

**The Pleasure of Being a Pig:
Marie Darrieussecq's *Pig Tales***

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During the fall of 1996, Marie Darrieussecq's debut novel, *Truismes (Pig Tales)*, a text about a woman who is transformed into a sow, took the French reading public by storm. One reviewer states: "Marie Darrieussecq is the new darling of the French literary world" and goes on to tersely describe the book as "short, . . . effective but revolting" (Dallas 4).¹ While the novel's extravagant success may be inspired in part by the shock value of its language as well as its sexual and violent content, it is also clear that *Truismes* echoes earlier writers. The protagonist, who describes her metamorphosis from woman to sow, recalls Kafka's Gregor Samsa. The sow, which seems remarkably human, reminds the reader of Orwell's *Animal Farm*.²

Underneath the Kafkaesque metamorphosis and the Orwellian critiques of society and ideology lies a different text that weaves a web of apparent paradoxes and *double ententes* which address questions of madness and bliss which are, in turn, tied to the concept of identity. Ultimately, *Truismes* resolves the complex issue of identity by proposing a synthesis of the woman and the pig, which combines the two and, by virtue of this combination, stresses the characteristic aspect of identity to be a *process* instead of a static entity.

Ostensibly, the narrator works as a sales clerk in a beauty parlor. Since she had been desperate to find employment, she is perhaps too grateful, or else too naive, to realize that what she is asked to sell are crude sexual gratifications. For a while, the narrator tries to convince her readers (and herself) that this is where she is most alive and blissful and thus relates existence to the physical and experiential. The narrator's *naiveté* points to an important *double entente*.³ On

the one hand, it appears she is not aware how or even that she is becoming a prostitute. On the other hand, her *naïveté* may also be read as a refusal to grow up or to become socialized, for she would need to embrace madness in the mad and abusive world of the novel in order to be a fully integrated member.

The narrator's identity and knowledge of the world appear to hinge on a haphazard string of single and non-reasoned experiences. By 'non-reasoned experiences' I mean to describe an epistemological process which is neither simply random, nor arrived at by employing the faculty of reason, i.e., connected, analytical or rational modes of thinking. Just as the reader may begin to think that the text itself, by virtue of its very existence, constitutes a meaningful organization of events based on judgment, memory, and a willful remembering of the past, the narrator denies any such transparent structure. Instead of using language to create a reliable account, she utilizes it to give shape to images and sensations: "si . . . je me concentre très fort . . . je parviens à retrouver des *images*" (11-12; emphasis mine). Her language does not mirror the world or human nature, but it mediates and reveals phantasms of the individual.⁴

The narrator's repeated confessions about her lack of knowledge and education run parallel to her bodily changes from human to pig. Interestingly, these interspersed reminders about her feeble intellect also serve to point the reader to the text's underlying structure. Put differently, the narrator expresses in words the number of experiences, i.e. nonverbal events, which transform her from woman to sow, but she does so at a time when these experiences have already come to 'fruition'. Already in the first paragraph of the text, the reader can suspect that the narrator writes *as a pig* when, for instance, she makes reference to having difficulty holding a pen, or when she asks her editor to excuse her bad handwriting, described in Linda Coverdale's English translation as 'piggle-squiggles' (Darrieussecq, *Pig 2*):

[I]l faut que j'écrive ce livre sans plus tarder, parce que si on me retrouve dans l'état où je suis maintenant, personne ne voudra ni m'écouter ni me croire. Or tenir un stylo me donne de terribles crampes. Je manque aussi de lumière, je suis obligée de m'arrêter quand la nuit tombe, et j'écris très, très lentement. Je ne vous parle pas [. . .] de la boue, qui salit tout, qui dilue l'encre à peine sèche. J'espère que l'éditeur qui aura la patience de déchiffrer cette écriture de cochon voudra bien prendre en considération les efforts terribles que je fais pour écrire le plus lisiblement possible. (11)

During the transitional phase, as the narrator becomes more pig and less human, the text slowly dissociates all concrete physical acts from the ideas of existence and identity in order to forge and stress a new alliance between the mind and identity. Paradoxically, it is the 'perverted' human, the pig, who develops a real intellect and human identity. This process becomes an example of the creation of a new mode of being, part woman and part pig.

