

Representations of the Hysteric in Contemporary Women's Writing in French

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of Doctor of

Philosophy

Queen Mary University of London

September 2014

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## Abstract

This thesis explores how the celebratory figure of the hysteric as imagined by proponents of *écriture féminine* is developed and complicated in more recent representations of hysterical female bodies in contemporary women's writing in French. With the aim of understanding the evolution of the hysteric from a traditionally negative embodiment of patriarchal parameters of femininity to a potentially revolutionary female figure, this thesis undertakes single-chapter studies of the most telling contemporary representations of hysterical bodies. The first chapter focuses on the physicality of Lorette Nobécourt's writing in *La Démangeaison* (1994) and *La Conversation* (1998), and argues that the abject subject matter of the former coupled with the innovative and experimental form and style of the latter constitutes an almost physical performance of 'madness'. The second chapter focuses on Marie Darrieussecq's *Truismes* (1996) and argues that Darrieussecq's hybrid narrator harnesses the anti-establishment carnival force of the hysteric in a shifting and grotesque body which forms the epitome of all that threatens order. The final two chapters focus on anorexia as a contemporary equivalence of Victorian hysteria. The first of these deals with *Petite* (1994) by Geneviève Brisac and *Thornytorinx* (2005) by Camille de Peretti and examines how these writers recreate the fragmentation of the anorexic self through a realist, performative 'rhetoric of anorexia'. The second deals with Amélie Nothomb's *Robert des noms propres* (2002), *Biographie de la faim* (2004) and *Métaphysique des tubes* (2000), and argues that Nothomb privileges a disembodied aesthetic that presents a masculine fantasy of the female body which all but erases the feminine. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to discover how and why selected contemporary female authors choose to engage with – and reject – 1970s models in which writing by women was presented as a means of finding one's own voice, as well as a platform for

politically significant action. It argues that new configurations of the hysteric nevertheless achieve a certain social and political impact.

## Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the support, guidance and encouragement of many people. First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor Prof. Shirley Jordan for her insight, support and motivation along this long path to completion. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Anna Kemp for sharing her knowledge of Nothomb with me, and to Prof. Eddie Hughes for his input during the early stages. I would also like to acknowledge the generous support of the Isle of Man Board of Education without which I would not have been able to undertake this project. I would also like to thank Alison Beales for instilling a love of French way back at QEII and Dr. Andrew Watts for venturing out of his *Dix-Neuviémiste* comfort zone and teaching the undergraduate contemporary women's writing course which sparked my interest in the subject and eventually led me to this thesis. I am also very lucky to have been surrounded by some lovely friends. In particular I would like to thank Nisha and Jess for letting me move in to their spare room and prolonging the inevitable banishment from London whilst writing-up. I'd like to thank Sara for red wine, cheese and inspiration (not always in that order), Nicci for many, many pep talks, Gemma for being an exemplary feminist and Wendy for always being a supportive, smiling best friend. I would also like to thank Ian for being, well, perfect really. Last but not least I would like to thank my parents for their encouragement and support without which I would not have been able to do this.

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## Introduction

This thesis explores representations of the hysteric in contemporary women's writing in French. Through case studies of selected fictional and autofictional works published by five female authors – Lorette Nobécourt, Marie Darrieussecq, Geneviève Brisac, Camille de Peretti and Amélie Nothomb – who employ the motifs of hysteria to understand and articulate contemporary female experience in new and authentic ways, this thesis examines the evolution undergone by the figure of the hysteric in women's writing since the 1970s. As this introduction will explore, for centuries, hysteria was traditionally perceived as a uniquely female malady; a behavioural disorder stemming from the displacement of the uterus – considered to be a mobile, independent organism – from its normal position. This 'unruly' womb was thought to be the cause of the uncontrollable, disturbing, and often violent, pathological symptoms exhibited by the hysterical woman, and the cures prescribed (typically marriage and pregnancy) reflected the necessity to re-submit the rebellious female body to the patriarchal social order. The medical establishment of the nineteenth century and the field of psychoanalysis at the turn of the century reconceptualised the hysterical body as a written text; a pathological object which needed to be read and interpreted. However, the hysteric's inability to express her trauma in language rendered her a blank slate onto which the male doctor 'ventriloquized', in Janet Beizer's words, or projected his fear of the female Other.<sup>1</sup> Medical, and literary, accounts of hysteria relied on these 'silent' bodies to perpetuate pervasive cultural associations between woman and madness, and the nineteenth-century figure of the hysteric became part of the fundamental cultural framework in which ideas about femininity and insanity were constructed.

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of the Hysteric in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).



Although its medical connotations have been largely lost, hysteria's link to femininity, which will be explored throughout this chapter, remains. Today, the term is still in common parlance as an epithet most often directed at women who display an excessive amount of emotion, or evoked when a collective disturbance is disparagingly designated as 'mass hysteria'. The hysterical women who were so numerous and so visible during the nineteenth century, however, appear to have vanished. It is undoubtedly true that throughout history the medical landscape has evolved according to fluxes of psychosomatic illnesses specific to certain cultures and particular eras. In every era, the transformation of acute emotional anxiety (stress) into physical symptoms can be seen. The common disorders of today, then, can perhaps be regarded as past 'hysterias' moulded by the modern culture in which they now appear. It is this perspective that the reading of the primary texts undertaken in this study will presuppose.

Despite hysteria's 'disappearance', the figure of the hysteric has recently seen a revival in literature and theory. In the wake of May '68, women's creative projects gained political significance and second-wave French feminist writers, notably Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, whose re-conceptualisations of the figure of the hysteric will form the starting point of this study, theorised and advocated an *écriture féminine* as a means of liberating woman from the silence imposed by phallogocentric discourse. This feminine writing, characterised by fluidity and excess, is inextricably linked to the female body; a body which, according to Cixous, 'n'a jamais tenu "en place"'.<sup>2</sup> In its paradoxes, evasion of categorisation, unpredictability and *performative* nature, all of which will be drawn out throughout this study, this writing enacts the excesses of the female body and is easily connected to hysteria. As a figure who epitomises the

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<sup>2</sup> Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *La jeune née* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1975), p. 168. Subsequent references will appear as *JN*, followed by the page number.

disruptive spirit of such a writing, the figure of the hysteric was reclaimed by second-wave French feminist writers, and the hysteric's silence re-positioned as a form of female protest; a bodily resistance to be recuperated through the act of writing.

Since this wave of 1970s feminist theory, an increasing prevalence of hysterical themes and metaphors may be observed in texts published by women. Today, as we will see, writing the disordered body represents a textual performance of identity; a re-negotiation of female subjectivity previously defined by patriarchal parameters. Such texts can undoubtedly be considered a continuation of many of the goals of 1970s writing projects that sought to overcome the position of silence culturally ascribed to the feminine and enact a deliberate deconstruction of socially constructed taboos concerning the female body. The links between hysteria and protest advocated by proponents of *écriture féminine*, however, came dangerously close to romanticising and endorsing 'madness' as a desirable form of rebellion, rather than seeing it as, in Shoshana Felman's words: 'the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation'.<sup>3</sup> It must not be forgotten that hysteria, after all, is a bodily manifestation of a trauma that is so painfully potent it cannot be articulated. These new writing projects make use of the figure of the hysteric to evoke a potential liberation (a personal emancipation which is recuperated through the act of writing) from social constraints imposed upon femininity and the female body, whilst still taking into account the fact that hysteria, as a debilitating pathological disorder, also necessarily involves marginalisation and alienation.<sup>4</sup> Although there are

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<sup>3</sup> Shoshana Felman, 'Woman and Madness: The Critical Phallacy', *Diacritics* 5 (1975), 2-10 (p.2).

<sup>4</sup> Nothomb's texts, as we will see in the final chapter, are the possible exception in their almost blatant romanticisation of the anorexic body which Nothomb idealises for its aesthetic 'feminine' qualities. The marginalisation and alienation experienced by her anorexic protagonists are controversially presented as a natural condition of a higher state of being.

many parallels, it is this which ultimately separates them from the celebration of the body advocated by proponents of *écriture féminine*.

We will see that each of the texts under consideration can be considered a continuation of, and a simultaneous departure from, the goals of 1970s feminist writing projects. Their similarity lies in their continued insistence on the rejection of oppressive patriarchal structures coupled with the gradual discovery, through writing, of an individual voice and language with which to express and denounce this oppression. In addition, an express pleasure in creativity and the capacity to regain control of the female body through writing remains an enduring feature of each of these texts. However, they significantly depart from earlier writing projects in that the individual identity quests played out through the transcription of the female body are systematically problematised. So, too, is the possibility of writing as a solution, both to the marginalisation of the respective female narrators and to the problems faced by women in contemporary society in general. The innovation of these new writing projects lies in their insistence on the abject, disordered female body. The celebratory tones of *écriture féminine* are appropriated and redirected in these texts, we will discover, to celebrate the disordered and the disgusting. What is most significant, however, is the repositioning of the reader *vis-à-vis* these new writing projects.

The explorations of the female body undertaken in these texts demonstrate a fascination with the visceral, the painful, and the repulsive; often eliciting a physical reaction of repulsion from the reader. In addition, a troubling excess of intimacy frequently leaves the reader feeling uneasy. The notational detachment which we will find to be characteristic of many of these texts adds to their ambiguity, and the reader is often unsure how to digest the impassive narration of such unmistakably harrowing experiences. Furthermore, the political underpinnings of these writing projects are not always made explicit; plunging the reader, yet again, into ambivalence. Many of these

texts exhibit a masochistic urge to self-annihilation which is not readily recuperable within a feminist project. Vulnerability and shame appear to exist alongside, or even override, the control and empowerment 1970s women writers craved. An uncomfortable mixture of pleasure and pain, in which physical trauma (particularly in Nobécourt's writing), sexual abuse (in Darrieussecq) and even death (Nothomb) are enjoyed or romanticised, is also recurrent and potentially alienating to the reader who is forced to continually re-situate themselves *vis-à-vis* a highly intimate writing which nevertheless demands to be read as representative. The elements of hysterical revolt recuperated by second-wave French feminist writers, then, are undoubtedly visible in these texts; but they appear to be systematically highlighted simply to be later undermined. The initial questions this thesis seeks to answer, then, are how and why do these new women writers choose to engage with, but ultimately reject 1970s models? If these writers recognise the pitfalls of presenting the hysteric as a revolutionary figure, then why does she remain a recurrent figure in contemporary women's writing? Does the hysteric ever get cured, or is she caught in an endless repetition?

Questions may also be raised concerning the usefulness of a reading of contemporary female-authored texts via the application of a term which, as we will see throughout this introduction, has such a clear misogynous history. However, given the increasing number of texts representing the disordered female body as a product of, or a means of communicating, the numerous and often contradictory social, familial and political pressures experienced by women in contemporary society, it is clear that there is much to be gleaned from a reading of these texts which exposes the disordered body as a 'symptom' of these culturally specific pressures. The recurrence of hysterical female figures throughout contemporary women's writing, and the questions raised in the primary texts, seem to point to the pertinence of the fragmented identities depicted as representative of women's everyday experience in the contemporary cultural and

socio-political context. That such texts appear to present the hysterical female body, as we will see throughout the following chapters, as an especially appropriate response to contemporary society certainly invites critical reflection upon the relation of hysteria to politics and culture *now*.

Another key question raised relates to how these contemporary texts reflect the ways in which women today view the female body. Judging by the sheer volume of disordered female bodies which have begun to populate texts written by women, the pathological symptoms once described as ‘hysterical’, have clearly become the vehicle by and through which *new* expressions of female identity and corporeality are articulated. As we will see in the following sections of this introductory chapter, the hysterical body is evidently tied up with notions of silence, performance, deceit, sexual deviancy, excess and (fragmented) subjectivity, all of which tend to overlap to a large degree with misogynistic stereotypes of femininity and the female body. Surely this can only lead to confusion and disturbing ambiguities in the development of such metaphors in women’s own representations of their bodies? We will see the factors at stake in the ‘epidemic’ of hysteria which swept through the middle and upper classes in the nineteenth-century, but what are the concerns which mark the bodies of the troubled women of today? And what is there to gain from reproducing them in texts which seemingly *perform*, without questioning, the very problems these women find insurmountable?

The idea of performance is particularly important throughout this study, as it is inextricably linked to the specificities of the writing processes involved in the hysterical narratives examined. The field of trauma studies has much discussed the pitfalls of narrating trauma. As Kathryn Robson explains, trauma ‘seems “unspeakable” because it exceeds the mind’s capacity to assimilate or understand it as it occurs and by extension

seems beyond language'.<sup>5</sup> As traumatic experiences are frequently 'disavowed' in particular social contexts, Robson writes, 'there are no available templates, no formulations in which to give voice to these traumatic experiences'.<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, as we will see, discovered that when the hysteric finds the words to describe the psychological trauma behind her hysteria, her somatic symptoms cease. The links between psychological trauma, bodily symptom and the curative power of words, then, seem unambiguous. Yet in describing trauma and its symptoms, the process of representation is necessarily rendered excessive, in the sense that there is no definitive set of words to describe or define the traumatic experience or its effect on the body.

This raises questions concerning the extent to which hysteria and the hysterical body are representable, and the type of relationship which occurs between hysterical texts and their readers. It also poses considerable problems of interpretation. Each narrative is necessarily anchored to a disordered female body. This body drives the narrative trajectory but simultaneously disrupts the process of narration; how can a body which defies definition, which is characterised by the ambiguity and changeability associated with the abject, be accurately and exhaustively represented? To surmount this, narratives of trauma are frequently characterised by an aesthetic of excess, but, as we will see in the majority of texts under consideration in this study, this often incorporates a parodic aspect which risks leaving the reader uncertain of their sincerity. Taken together, the issues raised so far lead to the ultimate question at stake in this thesis: can such texts, which express often highly individual, pathological and idiosyncratic bodily experiences, fulfil a social or political function, or do the performative strategies necessarily employed in the depiction of the hysterical body

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<sup>5</sup> Kathryn Robson, *Writing Wounds: The Inscription of Trauma in Post-1968 French Women's Life-writing* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), p.12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

mean that these writing projects remain irremediably characterised by ‘madness’ and the impossibility of successful communication? In sum: can hysteria be rendered productive through writing?

With a view to addressing these issues, this thesis focuses on the most telling texts in contemporary women’s writing in terms of literary representations of (both real and metaphorical) ‘hysterical symptoms’. Namely, skin disorders, metamorphosis and eating disorders. The underlying premise is that such disorders – which are all highly visible, played out on or through the body, and triggered, exacerbated and sustained by stress or psychological trauma – can be considered contemporary equivalents of the ‘nervous’ disorders suffered by women in the nineteenth century. Each chapter focuses on one symptom, with the exception of eating disorders to which two chapters of a comparative nature are dedicated, and each chapter takes as its starting point a different theoretical angle on the question of hysteria and its presentation in literature. To provide a ‘benchmark’ for these analyses, the final sections of this introductory chapter will outline key aspects of Marie Cardinal’s *Les Mots pour le dire* (1975), as a narrative of hysteria published in the midst of the second-wave French feminist conceptualisations of *écriture féminine*.<sup>7</sup> To avoid an approach in which the primary texts are reduced to straightforward examples of a theoretical model, an extended analysis of each text is undertaken, showing how each writer approaches the depiction of the hysterical body. The final choice of corpus is based on two key considerations. Firstly, the primary texts chosen lend themselves to interesting and fruitful comparisons due to their thematic content. Secondly, the authors selected display a range of styles and differing motivations for representing hysteria. Although each author will be introduced fully at the beginning of each chapter, it should be stated here that, above all, what links these

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<sup>7</sup> Marie Cardinal, *Les Mots pour le dire* (Paris: Grasset, 1975).

authors is that they mark their literary territory by writing about uniquely female experience in a highly graphic, yet often notationally detached, manner. In addition, it is of note that these authors range from those considered highly ‘literary’, to the mainstream, to the marginal.

Lorette Nobécourt and Marie Darrieussecq fall under this first category, although the latter is better known, and represent an important contribution to this thesis as writers whose texts are characterised by experimental forms and new creative strategies for understanding and overcoming the problems to which they respond. Nobécourt’s texts *La Démangeaison* (1994) and *La Conversation* (1998) are the focus of Chapter 1,<sup>8</sup> which examines skin disorders as a hysterical symptom. The originality of this chapter lies in its reading of Nobécourt’s works in relation to Didier Anzieu’s theory of *Le Moi-peau* (1995), or ‘psychic skin’, which brings out interesting links between the skin and the psyche, and permits an innovative reading of the ‘physicality’ of Nobécourt’s writing, with specific reference to the body as a limiting, restrictive ‘container’.<sup>9</sup> A chapter dealing with skin disorders is an important addition, and an apt place to begin this study, as the skin is tied up, much like hysteria, as we will see, with notions of communication, visibility, abjection, alienation and identity. These texts in particular represent a logical starting point to this study as, of all the texts under consideration, *La Démangeaison* and *La Conversation* are the most closely linked, in terms of both themes and structure, to 1970s writing projects.

