Something strange happened to Marie Darrieussecq. It wasn't that she was born in France, in Bayonne, in 1969. Or that she is a writer (in addition to being a scholar of literature and psychoanalyst) who has published works of fiction, autobiographical short stories and literary essays. There is nothing strange about that. What is strange is that half of her novels have been considered, by various readers and by other writers, «imitations», «copies», «psychic plagiarism», and even «manuscript theft». The person most surprised by this persecution is the author herself, who wrote a book that is both essay and autobiography, not solely to defend herself against the charges of the presumed 'plagiarism', but more to investigate the phenomenon of *plagiomnie* (a neologism that Darrieussecq says explains the «desire of being plagiarized» that «leads to slander»). The book, titled *Rapport de police: Accusations de plagiat et autres modes de surveillance de la fiction* (Police Report: Accusations of Plagiarism and Other Modes of Fiction

Marie Darrieussecq, *Rapport de police* (Niccolò Scaffai)

Surveillance) (Paris, P.O.L., 2010), created a sensation first in France and then in Italy, where it has just been published with the title *Rapporto di polizia. Le accuse di plagio e altri metodi di controllo della scrittura*, trans. Luisa Cortese, Parma, Guanda, 2011.

In *Rapport de police* we learn that accusations of plagiarism—false, instrumental, unable to be proven and sometimes even lethal—have been levelled against a number of modern authors, from Zola to Apollinaire, Mandel'stam to Celan. *Plagiomnie* is almost a counter-genre that, like a parasite, feeds off the flesh and blood of the work and of the writer. Among other things, *Rapport de police* proposes a revisiting of the history of this parasitic 'literature'. But the book's most notable characteristic consists in treating plagiarism as an issue of literary theory: more precisely, as a product of the pathological reaction between reality and fiction, and between fiction and nonfiction. In other words, Darrieussecq realized that the accusation of plagiarism, in the forms that directly involved her, can touch an exposed nerve in contemporary critical and theoretical reflection. What she chooses to do, then, is follow the different impulses that branch out from that nerve, through the body of literature. And she does so, incidentally, in the most constructive and refined way possible with respect to a book published shortly before hers which brought attention to similar themes—the 'right' to plagiarism as effect of the ontological falsification implicit in the act of re-telling reality through writing: *Reality Hunger. A Manifesto* by David Shields.

Let us attempt to follow these impulses, to trace the lines of tension and bring them into the theoretical fires surrounding the issue. To do so, we shall continue with the Darrieussecq affair and in particular with the more serious accusation, or at least the one that resonated more in the literary realm: the accusation of «psychic plagiarism» brought about by Camille Laurens in 2007. In her eighth novel, *Tom est mort*, Darrieussecq is accused of having 'appropriated' a painful episode narrated by Laurens in an earlier book (*Philippe*, Paris, P.O.L., 1995). That notwithstanding, the accusation does not pertain to the excessive similarities in the story recounted by her colleague and Laurens' own: in addition, the parallels that Laurens points out (*Marie Darrieussecq ou Le syndrome du coucou*, in "La Revue littéraire" n°32, automne 2007: the article can be read online at: <http://www.leoscheer.com/la-revue-litteraire/2009/12/15/22-camille-laurens-marie-darrieussecq-ou-le-syndrome-du-coucou>), are fairly generic and may lead us to think that at most, Darrieussecq was freely inspired by *Philippe*. In an interview, the French writer spoke of «amitié entre les livres», and of the pleasure of «strolling from book to

book» (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kyNhuUefZ1k&feature=related>): as paradoxical as it may seem given the relationship between the two writers, the relationship between the two books by Darrieussecq and Laurens could be defined as a «friendship».