An obvious question is why did the author choose a pig instead of some other animal? The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines pigs as: “[S]tout-bodied, short-legged, omnivorous mammals, with thick skins usually sparsely coated with short bristles. Their hooves have two functional and two nonfunctional digits” (“Pigs”). One has to wonder what led to the choice of such an arguably unattractive, gluttonous, and somewhat defective creature. We are free to speculate that perhaps the author's native city, Bayonne, may have inspired the choice, for it is known as 'city of ham'. Chris Hall, in a tongue-in-cheek review, surmises that Darrieussecq “found the idea strange, funny, and shocking. A pig is contrary to all that is demanded of a woman. It's fat, ugly, obscene, dirty” (“Marie Darrieussecq”). In addition to these whimsical explanations, it may be helpful to remember that the author's apparently paradoxical choice may be occasioned by the fact that the pig also has a long tradition as a symbol. The Buddhist Wheel of Life, for instance, houses the pig together with the snake and the cock in its center. Here these animals “exemplify those baser human instincts that keep us tied to the realms of birth and death

and prevent us from stepping off the wheel into Nirvana” (Fontana 78). The pig also symbolizes fertility, motherhood and, in the Christian tradition, sex, i.e. sensuality and the sins of the flesh that come with it (Fontana 93). The same source mentions the Christian tradition attributing gluttony to the pig, while the Buddhist tradition sees the pig as symbol of greed. Both gluttony and greed establish a connection to the material side of human nature. In both the Judaic and Islamic traditions, the pig is unclean and its flesh is not eaten. Finally, and perhaps surprisingly, the pig is also a symbol of ignorance.⁵ Interestingly, all of these symbolic qualities are fully represented in the text, although paradoxically, it is the *woman*, not the sow, who seems to possess the more negative qualities.

The woman revels in all types of sensation. It is certainly no coincidence that she works in a perfume and cosmetics shop, where potions, creams, and ointments are readily at hand to affect the olfactory and tactile senses. She also experiences the effect of nature in a pervasive internal sensation which she describes: “Moi je n’avais jamais été aussi en forme de ma vie . . . l’air, les oiseaux, je ne sais pas . . . ça me faisait tout à coup quelque chose” (19-20). At one point, the narrator freely confesses her addiction to sensual things, stating: “C’est mon corps qui dirige ma tête” (26). The gustatory sense is invoked in the somewhat coy admission of why she enjoyed the customers’ compliments in the form of flowers: “[C]e que j’ai du mal à avouer ici, et pourtant il faut bien que je le fasse parce que je sais maintenant que cela fait partie des symptômes, ce que j’ai du mal à avouer c’est que les fleurs, je les mangeais” (35).

From the beginning, it is clear that the narrator accords both sex and sensuality a capital role in her life. Even prior to prostituting herself in the perfume and cosmetics shop, she proudly announces: “A cette époque-là de ma vie les hommes s’étaient tous mis à me trouver d’une élasticité merveilleuse” (12). She eagerly responds to the attraction men feel toward her by having sexual intercourse whenever the opportunity presents itself:

Elle [la mère] a . . . refusé de me donner un ticket de métro a j'ai été obligée, pour franchir la barrière, de me coller contre un monsieur. Il y en a toujours beaucoup qui attendent les jeunes filles aux barrières du métro. J'ai bien senti que je faisais de l'effet au monsieur; pour tout dire, beaucoup plus d'effet que je n'en faisais d'habitude. Il a fallu, dans les salons de déshabillage de l'Aqualand, que je lave discrètement ma jupe. (14)

Lest the reader think that the narrator is merely a passive victim of men's desires, she stresses that she enjoys sex and that she actively seeks to engage in it: "Mes massages avaient le plus grand succès, je crois même que le directeur de la chaîne soupçonnait que je m'étais mise de ma propre initiative aux massages spéciaux, alors que normalement on laisse un peu de temps à la vendeuse avant de l'y inciter" (19).

