Marie Darrieussecq has produced nine works of fiction since 1996 and has firmly established her reputation as one of France’s leading young writers. Her texts often deal with intense and complex situations, the most well-known being the metamorphosis of a woman into a pig in 1996’s *Truismes*, but she has also written on madness, the death of children, unexplained disappearance, the moment of death, acute loneliness, intense cold, rapacious maternal emotions and the moment of falling in love. Her exploration of such excessive, yet not unusual, events is directly linked to their representation via language. Her interest lies in experiences which are not codified according to standard linguistic conventions. Her protagonists have recourse to alternative linguistic forms as a means of comprehending their personal relationship with the world. As such, Darrieussecq’s writing is vehemently and self-confessedly anti-cliché.¹ In line with Foucault’s general theory about the way in which language moulds collective consciousness,² she believes cliché and truism limit and regulate our behaviour:

Les clichés, c’est une forme d’absence à soi-même, c’est-à-dire qu’au lieu de penser et de parler avec ses propres mots, on prend le « on dit » général, toutes les phrases qui circulent, qui sont bonnes ou mauvaises, ce n’est pas la question, mais au lieu de parler avec ses propres mots, on utilise les lieux communs, les lieux communs de la langue, du pays et de la société, etc.³

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The narrative of her 2001 novel, *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, displays a high degree of stylistic innovation in an attempt to assert individual subjectivity authentically. The novel presents the voices of four female members of the Johnson family whose thought processes last from a single paragraph to several pages. In the course of the novel, the reader discovers that the protagonists’ son and brother variously, drowned in the sea at the age of four while under the protective eye of his elder sisters. His body was washed up on the shore some months later. The novel is constructed around the difficulty of coming to terms with this memory and the (im)possibility of sharing it or expressing it. The relationship between subjectivity and the capacity to communicate the *indicible* has been a source of fascination for writers since the beginning of the twentieth century. In the wake of modernists such as Joyce, Duras and Sarraute, written representation in Darrieussecq’s work becomes the memory itself while simultaneously constituting a new experience. Via a study of Darrieussecq’s presentation of sensory perception and the workings of consciousness, this paper will examine how, through a mixing of individual stylistic techniques, *Bref séjour* innovatively bears witness to the unreliability of the constitution of the past and will assess the extent to which it manifests the unnarratability of this experience, while simultaneously commenting on the nature of language and narrative.

The taboo of the death of children haunts Darrieussecq’s texts. This obsession comes to its climax in the writing of her latest novel, published in August 2007 and explicitly named *Tom est mort*. A first person novel which relates the death of a seven-year-old boy told by his mother ten years later, the protagonist’s remembered grief is portrayed via repetition: ‘Je découvre que Stuart a tout organisé.’ / ‘Stuart avait tout arrangé.’ / ‘Je découvre que Stuart a tout arrangé.’ She writes constantly of the impossibility of describing her grief, of the non-existence of words capable of describing her experience: ‘…je ne sais pas comment parler de ça…’ / ‘Quelle est la langue de la mort de Tom ?’ / ‘Même ça, refuser de faire le deuil, ça fait partie du travail, c’est codifié par les graphiques.’ Although the protagonists in *Bref séjour* are not metalinguistically explicit in this way, the particular narratological position taken, in addition to the presentation of time, the structure of individual sentences and the use of graphics, contribute to an embodiment of memory.

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In his theory of time, Augustin showed the experiences of memory and expectation to colour our experience of the present. Accordingly, representation of the past is characterised by use of the present tense. In *Bref séjour*, the eldest daughter, Jeanne, recalls a terrifying fairground ride at Blackpool she once rode with her now dead brother:

Pierre me fait mal au poignet, ses cheveux sont dans ma bouche.
Rire, terreur, on va tomber. Mais quelque chose ne va pas. Quelque chose déraille et manque.

This lack of temporal clarity indicates the simultaneous sense of past and present within memory. The subjectivity of time in the retrospective representation of events is equally captured by use of compression. We are again inside the consciousness of Jeanne, who this time confuses different moments from the past as she recalls her brother’s death:

on avait fait toute la plage vingt fois de long en large en l’appelant John m’a giflée parce que je voulais faire pipi, c’est au début de l’hiver, de l’automne, que le corps est revenu.

