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Gill Rye, *Narratives of Mothering: Women's Writing in Contemporary France*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009. 221 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$52.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-87413-040-9.

Review by Janet L. Beizer, Harvard University.

In *Narratives of Mothering: Women's Writing in Contemporary France*, British critic and professor Gill Rye refocuses narratives of mothering on the perspectives of mothers themselves. Coincidentally, the same week that I am writing this review, two other publications meet my eyes. One is a profile of the French feminist *philosophe* Elisabeth Badinter by Jane Kramer, writing for the *New Yorker* magazine, who speaks of Badinter's war with "a spreading cult of 'motherhood fundamentalism' in the West"[1]; the other is an issue of the French magazine *Books* devoted to the mother and rather ambitiously titled *Tout sur la mere*; it consists of a number of accounts of books and articles about mothers and mothering at the current moment, a good number of which are personal testimonies.[2] The conjunction of these three publications, while doubtless aleatory in the timing of my encounters with them, is more significant in their compounded signaling of a certain renewed attention being paid in the West and particularly in France to the subject of mothering/motherhood/maternity.[3] Rye's term of preference is "mothering" in that it privileges "the multiple and individual *experiences* of mothers" (p. 32) over the institution of motherhood.

Although the wave of feminist theory of the 1970s and 1980s brought with it a concentrated focus on mothers, it tended to represent them much more often as objects than as subjects, and most often did not hear or read their texts, even when they did exist. When Moyra Davey introduced her groundbreaking *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood*--an anthology (with few precedents) that compiled the rare dispersed texts by writer-mothers writing about the conjunction of motherhood and writing, in 2001--she explained, "there is a dearth of such literature because mothers do not have the time to record their experience." [4] Davey's pragmatic reminder is shadowed by Susan Suleiman's ideological synopsis in the same volume: "Mothers don't write, they are written." [5] Outside of these practical and cultural brackets enclosing extremely limited and invaluable testimony of mothers themselves was a rampant discourse on and about mothers, often from a literal or figurative daughter's perspective, and tending to idealize or to denigrate.

Against this necessarily summary background we can situate the innovation of Gill Rye's turn to mothers' own voices. Her epigraph, attributed to Yvone Knibiehler and Catherine Fouquet, defines her trajectory. "Women have never tried to think about the maternal condition together, in a original way, in order to define it for themselves. Perhaps the moment has arrived" (p. 6). In a series of eight chapters divided into three sections--the first, introductory; the second, devoted to "Mothering: Loss, Trauma and Separation;" and the third, "New Stories of Mothering"--Rye explores a selection of autobiographical and fictional narratives of mothering drawn from the period running from 1990 to 2010. One of her driving questions is to what extent these narratives reproduce dominant patterns and discourses of mothering and to what extent they question, challenge, subvert, or reinvent mothering. She looks into mothers' fears, desires, fantasies, and anxieties, and seeks to find how motherhood is changing in contemporary France.

In her first two introductory chapters, Rye gives us socio-cultural contexts for what follows, looking at new family patterns in France (declining numbers of traditional families, new variants including single mothers, post-divorce families, homosexual families, adoptive families), and notes the contradictory shapes of motherhood in the contemporary French Republic, where motherhood is in fashion, but is experienced on complicated terms. She gives us a theoretical, historical, literary, and literary-critical background—an ambitious, but necessary undertaking in a single chapter—for understanding her following chapters. Moving us from the work of Simone de Beauvoir begun in 1949 with *Le Deuxième Sexe* to Anglo-American and French feminist writing of the 1970s to 1990s, she summarizes the contributions of thinkers as diverse as Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone, Adrienne Rich, Luce Irigaray, Nancy Chodorow, Annie Leclerc, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Elisabeth Badinter. At times her net is cast very wide. She faces the perennial problem of scope, of balancing completeness and depth of encounter with her span of texts and times. On an editorial level, one wishes that the endnotes—plentiful and dense—had been better handled, either as footnotes or more completely introduced in the text so that the reader would know who was being quoted without having to turn constantly to the back of the book. But this is a methodological quibble related in part to the richness of sources.