In conjunction with sex and sexuality, the narrator broaches the subjects of fertility and motherhood. Her sexual engagements at work do not remain without consequence, especially in view of the fact that "je ne gagnais pas assez pour pouvoir faire attention" (29). Soon she becomes pregnant. Ever ardent on the job, however, this state results in a spontaneous miscarriage. The miscarriage can be read as a *double entente*. On the one hand, the narrator miscarries because she continues to be promiscuous and thus abuses her body. On the other hand, the miscarriage may also occur due to the fact that her reproductive system is temporarily non-functioning as she is on her way from woman to pig. This is supported by the doctors' assessment that "ils n'avaient jamais vu un utérus aussi bizarrement formé" (31). Shortly after the incident, the reader witnesses a repetition of all the symptoms of pregnancy. This time, the narrator goes to an abortion clinic and is told "que si je ne faisais pas attention . . . je risquais de devenir stérile" (31). Far from barren, she proves quite fertile when a third pregnancy occurs which produces "six petites choses sanglantes qui remuaient" (91). While the offspring does not survive, the reader still comes to appreciate motherly instincts in the narrator: "J'ai léché les

petites choses le plus soigneusement possible. Quand elles sont devenues froides, ça a fait comme si ça ne pouvait plus continuer en moi. Je me suis roulée en boule et je n'ai plus pensé à rien" (92). Later on, she embraces the idea of motherhood when she notes: "C'est beau l'instinct maternel, la *reconnaissance du ventre* comme on dit" (133). The *ventre*, here, implies another *double entente*. A belly swells with pregnancy, but it also swells due to the increased intake of food, which is an effect of the transformation from woman to pig.

The *ventre* is also important in that pigs symbolize gluttony and greed. On many occasions, the narrator refers to hunger, for instance "j'avais faim" (20), "j'avais de plus en plus faim" (21), "avoir constamment faim" (12), and her "appétit" (43). Consequently, she keeps gaining weight as she consumes copious amounts of anything from exotic drinks to apples, sandwiches, truffles, grass, acorns, pizza, flowers, and more.⁶ In addition to this gluttony and greed for food, there is evidence of materialistic greed as well. The teacher, Honoré, becomes her boyfriend only after he buys her a pretty dress and after they have intercourse. Similarly, the narrator barely notices the sexual favors she is asked to perform during her interview with the director of the perfume shop, because she ogles her precious contract, fantasizing about dresses and perfumes:

Ses doigts étaient descendus un peu plus bas et déboutonnaient ce qu'il y avait à déboutonner, et pour cela le directeur de la chaîne avait été bien obligé de poser le contrat sur son bureau. Je lisais et relisais le contrat par-dessus son épaule, un mi-temps payé presque la moitié du SMIC, cela allait me permettre de participer au loyer, de m'acheter une robe ou deux; et dans le contrat il était précisé qu'au moment du déstockage annuel, j'aurais le droit à des produits de beauté Le directeur de la parfumerie m'avait fait mettre à genoux devant lui et pendant que je m'acquittais de ma besogne je songeais à ces produits de beauté, à comme j'allais sentir bon, à comme j'aurais le teint reposé. (13-14)

References to food and greed are accompanied by references to the narrator's growing revulsion toward pork. Pig meat becomes the one thing the narrator cannot eat under any circumstances because it makes her vomit. Clearly, she has to experience this revulsion. If she did not, she would exhibit some form of 'pig cannibalism'. On the other hand, the refusal to eat pork also serves as a reminder of the symbolic uncleanness of the pig, which renders its meat taboo. Apparently this uncleanness is not an issue with the woman before she begins her metamorphosis.

Finally, the reader becomes privy to the narrator's alleged ignorance of current events when she states that "je ne suivais pas les informations" (30), or when she stresses how "ma tête était toujours . . . embrouillée" (46). Two of her references to education are interesting because of the choice of verb tenses. First she notes her lack of education: "je n'ai pas fait tellement d'études" (64), whereas later she informs the reader about not having had any education: "je n'avais pas fait d'études" (78). The switch to pluperfect is evidence that some type of learning takes place on the narrator's part as the text unfolds.