The theme of metamorphosis is the focus of Chapter 2, which reads Marie Darrieussecq’s debut novel *Truismes* (1996) as a narrative of hysteria and draws out themes of monstrosity, doubling, abjection and excess, as well as a focus on the adult

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<sup>8</sup> Lorette Nobécourt, *La Démangeaison* (Paris: Grasset, 1994) ; *La Conversation* (Paris: Grasset, 1998). Subsequent references will appear in parenthesis as *D* and *C* respectively, followed by the page number.

<sup>9</sup> Didier Anzieu, *Le Moi-Peau* (Paris: Dunod, 1995). Subsequent references will appear in parenthesis as *MP*, followed by the page number.



female body and female sexuality; all of which, we will see, are particularly pertinent to hysteria.<sup>10</sup> In particular, this chapter reads the narrator's metamorphosis as an 'involuntary' somatic manifestation of disgust at a socio-political system which is characterised by oppression, corruption and degradation of all forms, facilitating a discussion of the usefulness of motifs of hysteria for political and social critique.<sup>11</sup> Although much critical attention has been paid to *Truismes*, this study is innovative in its reading of Darrieussecq's text as a narrative of hysteria, and in its analysis of Darrieussecq's writing strategy (in particular her use of irony and an excessively naïve narrative voice) in light of Luce Irigaray's strategy of 'subversive mimesis' discussed in the latter sections of this chapter. The theme of metamorphosis is particularly interesting when considered in relation to hysteria, as it brings to the fore the idea of a female subjectivity which is split between that which conforms to patriarchal dictates of femininity and that which is repressed. We will see that the monstrous double comes to represent the literary equivalent of the hysterical attack; a spectacular embodiment of a repressed (monstrous) femininity.

Like Nobécourt and Darrieussecq, Geneviève Brisac also tends to be classed as a more 'literary' author, although she has a much lower public profile. Brisac's text, *Petite* (1994), forms the focus of the third chapter, alongside Camille de Peretti's debut text *Thornytorinx* (2005), in the first of two chapters dealing with narratives of anorexia.<sup>12</sup> Whereas Brisac's writing has been subject to a certain amount of literary

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<sup>10</sup> Marie Darrieussecq, *Truismes* (Paris: P.O.L., 1996). Subsequent references will appear in parenthesis as *T*, followed by the page number.

<sup>11</sup> The distinction 'involuntary' is deliberately made, here, and is something which will be picked up in Chapter 2. For now, it is enough to bear in mind that the disorders dealt with in the other chapters (psoriasis and anorexia) are at times, as we will see, desired and/ or deliberately exacerbated by the respective narrators.

<sup>12</sup> Geneviève Brisac, *Petite* (Paris: Édition de l'Olivier, 1994) ; Camille de Peretti, *Thornytorinx* (Paris: Belfond, 2005). Subsequent references will appear in parenthesis as *P* and *TX* respectively, followed by the page number.

criticism, as a relatively new writer de Peretti is yet to attract critical attention.<sup>13</sup> De Peretti's work is not only an original contribution to this thesis in terms of criticism, but it also stands alone in terms of the author's literary agenda. Not intended for publication, *Thornytorinx* was, instead, written as a personal attempt to understand and move on from the disorder, and as a private creative experiment. The lack of intended audience undoubtedly permitted de Peretti a greater degree of freedom in terms of self-censorship, thus her writing stands apart from the other primary texts in the somewhat brutal level of honesty which pervades descriptions of her suffering, vomiting, anorexic body. Brisac and de Peretti, then, seek to provide realist accounts of their experiences of anorexia, in order to accurately recreate the starving, anorexic body in writing and reposition themselves as subjects *vis-à-vis* a disorder which once subsumed their autonomy. The theme of *performative* writing, which we will see thread through each of the chapters in some form or other, takes on a new dimension in these two texts, which offer a starkly biological focus on the minutiae of bodily processes, narrated in detached, impersonal terms.

De Peretti's marginal status provides a stark contrast to the writer whose narratives of anorexia are the focus of the final chapter. The highly prolific Belgian author Amélie Nothomb is extremely popular, publishing a bestselling novel every September, and is widely read by both adolescents and adults and the focal point of copious (often self-solicited) media and critical attention. The female body is the inexorable focus of much of her writing, and critical attention has centred around her enduring fascination with the viscerally disgusting – in the form of monstrous,

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<sup>13</sup>My article entitled 'Purging the Self: Transcribing the Divided, Anorexic Subject in Geneviève Brisac's *Petite* and Camille de Peretti's *Thornytorinx*', in *Protean Selves: First-Person Voices in Twenty-First-Century French and Francophone Narratives*, ed. Adrienne Angelo and Erika Furlop (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014) is the only criticism *Thornytorinx* has received to date.

excessive bodies and bodily emissions – coupled with a contrasting idealisation of beauty; notably found in the lithe, slender, pre-pubescent female form. However, the reading of her texts proposed in this thesis, which seeks to link the literary figure of the anorexic – as depicted in *Biographie de la faim* (2004), *Métaphysique des tubes* (2000), and *Robert des noms propres* (2002)<sup>14</sup> – with the Cixousian figure of the hysteric, is an approach which has not yet been pursued. Whereas Brisac and de Peretti are overtly invested in producing a representative account of the disorder and its ravaging effects on the body, Nothomb exhibits a marked fascination with the aesthetic ‘attractions’ of the disorder. The contrasting agendas and preoccupations of these three authors, then, create a logical division of their texts into two chapters. However, this has an added advantage in terms of understanding the disorder, as Brisac and de Peretti’s realist accounts not only provide a sense of closure which is not present in Nothomb’s texts, but these texts also provide a much clearer depiction of the disorder from onset to cure, and a comprehensive picture of the contradictions inherent in anorexia and the anorexic mindset. Although the idea of closure would perhaps suggest that they should be examined *after* the works by Nothomb, it is their usefulness in drawing out the specificities of anorexia which leads to their inclusion in the previous chapter.

That two chapters have been devoted to narratives of anorexia reflects not only the strength of the links between this disorder and hysteria in the nineteenth century, but also the level of interest it has sparked not only amongst the medical establishment but also from sociological, cultural, feminist, literary and psychoanalytic perspectives. It is unsurprising, then, that contemporary women’s writing in French has seen a correlative

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<sup>14</sup> Amélie Nothomb, *Biographie de la faim* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2004) ; *Métaphysique des tubes* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000) ; *Robert des noms propres* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002). Subsequent references will appear in parenthesis as *BF*, *MT* and *RNP* respectively, followed by the page number.

rise in anorexia narratives in recent years.<sup>15</sup> The links between hysteria and anorexia will be discussed in full in Chapter 3 using current medical research and statistics combined with an examination of the academic and clinical discourses which contribute to the understanding of anorexia and the anorexic body today. However, at this point it is important to highlight the two principal similarities between the disorders to draw attention to the aspects of hysteria, discussed in the remaining sections of this chapter, which we will re-encounter in relation to anorexia in Chapters 3 and 4.

The first and perhaps most striking similarity concerns the demographic affected. Much like hysteria in the nineteenth century, as we will see, anorexia is largely experienced by a specific demographic – predominantly young, Caucasian women<sup>16</sup> – suggesting a cultural, rather than exclusively individual, root cause. Throughout this introduction we will see a marked emphasis placed upon the social and familial pressures experienced by the Victorian hysteric, this emphasis is evident in the textual representations of hysteria and anorexia in each subsequent chapter. In particular, it is the mother-daughter relationship which is highlighted as an especially potent influence on the onset, continuation and cure of hysteria and its contemporary equivalents. This will be explored in more detail in relation to Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire* in the final section of this chapter, but should be borne in mind throughout the contextual and theoretical discussions which form the main body of this chapter.

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<sup>15</sup> Narratives of anorexia, or texts in which self starvation is a theme, which have received a certain amount of critical interest (and which discredit the argument that anorexia is found largely amongst upper-class, white women) include: Nina Bouraoui, *La Voyeuse interdite* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993) ; Sabrina Kherbiche, *La Suture* (Algeria: Laphomic, 1993) ; Marie NDiaye, 'Le Jour du Président', *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 537 (October 1997) ; Delphine de Vigan, *Jours sans faim* (Paris: J'ai Lu, 2009). In addition, Valérie Valère's *Le Pavillon des enfants fous* (Paris: Stock, 1978) is of particular interest as an earlier narrative of anorexia.

<sup>16</sup> The demographic affected will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. Suffice to say the rate of reporting anorexia is highest amongst young, white women; statistics may express this, rather than an accurate picture of the demographic affected.

The second similarity arises in relation to the sense of fragmentation experienced by both the hysteric and the anorexic. In both disorders, this fragmented sense of self is frequently positioned as the product of a schism between the contradictory, and often unrealisable, cultural ideals of femininity and lived bodily reality. Just as the disordered body of the hysteric, then, functioned to expose the cultural pressures exerted over the Victorian woman (as we will see throughout the remainder of this chapter), the dramatic physical transformation of the anorexic body similarly highlights problematic contemporary cultural expectations which converge upon the female body today. In each of the primary texts a divided self is represented, however, as we will see, in Chapter 3 this division is not only performed through the bodies of the anorexic narrators, but through the narrative techniques employed by both authors. In light of these principal points of convergence between the two disorders, then, it is perhaps unsurprising that feminist scholars have recently focussed on anorexia as a form of embodied protest much like that enacted by the celebratory model of the hysteric as imagined, as we will see, by proponents of *écriture féminine*.

It is evident from the above that bringing together works by very different authors and arranging the primary texts according to symptom, as opposed to following the trajectory of one particular author dealing with hysterical themes, enriches this study in several ways. Firstly, it permits exploration of the different causes behind hysteria, and the forms it can take. Secondly, it permits comparison and evaluation of the various different techniques employed by each author to recreate the hysterical body in writing. Finally, it exposes a range of different motivations behind literary representations of hysteria and the hysterical body; ranging from an attempt to use the motifs of hysteria for socio-political critique, to a desire for closure, a need to bear witness to traumatic experience, or an aesthetic fascination with the 'attractions' of the disorder. In sum, it enables this thesis to cover a representative sample of a contemporary trend, whilst

providing in-depth analysis of individual writers who have been subject to varying degrees of literary criticism.

It is important to ground this study in foundational works which will form the contextual and theoretical backdrop to the individual analyses undertaken in each chapter. To this aim, the remainder of this chapter discusses the salient developments in the understanding and diagnoses of hysteria throughout history. It then turns to the re-appropriation of the figure of the hysteric in second-wave French feminist writing, before closing with an analysis of Marie Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire*. The first section, entitled 'Womb, Witch or Wanton?: The Historical Construction of the Figure of the Hysteric' introduces antiquated medical theories of women's greater susceptibility to hysterical disorders as the result of an innate (feminine) weakness, the idea of the womb as an autonomous 'animal' in Hippocratic texts, and the association between femininity and witchcraft which endured throughout the Middle Ages. It closes with a discussion of the redefinition of hysteria as 'moral insanity', which brings us up to the modern era, and which is particularly important in its explicit and, as we will see, enduring condemnation of female sexuality. Of specific interest in this section are the patriarchal investments and moral judgements at work in historical and medical accounts of hysteria, which were largely imbued with misogynistic attitudes towards femininity and the female body, and which, significantly, still hold resonance to the present day.

The second section, 'Victorian Hysteria: Charcot and Freud's "Spectacular" Hysterics', turns to the psychoanalytic approaches to hysteria developed by Jean-Martin Charcot and Sigmund Freud in the nineteenth century. This section will expose how Charcot and Freud were influenced by the various historical, cultural and medical discourses discussed in the previous section. It begins with the work of Charcot and focuses in particular on notions of the hysteric as an attention-seeking 'malingerer',

before turning to the aspect of ‘performance’ exhibited (and cultivated) in Charcot’s famous *leçons du mardi*. It then turns to the work of Freud, which brings to the fore the links between the body, hysteria and language. This section closes on a discussion of the Dora case, which, as we will see, provides the connection between the Victorian hysteric and second-wave French feminist writing projects.

The following section, entitled ‘Hysteria as Protest: Cixous, Clément and Irigaray’, discusses recuperation of the figure of the hysteric in Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément’s seminal text *La Jeune Née* (1975) and Luce Irigaray’s stylistically experimental text *Ce Sexe qui n’en est pas un* (1977).<sup>17</sup> This section will draw out Cixous’ concept of *écriture féminine* and its relationship to hysteria, before revisiting the case of Dora, this time from a feminist perspective. It will then consider the pitfalls of using the hysteric as a feminist role model, as discussed by Clément, before examining how Irigaray makes use of the hysteric as inspiration for a feminine writing practice which attempts to leave behind associations of pathology, marginalisation and alienation.

The final section concludes this introductory chapter with a discussion of Marie Cardinal’s text *Les Mots pour le dire* (1975). This section seeks to draw out any patterns of influence between Cardinal’s textual preoccupations in the 1970s, at a time when *écriture féminine* was mesmerising the scholarly community, and the thematic and stylistic concerns occupying women writers in French today. Of particular importance

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<sup>17</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n’est pas un* (Paris: Grasset, 1977). Subsequent references will appear in parenthesis as *CS*, followed by the page number. It must be noted that the aim is not to provide an exhaustive analysis of Cixous and Irigaray’s writing, here, but to focus on salient points which elucidate the relationship between Cixous and Irigaray’s differing conceptualisations of a ‘feminine writing’ and the figure of the hysteric, in order to inform the following analyses of the primary texts. For a comprehensive discussion of Cixous’ theory of *écriture féminine*, and the development of her fictional and dramatic writing in the context of this theory, see: Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Authorship, Autobiography and Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), which has informed this discussion. For a discussion of Irigaray’s work, see: Margaret Whitford (ed.), *The Irigaray Reader* (Boston: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992).

are the themes of fragmentation, experimental writing strategies and familial relationships (the mother-daughter relationship in particular). Ultimately, this introductory chapter will elucidate the historical, medical, cultural, and socio-political conceptions of hysteria which have merged to construct the literary figure of the hysteric as she stands today.

### **Womb, Witch, or Wanton?: The Historical Construction of the Hysteric**

Juliet Mitchell wrote in an article in 1998 that ‘hysteria’s existence is co-terminus with written records of human history’.<sup>18</sup> Throughout its history, the disorder has had many names and many antecedents. The idea of the womb moving about the body and causing symptoms is commonly thought to have originated with the ancient Egyptians (although this has been disproved<sup>19</sup>), whose medical literature was thought to have exerted a particularly strong influence on the Hippocratic corpus, which provided a set of culturally shared understandings of the sources of disease and its treatments that persisted with very little alteration for several centuries. In Hippocrates’ writing, the body was understood to be a system in continuous dynamic interaction with its environment; seasonal and developmental changes constantly threatened the balance of the ‘humours’ which made up this system, and thus the physical and mental health of the patient. As the female body was considered to be differently constituted from the

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<sup>18</sup> Juliet Mitchell, ‘Questioning the Oedipus Complex’, in *Central European Hysteria*, ed. by Miklós Hadas et al., *Replika: Hungarian Social Science Quarterly* (Budapest: Mesier, 1998), 113-24 (p. 117).

<sup>19</sup> A wealth of literature detailing the origins and evolution of hysteria recounts this view. For example: Katherine A. Phillips, *Somatoform and Factitious Disorders* (Arlington: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2008), p. 102 ; Andrew Scull, *Hysteria: The Disturbing History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). However, Dr Harold Merskey of the London Psychiatric Hospital examined translations of the Ebers and Kahun papyri, on which these claims are based, to conclude that ‘the wandering womb did not come from Egypt’. See: H. Merksey and P. Potter, ‘The Womb Lay Still in Ancient Egypt’, *British Journal of Psychiatry* 154 (1989), pp. 751-753.



male (looser textured, softer, with spongier flesh), the equilibrium of her body was more easily disturbed. Puberty, menstruation (or lack of), pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause were all thought to impose profound distress upon this delicate internal equilibrium. Woman's 'wetter' constitution, 'by [her] very nature retaining moisture', as discussed by Naomi Segal, produced an excess of blood, which regularly needed to be drained from her system.<sup>20</sup> In Chapter 2 we will encounter a similar construction of the female body as an entity in continuous interaction with its environment, but in this instance the narrator's bodily changes are often dependent upon the alternately socially acceptable or liminal spaces she inhabits. In addition, we will see the above practice of bloodletting, which is based upon a misogynist perspective of the female body as inferior, both desired and endorsed by Darrieussecq's narrator.