However, as previously mentioned, the textual aspect has importance on a secondary level. The presumed specific contacts are only the clues found on the scene of a more serious crime—the theft of personal memory. That which Laurens charges the author of *Tom est mort* with is in fact the *usurpation d'identité*; she contests her right to tell a story, to make the event hers through her narration of it. It is a right that Laurens asserts for herself, because her story is autobiographical; in other words, it is *true*. Darrieussecq's story instead, is invention, fiction. In this way, the question moves from the textual plane to the cognitive-moral one. If you have not lived the events of which you speak, how could you possibly understand and express the sentiments of the characters? There are certain events so terrible (the death of a child in this instance) that cannot be simply imagined: those writing without having experienced the event in person, cannot but have 'stolen' it from the (real) life as told by other (real) persons. As often happens in the history of literature and the arts, the ancient Aristotelian binomial of *true* and *plausible* once again takes on an axiological hue: *legitimate* versus *illegitimate*, *useful* versus *useless*.

The logical short-circuits of this argumentation are fairly evident, as is the critical partiality at its base. And yet we cannot dismiss Laurens' reasoning with a simple shrug of the shoulders. Primarily because a part of what Darrieussecq is being accused of could also concern other significant recent narratives that have contributed to redirecting the debate about the form of the contemporary novel. For example, the scandal provoked by Littell's *Les bienveillantes* (a book Darrieussecq cites deliberately), and by previous works that have 'crossed the gates' of Lagers through resources of fiction rather than the authority of direct testimony, are connected to the same kind of objection levelled by Laurens at Darrieussecq: What right do you have to tell such a horrible story without having lived it? Do you not feel the shame of putting the imagination in front of the unimaginable? Why, as Laurens suggests to Darrieussecq at the end of her closing arguments, don't «you stay in your room», comfortably seated at your desk, feeding your neuroses? Of course, the tone and the format of the exhortation that Laurens addresses to her rival are hatefully aggressive; but is it possible, putting aside the repressed anger, to at least partially understand the meaning? A work, and a successful one at that, inspired by another book in which the same dramatic tale is

narrated but with a firm autobiographical basis, could be *morally* accused, if not of plagiarism, of at least benefitting from others' pain? The difficulty of responding affirmatively to this question lies in the fact that it risks judging as immoral every work of fiction that speaks of tragedy, because almost every author who has not experienced firsthand the stories of which they write would have to have been inspired by others' stories, by authentic chronicles, by biographies or autobiographies. The question of an ethic of shame, in the face of a subject too atrocious and too real to be put in story format has recently arisen in the case of *Elisabeth*, a book by Paolo Sortino inspired by the story of Josef Fritzl's daughter, hidden and raped by her father for more than twenty years (among other comments, see those of Christian Raimo in *mimima & moralia*: <http://www.minimaetmoralia.it/?p=4413> and Gianluigi Simonetti in *Le parole e le cose*: <http://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=993>).

We might be tempted to disturb the *Critique of Judgement*, the difference between beautiful and pleasing, the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere with respect to the moral one. But first perhaps we should clarify two simple points. The first is that *Tom est mort* (perhaps also, though with an increased ambiguity, *Elisabeth*: again, see Simonetti's observations) should not be read as though it were nonfiction, nor as if it were autofiction. *Tom est mort* is fiction and the person who uses the pronoun "I" in that book is only a narrative instance, with whom the empirical person of Camille Laurens—whatever one thinks of her reasoning—cannot be in competition. On Darrieussecq's part, accused of having appropriated the biography of another to create her own false autobiography, reacts expressly against the idea of autofiction, or rather against other effects created by the format and conception of today's literature. It is a critique similar to the one expressed recently by Clotilde Bertoni: «lately the rights of fiction have begun crossing into the realm of falseness, the historical novel and autofiction focus less on the reinvention of facts than on their tendentious distortion, obedient to popular fashion and to general or personal conveniences: hiding behind the autonomy of literature, they do nothing but sabotage freedom and take its power to problematise in order to subject it to contingent goals» (<http://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=1042>). If for Bertoni, the risk of inertia and impunity of autofiction is connected to the excess of license, for Darrieussecq it is almost the opposite; it depends on the pretext of reality and truthfulness to which the public would have become accustomed, as well as depending on the authors themselves. It is a significant similarity, which speaks to the level of acclimatization to the genre that exists in France, where autofiction has been successful and