The compression here of the events of the day of Pierre’s disappearance and the return of his body by the sea months later, emphasises that memory supersedes the way we conventionally understand time, indeed, suggests that memory creates its own timeframe, not constituted by logic. This temporal dislocation in the sequencing of material thus emphasises the role of the present in memory and the role of memory in the present.

A further collision is captured by Darrieussecq’s bringing together of *le temps de l’événement*, time of narration, and *le temps de l’énonciation*, narrated time, as defined by Gérard Genette. This time it is not two points in the past which collide, but rather the time portrayed within the narrative and the actual reading of the text. Genette describes the

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9 Darrieussecq, *Bref séjour*, p. 82.
moment when ‘l’histoire rejoint la narration’. Certain spaces are left blank on the page to express the passing of time within the text:

qu’est-ce qu’il y a dans le frigo à la télé tire les rideaux

j’y pense le soir

In both these instances, the blanks serve to describe the pauses as Anne moves around in real time, allowing the reader to experience more poignantly and directly her return to the empty apartment, her solitude, her immersion within her consciousness, and her inability to move forward from the blanks of the past. The reader reads and the activity takes place in the same moment, at the same rhythm. Here, reality and narrative are blurred: text and memory enter the present and the reader’s ‘reality’, suggesting the active role of language in the creation of representation of memory.

Darrieussecq’s choice of narratological position equally contributes to our understanding of the unreliability and unnarratability of the memorial process. The novel is striking in its lack of an organising narrative voice. The focalisation remains at all times that of the protagonists, whose voices are autodiegetic, defined by Genette as ‘où le narrateur est le héros de son récit…’ The absence of an exterior, authoritative voice captures the fragmentation apparent in the women’s subjectivities and the difficulties they experience in communicating and sharing their thoughts, while allowing the reader closer access to the memory and its linguistic construction. In addition, referential instability is created by the constantly changing multiple viewpoints of the four women. The reader is frequently unaware as to which particular voice is being used at particular points. Furthermore, within each consciousness, Darrieussecq varies the use of pronoun, sometimes using ‘je’ and sometimes ‘elle’ within only a few lines:

…que t’est-il encore arrivé, ne m’appelle que lorsqu’elle va mal…

Elle prend un dahlia blanc dans sa main libre…

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12 Genette, *Figures III*, p. 238.
13 Darrieussecq, *Bref séjour*, p. 159
14 Darrieussecq, *Bref séjour*, p. 160
16 Darrieussecq, *Bref séjour*, pp. 20-21, my emphasis.
The random alternation of these points of view emphasises that we cannot know what happened in this family’s past, and, more generally, that memory cannot be completely encompassed. Somewhat paradoxically, the authentic capturing of individual consciousness is also dependent on the reproduction of collective social discourses. As Simon Kemp has shown, human consciousness is not simply made up of our personal inner voice:

Also to be rendered are the other contents of the mind: the images and sounds which are remembered or perceived, the emotions, sensations or sexuality which impinge on our consciousness.17

Thus, the reader encounters voices of all kinds. The past is pieced together via the lyrics of songs from childhood, advertising slogans and favourite family stories:

Anne me racontait qu’elle avait vu s’échouer une petite sirène, mais une sirène dont l’opération avait raté, trois jambes au lieu de deux, et comment marcher avec trois jambes ? Les clubs de golf de Daddy qui restaient encore à la maison, ou les bois flottés blancs de sel, un deux trois nous irons au bois. Anne s’amusait à me faire peur et Jeanne me consolait. Un deux trois soleil, au jeu des statues de sel Anne trichait en prétendant ne pas bouger.18

This mode of reconstitution serves to remind the reader of the words of others which resonate constantly in our heads, the patchwork which makes up the thought pattern of memory and the discontinuities of our subjectivities. In an interview with Alain Nicolas for L’Humanité, Darrieussecq explains her attempt to create the link between our thoughts and the discourses which surround us: ‘Il y a des morceaux de rêves, un fantasme, un souvenir, des chansons……C’est ça que j’ai essayé de reproduire.’19 In the same interview, she expresses her desire not only to record this secondary contribution to our inner voice, but also to capture the lack of structure therein:

18 Darrieussecq, Bref séjour, p. 92.
Si vous faites attention non à ce que vous pensez mais à la forme de votre pensée, vous vous apercevez – ce sont des évidences mais qu’on oublie toujours – que vous faites rarement des phrases complètes sujet-verbé-complément.  