It was from the above notions that the classical accounts of hysteria, which tended to view the womb as an independent and mobile organism, were established.

Implicit in this view is the construction of the womb as semi-autonomous:

The womb is an animal which longs to generate children. When it remains barren too long after puberty, it is distressed and sorely disturbed, and straying about in the body and cutting off the passages of the breath, it impedes respiration and brings the sufferer into the extremest anguish and provokes all manner of diseases besides.<sup>21</sup>

Whether the womb is akin to some 'animal inside an animal', or 'like a living thing inside another living thing', what is clear is the animalistic status bestowed upon the female body, which is constructed as simultaneously domestic and wild.<sup>22</sup> The woman becomes the passive container for a disruptive, dangerous, inner 'femaleness'. Plato conceptualised the womb as 'voracious, predatory, appetitive, unstable, forever

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<sup>20</sup> Galen cited in Naomi Segal, 'Witnessing through the Skin: The Hysteric's Body as Text', *Journal of Romance Studies* 9: 3 (2009), 73-85 (p. 76).

<sup>21</sup> Ilza Veith, *Hysteria: The History of a Disease* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 7-8.

<sup>22</sup> Areteaus cited in Helen King, 'Once Upon a Text: The Hippocratic Origins of Hysteria', *Hysteria Beyond Freud*, ed. by Sander L. Gilman et al. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1993), 3-90 (p. 38).

reducing the female into a frail and unstable creature'.<sup>23</sup> Such notions place woman in a fundamental dissension with her own body, which is split between an outward façade of conformity, and an unruly, interior force which is less than fully human. The idea of an autonomous force, situated in the body, which disrupts the self is exhibited in many of the texts under consideration in this study. The adjectives 'voracious' and 'predatory' can both be applied, as we will see, to the hysterical bodies in Nobécourt and Darrieussecq's texts. In Chapter 1, the narrator of *La Démangeaison* experiences her skin disorder as a monstrous and autonomous 'plante animal' (D 47) which takes over her body from the inside out. In Chapter 2, it is 'appetitive' which is most applicable to the narrator of *Truismes*, whose (initially conforming) body is soon consumed by insatiable bodily drives. The idea of a monstrous inner force reducing the female into a 'frail unstable creature' resonates with the final two chapters on anorexia, in which the idea of a split, fragmented self whose autonomy is completely subsumed is most clearly elucidated.

In the Hippocratic texts, proposed cures, as Charles Bernheimer notes, included 'fumigation' of the female genitals with fragrances designed to attract the 'deviant' womb back down into its normal position, or the ingestion of 'foul-smelling' and 'vile-tasting' potions designed to drive the uterus back down from above.<sup>24</sup> Other theories which situated the womb as the root cause of hysterical symptoms, such as that by Galen, disputed its capacity to move around and instead proposed that it filled with putrefying liquids (retained seed or menses) which released vapours affecting the equilibrium of the humours in the body.<sup>25</sup> There was thus a venerable tradition within

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<sup>23</sup> G.S Rousseau, "'A Strange Pathology": Hysteria in the Modern World 1500-1800', in *Hysteria Beyond*, ed. by Gilman et al., 90-201 (p. 107).

<sup>24</sup> Charles Bernheimer, 'Introduction: Part One', in *In Dora's Case Freud – Hysteria – Feminism*, ed. by Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 1-18 (p. 2).

<sup>25</sup> Kaara L. Peterson, *Popular Medicine, Hysterical Disease, and Social Controversy in Shakespeare's England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 24-25.

Western medicine which associated hysteria to gender, and specifically to sexuality; for Galen upheld that sexual deprivation could cause the disorder, and advocated sexual relations for the married, and marriage for the single. The ‘unruly’ female body, then, was cured, or controlled, through its successful reinsertion into the patriarchal economy.

The translation of these texts from Greek into Arabic, and then into Latin at the beginning of the eleventh century, blended these diagnoses to incorporate aspects of both uterine movement and vaporous, fetid uterine contents. In the Middle Ages, such constructs of the womb as an autonomous, disruptive animal compounded cultural fears of the female body and led to one of hysteria’s most notorious manifestations: witchcraft. The *invisible* causes of highly *visible* hysterical symptoms led to the widespread consensus that those exhibiting such symptoms must be either wilfully, and innately, evil, or victimised by witchcraft. Interestingly, we will see this picked up in many of the primary texts, in which the narrators’ symptoms are often presented as the result of some form of original sin. In *Truismes*, the narrator’s bodily changes are linked to female promiscuity. In *Robert*, in Chapter 4, the narrator’s unusually large eyes belie an unsettling power attributed to the disturbing circumstances surrounding her birth. To return to historical understandings of hysteria, in the Middle Ages, if the hysteric (or witch) refused to assimilate obligingly into the masculine economy, the penalty was death; a definitive manner of ensuring the eradication of unwanted disruption to patriarchal rule.

It was not until the work of Edward Jorden, an influential member of London’s College of Physicians, in 1603, that an alternative to diagnoses of a ‘wandering’ womb or demoniac possession was offered. Jorden published a pamphlet, entitled *A Briefe Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother* (1603), in response to a high-profile court case involving a young girl named Mary Glover who was accused of

demoniac possession.<sup>26</sup> Jorden rooted the cause of her hysterical symptoms (specifically the sense of suffocation in the throat) in bodily illness. Despite Jorden's assertion that hysterical symptoms resulted from the natural and not the supernatural, his diagnosis did not escape the misogynist overtones of previous diagnoses as it remained rooted in woman's greater susceptibility to the disorder because of the womb's close connection (although he refuted its ability to 'wander') with 'the braine, heart and liver [...] and the easie passage which it hath into them by Vaines, Arteries, and Nerves'.<sup>27</sup> Although Jorden did suggest that hysterical symptoms could be related to 'the perturbations of the minde', which hints towards a psychosomatic model; his focus on the equilibrium of bodily humours and the effects of 'vapours' on the emotions meant that his diagnosis remained rooted in internal disturbances of the female body. However, due to the strong religious convictions of his time, little interest was accorded to Jorden's theories. It was not until the 1680s that the first consideration of hysteria as a psychological disorder would appear, with the work of Thomas Willis and Thomas Sydenham.

Willis and Sydenham conceived the brain in mechanical terms as the distributor for what they termed 'animal spirits', which were able to rapidly traverse corporeal space and attack the weakest bodily organ if thrown out of balance.<sup>28</sup> The more dense and firmly organised the internal space of the body, the less vulnerable it was to hysterical attacks. Women, then, were more prone to hysterical attacks due to their less firm constitution and less demanding lifestyle. Although Willis and Sydenham finally

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<sup>26</sup> This case attracted a large public and medical audience, attributing a distinctly theatrical, and moral, aspect to the proceedings which pre-empted Charcot's famous lectures at the Salpêtrière. See: Scull, pp. 6-23.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Jorden cited in Scull, p.17. In Jorden's work 'the mother' can be read as a synonym for 'womb'. Male disorders, which were similar to hysteria but which could not (for obvious reasons) be rooted in the womb, were described as 'a touch of the mother'. See: Peterson, *Popular Medicine*, p. 57.

<sup>28</sup> Robert S. Kinsman, 'Folly Melancholy and Madness: A Study in Shifting Styles of Medical Analysis and Treatment, 1450-1675', in *The Darker Vision of the Renaissance: Beyond the Fields of Reason*, ed. by Robert S. Kinsman (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), p. 316.

offered a psychological explanation, it was yet to escape misogynist moral and ethical connotations.

In the eighteenth century, the system of nerves linking brain to body became accountable for the typical disorders of the age: ranging from vapours, spleen, and melancholia to dementia and lunacy. Diagnoses no longer focussed on the womb but spread all over the body as a system of ‘nerves’. The more refined, delicate nervous systems of the bourgeois put them at greater risk of hysterical attacks. ‘Nervous’ disorders were largely absent amongst the lower classes as ‘Fools, weak or stupid Persons, heavy and dull souls’ were considered to be ‘seldom troubled with Vapours or Lowness of Spirits’.<sup>29</sup> Hysteria became a disease of the distinguished, ‘of the best and the brightest, of the wealthy and the cultured’, as it was these segments of society who were ‘most exposed to the stresses and pressures of modernity, whose nervous systems were stretched the tightest, eventually to breaking point’.<sup>30</sup> Instead of finally gaining recognition as a pathological result of the conflicting pressures exerted over women, it was instead understood that hysteria was a reflection on the *quality* of the country’s women and the ‘triumph’ of the economic and social arrangements which ‘made hysteria and associated nervous complaints so prominent a part of its medical landscape’.<sup>31</sup> Since a woman was *supposed* to be fragile and sensitive, her falling ill and being confined to the sickbed was accepted as an *affirmative* sign of her femininity. This notion of fragility as an affirmative sign of femininity should be borne in mind as a construct which is taken up and complicated in Chapters 3 and 4. In Chapter 4 in particular, we will see the narrator’s mother, in *Robert*, take pride in the narrator’s anorexic eating habits as an affirmative sign of her exceptional talent and dedication.

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<sup>29</sup> George Cheyne cited in Scull p. 48.

<sup>30</sup> Scull, p. 96.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

By the nineteenth century women still accounted for the majority of hysterical patients, so diagnoses remained tied to a moral condemnation of femininity. This is particularly evident in the work of Philippe Pinel, who demonstrated clinically that the behavioural disorders of the hysteric could not be rooted in any organic changes in the brain or nervous system, but instead their cause was, in his terms, ‘moral’.<sup>32</sup> Pinel’s recommended treatments reflected this association of woman with immorality; in his view the hysteric’s deviant body could only be cured by being ‘tamed’ through marriage, the family and productive work. According to Bernheimer, Pinel’s ‘paternalistic’ therapy was ‘congenital to the repressive spirit of the Victorian age’, during which the contradictory expectations which had characterised patriarchal attitudes towards women for centuries were further exaggerated.<sup>33</sup> The number of women experiencing hysterical symptoms dramatically increased during this era as a result of having to repress ‘natural frustration and aggressive impulses’ for which this culture ‘gave them no outlet’.<sup>34</sup>

As doctors became increasingly frustrated with an influx of female patients experiencing seemingly inexplicable hysterical symptoms, associations between femininity and deceit which had dominated preconceptions of hysteria in earlier centuries again rose to the fore, and the disorder again began to be perceived as malingering female treachery. As Asti Hustvedt writes, due to the highly visible nature of hysterical symptoms, ‘a flair for drama and artful deception was written into the definition of hysteria, which was therefore, by its very nature, an illness that aroused suspicion within the medical community’.<sup>35</sup> This ‘flair for drama and artful deception’

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<sup>32</sup> Pinel is famous for having removed the chains restricting the insane inmates at the *Bicêtre* Hospital in Paris, and for instigating more humane practices throughout the asylum system.

<sup>33</sup> Bernheimer, *Dora’s Case*, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Asti Hustvedt, *Medical Muses: Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), p. 36.

is something which will become particularly important throughout this study, as associations of hysteria and performance pervade the narratives of hysteria discussed in the following chapters. In Chapter 3, in particular, we will see both Brisac and de Peretti's anorexic protagonists repeatedly accused of deliberately, and maliciously, deceiving those around them.

Female 'deceit' was nowhere more prominent than amongst those patients who exhibited 'excessive' sexual desire. As Carol Groneman remarks in her study of the historical construction of female sexuality, 'even minor transgressions of the social strictures that defined "feminine" modesty could be classified as diseased'.<sup>36</sup> Too much coitus (either wanting it or having it), too much desire, and too much masturbation were commonly diagnosed as hysterical symptoms. Whilst women who committed adultery, flirted, had lascivious dreams, felt more passionate than their husbands, or attempted to attract men by wearing perfume, adorning themselves or talking of marriage, were also diagnosed as hysterical.<sup>37</sup> Such symptoms embodied Victorian fears of the dangers of even the smallest transgressions, particularly amongst middle-class women whose conventional roles as daughters, wives and mothers were perceived as 'a necessary bastion against the uncertainties of a changing society'.<sup>38</sup> Women were believed to be more easily overwhelmed by their desire than men because they were closer to nature and thus more volatile and irrational. In Chapter 2, we will see this view taken up in *Truismes*, in which Darrieussecq's sexually exploited hybrid narrator is continually positioned on the side of nature and irrationality.

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<sup>36</sup> Carol Groneman, 'Nymphomania: The Historical Construction of Female Sexuality', in *Signs* 19: 2 (Winter 1994), 337-67 (p. 339).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 338-9. Nymphomania later became a separate disorder, although symptoms and treatments often overlapped with those of hysteria. As Groneman notes, women with such symptoms were often diagnosed as 'a nymphomaniac subject to hysterical attacks', or, 'a hysteric with nymphomaniacal manifestations'.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340.

The hysteric exhibiting symptoms of sexual deviancy was considered not only morally but literally dangerous as well, as some doctors argued that she was capable not just of seducing a man, but of physically overpowering him and forcing him to satisfy her sexual desires. The female patient was positioned as a deceitful ‘seductress’; a nymphomaniac who sought to entice the unwitting physician into a gynaecological examination in order to glean sexual gratification.<sup>39</sup> She was often depicted swearing and using vulgar language, making improper gestures and suggestive facial expressions. As Charles Richet noted: ‘Rien n’embarrasse ces Diogènes femelles: elles ont réponse à tout, posent les questions les plus indiscretes, disent crûment la vérité à tout un chacun’.<sup>40</sup> The need to civilise and control the female body was paramount. This restraint not only applied to woman’s physical appearance, but her language, emotions, movements, facial expressions and bodily drives. In response, the cures became increasingly domineering; ovariectomies and clitoral cauterization, for example, were not uncommon. The extent to which women interiorised such views of their bodies, and of themselves, as deviant was also widely evidenced in case histories. One doctor reported that a twenty-three-year old unmarried woman had begged him to remove her ovaries as ‘she deplored the fact that anyone with sufficient opportunity could prevail over her scruples’.<sup>41</sup> It was not only doctors, fathers and husbands who upheld prevailing misogynist values, then, but many female patients too, who came to regard their own sexual desires or ‘unseemly’ emotions as signs of disease or inherent

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<sup>39</sup> Groneman suggests that this could be the result of the complicated position of the male doctor, who risked being perceived as a potential ravisher of wives and daughters. The blame was thus placed on ‘wanton’ female patients; repositioning the doctor as victim (‘Nymphomania’, p.347). This is the construction of the female hysteric, which focuses on her exciting and threatening sexuality, which is depicted in popular culture. The recent release of Box Office films such as *A Dangerous Method* (2011) and *Hysteria* (2011) bears witness to a revival of the figure of the hysteric in pop culture, but both films privilege a voyeuristic portrayal of the young, female hysteric and leave aside the socio-cultural influences which caused such symptoms and the vulnerable position these women often found themselves in.

<sup>40</sup> Charles Richet, ‘Les Démoniaques d’aujourd’hui – étude de psychologie pathologique’, in *Revue des Deux Mondes* 37 (1880), 340-72 (p. 360).

<sup>41</sup> Groneman, ‘Nymphomania’, p. 345.



immorality. This will again be taken up in Chapter 2, in which we will see Darrieussecq's narrator suffer painful, damaging medical procedures to 'cure' her unruly (sexual) female body. We will also see her interiorise the misogynist values of the society she inhabits to the extent that she regards her involuntary metamorphosis as 'un châtement de dieu' (*T* 44), a direct result of her unchaste lifestyle.

So far, this section has drawn out ideas of uterine disorder, inherent weakness, witchcraft, performance, deceit and deviant sexuality, and begun to highlight where these aspects of hysteria will arise across the following chapters. We have seen how the idea of 'moral' insanity has extended the definition of hysteria to encompass any deviation from accepted 'feminine' behaviour. In all of the instances above, woman is depicted as calculated, wily and out of control. Her deviance is at once innate and deliberate. Despite diagnoses which centred on uterine disorder and demoniac possession being largely discredited, their moral implications undoubtedly continued to influence the work of hysteria's most famous doctors – Charcot and Freud – to whose work the following section now turns.