Clearly the story is one of a transformation that occurs on several levels, ultimately narrated by the changeling. While one may not wish to go so far as to call it a *Bildungsroman*, the reader can place this novel in the French tradition of what Serge Doubrovsky termed "autofiction," which is also referred to as 'autobiofiction', a genre in which the past is resurrected through memory, culminating in the establishment of (an) identity (Ramsay 37). This genre has come into its own through the works of Robbe-Grillet and Marguerite Duras, to name but two. Like the works of these authors, Darrieussecq's novel "unfold[s] in a world of ontological and epistemological uncertainty . . . [and] is characterized by a telescoping of personal story and history and rewrites a self," as Raylene Ramsay informs (37). In *Truismes*, the 'telescoping' is undertaken by the pig which remembers itself as a woman and which traces the transformation

from one into the other. Given the connection of *Truismes* to autofiction, the reader is now in a position to make sense of the metamorphosis from woman to pig, because the transformation allows a body's history to be rewritten by changing the body itself. Put differently, by problematizing the past, the narrator controls actively what the body has undergone passively.

It remains to be seen who and/or what the 'new' self is. Since the narrator asserts that "c'est la *rationalité* qui perd les hommes, c'est moi qui vous le dis" (126), it is clear that we are not witnessing the emergence of another "traditional single and centering Cartesian subject present to itself in thought" (Ramsay 38). In addition, the reader comes to appreciate that the narrator's identity also does not fit the category of the decentered or endlessly deferred self that has become typical of postmodern fiction. This narrator's self must be somewhere beyond the dichotomy of body and mind and is, in fact, a sustained union of both.

The use of the pig as a symbol adds a dimension to this text that makes it neither wholly referential, nor wholly fantastical or mad, because symbols invoke principles of analogy between the outer and the inner worlds. In Cirlot's words, these principles are "the common source of both worlds, the influence of the psychic upon the physical, [and] the influence of the physical world upon the spiritual" (Cirlot xxxix). What is most significant about this analogy, for my present purpose, is the codependency that exists between the outer and inner worlds. *Truismes* resists favoring one over the other and, in turn, actively seeks to create a harmony between the two. In fact, finding the harmony becomes a matter of survival. Witness the narrator's comment: "Je ne pouvais jamais être au *diapason* de mon corps, pourtant *Gilda Mag* et *Ma beauté ma santé*, que je recevais à la parfumerie, ne cessaient de prévenir que si on n'atteignait pas cette harmonie avec soi-même, on risquait un cancer, un *développement anarchique des cellules*" (46).

Unfortunately, the narrator cannot find this balance as woman, nor can she find it as pig. The woman fails because she cannot make herself live up to others' expectations and she comes

to the conclusion that the relationship with Honoré ended because she could not be satisfied with becoming a 'normal' wife: "Les choses auraient sans doute été plus simples si j'avais accepté de rester à la maison, de faire un enfant et tout ça" (71). In the end, the pig, too, experiences failure in the company of other pigs: "Même dans la forêt avec les autres cochons, ils me reniflent souvent avec défiance Je ne suis pas à la hauteur de leurs attentes" (141).

The reader might be left at this impasse were it not for the narrator's falling stark raving madly in love with Yvan. It is Yvan who teaches her to embrace the woman/pig synthesis as the source of bliss and fulfillment. He does so by loving both the woman and the sow and by telling her, for instance, "que c'était formidable d'avoir deux modes d'être" (122). Yvan himself is an authority on the subject, because Yvan is a werewolf. And with Yvan's introduction to the narrative, the text moves from symbol to myth.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to address Catherine Rodgers' discussion of *Truismes* which centers on the assumption that Darrieussecq's text is "un texte de fin de siècle par excellence" (Rodgers 74). Specifically, Rodgers sees *Truismes* as "un collage de genres et de thèmes" (79) and its narrator, by virtue of her metamorphosis, "participe de l'indécidable du texte" (74). Considering Rodgers' conclusion that "*Truismes* se prête à différentes lectures" (80) and that "[e]n fin de compte, on peut y voir ce que l'on veut" (80), I suggest that Darrieussecq's introduction of myth does not diminish the "image d'un monde cauchemardesque" (Rodgers 79), but that it marks an insistence on the need not to resign oneself to the "cauchemar" but to generate (new) questions and (new) knowledge instead.⁷

With Vickery, I understand myth here to mean "some alternative to the narrow categories of modern rationalism" (Vickery 139). The werewolf, specifically, "remains a true myth because it was not created as a symbolic representation; it was designed . . . as a description of what passed for 'true occurrence' outside the sphere of everyday life" (Vickery 400). Through Yvan,

the werewolf, the reader accepts the narrator's metamorphosis from woman to pig as "true occurrence." In different words, we may accept the presence of the werewolf as an interpretive tool which helps to understand the presence of the pig.