As such, the discontinuity of memory is equally manifested through her use of individual sentence structure. Her phrases are characterised by a recording of thought in its nascent, pre-logical state. The narrative voice does not erase the clumsiness of its characters’ thoughts as they battle to enunciate the drowning of the brother:

au large, que dire, qu’en penser, son fils dans la baïne, son enfant fils mon petit Pierre mon petit frère perdu de vue une seconde et à jamais, lui, debout en maillot rouge, seau à la main pelle à la main il veut aller chercher de l’eau le soleil...  

Repetition and ellipsis are employed to manifest the fragmentation of the recollection and to personify the stuttering grief. Phrases take the form of lists which lack articles, conjunctions and verbs, suggesting the urgency of the remembrance and the impossibility of organising the memory of grief into coherent thought. It is clear that Darrieussecq’s style here embraces the stream of consciousness technique described by Breton in *Manifestes du surréalisme*:

…un monologue de débit aussi rapide que possible, sur lequel l’esprit critique du sujet ne fasse porter aucun jugement, qui ne s’embarrasse, par suite, d’aucune réticence, et qui soit aussi exactement que possible la pensée parlée.  

In the same way, punctuation and paragraphing in *Bref séjour* serve to organise thought and, as such, do not follow grammatical rules:

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il aurait fallu le faire, cette école de cinéma, au lieu de tout balancer en Afrique et ailleurs
oh elle n’a pas de regrets
la faute de personne
quand Diego rentrera il faut que je
mais non, nous avons rendez-vous à l’embarcadère

Full stops, paragraph and line breaks are rather used to divide separate thoughts than to indicate the end of full sentences or paragraphs. Yet use of stream of consciousness technique in Bref séjour is distinctive, both in its content and its form. The novel clearly depicts a recognisable, contemporary society, and within this, considers the developments of globalisation and technology, ‘le grand cerveau global’. The influence of the ubiquitous media is emphasised as all three sisters read the same horoscope in their three different locations, while Anne, a psychology student, considers the advances of brain theory and the capacities of machines to interfere with our thought patterns. Simon Kemp compares Darrieussecq’s technique to that of James Joyce and Édouard Dujardin. However, he points out her more fragmentary approach to stream of consciousness, in her rejection of grammatical rules and her recourse to the non-linguistic.

Darrieussecq abandons language to make use of diagrams in a number of her texts. In Bref séjour, this technique allows her to suggest the enunciation of the memory of trauma to be beyond conventional signification. When Jeanne leaves her building in Buenos Aires, she sees a piece of graffiti which reads ‘ASESINO’, meant for the war criminal living in the penthouse above. On the page, the word appears detached from the bulk of the text in bold font:

Il faut que j’arrose les fleurs
Un graffiti nouveau, de cette nuit

23 Darrieussecq, Bref séjour, p. 139.
24 Darrieussecq, Bref séjour, p. 117.
26 Darrieussecq, Bref séjour, p. 156.
27 Dujardin published the first major study of the technique as Le Monologue intérieur (Paris, Messein, 1931).
28 Simon Kemp, The Return to the Story, p. 7
Reproducing the word exactly as Jeanne sees it, instead of merely providing a description of its appearance, makes the effect of this word on Jeanne, suffering from the guilt of her brother’s death, more poignant. Similarly, while the mother is lingering in the bathroom supposedly cleaning, she absent-mindedly draws in the steam on the tiles, recalling the children drawing on the car windows. However, she draws *une tête de Toto*, a symbol of the ever-present memory of her son’s death, lingering in the wings of her thought process.

Incorporating diagrams into a work of words allows Darrieussecq to overcome the impossibility of imitating, or accurately representing, events or sensations. The use of diagram provides her with the means to “dire l’indicible”, to present, to manifest experience instead of describing, breaking open the unified linguistic sign in which the signifier exists to represent the signified. Meaning is thus created through each element of the text: the blanks, the pauses, the silence and the graphical aspect, rather than solely through the semantic connection between the word and the referent. Darrieussecq thus enlarges the system of signification in a Derridean sense, rejecting the stability and the unity of the sign and the tyranny of the logos.