### **Victorian Hysteria: Charcot and Freud's 'Spectacular' Hysterics**

It was in the heated medical environment of late nineteenth-century Paris that the world-famous clinical neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot turned his attention to hysteria in l'Hôpital de la Pitié-Salpêtrière.<sup>42</sup> In a medical environment which had come to consider the hysteric as an attention-seeking fraud, Charcot's scientific explorations legitimised

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<sup>42</sup> The Salpêtrière was first used as a women's hospital in the seventeenth century, however, at this point 'it was more of a warehouse for female outcasts' (Hustvedt, p. 11). It housed women who were mad, crippled, violent, blind, chronically ill, pregnant out of wedlock, orphaned, suffering from advanced venereal diseases, or simply old and poor. By the 1680s this included female prostitutes and convicts awaiting execution, and later female heretics. After the French Revolution the Salpêtrière became the exclusive home of elderly and insane women.

hysteria by defining it as an inherited neurological disorder, not madness or malingering, and proposed that inherited weakness created a predisposition to hysteria which was typically triggered by trauma. However, his research was geared less towards therapeutic treatments than the scientific analysis of the disease. As we have seen, the idea developed in Greek medical literature that almost anything in the female reproductive cycle, from adolescence onwards, was regarded as a catalyst for hysterical symptoms, was still in circulation in the majority of medical texts published on the disorder during the beginning of Charcot's career. Female adolescence in particular was described as a state of 'miniature insanity', during which previously well-behaved girls turned 'snappish, fretful [...] full of deceit and mischief'.<sup>43</sup> Across the following chapters we will see many of the female narrators begin their symptoms (in particular anorexia in Chapters 3 and 4) at the onset of puberty.

Menstruation, amenorrhea, pregnancy, infertility and menopause, as well as excessive sexual stimulation or frigidity, were all regarded as principal causes for hysterical symptoms. However, as Charcot believed hysteria was a distinctive, universal pathology, he departed from his predecessors in his adamant refusal of uterine theory. His insistence that hysterical symptoms could be found in both sexes was one of his most radical departures from previous medical theory. Although hysterical symptoms had long been recorded in both sexes; male symptoms had been diagnosed according to a framework which hinged upon the tiring effects of an over-used brain. Neurasthenia (literally, weakness of the nerves) a condition brought about by stress and overwork became the diagnosis for the 'nervous' man.<sup>44</sup> The term 'hysterical' applied to a man

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<sup>43</sup> Edward Tilt, cited in Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 56.

<sup>44</sup> For an in-depth study of male hysteria and what Mark S. Micale terms the 'cultivated silence' which surrounded it see: Micale, *Hysterical Men: The Hidden History of Male Nervous Illness* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2009).

was an exception, existing in defiance of the prevalent uterine theory. Such a figure was likewise branded with the stamp of femininity; hysterical males were portrayed in medical literature as weak, effeminate, ‘over-refined’ creatures who lacked appropriately masculine qualities. Although Charcot was the first to reject the association between hysterical symptoms and innate femininity, he nevertheless proceeded as if it were a female condition and created a topography of the female body in which he identified ‘hysterogenic zones’. This mapping privileged the ovaries and mammary glands which he claimed functioned as triggers for hysterical attacks. The hysterical attacks of men, on the other hand, were said to be triggered solely by traumatic episodes.

Charcot’s *leçons du mardi* were flamboyant public displays of his hysterical patients. As one of his students, Pierre Janet, noted; ‘everything’, in his lectures, ‘was designed to attract the attention and to captivate the audience by means of visual and auditory impressions’.<sup>45</sup> Through observation, Charcot isolated four distinct phases of hysterical attacks: an epileptic period, where the patient suffered fits; the period of contortions and *grands mouvements*, the patient then adopted *attitudes passionnelles* (posing as if in the throes of ecstasy), and finally moved into the hallucinatory stage. These four stages became a paradigm for hysteria and, although Charcot admitted they could vary, what had once been regarded as a chaotic fit of inexplicable bodily reactions was now reformulated as a predictable progression of hysterical symptoms. The consistent regularity of these four stages lent weight to Charcot’s assertion that hysteria was a disease of the nervous system, but this regularity also bolstered the age-old arguments of simulation.

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<sup>45</sup> Pierre Janet cited in Georges Guillain, *J.-M. Charcot: 1825-1893, His Life, His Work*, ed. and trans. by Pearce Bailey (New York: Paul B. Hoeber, 1959), p. 55.

Those who doubted the authenticity of hysteria regarded Charcot's patients as malingerers and fakes, coached by assistants to respond according to expectation. Although Charcot insisted on the validity of his patients' symptoms, he himself claimed to be impressed by 'la ruse, la sagacité, et la ténacité inouïe que les femmes, qui sont sous le coup de la grande névrose, mettent en œuvre pour tromper, surtout lorsque la victime doit être un médecin'.<sup>46</sup> Hysterical patients were notoriously difficult to diagnose. Richet noted:

Rien ne leur plaît plus que d'induire en erreur ceux qui les interrogent, de raconter des histoires absolument fausses, qui n'ont même pas l'excuse de la vraisemblance, d'énumérer tout ce qu'elles n'ont pas fait, tout ce qu'elles ont fait, avec un luxe incroyable de faux détails. Ces gros mensonges sont dits audacieusement, crûment, avec un sang-froid qui déconcerte.<sup>47</sup>

The idea that the hysteric was inherently deceitful, then, a liar and a fraud who took pleasure in deliberately misleading those around her, rendered her the epitome of the threatening female 'other' which abounded in tales of witchcraft and sorcery in earlier medical accounts. It also had the effect of overriding any public, and professional, sympathy towards the hysteric as a victim of a distressing and debilitating disorder, and positioned the patriarchy, instead, as the 'victim' of her dangerous ruse. In Chapters 3 and 4 we will see that it is not the anorexic who is positioned as the victim of oppressive social codes, but those around her that are positioned as the victim of the anorexic's cruel ruse. It is already becoming easy to see how the hysteric, and the literary figure of the anorexic discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, could be re-conceptualised as figures of feminist rebellion.

Charcot's serial exploitation of these subjugated women, his willingness to recurrently expose them to the lascivious gaze of his (male) audience with a complete

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<sup>46</sup> Jean-Martin Charcot, *Leçons sur les maladies du système nerveux faites à la Salpêtrière* 3, ed. by Charles Féré (Paris: A. Delahaye & Lecrosnier, 1883), p. 81.

<sup>47</sup> Richet, 'Les Démoniaques', p. 344.

disregard for ethics, drew criticism from his contemporaries and, later, from feminist historians. As Ruth Harris comments, Charcot was ‘ruthlessly insensitive to the pain and anguish of his patients, and so enamoured of his scientific mission that he dispensed with ethical proprieties when presenting them to the public’.<sup>48</sup> Hysterical symptoms were reproduced at the Salpêtrière in various forms: staged re-enactments, sketches, wax and plaster casts, paintings and photographs.<sup>49</sup> All of the above added to the objectification of the hysterical patient. This gave the hysteric a profile which was *even more* externalised and ‘spectacular’. The relationship between doctor (male, healthy, educated, and bourgeois) and patient (female, diseased, uneducated, and typically lower-class) was thoroughly unbalanced.<sup>50</sup> A select few hysterical patients became ‘famous’, as Charcot’s favourites, who were regularly chosen to demonstrate their symptoms in his *leçons du mardi*; they became living illustrations whose hysteria was ‘manufactured’ for mass consumption. As the hysterics were not considered mentally ill (they suffered from a disorder of the nervous system) they enjoyed a large amount of freedom within the hospital grounds. Hysterical patients were permitted to take walks in the garden, attend classes at the gymnasium, make use of the photography laboratory and art studio, and attend the annual *bal des folles* (the major social event of the year for patients); punishments for bad behaviour most commonly involved the loss of these

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<sup>48</sup> Ruth Harris, ‘Introduction’, in Jean-Martin Charcot, *Clinical Lectures on Diseases of the Nervous System* (London: Routledge, 1991), xiv.

<sup>49</sup> This was mirrored in wider society, which saw detailed articles and lithographic prints concerning life at the hospital regularly appear in magazines and newspapers throughout Charcot’s reign. For a number of years, the popular tabloid *Le Gaulois* featured descriptions of the *bal des folles* on the society page of their newspaper, and Andre Brouillet’s famous *Leçon clinique à la Salpêtrière*, hung in the Salon of 1887, was reviewed extensively as one of the major cultural icons of the day (See: Micale, ‘Les Démoniaques’, p. 721). The Salpêtrière also became a tourist attraction, with many guides citing it as one of the fashionable sites of *belle époque* Paris (Ibid., p. 724).

<sup>50</sup> Hustvedt adds ‘drug dealer and addict’ to this list of imbalances, as hysterics were often medicated with sedatives. Many of the symptoms Charcot attributed to hysteria could easily have been drug-induced side effects (Hustvedt, p. 46).

privileges.<sup>51</sup> It would have been natural then, for the hysteric to ‘perform’ the desired symptoms, so often and so prominently displayed, in order to curry favour with the *grand professeur* and the medical establishment. As Hustvedt remarks, ‘a productive collaboration between doctor and patient occurred’, and the patient often ‘emerged from the encounter as the prototypical hysteric’.<sup>52</sup>

This idea of the hysteric as an ‘actress’ was further compounded by suspicious attitudes towards hysterical patients who remained at home, confined to bed rest on doctor’s orders. The temporary escape from the monotony of the domestic role, and the shift in the balance of power in the home that illness permitted (and produced), left physicians concerned that women were enjoying their freedom from domestic and marital duties, as well as their power over the family and the physician himself.<sup>53</sup> Charcot’s practice of hypnosis further fuelled debates surrounding performance, as critics argued that the basis of hypnotic trance was suggestion: the manipulation of psychological states. According to Charcot, however, hypnotism was a technique that could work only when practised upon the defective; to be hypnotised was to reveal oneself as a hysteric, to make manifest an underlying diseased state of the entire body.<sup>54</sup> After Charcot’s death, his research was strongly criticised and largely discredited; many of his students and disciples quickly dissociated themselves from his work on hysteria which was regarded as ‘an embarrassing mistake’.<sup>55</sup> The association between hysteria and performance is particularly pertinent to this study. In each of the texts dealt with in

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<sup>51</sup> The hysterical patients were also openly permitted to enter into relationships with the hospital staff. Such relationships were often noted in case histories, which suggests that it was both common practice and not considered unethical. See: Hustvedt, p. 42; Micale, p. 718.

<sup>52</sup> Hustvedt, p. 50.

<sup>53</sup> Elaine Showalter discusses the concern of doctors at becoming ‘accomplices’ in the hysteric’s deception (*Malady*, p. 133). Smith-Rosenburg describes how hysteria could offer women a measure of control within the rigid family structures of the nineteenth century. Smith-Rosenburg, Carroll, ‘The Hysterical Woman’, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), pp. 115-6.

<sup>54</sup> These debates are discussed in Scull, p. 133-4.

<sup>55</sup> Hustvedt, p. 30.

the following chapters, we will see that performance is a strong theme; be it the physical ‘performance’ of the bodily symptoms experienced by each narrator, or the performative writing strategies which are used by each author to recreate the hysterical body or mindset. The idea of ‘curative’ writing which also pervades these chapters, however, can be understood more clearly in relation to Freud’s work on hysteria, to which this section now turns.

Upon establishing his own practice in 1886, Freud began using hypnosis, with the support of an older colleague, Josef Breuer, as a means to provoke recollection of the traumatic incidents which had given rise to the physical symptoms of his hysterical patients. Breuer had previously treated the famous case of Anna O., or Bertha Pappenheim. Under hypnosis, and without therapeutic suggestion, Anna O. had begun to describe the incidents which had led to the appearance of her symptoms, all of which, Freud noted, ‘went back to moving events which she had experienced while nursing her father; that is to say, her symptoms had a meaning and were residues or reminiscences of those emotional situations’.<sup>56</sup> She experienced extreme weight loss (anorexia), a cough which resembled her father’s, somnambulism (sleep walking), paralysis, headaches, intermittent deafness, disturbances of vision, intermittent disturbances of speech – which resulted in the total loss of her native language, German, and over-night fluency in English, French and Italian – and finally; total aphasia (the inability to use words). As Bernheimer summarises:

Without the benefit of the stage-directing Charcot’s patients received, Anna O. made a spectacle of herself as a means of dramatizing through her body, of converting from the psychic to the physical, the tension she felt between her guilt and ambivalence about her father’s death and her desire to escape the strangulating demands of a repressive, patriarchal, bourgeois family.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 20, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press; New York: Macmillan, 1953-74), p. 20.

<sup>57</sup> Bernheimer, *Dora’s Case*, p. 8.

She would live each day according to the same pattern. During the first stage, she experienced extreme hallucinations throughout which she was uncommunicative and violently hostile. During the second stage, she entered a period of induced hypnosis during which she would narrate the content of her hallucinations to Breuer. If, and only if, she was successful in her narration, she would enter a third stage in which she was peaceful and contented.<sup>58</sup> The link between narrating her hallucinations and her sense of peace became irrefutable. Through narrating the events which led up to each of her hysterical symptoms to Breuer, by ‘bringing them one by one into the symbolic’, as Diane Price Herndl notes, Anna O. was relieved of each one of them, and the ‘talking cure’ was born.<sup>59</sup>

The importance of Freud’s work to this study rests on one of his most famous cases, ‘Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria’, or the case of Dora.<sup>60</sup> From eight years old, Dora (Ida Bauer) suffered from various hysterical symptoms, including coughing, loss of voice and breathing difficulties. At the age of eighteen, Dora’s father discovered a suicide note and decided upon her treatment in order to ‘bring her to reason’.<sup>61</sup> The principal cause of her symptoms was the family’s longstanding friendship with a married couple, Herr and Frau K., who had two young children. As Dora got older, she came to realise that her father was conducting an affair with Frau K., who had all the while been Dora’s close friend. As Freud remarks, Dora ‘had been the wife’s confidante and advisor in all the difficulties of her married life. There was nothing they had not talked about’.<sup>62</sup> Dora was often left in charge of the children,

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<sup>58</sup> For more information on of the case of Anna O., see: Diane Price Herndl, ‘The Writing Cure: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Anna O., and “Hysterical” Writing’, *NWSA Journal* 1: 1 (1988), pp. 52-74 ; Dianne Hunter, ‘Hysteria, Psychoanalysis, and Feminism: The Case of Anna O.’, *Feminist Studies* 9 (1983), pp. 464-488.

<sup>59</sup> Price Herndl, ‘Writing Cure’, p. 65.

<sup>60</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.



especially when her father was with Frau K., and had a very close friendship with Herr K.. When she was fourteen, Herr K. attempted to kiss Dora. This was met with physical revulsion and flight on her part. When she was sixteen, Herr K. again attempted seduction, this was likewise met with a sharp slap and Dora's escape. Dora's symptoms were triggered by her father's secret liaison with Frau K. (coupled with his denial of it) and the fact that her father had believed Herr K.'s lie that his attempts to seduce her were nothing more than a product of Dora's deviant sexual fantasies. Dora's hurt and anger at not being told the truth by her father, and then not being believed by him, were compounded by the betrayal of Frau K., who, according to her husband, had said that Dora took no interest in anything but sexual matters.

At the time of Dora's case, Freud had developed a theory of psychic development based on the Oedipus complex; a set of relations in which the child desires the parent of the opposite sex, and feels hostility towards the same-sexed parent. Freud based this theory on the assumption of a natural heterosexual attraction and viewed his task as the translation into consciousness of that natural desire which, when repressed, resulted in hysterical symptoms. Freud's transcription of the case suggests he understood the adult conspiracy encircling Dora:

the two men had of course never made a formal agreement in which she was treated as an object for barter; her father in particular would have been horrified at any such suggestion. But he was one of those men who know how to evade a dilemma by falsifying their judgement upon one of the conflicting alternatives.<sup>63</sup>

Freud also appeared to appreciate Dora's feeling of betrayal at being 'handed over to Herr K. as the price of his tolerating the relations between her father and his wife'.<sup>64</sup>

The idea that Dora is 'an object for barter', and her sexual exploitation is 'the price' of her father's affair being allowed to continue, is important in relation to Irigaray's

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

writing, discussed in the following sections of this chapter, in which she argues that ‘la culture qui est la nôtre, est fondée sur l’échange des femmes’ (CS 167). The governess of Herr K.’s children had attempted to warn Dora, by telling her of his own advances towards her, during which he had used the words ‘I get nothing from my wife’.<sup>65</sup> Freud’s assertion that Dora’s slapping of Herr K. was triggered by his use of these very same words whilst trying to seduce Dora is a further indication of Freud’s understanding of her position.