where it was codified on the theoretical level before it was codified in Italy: for an analysis, see Philippe Gasparini's monograph *Autofiction. Une aventure du langage*, Paris, Seuil, 2008. Further, referencing what Paolo Zanotti writes in a chapter of his book *Dopo il primato. La letteratura francese dal 1968 a oggi* (Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2011) (The Aftermath of Supremacy: French Literature from 1968 to today) what is in France defined as autofiction would be a slightly more inert genre in terms of theoretical implications and sociological awareness, with respect to the same form adopted in Italy. 'Autofiction', in other words, would work like an attractive label, preferable to simple (!) 'autobiography' for its increased marketing appeal. Perhaps the same is starting to happen in Italy as well, but the books by the first authors for whom the category was employed, all of Walter Siti's works, cannot be peacefully assimilated into the autobiographical genre. Characterizing them is instead the friction between invention and experience, produced by small incongruities, symbolic protrusion, implausible events and the insertion of heterogeneous passages (such as short stories, letters, author analysis and judgement) on which the narration is punctuated. Perhaps, to create a bit of clarity, we can reserve the use of the term 'autofiction' solely for a narrative capable of adhering to reality by exhibiting critical points of detachment.

The second point is that Laurens' accusations, while chiefly focusing on legitimacy and moral damages are not, however, independent of the fear of material damages and perhaps more precisely, the fear of economic damages. Staying within the same thematic arena as the books by Laurens and Darrieussecq, we should ask ourselves if Ian McEwan's novel *The Child in Time* (1987), which dealt with the unresolved kidnapping of a little girl received the same criticisms as *Tom est mort* on the part of British families that had had a child disappear. Probably not; as long as one of these families did not boast a writer who had published a book about his/her experiences sometime before; perhaps with the same editor as McEwan, as happened with Laurens and Darrieussecq, both writers with the Parisian P.O.L., at the time of the event. Contrarily to what Darrieussecq herself may think, within the accusations that surround her, the economic and anti-economic axis (Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*) do not correspond to two opposing visions of literature—interested and disinterested—but are so close that they overlap.

The ties that bind (even inappropriately) literary forms and genres, morals, markets and laws, constitute the second reason that will not allow Laurens' arguments to be overlooked. Incoherency and partiality, in fact, do not reduce the interest of plagiarism to theoretical object; conversely, they increase it because they increase the range of

the problems to be confronted. In the first place, if putting literature before the law, it would be informative to measure the eventual legal consistency of the accusations. To do so, however, we would likely need to go back to the texts, testing and refuting *in re* the level of similarities between the narration of Laurens and Darrieussecq. As mentioned above, the parallels indicated by the accuser do not seem to justify such a serious suspicion. However, if we were to proceed with a systematic examination, even within a legal framework we would necessarily use an instrument of literary criticism: intertextuality, in the different forms and levels that define it, from the unaware eco of an allusive art, from citation to parody. As John Neubauer sustains in *Quanto scandaloso è il plagio?* (in *Scandalo. Quaderni di «Sinapsys» VIII*, edited by Rossella Carbotti, Firenze, Le Monnier, 2009, pp. 131-144), accusations of plagiarism can be the worst consequence of the romantic idea of the originality and individuality of a literary work, completely justified in a 'postmodern' age, when the citation or even the insertion of another's text within one's own becomes part of the 'licit' resources of creativity. Who if not a critic can determine, if possible, the confines between a secondary invention and an intentional appropriation of another's work? Who can interpret the meaning of the relationship of similar stories, instead of limiting oneself to a simple quantitative estimation?

This is a case in which the law needs literature; or more precisely, for those who work with and for literature.

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