Her attempt to grasp meaning and her embrace of each element of the text personifies the endless flow of meaning apparent in the process of *différance*. The search for presence that this process implies, and the simultaneous awareness of absence and fragmentation within it, echoes the difficulty in finding the means of expression with which to portray the sensation of memory.

Through a lack of temporal clarity, a presentation of multiple and changing viewpoints, aspects of stream of consciousness technique and use of diagram, Darrieussecq embodies the reality of memory: subjective, unknowable, urgent and disjointed. Her stretching and breaking open of the unified linguistic sign expresses the post-structuralist paradox in which language is shown at one and the same time to be essential and nevertheless inadequate to expression.

On the publication of Darrieussecq’s latest novel, *Tom est mort*, Camille Laurens, a fellow author at POL, claimed a number of similarities with her own text, *Philippe*, written after the death of her newborn son in 1995. In an article in *La Revue littéraire* in September 2007, she accuses Darrieussecq of “piratage” and “ usurpation d’identité”:

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29 Darrieussecq, *Bref séjour*, p. 141
30 Darrieussecq, *Bref séjour*, p. 53
J’ai eu le sentiment, en le lisant, que ‘Tom est mort’ avait été écrit dans ma chambre, le cul sur ma chaise ou vautrée dans mon lit de douleur. Marie Darrieussecq s’est invitée chez moi, elle squatte.  

Both Darrieussecq and the authors’ shared publisher, Paul Otchovesky-Laurens, launched an attack on Laurens’s accusations. Darrieussecq defended her right to explore whichever subject she pleased in her writing, whether she had personally lived the experience or not. Their publisher accused Laurens of failing to distinguish between the individual and the universal and declared his refusal to publish her further. Literary critic Patrick Kéchichian rightfully pointed out the numerous literary issues raised by this dispute: the nature of fiction, the limits of the novel and whether or not it has a moral duty. In Darrieussecq’s words, ‘« mensonge » est une catégorie morale, pas littéraire’. The capacity of literature to evoke and express subjectivity and consciousness, and not merely record and represent, is its purpose and its beauty, and while Laurens’s grief and shock are to be respected, literature should be defended against such attacks. Similarly to Tom est mort, Bref séjour succeeds in not only evoking a powerful experience, lived or not, but also commenting on the nature and purpose of both memory and literature.

In her study of stream of consciousness technique, Belinda Cannone suggests that the stream of consciousness novel ‘ne sert plus à véhiculer une intrigue, (il) est l’intrigue même’. It could thus be argued that through its use of stream of consciousness technique, the subject of Bref séjour is actually language itself and the recording of the thought process and memory. In this way, the novel functions to challenge the representative relationship between language and reality, with memory appearing as an experience inextricably entwined with its representation. Indeed in Bref séjour language produces memory as opposed to representing it. It does not reflect memory, rather, it creates, expresses and enacts it.

32 Camille Laurens, ‘Marie Darrieussecq ou Le syndrome du coucou’, La Revue littéraire, no. 32 (Autumn 2007), quoted in Le Nouvel Observateur, 25 August 2007 [www.nouvelobs.com, last accessed 06/10/07]. The article caused such furore in France that the issue in which it appeared was withdrawn from sale in a number of bookshops and the possibility of downloading it from the website of La Revue Littéraire was prevented.
33 Philippe Lançon, ‘Ma fiction est hantée : La réponse de Marie Darrieussecq, auteure de «Tom est mort», Libération, 30 August 2007 [www.liberation.fr, last accessed 06/10/07].
34 Paul Otchovesky-Laurens, ‘Pour Marie Darrieussecq : Non, Marie Darrieussecq n’a pas « piraté » Camille Laurens’, Le Monde, 31 August 2007 [www.lemonde.fr, last accessed 06/10/07].
35 Patrick Kéchichian, ‘Quelle est la réalité de la fiction ?’, Le Monde, 10 September 2007 [www.lemonde.fr, last accessed 06/10/07].