However, as his theory proposed that every hysterical symptom must stem from a repressed sexual fantasy, Freud refused to accept a possible alternative and remained adamant that Dora’s symptoms revealed an unconscious desire for Herr K., a desire which derived from her infantile love for her father. Instead, Freud pressed Dora to admit her desire and accept Herr K. as a suitor chosen by her father. Though, in the footnotes of his case, Freud undermines his insistence on Dora’s heterosexual desire and points to the possibility that she feels not only rivalry towards Frau K., as her father’s love object, but sexual desire, this possibility remains relegated to the margins as Freud’s patriarchal prejudices disallowed the possibility of relationships between women. As Toril Moi notes, despite the fact that ‘Dora’s condition as a victim of male dominance [...] a pawn in the game between Herr K. and her father’ is evidently visible to Freud, he nonetheless ‘joins the male team’ and untiringly attempts to ‘ascribe her desires she does not have and to ignore the ones she does have’.<sup>66</sup> As many contemporary readers note: ‘never did he question the validity of his interpretation’.<sup>67</sup> Nor did he indicate an awareness of the role of transference and counter-transference; dialectical processes in which both patient and analyst are implicated. Contemporary

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<sup>65</sup> Freud, *Dora*, p. 98.

<sup>66</sup> Toril Moi, ‘Representation of Patriarchy: Sexuality and Epistemology’, in *Dora’s Case*, ed. by Bernheimer and Kahane, p. 191.

<sup>67</sup> Claire Kahane, ‘Introduction Part 2’, in *Dora’s Case*, ed. by Bernheimer and Kahane, p. 23.

readings have argued that Herr K. becomes Freud's unconscious alter ego, and Freud's desire for Dora to accept her attraction to Herr K. represents Freud's own unconscious wish for gratification.

Freud suppresses his own attraction to Dora, and also, significantly, his identification with her, and instead forms a narrative which exerts the dominance of a (masculine) discourse of mastery over a duplicitous (feminine) tale of repressed desire. Thus Dora's condition as 'a victim of male dominance' as Moi explains, 'becomes starkly visible'.<sup>68</sup> Dora was not only an object of exchange between Herr K. and her father, but the scapegoat in a power-play by her male doctor. In light of Irigaray's question: 'la psychanalyse "guérit-elle" les hystériques autrement que par un surcroît de suggestions qui revient à les adapter, un peu mieux, à la société masculine?' (CS 135), Freud's 'talking cure' can be seen as putting words into Dora's mouth, denying her own explanation in order to adhere to his own patriarchal construction of her experiences.

Three months after Dora began treatment with Freud, she abruptly terminated her analysis and never returned. Dora's early termination of her treatment left Freud with an incomplete analysis, to which he returned with footnotes and amendments in his desire for complete mastery. As Moi points out, 'knowledge, for Freud, is a finished, closed whole. Possession of knowledge means possession of power'.<sup>69</sup> The fragmentary nature of the case has thus come to represent the master's failure to assimilate the hysteric, as a 'female, oral and scattered' disruption, into the coherent unity of masculine discourse.<sup>70</sup> In Erik Erikson's words, Dora's treatment at his hands was:

one of the great psychotherapeutic disasters; one of the most remarkable exhibitions of a clinician's published rejection of his patient; spectacular, though tragic, evidence of sexual abuse of a young girl, and her own analyst's

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<sup>68</sup> Bernheimer, *Dora's Case*, p. 18

<sup>69</sup> Moi, 'Representation of Patriarchy', p.194.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

exoneration of that abuse; an eminent case of forced associations, forced remembering, and perhaps several forced dreams.<sup>71</sup>

Dora's departure from Freud's analysis broadly coincided with the swing of his clinical activity toward other forms of neurosis, and hysteria lost its initial centrality to his work. In theory and literature, however, the figure of the hysteric has found a renaissance. It is this which will form the focus of the remainder of this chapter.

This section has shown how nineteenth-century medical research on hysteria was influenced by previous understandings of femininity and the female body as deviant. It has discussed the objectification of the hysteric, both in Charcot's visual spectacles, and in the reproduction of the hysterical body in various art forms, which rendered the female body a cultural signifier of irrationality and 'madness'. It has drawn out notions of hysteria as performance, and discussed the complicated, and imbalanced, relationship between the typically lower-class hysterical woman, and the bourgeois male doctor. Most importantly, however, it began to unravel the relationships between the female body, female sexuality, hysteria and language; specifically the role that language plays in relieving hysterical symptoms. Most significantly, through a discussion of the Dora case, it has positioned hysteria as an unconscious response to a system in which woman is expected to remain silent; a system in which her subjectivity is denied. Unsurprisingly, then, the Dora case has sparked considerable interest amongst contemporary feminists. As Dora terminated her treatment early (she asserted her subjectivity) Freud was unable to deliver a complete narrative, and Dora arguably managed to beat the system. The following section will turn to the work of Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clément and Luce Irigaray, in which hysteria has been ascribed a certain political potential as a 'bodily language' which expresses a feminist rejection of

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<sup>71</sup> Erik Erikson cited in Patrick Mahoney, *Freud's Dora: A Psychoanalytic, Historical, and Textual Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 148-9.

an oppressive female ‘cultural identity’, or, as a means (as we already have seen) to a form of power over others.

### **Hysteria as Protest in Cixous, Clément and Irigaray**

The question of a feminine writing came to occupy a central position in the political and cultural debates of 1970s France thanks, in large part, to the work of Hélène Cixous.

Between 1975 and 1977 Cixous produced a wealth of theoretical texts which explored the relationship between women, femininity and writing. This enduring focus, and the repetition of tropes, images and central ideas, leads the reader to regard these writings as a continuum. Her style is poetic, metaphorical and, as Moi remarks, ‘explicitly anti-theoretical’.<sup>72</sup> This section will focus on Cixous’ collaboration with Catherine Clément, *La Jeune Née* (1975), which deals explicitly with the figure of the hysteric, before turning to the work of Luce Irigaray. Irigaray’s doctoral thesis *Speculum de l’autre femme* (1974), which led to heavy criticism from mainstream Lacanians and her expulsion from Lacan’s *École Freudienne* at Vincennes, has been the object of much feminist criticism and debate. It was followed by a collection of texts, *Ce Sexe qui n’en est pas un*, which enacts the fluid, poetic, semi-theoretical writing described in *Speculum*. For a full understanding of Irigaray’s theories it is useful to read these texts together, however, this study will focus predominantly on *Ce Sexe* as it is in this text that we see the usefulness of the figure of the hysteric come to the fore in relation to Irigaray’s innovative model of feminine writing. Throughout much of her writing, Irigaray’s interest centres on imitative or mimetic relationships to the structure of language. It is the relationship which she sees between hysteria and her concept of

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<sup>72</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 102.

mimetic writing which is of particular interest in the discussion which follows that of *La Jeune Née*, to which this section now turns.

In *La Jeune Née*, Cixous writes ‘*Le “Continent Noir” n’est ni noir ni inexplorable: Il n’est encore inexploré que parce qu’on nous a fait croire qu’il était trop noire pour être explorable*’ (JN 125). According to Cixous, and as we have seen in the previous sections of this chapter, women have been taught, throughout history, to be ashamed, disgusted and fearful of their bodies and sexuality. Cixous and Clément’s project, in *La Jeune Née*, is to discover a ‘way out’ of our current system of thinking – Western discourse – which they believe is founded on the eradication of difference and the repression of the feminine. Throughout *La Jeune Née*, Cixous and Clément bring to light, and pull apart, the assumptions that have alienated woman from the ‘*le “Continent Noir”*’ of her own body and channelled female desire into the aberrant figures of the sorceress and the hysteric. This focus on the sorceress neatly ties *La Jeune Née* to the earlier discussions of the longstanding associations between femininity and witchcraft, and antiquated medical equations of hysteria with demoniacal possession. In Part One, ‘La Coupable’, Clément provides an analysis of ‘images of women’, specifically the sorceress and the hysteric, as exemplary female figures. In Part Two, ‘Sorties’, Cixous focuses on well-known theories of patriarchal ‘hierarchisation’ and imagined liberations from such structures. Part Three, ‘Échange’, is the transcript of an unpremeditated dialogue between Clément and Cixous which draws out the similarities and differences in their positions. Of the two, it is Cixous who ascribes the greatest effectiveness to the hysteric’s rebellion. For her, as we will see, the hysteric succeeds in disrupting the family structure, which Cixous equates with a disruption of the social structure. For Clément, however, the hysteric’s disruption is only temporary; it is always inevitably silenced by patriarchy (the family, the Law or the medical establishment).

Throughout the text, however, Cixous and Clément's shared focus is on the alternately oppressive, revolutionary, pathological, or privileged 'madness' which marginalisation engenders, and it is their re-conceptualisation of the figure of the hysteric as the archetypal woman which is of particular interest to this study. For the sake of coherence, this section first focuses on Cixous' critique of Western discourse and her call for women to write the body. It then discusses her concept of *écriture féminine*, its significance as a 'way out' of phallogentric discourse, and its links to the figure of the hysteric. This section then revisits Freud's case study of Dora, discussed earlier in this chapter, this time from the perspective of Cixous in 'Échange', who makes use of Dora to position the hysteric as a disruptive and potentially revolutionary female figure. However, attributing political potential to a figure of marginalisation – of madness and, essentially, incoherence – is necessarily problematic. The idea that hysteria is a form of bodily protest, a silent revolt against male power, has faced much criticism, not least from Clément, whose vision of the hysteric as 'à la fois contestataire et conservateur' (JN 13) forms the focus of the following discussion. The remainder of this section then turns to Irigaray's strategy of 'subversive mimesis', derived from hysteria, as a potential solution to the inefficacy of the figure of the hysteric as a political role model. Ultimately, this section exposes how the cultural construction of the Victorian figure of the hysteric, with its archaic associations of deviance, weakness, witchcraft and performance, has been re-appropriated as a figure of feminist revolt.

As the title of her essay, 'Sorties', suggests, Cixous is searching for a 'way out' of the endless hierarchical binary oppositions in which our current 'masculine' system of thinking is embedded. According to Cixous, these binary oppositions consistently return

to the fundamental couple of *homme/femme*, in which the ‘feminine’ side is invariably positioned as inferior.<sup>73</sup> Cixous writes:

La hiérarchisation soumet à l’homme toute l’organisation conceptuelle. Privilège mâle, qui se marque dans l’opposition dont il se soutient, entre *l’activité et la passivité*. Traditionnellement, on traite la question de la différence sexuelle en accouplant à l’opposition: activité/ passivité (JN 117).

For Cixous, this hierarchical system is ‘une constante absolue’ (JN 116) throughout history and the history of philosophy. Echoing Foucault, Cixous posits this dualistic system as a strategy of exclusion: ‘le mouvement par lequel chaque opposition se constitue pour faire sens est le mouvement par lequel le couple se détruit’ (JN 116).

Within this system, ‘la femme est toujours du côté de la passivité. [...] Ou la femme est passive; ou elle n’existe pas’ (JN 117-8). Cultural anthropologist Sherry Ortner usefully sums this up: ‘Woman is being identified with, or, if you will, seems to be a symbol of, something that every culture devalues, something that every culture defines as being at a lower order of existence than itself’.<sup>74</sup> That symbol, according to Ortner, is ‘nature’. She argues that ‘every culture implicitly recognises and asserts the distinction between the operation of nature [...] and the operation of culture’ – culture, here, is defined as human consciousness or its products (for example, technology) by means of which it attempts to assert control over nature – ‘and further, that the distinctiveness of culture rests precisely on the fact that it can under most circumstances transcend natural givens and turn them to its purpose’.<sup>75</sup> At some level, then, every culture asserts itself to be distinct from, and, crucially, more powerful than, nature. According to Ortner, that sense of distinctiveness and superiority rests precisely on the ‘ability to transform – to

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<sup>73</sup> At this point, Cixous is heavily indebted to Derrida, who had already discussed the implicit phallogentrism of the very structure of binary oppositions. See: Jacques Derrida, *L’écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1967).

<sup>74</sup> Ortner, Sherry B., ‘Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?’ *Feminist Studies* 1: 2 (Autumn 1972), 3-10 (p.10).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.



“socialise” and “culturalise” – nature’.<sup>76</sup> In terms of the primary texts, this will be drawn out most explicitly in Chapter 2, in relation to Darrieussecq’s narrator who is consistently aligned with (feminine) ‘nature’ as opposed to (masculine) ‘culture’.

As Ortner explains, ‘it all begins of course with the body, and the natural procreative functions specific to women alone’.<sup>77</sup> As we have seen so far, it is the ‘unruly’ female body which is the object of this ‘civilising’ mission. The first and fundamental purpose of systems of order is to repress ambiguity and contradiction. What the female body unleashes, with its physical flows of tears, vomit, excrement, sweat and blood (specifically menstrual blood), is the internal ambiguity and uncertainty of the ‘natural’ that logical systems attempt to deny or disguise.<sup>78</sup> To this end, for Cixous, the female body and sex-specific experience has always been appropriated and imaged by men: ‘nous nous sommes détournées de nos corps, qu’on nous a honteusement appris à ignorer, à frapper de la bête pudeur’ (*JN* 174). In order to “socialise” and “culturalise” nature’, to quote Ortner above, women have been taught to be ashamed of their bodies, to repress their natural drives and to police and conceal their natural bodily processes. As the following passage eloquently expresses, the female body and female experience have been repressed within history and culture:

Sa “propre” maison, son corps même, elle n’a pu l’habiter. [...] Elles ne sont pas allées explorer leur maison. Leur sexe les effraie encore maintenant. On a colonisé leur corps dont elles n’ont pas osé jouir. La femme a peur et dégoût de la femme. Contre les femmes ils ont commis le plus grand crime: ils les ont amenées, insidieusement, violemment, à haïr les femmes, à être leurs propres ennemis, à mobiliser leur immense puissance contre elles-mêmes, à être les exécutantes de leur virile besogne. Ils lui ont fait un anti-narcissisme! (*JN* 124).

I shall return to this passage at the end of this chapter, as it contains several ideas which will resurface throughout this study. For now, the idea that women’s ‘sexe les effraie’,

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>78</sup> See: Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l’horreur: essai sur l’abjection* (Paris: Points, 1980).

and that ‘la femme a peur et dégoût de la femme’, usefully links Cixous’ argument to what we have seen in the earlier sections of this chapter, which have explored how the female body, and female sexuality, have consistently been constructed as deviant, threatening and abject throughout medical, cultural and literary history.

This repressed femininity, however, has not been obliterated. According to Cixous, it lives on within the body, ‘en rêves, en corps mais tus, en silences, en révoltes aphones’ (*JN* 177). To release herself from this repression, and to subvert a notion of subjectivity which is both limited and destructive, woman must write her body: ‘Il faut que la femme écrive son corps, qu’elle invente la langue imprenable qui crève les cloisonnements, classes et rhétoriques, ordonnances et codes’ (*JN* 175) of the patriarchal symbolic. For Cixous, writing is an elsewhere which is not obliged to reproduce the hierarchical system which represses the feminine. She writes: ‘S’il y a un ailleurs qui peut échapper à la répétition infernale, c’est par là, où ça s’écrit, où ça rêve, où ça invente les nouveaux mondes’ (*JN* 132).

Cixous argues that an *écriture féminine* might formulate an order which does not rely on ‘*le meurtre de l’Autre*’ (*JN* 127) which she believes underlies Western discourse in which, Cixous argues, that which is designated as different, or other, is appropriated, devalued and excluded. This feminine writing practice is not strictly confined to women, but is the domain of both sexes.<sup>79</sup> Although Cixous argues that women, as a result of our relegation by the patriarchal system, are more likely to adopt a feminine position than men, she stresses that we all perpetually fluctuate between gender roles. As Susan Sellers remarks, this fluctuation involves: ‘sometimes assuming defensive,

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<sup>79</sup> Without entering into a full discussion of the complexities and contradictions of Cixous’ theory, it must be noted that Cixous characterises both men and women as alienated from the diversity of their sexuality in a patriarchal culture. Cixous claims that culture has privileged a certain idea of male power (the phallus), but has neglected the actual bodies and desires of men. By privileging the ‘masculine’ and repressing the ‘feminine’, patriarchal culture does violence to both men and women.

masculine postures that seek to close down, appropriate and control, at other times adopting a more open, feminine response willing to take risks, and at other times combining elements of each'.<sup>80</sup> In contrast to the masculine approach to the other, in which 'l'autre n'est là que pour être réapproprié, repris, détruit en tant qu'autre' (*JN* 130), this new writing would entail a feminine relation to the other, in which both self and other can exist: 'un type d'échange où chacun conserverait *l'autre* en vie et en différence' (*JN* 145). Cixous posits bisexuality as a recognition of plurality; a simultaneous presence within the subject of both masculinity and femininity. Woman, in particular, benefits from and opens up – through her capacity to accept both self and other – this bisexuality 'qui n'annule pas les différences, mais les anime, les poursuit, les ajoute' (*JN* 156). This relationship between bisexuality and writing allows a re-appropriation of corporeality. Woman is physically present in her text, she materialises her thoughts, she signifies them with her body.<sup>81</sup> In her wish to avoid masculine systems of classification, Cixous warns against the danger of attempting to theorize an *écriture féminine*, a process which she believes will inevitably misrepresent or eliminate its essential features: 'Impossible à présent de *définir* une pratique féminine de l'écriture, d'une impossibilité qui se maintiendra car on ne pourra jamais *théoriser* cette pratique, l'enfermer, la coder, ce qui ne signifie pas qu'elle n'existe pas' (*JN* 169).