Ultimately, the werewolf serves to contextualize the woman/pig, or the body/mind synthesis, rendering it constitutive of human nature. The relationship with Yvan, with the beast and the man, does not only mark the narrator's happiest period of life, but it also awakens something atavistic in her: "J'entendais le monde s'arrêter de vivre sous le hurlement d'Yvan, c'était comme si toute l'histoire du monde se nouait dans ce hurlement" (118). The narrator begins to feel the "distress of dinosaurs" (141) and is amazed when she can verbalize to him vague universal memories of humankind: "Je lui ai parlé des rêves des enfants, des cauchemars des hommes, je lui ai parlé de la Terre. Je ne savais pas d'où je sortais tout ça, ça me venait, c'était des choses que je découvrais très au fond de moi, et je trouvais les mots même les plus difficiles, même les plus inconnus" (129).

Yvan not only encourages her to embrace both modes of her being, but also teaches her to move between them at her will. Thus the narrator, from here on out, vacillates from pig to woman to pig to woman to pig in a way that makes a separation of the two impossible.

In conclusion, one may well want to remember Blaise Pascal's succinct and elegant description of human nature: "La nature de l'homme n'est pas d'aller toujours, elle a ses allées et venues" (Pascal 150). *Truismes* adds its own interpretation to this and celebrates human nature not as merely *having* comings and goings. Here, human nature *is* comings and goings which can only be grasped if we mark each one in its continuous turn and return, engaging in synchronic and diachronic constructions of identity. In *Truismes*, identity is neither equivalent to a single (Cartesian) subject, nor is it merely random, rather it is paradoxically a *process* of 'becoming'. The implication is that the re-membering process is never ending because the work of becoming

cannot conclude. This also means that the identity of the narrator in *Truismes* allows the pig-woman to be a creator of meaning instead of a passive victim of the nightmarish society portrayed in the text.

Notes

¹ With one exception to be discussed later, critical work on Darrieussecq's first novel is currently to be found in short review articles occasioned by the novel's publication in many different countries. Searches on the internet show several dozen listings for Darrieussecq. Many of these listings indicate that *Truismes* is being read in university literature courses in both the United States and in France.

² While Kafka's Gregor wakes up a bug, *Truismes* is a text about the narrators recollection of the process of transformation unfolding. A discussion of intertextual connectors to Orwell's text is omitted, but can be summarized: they are the pig, political corruption, and totalitarianism, which Darrieussecq calls 'Social Free Progressionism'.

³ Another example of a *double entente* is the novel's title, since *la truie* refers to the sow, whereas *le truisme* means truism.

⁴ Possibly, this view is supported by the title of Darrieussecq's second novel: *Naissance des fantômes* (Paris: POL, 1998).

⁵ This is another example of *double entente*. The narrator repeatedly refers to her ignorance but does so retrospectively, i.e. when she no longer is ignorant. In addition, the symbolic connection to ignorance is ironic in that pigs are now known to be intelligent animals, which the narrator mentions near the end of the text (145).

⁶ Again, a *double entente*. The weight gain is undoubtedly due to the consumption of massive amounts of food, but is also a consequence of the transformation from woman to pig.

⁷ This possibility is corroborated by a German writer whose most recent work is inspired by myth. I am thinking of Christa Wolf's *Medea*. (Wolf, Christa. *Medea. Stimmen*. Munchen: Luchterhand, 1996. English translation 1998.) For Wolf, working on myth enables one to see and to understand why "unsere Kultur, wenn sie in Krisen gerät, immer wieder in die gleichen Verhaltensmuster zurückfällt: Menschen auszugrenzen [und] Feindbilder zu züchten" (Hochgeschurz 77).

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