In part two we are moved on to narratives of loss, trauma, and separation in three chapters that constitute the formal and, I would argue, signifying center of the book. Chapter three is a reading of narratives of child loss in Camille Laurens' *Philippe* and Laure Adler's *A Ce Soir*. One of the most provocative series of questions raised in these strong readings of the difficult subject of maternal bereavement has to do with the place of the reader. "To what extent is it unacceptably invasive to take a critical position on personal accounts of loss?" Rye wonders. "How can we ethically negotiate the tension between reading as bearing witness to a testimony of traumatic loss and reading as interpreting a published text, when the very act of publication implicitly renders a text open to interpretation, interrogation, criticism, appropriation, and even possibly the skepticism and/or suspicion, of the reader?" (p. 44). In chapters four and five, she moves on respectively to voicing birth trauma (Christine Angot's autofiction, *Interview*, and Leila Marouane's novel, *Le Châtiment des hypocrites*) and to separation, focusing here on mothering daughters (Marie Ndiaye's novel, *La Sorcière*, and Chantal Chawaf's *La Sanction*). Her sources are British, American, French (with heavy leanings—justifiably so—on the work of Cathy Caruth), reinforcing my sense of the difficulty these days of isolating a tradition in national terms.

Part three takes us to "New Stories of Mothering." Here Nye chooses three "case studies," as it were: "Narratives of Mothering Alone" (chapter six), "Narratives of Lesbian Mothering" (chapter seven), and "Narratives of Mothering without Guilt" (chapter eight), in which she operates close readings of, respectively, Geneviève Brisac's *Week-end de chasse à la mère* and Véronique Olmi's *Bord de mère*; Eliane Girard's *Mais Qui Va Garder Le Chat?* and Myriam Blanc's *et elles eurent beaucoup d'enfants...: Histoire d'une famille homoparentale*; Christine Angot's *Léonore, toujours* and Marie Darrieussecq's *Le Mal de mer*. I found the last section, devoted to mothering without guilt, especially provocative if not entirely convincing. Rye vacillates between finding traces of the demise of maternal guilt in her two narratives and discovering instead that her authors play with the notion. In the end I wonder if these narratives are as much about mothering without guilt as about a flirtation with transgressing the category of guilt, which is not necessarily the same thing at all as subverting the phenomenon. I find the chapter to be more a meditation on guilt than a convincing manifestation of guilt surpassed. Rye's exploration raises powerful questions about the coincidence of guilt and maternity in Western culture. Can we as Occidental readers—and subjects—even begin to imagine mothering without guilt?

Rye's "new stories" (throughout the book and not only in the section whose title proclaims such innovation) constantly pose the question of their newness: to what extent are her twelve narratives subversive or conventional? Do they in fact succeed in subverting the conventional categories (biology/nurturing/socializing/educating) they rehearse? In this and in general, we need to take her selection of texts as synecdochal. Choosing two texts for each of her chapters, she strives not to be comprehensive but suggestive, a strategy that is perhaps a necessary one for such a broadly ambitious undertaking. She names, but does not explore in detail, related stories (such as surrogate mothering and adoptive mothering). One of the most emphatic, if understated motifs that emerges from this study is that of maternal ambivalence. Rye's bold recognition of emotional and cognitive ambivalence underscores and responds to the political and cultural complexities of mothering in the West today, where brave "new stories" nevertheless encounter and retread familiar pathways.

NOTES

[1] Jane Kramer, "Against Nature: Elisabeth Badinter's contrarian feminism," *The New Yorker* (July 25, 2011): 44.

[2] "Tout sur la mère: Les bonnes, les mauvaises, et les autres," *Books* 24(July/August 2011).

[3] Oddly however, this issue of *Books* is vastly underrepresented by French authors on the subject. Very international in scope, published in Paris by a team of French editors, it includes selections and reviews of books and articles by American, English, Australian, Welsh, Spanish, Israeli, German, and Canadian authors, with only one or two French representatives (one being Élisabeth Badinter's recent *Le Conflit: La femme et la mère* [Flammarion, 2010]).

[4] Moyra Davey, "Introduction," in Moyra Davey ed., *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), p. xiv.

[5] Susan Suleiman, "Writing and Motherhood," in *Mother Reader*, p. 117.

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