The importance of *écriture féminine*, for Cixous, is precisely this capacity to challenge the present modes of representation and perception. If the solidarity of Western discourse and the oppression of women in language were brought to light, and hence threatened, 'toutes les histoires seraient à raconter autrement, l'avenir serait incalculable', and the opportunity to transform 'le fonctionnement de toute société' (*JN*

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<sup>80</sup> Sellers, *Hélène Cixous*, p. 4.

<sup>81</sup> This passionate return to the body, in particular the relationship to the mother, has led to charges of essentialism. See: Moi (1988).

179) would be presented. Cixous underlines that the aim is not to usurp man's position of dominance, however; 'il ne s'agit non plus de s'approprier leurs instruments, leurs concepts, leurs places, ni de se vouloir en leur position de maîtriser' (*JN* 177), as this would merely replace one hierarchy with another. Rather, the objective should be to appropriate the dominant position in order to destroy it. She writes: 'Maintenant je-femme vais faire sauter la Loi: éclatement désormais possible, et inéluctable; et qu'il se fasse, tout de suite, dans la langue' (*JN* 177).

It is through *écriture féminine*, then, that women will reclaim their bodies. As Cixous writes: 'en s'écrivant, la Femme fera retour à ce corps qu'on lui a plus que confisqué, dont on a fait l'inquiétant étranger dans la place, le malade ou le mort, et qui si souvent est le mauvais compagnon, cause et lieu des inhibitions' (*JN* 179). This 'inquiétant étranger', 'le malade ou le mort', evokes the famous images of Freud and Charcot's desperate hysterics, alternately photographed in the midst of a violent hysterical attack, or in a state of passive delirium.<sup>82</sup> Just as Freud, according to Cixous, believed that 'dans la femme survit le passé refoulé; la femme est, plus qu'une autre, vouée à la réminiscence' (*JN* 13); for Cixous, and Clément, as we will see, it is the hysteric who incarnates the reinscription of the repressed feminine. The hysteric is able to repeat 'dans le registre de symptômes, toute l'histoire inscrite dans les mythologies féminines' (*JN* 12). In the figure of the hysteric, then, Cixous sees a disruptive, revolutionary potential. According to Cixous, these women are living proof that the femininity repressed in patriarchal culture is seething beneath woman's outwardly conforming exterior. She writes: 'Elles n'ont pas sublimé. Heureusement: elles ont sauvé leur peau, leur énergie. Elles n'ont pas travaillé à aménager l'impasse des vies

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<sup>82</sup> In particular, a young girl named Augustine, who was photographed during each of Charcot's four stages of a hysterical attack. These pictures were exhibited as the prototypical example. These images are reproduced in Hustvedt, pp. 172-184.

sans avenir. Elles ont habité furieusement ces corps somptueux' (*JN* 176). The hysteric's bodily symptoms, according to Cixous, act out a rebellion. She describes them as 'admirables hystériques':

qui ont fait subir à Freud tant de voluptueux et inavouables moments, bombardant sa statue mosaïque de leurs charnels et passionnés mots-de-corps, le hantant de leurs inaudibles et foudroyantes dénonciations [...]. Celles qui en un seul mot du corps ont inscrit l'immense vertige d'une histoire détachée comme une flèche de toute l'histoire des hommes (*JN* 176).

The hysteric does not simply refuse the positioning of the body in Freudian thought, she disputes and destabilises it through her bodily speech. Those hysterics exhibiting specifically 'sexual' symptoms, discussed earlier, who Cixous describes as submitting Freud to 'voluptueux et inavouables moments', were, in Cixous' eyes, unleashing an underlying, repressed female desire which has been culturally forbidden throughout history. For Cixous, the hysteric's power is precisely the force of this repression. For her, when *The Repressed* of culture and society return, 'c'est d'un retour explosif, absolument ruinant, renversant, d'une force encore jamais libérée, à la mesure de la plus formidable des répressions', as, by the end of this 'époque du Phallus', women 'auront été ou anéanties ou portées à la plus haute et violente incandescence' (*JN* 175-76).

It is Dora, in particular, whom Cixous regards as 'indomptable' (*JN* 176). In 'Échange', Cixous provides a reading of the Dora case which positions the hysteric, and Dora in particular, as 'la femme-type' (*JN* 284) in all her force. As discussed earlier, Freud's reading saw Dora slap Herr K. because he used the same words, 'I get nothing from my wife', to seduce Dora as he had spoken to his children's governess before 'he had made violent love to her'.<sup>83</sup> Cixous proposes an alternative reading which links Dora, her mother and the governesses. She writes:

Aucune femme ne tolère d'entendre dire, même si c'est à propos de l'autre femme: 'Ma femme, une femme qui est ma femme peut être rien.' C'est un

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<sup>83</sup> Freud, *Dora*, p. 97.

meurtre. Or Dora, entendant cela, sachant que la bonne a entendu ça, voit la femme mourir, sa mère, la bonne; elle voit un massacre de femmes fait pour lui faire place à elle. Mais elle sait qu'elle va être à son tour massacrée (*JN* 281).

As Cixous points out, the Dora case is punctuated by women being declared 'rien'. Both Herr K. and Dora's father say that of their wives, and, as Jane Gallop comments, 'what is true of the wives (mothers) is even more explicit for the two governesses'.<sup>84</sup> Drawing reference from Levi-Strauss' work on the structures of kinship, Cixous implies that there is no difference between the institutionalised exchange of women which forms the basis of society and the power play of which Dora is the victim. Here, the female members of both families occupy the same positions in relation to the two men (wife, mother, daughter, governesses); all women's bodies are either exchanged or rejected. In this light, Dora's situation is representative of the foundation of the social institution. What is significant in the case of Dora, is that she refuses this identification with these women who are exchanged and subsequently rejected. By terminating her treatment, she thwarts the 'massacre' involved in the exchange of women *and* Freud's patriarchal perspective of her situation. For Cixous, what is most striking about Dora, then, is that in spite of her powerlessness, indeed '(grâce à) cette impuissance, c'est une gosse qui arrive à bloquer tous les petits moulins adultères qui tournent autour d'elle et ils tombent en panne les uns après les autres' (*JN* 274). Dora's rejection of femininity, which signifies 'rien', leads Cixous to regard her as 'celle qui résiste au système, celle qui ne peut pas supporter que la Famille et la société soient fondées sur le corps des femmes, sur des corps méprisés, rejetés, humiliés une fois employés' (*JN* 283). Dora thus epitomises what Cixous posits as the subversive power of the hysteric:

Et cette fille qui, comme toutes les hystériques, était privée de la possibilité de dire ce qu'elle percevait en direct [...] elle a eu quand même la force de le faire savoir [...] Oui, l'hystérique, avec sa façon d'interroger les autres parce que si elle arrive à descendre les hommes qui l'entourent, c'est en les interrogeant, en leur

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<sup>84</sup> Jane Gallop, 'Keys to Dora', in *Dora's Case*, ed. by Bernheimer and Kahane, p. 216.

renvoyant sans arrêt l'image qui vraiment les castre, dans la mesure où ils ont voulu imposer une puissance illégitime de rapt et de violence. L'hystérique, à mes yeux, c'est la femme-type dans toute sa force (*JN* 284).

Instead of discarding the traditional identification of the woman with the hysteric, then, Cixous valorises it in order to posit the hysteric as a contemporary symbolic configuration of female power. Cixous' focus is on the energy of the hysteric's repressed desire. For her, 'l'hystérique, ce n'est pas seulement quelqu'un qui a la parole coupée, quelqu'un dont le corps parle' (*JN* 284-85). Her power stems from 'l'immensité de son désir' (*JN* 285), which gives her the ability to work changes. No longer a symbol of woman's fragility, incoherence and marginalisation, the hysteric becomes a figure that is capable of disrupting and demolishing existing (patriarchal) social structures.

Clément, on the other hand, ultimately deems it necessary to leave the figure of the hysteric behind. Nevertheless, her first move is, likewise, to underscore the innovative force of the hysteric's desire and her disruptive potential. In 'La Coupable', Clément surveys several images of women who have pervaded Western thought; to the figure of the hysteric, she adds that of the sorceress. As we have already seen, accusations of witchcraft have pervaded cultural constructions of femininity for centuries. For Clément, the sorceress embodies a fantastical past which has been repressed by patriarchal culture. The sorceress, like the hysteric, is characterised by ambiguity. She is at once threatening and soothing; she has the power to both heal and destroy. She is unruly, destructive and magical; triumphant, beautiful and terrifying. She is the anomaly, yet she invokes a shared, feminine history. The sorceress 'peut ensuite rêver la Nature, et donc, la concevoir, qui incarne la réinscription des traces du paganisme refoulé par le christianisme triomphante' (*JN* 13). The hysteric 'qui vit son corps au passé, qui le transforme en théâtre pour des scènes oubliées' (*JN* 13), bears witness to a lost childhood that survives in suffering. Both figures embody the return of

what is repressed by the masculine, and thus represent a threat to the coherent functioning of the patriarchal economy.

The roles of the sorceress and the hysteric are undoubtedly anti-establishment. Their symptoms ‘révoltent et secouent ceux pour qui ils sont faits, le public, le groupe, les hommes, les autres’ (JN 13). Whilst the hysteric ‘défait les liens familiaux [...] suscite la magie dans l’apparente raison’, the sorceress goes against the church: ‘elle avorte les femmes, favorise l’amour non conjugal, aménage l’invivable espace d’un christianisme étouffante’ (JN 13). However, Clément doubts the effectiveness of their rebellion. For her, their roles are ultimately conservative. Despite their disruption of the accepted cultural conventions and the introduction of disorder into the well-regulated unfolding of daily life, every sorceress ‘finit par être détruite, et rien ne s’inscrit d’elle que les traces mythiques’, just as every hysteric ‘finit par habituer les autres à ses symptômes, et la famille se referme autour d’elle, qu’elle soit curable ou incurable’ (JN 14). The hysteric and the sorceress, then, both inevitably meet their end.

According to Clément, both the sorceress and the hysteric ‘marquent à leur façon la fin d’une norme, le terme d’un clivage’ (JN 14). This split marks the edge of acceptable configurations, configurations which occupy the imaginary zone which every culture has for what it excludes. However, this ‘imaginary zone’ nevertheless constitutes an allocated *place* for what is excluded. In which sense, the excluded remains within the totality of the structure, as a designated outside, but still figuring as part of discourse, consequently remaining subject to the power of the system. For this reason the dangerous, demoniac, disruptive hysteric is ultimately ineffective. In support of this argument, Clément invokes Claude Lévi-Strauss’ attempt to define the function of anomaly. In all societies, there are individuals and groups who do not *fit* in the symbolic order but find themselves segregated or marginalised. Regardless of their social origin, these marginal people are ‘non-situés dans l’ordre symbolique, *du point de*



*vue culturel'* (JN 17). They may be represented in a symbolic system, and indeed, fulfil a function in it, but do not participate in their own inscription in the system, that is, they are not *agents* of representation. In describing their symbolic function, Lévi-Strauss observes:

A ceux-là, le groupe demande et même impose de figurer certaines formes de compromis irréalisables sur le plan collectif, de feindre des transitions imaginaires, d'incarner des synthèses incompatibles.<sup>85</sup>

As 'abnormal' tendencies are repressed in 'normal' individuals, the symbolic function Lévi-Strauss discusses is the compensatory and calming role played by abnormality; the 'exceptional' behaviour of certain individuals assures the 'normality' of the group. More than any others, according to Clément, it is women who embody this group of anomalies, showing the flaws in the system as a whole. Or rather, 'elles incarnent *aussi* l'anomalie, elles qui sont porteuses par ailleurs de la plus grande norme, celle de la reproduction' (JN 18). Of the sorceress and hysteric, Clément writes: 'Ils sont en quelque sorte la caution qui verrouille les systèmes symboliques, comblant le jeu qui peut exister de l'un à l'autre, effectuant dans l'imaginaire les figurations impossibles *dans le temps présent*' (JN 20). The very fact that they can be named, despite their exclusion, is evidence of their integration into the system of the whole; thus their position is not subversive, on the contrary, it is constitutive. She writes:

L'analyse que je fais de l'hystérie passé par une réflexion sur la place des déviants dans l'ensemble social, qui ne sont pas seulement les hystériques: mais aussi les clowns, les baladins, les fous, tout plein de gens bizarres. Tous occupent des places de contestation prévues par toutes les cultures, ça ne change pas les structures, au contraire, cela les conforte (JN 285-6).

However, it is not only this, in Clément's eyes, which subsumes the hysteric's effectiveness. A further problem resides in the inability of the sorceress and hysteric to transcribe their experiences from the Imaginary into the Symbolic. She writes: 'les

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<sup>85</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss cited in *JN*, p. 18.

symptômes hystériques, inscrits métaphoriquement sur le corps, sont éphémères, énigmatiques, et ne constituent un langage que par analogie' (*JN* 22). It is precisely because her figuration remains decidedly individual that Clément believes the hysteric fails to effect any lasting transformation; since hysterical symptoms are a matter of individual symbolism and not directly communicable, the culture cannot take them into account and make them an object of transmission. While hysteria might temporarily disrupt the social order, for Clément, it is ultimately redundant as its language is an imaginary one in excess of symbolic expression; it thus fails to permanently change the enduring patriarchal imperatives of the established social order. Hysteria, Clément argues: 'Ça mime, ça métaphorise la destruction, mais la famille se reconstitue autour. Comme quand tu as jeté une pierre dans l'eau, l'eau se ride, mais redevient lisse' (*JN* 286).

To this end, Clément regards hysteria as a celebration; a visual performance of repressed femininity before an audience of men. However, this celebration ultimately provides a return to regular rhythm. To support her argument Clément tells the tale of women in the Mezzogiorno who can be cured of imaginary spider bites only by performing a collective ceremonial dance. To the music of the village orchestra, the bitten woman re-enacts the moment of the spider bite, in this case; '[le] moment affectif où un premier amour avait été déçu. Chaque crise permettait de faire retour à l'amour perdu' (*JN* 40). In this way, the hysteric is understood to be driven by unsatisfied desire; a desire which cannot be expressed in the patriarchal symbolic system. Such a ritual thus functions as a substitute for the hysteric's desire:

Le plaisir, c'est pendant la crise qu'il a lieu, comme substitut de l'orgasme, mimé sous toutes les formes de déplacement, placé dans les torsions des mains, dans les acrobaties, dans les membres noués, dans les arcs tendus; et la résolution de la crise, c'est la fatigue, l'alanguissement, l'immobilité silencieuse (*JN* 43).

After expelling the foreign body, the venom (female desire) through a forced dance, the hysteric is 'cured'. This 'cure' facilitates the hysteric's peaceful reinsertion into patriarchal society:

Rentrer dans la vie sociale, quitter le mode 'naturel', la merveilleuse liberté animale et désirante, quitter la musique et la danse, et leur temps spécifique [...] c'est quitter bien sûr le risque, le danger du corps enfin déchaîné, c'est se fixer à nouveau, sous un toit, dans une maison, dans l'entourage de relations parentales, conjugales, c'est retourner au monde des hommes: la fête est bien finie (JN 44).

Although Clément appears to suggest their revolutionary potential, through her assertion that the sorceress and the hysteric 'montrent la fête dans leur corps, accomplissant les retournements impossibles, donnant à voir le non-représentable, figures de l'inversion', (JN 46) this is swiftly undermined through her reiteration of Lévi-Strauss' observation that: 'Les fêtes jouent la vie sociale à l'envers, non parce qu'elle a jadis été telle, mais parce qu'elle n'a jamais été, et ne pourra jamais être autrement' (JN 45). Although the hysteric and the sorceress *appear* to exhibit impossible configurations and escape patriarchal definitions, then, in fact they merely *perform* what cannot be represented in the closed space of the Imaginary; that which is securely withheld from symbolic transmission.

In her search for a solution, Clément also turns to a notion of bisexuality. For Clément, the hysteric can be compared to bisexual woman. She writes: 'Elle est, dit Freud, à la fois "femme" et "homme" dans les grandes attaques hystériques' (JN 110). Clément underscores the revolutionary potential of such a bisexuality, which she believes has the power to anticipate the impossible, the impermissible, whilst asserting that these are the women who are simultaneously the most imprisoned. For Clément, then, both the sorceress and the hysteric act as metaphors for prisoners of patriarchal omnipotence, but as yet neither one possesses truly liberating powers. 'For Clément, they are 'des figures périmées' (JN 110-11). She writes; 'je les ai bien aimées, mais elles n'existent plus' (JN 110-11).

So far, then, this section has discussed the re-appropriation of the figure of the hysteric by Cixous and Clément, it has discussed their respective arguments for and against the usefulness of the hysteric as a revolutionary figure. It has become clear that the hysteric undoubtedly possesses, in Cixous' words, 'une certaine force dérangeante' (JN 289). The problem resides, then, in translating this force from metaphor to political act. As Clément writes, it is only 'quand il y a passage à l'acte symbolique' that this force is *not* shut up again (JN 287). It is this idea that it is through writing, the act of transcribing the disordered body and making of it an object of transmission, that the figure of the hysteric is rendered productive which is central to the analyses carried out across the following chapters. At this point, however, the work of Irigaray – which makes use of hysteria as the *inspiration* for a new, subversive, writing practice – can provide a potential solution to the problem, raised by Clément, of translating hysteria's rebellious symbolism into a productive force for change. It is this which the remainder of this section will focus on.

Irigaray likewise advocates a new practice of feminine writing, which she calls a *parler-femme*, as a means of escaping the patriarchal parameters of Western discourse. She, too, critiques Western phallogentric discourse for its hierarchical structure of binary oppositions, which she believes signifies 'une assignation pour [la femme] à la passivité' (CS 25). For Irigaray, 'la sexualité féminine a toujours été pensée à partir de paramètres masculins' (CS 23). She begins *Ce Sexe* with a critique of the Freudian theory of sexual difference, which she argues is based upon the *visibility* of difference. In such a 'specular' economy, the feminine is necessarily described 'comme défaut, atrophie, revers du seul sexe qui monopolise la valeur: le sexe masculin' (CS 68). As Irigaray argues, the female sex organ represents 'l'horreur du rien à voir' (CS 25).

This point is crucial for Irigaray's argument that, in our current system of thinking, woman is outside representation. Woman is the negative required by the male

subject's 'specularization', according to Irigaray: 'le féminin est défini comme le complément nécessaire au fonctionnement de la sexualité masculine, et plus souvent, comme un négatif qui l'assure d'une auto-représentation phallique sans défaillance possible' (CS 68). 'Specularization', meaning the necessity of postulating a subject which is capable of *reflecting* on its own being, is, according to Irigaray, a basic assumption underlying Western philosophical discourse. Such a discourse, Irigaray argues, is incapable of representing femininity as anything other than the negative of its own reflection. Thus, Irigaray believes, 'c'est bien le discours philosophique qu'il faut questionner, et déranger, en tant qu'il fait la loi à tout autre, qu'il constitue le discours des discours' (CS 72). In order to disrupt this system, she considers it necessary to discover 'ce qui fait la puissance de sa systématité, la force de sa cohésion, la ressource de ses déploiements, la généralité de sa loi et de sa valeur' (CS 72). According to Irigaray, discourse only functions properly as long as woman's role (as the negative of the masculine) remains concealed by the system of discourse. As Irigaray affirms, 'l'important étant, bien sûr, qu'on [la femme] ne sache pas pourquoi, par qui, et que cela soit porté au compte de la "nature"' (CS 70). In order to subvert this system, then, it is necessary to 'rouvrir' the figures of philosophical discourse in order to pry out of them 'les emprunts au/ du féminin, leur faire "rendre" ce qu'elles doivent au féminin' (CS 72). What Irigaray calls for is an innovative interpretive reading of discourse which would seek to discover what it does not articulate: '*ses silences*' (CS 73).

In order to achieve this, Irigaray sees only one path; 'celui qui est historiquement assigné au féminin: *le mimétisme*' (CS 73). Diane Chisholm, in her essay 'Irigaray's Hysteria', defines women's hysterical mimicry as 'a symptom of the

way discourse functions differentially for the sexes'.<sup>86</sup> She states; 'that women must mime discourse rather than speak it directly is the logical and structural condition of a language system affording only one sex positive representation'.<sup>87</sup> The problem of a direct feminine challenge to the system of discourse, however, is that it would necessarily entail speaking as a (masculine) subject. In order to be intelligible, woman would have to speak *as* man. This would merely postulate 'un rapport à l'intelligible qui maintient l'indifférence sexuelle' (CS 74). Instead, Irigaray proposes, 'Il s'agit d'assumer délibérément, ce rôle. Ce qui est déjà retourner en affirmation une subordination, et, de ce fait, commencer à la déjouer' (CS 73-74). Woman must deliberately assume the feminine role in order to subvert it. For Irigaray, to play with mimesis presents the possibility of recovering the place of woman's exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. She writes:

C'est de resoumettre – en tant que du côté du 'sensible', de la 'matière' [...] – à des 'idées', notamment d'elle, élaborés dans/ par une logique masculine, mais pour faire 'apparaître', par un effet de répétition ludique, ce qui devait rester occulté: le recouvrement d'une possible opération du féminin dans le langage (CS 74).

Irigaray thus accepts what she regards as an unavoidable position of mimicry, and doubles it back on itself in order to expose and undermine such a position. Knowingly assuming this position of mimicry, then, will *undo* the phallogentric discourse which suppresses the feminine precisely by *overdoing* this very suppression. This strategy is easily linked to hysteria, as Irigaray's mimicry becomes a conscious performance of the hysterical (mimetic) position assigned to women under patriarchy. Just as the hysteric exaggerates her oppression in a staged bodily performance, Irigaray's strategic mimesis exaggerates women's oppression in language in a staged performance of male

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<sup>86</sup> Diane Chisholm, 'Irigaray's Hysteria', in *Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought*, ed. by Burke et al. (New York: Colombia University Press, 1994), p. 265.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

discourse. Irigaray regards hysteria as ‘un lieu privilège de la garde, mais “en latence”, en “souffrance”, de ce qui ne parle pas’ (CS 134). For her, hysteria speaks in the mode of ‘une gestualité paralysée’, in a speech ‘impossible et aussi interdite’ (CS 134). The drama of hysteria, for Irigaray, is that it is trapped between this gestural system and a language that has been learned within the family, education and society; a language ‘qui ne fait absolument pas continuité, ni, bien sûr, métaphore, avec les “mouvements” de son désir’ (CS 134). Both mutism and mimicry, then, are the domain of hysteria: the hysteric ‘se tait, et en même temps, elle mime’ (CS 134). Recalling earlier discussions of hysteria in the previous sections of this chapter, Irigaray notes, ‘[en] mimant-reproduisant un langage qui n’est pas le sien, le langage masculin, [l’hystérique] le caricature, le déforme: elle “ment”, elle “trompe”, ce qui est toujours attribué aux femmes’ (CS 134).

Irigaray’s *parler-femme* would link the gestural language of the hysteric, ‘cette parole du désir – qui, actuellement, ne sont réparables que sous forme de symptômes et de pathologie’ (CS 134-35), and an intelligible verbal language. Irigaray recognises that hysteria is at once a pathology and an expression of a repressed feminine ‘truth’. She writes: ‘cette “pathologie” est ambiguë, parce qu’elle signifie aussi bien la réserve d’autre chose. Autrement dit, il y a toujours, dans l’hystérie, à la fois une puissance en réserve et une puissance paralysée’ (CS 136). To return to the problem faced by Cixous and Clément, then, of translating the hysteric’s force from metaphor to political act, Irigaray posits hysteria, not as a definitive model, but as ‘une réserve culturelle encore à venir’ (CS 136). For Irigaray, the hysteric provides the *strategy* opening the way for a countercultural production, in the form of a *parler-femme*, which creates a space for feminine self-representation. Through this strategy Irigaray hopes to harness the disruptive potential of hysteria, the truth behind its bodily language (its expression of female desire), without resigning woman to its position of pathological silence. The

trick of this, however, as we will see in Chapter 2, relies on *how* her subversive mimesis is *read*. It is only as long as it is easily recognisable as mimesis, that it holds any real effectiveness. As soon as it slips back into straightforward re-iteration, it loses its destructive power and ultimately reinforces the very position it strives to evade. Thus the question of the political efficacy of Irigaray's subversive mimicry comes to hinge on the power of the new context provided by woman's writing which will be explored throughout this study.

This section, then, has explored the re-appropriation of the figure of the hysteric in second-wave French feminist writing. It has discussed Cixous' call for women to write the body in order to bring it back into the sphere of representation, and discussed her vision of the hysteric as a heroine of female rebellion alongside Clément's reluctance to endorse such a symbol of woman's silence as a feminist role model. Finally, it has explored Irigaray's use of hysteria as the inspiration for a *parler-femme* which attempts to harness the hysteric's power and leave behind her ineffectiveness. In their respective attempts to subvert the phallogocentric system of masculine discourse, they have succeeded in de-constructing the various mechanisms which have always excluded women; however, they have arguably not managed to escape reducing woman to a form of female essence.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, their re-conceptualisations of the hysteric represent an important attempt to reclaim a voice for women against a history of women's social and sexual submission to the masculine. In order to begin the exploration undertaken in the remainder of this thesis of how these innovative concepts of a feminine writing – each tied, in varying ways, to the figure of the hysteric – have impacted women's self-representations, and how writing the hysterical body has succeeded, to a certain extent, in rendering it productive, the following section will

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<sup>88</sup> See: Moi, 'Representation of Patriarchy', pp. 181-99.



introduce a contemporaneous text which deals with the reclamation of a female body wracked by hysterical symptoms that the narrator gradually discovers to be the result of her oppression within a patriarchal society.

### **Conclusions: Marie Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire***

*Les Mots pour le dire* (1975) was written in the midst of this new call for women to write their bodies. Cardinal's text was one of the most successful novels of the 1970s in France; it topped the best-sellers' list for five months and it was awarded the *Prix Littré* (a prize for medical art books) in 1976. By 1993 it had been turned into a film, translated into seventeen languages, and an estimated two million copies had been sold. In terms of this study, what is particularly interesting about this text is that it bridges the gap between the experimental, avant-garde writings of proponents of *écriture féminine*, such as Cixous and Irigaray, and women writers sharing similar preoccupations but writing in a more realistic vein. Although Cardinal deplored the elitism of feminist writers and theorists of *écriture féminine* – she believed they wrote for a specific, intellectual elite divorced from the everyday reality of women's lives – if we consider Cixous' call for women to transcribe their bodies to break away from the taboos surrounding female bodily representation, then Cardinal's own preoccupation with the inscription of female bodily experience in *Les Mots* certainly reflects some of the theoretical underpinnings of *écriture féminine*. Although *Les Mots* cannot be considered a straightforward example of *écriture féminine*, then, we will see throughout this section that it can be said to demonstrate some of its qualities.

This section will position Cardinal's text as a starting point for the evolution of the literary figure of the hysteric examined across the following chapters. It will outline

how this text brought together a number of areas of interest highlighted in the previous sections; namely the view of hysteria as the result of an oppressive social role and the reclamation of the female body in writing. It will flag up the elements of Cardinal's writing project which can be seen in the primary texts in this study, in order to facilitate discussions of how these 1970s themes and concerns have been appropriated, developed, or undermined by the women writers of today. Of particular importance will be Cardinal's unrelenting focus on the female body, the experimental narrative strategies (reminiscent of the techniques endorsed by proponents of *écriture féminine*) employed by Cardinal to express the disordered body and fragmented subjectivity of the hysteric, the text as identity quest, the *mise en scène* of writing a means to autonomy, understanding and a platform for political action, and the central importance of the mother-daughter relationship. It does not aim to provide an exhaustive analysis of the text, but to establish a basis for points of comparison throughout the following chapters in which specific examples from Cardinal's text will be drawn out where relevant. Finally, it will draw together all of the issues considered so far in preparation to begin the analysis of Nobécourt's *La Démangeaison* and *La Conversation* in Chapter 1.

*Les Mots* offers an account of the protagonist's seven year psychoanalytic treatment, working through her hysteria in order to find a resolution. The narrator recounts her fall into 'madness'; during which what she calls *la chose* manifests itself in the narrator's perpetual bleeding. She first consults a gynaecologist, who diagnoses a fibroid uterus and suggests an operation, which she agrees to and then refuses. She is then sent to a psychiatric hospital where she is given medication which numbs her senses and dulls her mind. The narrator finally revolts and escapes. In order to take her destiny into her own hands, she seeks help from a psychoanalyst. During the course of her psychoanalysis she evokes her childhood, her adolescence, and above all her relationship with her mother, which proves to be the source of her *folie*. In contrast to

later texts discussed in this study (in particular, Nobécourt's *La Conversation*) in which the writing style itself can be classed as 'hysterical', Cardinal's text follows a realist style and provides resolution at the end of the narrative, which sees the narrator pass from the personal to the political as her self-development is placed alongside the radical political changes afoot in French society around May '68.

Despite the echoes of *écriture féminine* in the aspects of Cardinal's writing project listed above, it is not Cixous or Irigaray's empowered hysteric which the reader finds in the early pages of Cardinal's text, but a story reminiscent of Clément's perception of hysteria as pathology. The opening pages see Cardinal's narrator crouched on the floor bleeding excessively, unable to leave the house, let alone express herself or write:

Entre le bidet et la baignoire, c'était là qu'elle était le mieux quand elle n'arrivait plus à maîtriser la chose intérieure. [...] Recroquevillée, les talons contre les fesses, les bras serrant fort les genoux contre la poitrine, les ongles si enfoncés dans les paumes de ses mains qu'ils avaient fini par y creuser des plaies, la tête ballottant d'avant en arrière ou sur les côtés, trop lourde, le sang et la transpiration qui coulaient.<sup>89</sup>

What is immediately evident is that this hysteric is not poised for rebellion, but broken and silenced. Her body is not evoked in the celebratory terms advocated by proponents of *écriture féminine*, but in terms of abjection, fear, shame and vulnerability. The narrator's symptoms cannot be said to offer an alternative form of feminine language, but do, as Kathryn Robson remarks, 'point back to unspoken, often unknown, feminine traumatic experiences of the past'.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, the narrator's incessant menstrual bleeding is the result of her internalisation of her mother's wish to miscarry. The narrator's *folie*, then, is a 'madness' rooted in the psychological trauma of the problematic mother-daughter relationship, but made visible and visceral as it is wholly played out through

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<sup>89</sup> Cardinal, *Les Mots*, p. 17.

<sup>90</sup> Robson, *Wounds*, p. 42.

(hysterical) bodily symptoms. As Robson points out, Cardinal's text 'invites us not to consider the blood, the body, purely as symptom'; it 'urges us to reread the significance of the (female) body within the text', as the blood the narrator sheds is gendered (menstrual) blood.<sup>91</sup> The narrator's bleeding marks her identity as a woman, but its hysterical nature represents her difficulty in assuming this identity. In typical 1970s fashion, the text is first and foremost an identity quest. The narrative is structured as a voyage of self-discovery, as the narrator unearths, one by one, the repressions which have fragmented her identity. Whereas Cixous attempts to reposition hysteria as empowering, the beginning of Cardinal's text sees the narrator's hysteria subsume her autonomy rather than facilitate expression. It is only through analysis that the narrator recovers, by assimilating her past into a coherent narrative. The structure of this narrative echoes the psychoanalytic process in the sense that each repression uncovered is explained in terms of its significance to the identity quest. However, its significance in terms of the future development of the narrator's analysis is left aside, inviting the reader's identification via the impression of participating in each stage of the narrator's analysis.

The image of a woman suffering from unstoppable menstrual bleeding also introduces the narrator's troubled relationship with her own body. Most striking is the split between her self and 'la chose intérieure' which takes over her body, introducing what we will see to be a constitutive theme in women's writing, that of the divided self. Cardinal's narrative can be considered a textual performance of this divided self in several ways. The most explicit feature is the narrative's division into two parts; the first dealing with the reclamation of the narrator's body and the second focussing on the construction of her subjectivity. This thematic split is accompanied by the recurrent

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p.43.

alternation between past and present, creating a textual rhythm which reflects not only the psychoanalytic process but the rhythms of the body. In *Autrement Dit*, a text which is in many ways a companion to *Les Mots*, Cardinal underlines her vision of writing and its relationship to the body: ‘Tout en moi est mélange de vagues et de règles, [...] les femmes sont vagues et réglées’.<sup>92</sup> *Les Mots* is predicated on the writing of these biological rhythms, a writing which consistently returns the reader to the specificity of the female body via an experimental form which is reminiscent of that endorsed by proponents of *écriture féminine*. The idea that woman is both ‘vague et réglée’ will become particularly important throughout this study, in which we will see many of the female narrators struggle with patriarchal condemnations of a female body which is at once defined by ‘la plus grande norme’ (*JN* 18) of the reproductive function, and the threatening ‘unruliness’ it simultaneously engenders.

If the fragmentation of the narrative line, the *va et vient* of its repeated splits and alternations, echoes the *va et vient* between the narrator and *la chose* which subsumes her autonomy and the natural rhythms of the female body, it also performs the struggle between the restrictive social codes which imprison the narrator and the subversion of those social codes discussed in the earlier sections of this chapter. A fragmented narrative, achieved through the implementation of a sense of motion, is a staple feature of Brisac and de Peretti’s texts in Chapter 3, in which we will see various narrative strategies employed to perform the split between body and mind, past and present, and anorexic and cured narrator. In Chapters 1 and 2, each narrator experiences a rediscovery of sexuality which is reminiscent of *Les Mots*, in which the recovery of Cardinal’s narrator sees her explore a new-found physical freedom. She describes ‘[la] joie immense’ her rediscovery of ‘ce jouet extraordinaire’ (her body) provides as she

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<sup>92</sup> Cardinal, Marie, *Autrement Dit* (Paris: Grasset, 1977), p. 22.

enters into sexual relationships and rediscovers pleasure.<sup>93</sup> The narrator's self-discovery thus involves a revaluing of her body and a move beyond the social and familial constraints which previously separated her from it.

Although the narrator only learns what it means to be a woman through the process of analysis, it is through writing that she is able to give her new understanding of her female bodily identity a political meaning. The explicit *mise en scène* of writing is an enduring feature in each of the narratives discussed in the following chapters. During analysis, Cardinal's narrator must tell the truth in order to be successfully cured; in writing, the narrator is able to invent possibilities beyond the limits of her experience. Although writing does not replace analysis, it facilitates a newfound autonomy by enabling her to situate her experiences within the socio-cultural context which mediated her relation to her body and her subjectivity. To combine the private and the political, the events of May '68 are explicitly mentioned in the final chapter, which consists of one sentence: 'Quelques jours plus tard, c'était Mai '68'.<sup>94</sup> This suggests a parallel between the personal struggle of Cardinal's narrator and the events affecting society as a whole. As Carolyn Durham remarks, this ending 'guarantees that we will recall reading far less the story of the private analytic cure of one individual than the political narrative of the social transformation of the situation of women'.<sup>95</sup>

Above all, criticism of Cardinal's text has tended to focus on her portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship. This relationship, a staple feature of 1970s women's writing projects, is often presented as highly ambivalent. This ambivalence can be traced back to contradictory social constructions of the mother's body as at once a figure of feminine plenitude, power and jouissance, and that which is aligned with the

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<sup>93</sup> Cardinal, *Les Mots*, p.102.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>95</sup> Carolyn A. Durham, *The Contexture of Feminism: Marie Cardinal and Multicultural Literacy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), p. 253.

horror and revulsion of the abject. A similar ambivalence was recreated in the polarisation of 1970s feminist debates surrounding the mother-daughter relationship, which tended to be seen as a source of creativity or a key factor in the oppression of women (as the relationship through which this oppression was transmitted). If Cixous' work can be aligned with the former – as, for her, the mother-daughter relationship should be viewed metaphorically, and in relation to writing which is posited as giving birth to oneself, transmitting the unsayable on behalf of others and drawing attention to their plight – then Irigaray's work can be aligned with the latter, as she positions the mother-daughter relationship as one of rivalry. In women's narratives in the 1970s, the focus was on how individual women's sense of self is tied up with their relationship with their mother.

In *Les Mots* the mother-daughter relationship is portrayed from the perspective of the daughter, and the focus is on forging self-identity via separation from the mother. The divisions within the text, discussed above, can be said to compound the two conflicting aspects of the mother: the good mother (associated with harmony and Algeria) and the bad mother (associated with violence and rejection). Imagery depicting the mother is split between sky/ earth and earth/ water metaphors, which entail connotations of purity/ impurity to symbolise the split between the good/ bad mother. The mother-daughter relationship is largely experienced in terms of conflict, notably taking place inside the domestic space of the house, whereas harmonious moments occur outside in the garden. The idea that 'madness' is passed from mother to daughter via the transmission of a fear of the female body is expounded through the narrator's conception of her body as an entity which cannot preserve intact its own boundaries. This resonates, in particular, with the narratives of anorexia in Chapters 3 and 4, in which the necessity of 'policing' the boundaries of the female body is paramount. Although the mother-daughter relationship, also narrated from the perspective of the

daughter, remains a central focus in the majority of texts discussed across the following chapters, it is nowhere more prominent than in these final two chapters on anorexia. These narratives, as we will see, portray fragmented subjectivities which are divided between autonomy and loss of control, self and body. In Chapter 3, we will see the mother-daughter relationship in *Petite* and *Thornytorinx* compound this sense of splitting and fragmentation which characterises anorexia, as each anorexic narrator struggles to forge an identity which is separate from that of the mother, who is simultaneously admired and rejected. In Chapter 4, we will see the protagonist of *Robert* forge a stable sense of self only upon the refusal of the mother-daughter relationship.

This section has provided an outline of the principal themes of Cardinal's text, which can be considered typical of 1970s writing projects, in order to inform later discussions of which of these themes have been developed or rejected by women writers of today. This chapter has discussed the historical, theoretical and literary background against which the textual analyses in the following chapters will be considered. It has charted the development of hysteria as a medical disorder and the figure of the hysteric as an icon, both patriarchal and feminist, throughout medical and cultural history. It has shown the disorder to be the result of untenable cultural constructions of femininity. It has elucidated the longstanding misogynist association between femininity and 'madness', which hinged, in particular on conceptions of femininity as duplicitous, immoral, threatening and abject. It has also shown how this association has been doubled back on itself as a means of exposing the repression of the feminine effected by Western discourse. It has discussed the various ways in which second-wave French feminist writers have engaged with the figure of the hysteric in order to gauge her effectiveness as a symbol of rebellion. It has explored how this figure was incorporated into 1970s writing projects and highlighted the themes which the following chapters



will draw upon. Above all, it has situated the writing of Nobécourt, Darrieussecq, Brisac, de Peretti and Nothomb within an innovative tradition of women's writing which focuses on the disordered body as a means of communicating the anxieties of women in the contemporary social, political and cultural environment.

To return to the earlier quotation from 'Sorties', which accused Western discourse of teaching women 'insidieusement, violemment, à haïr les femmes, à être leurs propres ennemis', of enforcing a brutal separation between woman and her body, so that 'sa "propre" maison, son corps même, elle n'a pu l'habiter [...] [ni] explorer' (*JN* 124); the texts in the following chapter will be read as a collective effort to *re-inhabit* and *re-explore* 'la maison' of the female body. Nowhere, is this violent separation more spectacularly enacted and overturned than in the writing of Lorette Nobécourt, in which the body is similarly conceptualised as a container ('une maison') for the self, and to which the following chapter now turns.

# Chapter 1

## The Body as Truth: Translating the Language of Hysteria in Lorette Nobécourt's *La Démangeaison* (1994) and *La Conversation* (1998)

### Introduction

This chapter will focus on two texts by Lorette Nobécourt, *La Démangeaison* and *La Conversation*, as texts which are structurally and thematically comparable to feminist writing projects of the 1970s, in which a female protagonist struggles to establish her own identity in a patriarchal system. As such, Nobécourt's texts represent an interesting starting point to this thesis. Although formally very different, both display significant thematic similarities – in particular their focus on physical responses to psychological distress – and share an hysterical protagonist, Irène. At the end of the *La Démangeaison*, Irène stabs her young lover Rodolphe and the subsequent text takes up the story of a woman with the same name who is about to stand trial for a similar crime. Both texts critique aspects of contemporary social life, whilst apparently lacking an identifiable political goal.<sup>1</sup> Unlike feminist writing projects of the 1970s, in which individual female identity-quests were framed in ways intended to be representative of female experience in general, these two 1990s texts present the experiences of their protagonists in isolation from others, in a manner which does not invite identification.<sup>2</sup>

The overarching purpose of this chapter, then, as with subsequent chapters, is to

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<sup>1</sup> Later works in Nobécourt's trajectory target specific geo-political situations and contexts. For example, the fall of the Berlin wall in *Nous* (Paris: Pauvet, 2002), and Pinochet's regime in Chile in *Grâce leur soit rendue* (Paris: Grasset, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> This notion of an 'exemplary' (hysterical) protagonist will have resonance throughout my thesis, notably in the following chapter with regard to Darrieussecq's hybrid narrator, and in Chapters 3 and 4 in relation to the literary figure of the anorexic.

consider how and why selected women writers in the 1990s choose to engage with and reject 1970s models in which writing by female protagonists was presented as a means of self-discovery and finding one's own voice, as well as a platform for politically significant action. In particular, this chapter will focus on the 'physicality' of Nobécourt's writing, not only in the abject subject matter of *La Démangeaison* – which is a departure from 'celebratory' representations of the female body in favour of representations of the disordered, hysterical female body – but in the innovative and experimental form and style of *La Conversation*, which pushes the limits of more conventional writing projects and produces a text which is itself 'hysterical', an almost physical 'performance' of 'madness'. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to discover in what ways, then, can Nobécourt's texts be said to contribute to the portrayal of the hysteric in contemporary women's writing in French?

Lorette Nobécourt is the author of eight novels to date, of which *La Démangeaison* was the first. Her oeuvre reflects a preoccupation with themes of madness, marginalisation and women's bodily experience. That images, themes and protagonists reappear from text to text alongside references to the author's personal experience suggests that writing, for Nobécourt, is a cathartic experience. As in 1970s writing projects, the identity-quest is a staple feature of Nobécourt's writing. Her protagonists each seek to establish a sense of subjecthood and identity and generally undertake a journey from a self-destructive individuality to a more broadly applicable understanding of the world. Published criticism has tended to focus on the 'visceral' nature of Nobécourt's writing, which consistently returns to themes of female corporeality.<sup>3</sup> Both *La Démangeaison* and *La Conversation*, and indeed much of

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<sup>3</sup> See: Katie Jones, *Representing Repulsion: The Aesthetics of Disgust in Contemporary Women's Writing in French and German* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013); Shirley Ann Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004).

Nobécourt's writing, exhibit an unrelenting focus on reversing what the author describes as contemporary culture's 'effacement' of the body. In an interview, Nobécourt argues that the body is 'nié en permanence, tout est fait pour l'effacer'.<sup>4</sup> In an era characterised by its relentless focus on the body, in particular the sexualised body, the persistently high profile of eroticised, incorporeal (as will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 of this study) and sanitised bodies conversely compounds the denial of the female body in contemporary culture.

According to Nobécourt, this neglect of the female body in all its leaky, fleshy, abject corporeality is embedded and reinforced in society through technological developments which isolate individuals more generally: 'D'Internet au télétravail, en passant par les supermarchés sans caissières, on supprime tous les contacts'.<sup>5</sup> Thus, as Shirley Ann Jordan remarks, Nobécourt 'embarks on a counter-movement in resistance' and attempts to restore the body through a 'body language' which is 'visceral, metaphysical and ethical'.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to *écriture féminine's* lyrical celebrations of the female body and sexuality, throughout her oeuvre Nobécourt accosts the reader with all that is culturally rejected as abject body matter: flaking or damaged skin, blood, pus, vomit, urine and faeces are mingled with images of butchery, self-mutilation, murder, suicide, rape and abortion, in a writing which consistently returns us to the body and often accounts for emotion through recourse to bodily sensation alone. We will see throughout the following chapters that this focus on bodily sensation as a means of expressing emotion is common to narratives of hysteria in contemporary women's writing in French. In Chapter 2, the reader of *Truismes* is primarily made aware of the narrator's emotional state via her fluctuating bodily transformations, whilst in Chapter 3

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<sup>4</sup> Nobécourt in Sylvain Borneau, 'L'Attrape corps', *Les Inrouptibles* (18-24 February 1998), 22-5 (p. 22).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Jordan, *Women's Visions*, pp. 221-2.

it is intense emotions such as anger and betrayal which are conveyed through physical sensation. This technique, then, highlights the primacy of the body as a means of communication. The task for the reader is to decipher the underlying message these representations of disordered bodies are attempting to expose.

As we will see in both *La Démangeaison* and *La Conversation*, for Nobécourt, the body is the ultimate signifier of individuality, be it through the personal specificity of Irène's skin disorder in the former, or the intimate physical sensations the protagonist cites to define herself in the latter. As Jordan writes, Nobécourt's writing 'represents an attempt to peel away the numbing layers of routine perception which anaesthetise us and to sustain for as long as possible an utter lucidity about human existence'.<sup>7</sup> *La Démangeaison* and *La Conversation* are certainly examples of this idea of 'peeling' away, not only of routine perception, but also of social conventions and cultural prescriptions of bodily norms. As Nobécourt notes:

C'est comme si on fonctionnait sans cesse avec des filtres, sinon la réalité entrerait trop fort. Et il y a des moments où c'est comme s'il n'y avait plus de peau, comme si on entraait directement en contact avec les choses. C'est alors tellement excessif que cela devient douloureux.<sup>8</sup>

In this chapter, it is argued that Nobécourt's texts go one step further and enact a more violent 'rupture'. In *La Démangeaison* there is a decidedly physical 'breaking out', not only of the skin as a container – which will be discussed in relation to psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu's theory of *Le Moi-peau*<sup>9</sup> – but of the isolated position Irène occupies in society, and indeed her own perception of this position as negative. In *La Conversation*, a linguistic 'breaking out' is enacted through the subversion of traditional modes of writing, dialogue and language. Language, here, becomes the container, and

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<sup>7</sup> Jordan, *Women's Visions*, p. 221.

<sup>8</sup> Isabelle Blandiaux, cited in *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Anzieu Didier, *Le Moi-Peau* (Paris: Dunod, 1995). Subsequent references will appear as *MP*, followed by the page number.

Nobécourt's 'hysterical' writing breaks conventional form and plays with the reader's expectations, pushing language and speech to their communicative limits and creating what Barbara van Feggelen has called a 'shattered text'.<sup>10</sup>

This chapter will deal with each text in turn. It begins with an examination of the metaphors of peeling, itching skin in *La Démangeaison* combined with an analysis of Didier Anzieu's theory of *Le Moi-peau*, which will form the principal focus of my chapter. It then moves on to a shorter examination of the form and style of *La Conversation*, not only because the latter text is a chronological progression from the former in terms of narrative events, but also because each text deals with the idea of 'breaking out' in specific ways. Beginning with a synopsis of the text, the first section of this chapter, then, posits Irène's skin disorder in *La Démangeaison* as an hysterical symptom – a physical manifestation of her psychological distress provoked by her marginalised position within the family and society. It examines the idea of the skin as a container, drawing on Didier Anzieu's theory of *Le Moi-Peau* or 'psychic skin', in which he argues that the ego encloses the psychic apparatus in the same way the skin encloses the body. Whereas the skin has a protective function for Anzieu, here it is argued that, in Nobécourt's text, the skin is represented as something restrictive and limiting which must be broken out of in order for the protagonist to achieve a stable, autonomous subjectivity.

This chapter, then, examines the communicative function of the skin, as a site of interaction between self and others. It explores how skin is linked to language in *La Démangeaison*, through a discussion of Irène's turn to writing, in which writing at first appears as both cathartic and curative. It then examines how Nobécourt uses bodily disorder as metaphor, through a focus on the 'physicality' of her writing, in particular

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<sup>10</sup> Barbara van Feggelen, 'Lorette Nobécourt's *La Conversation*: A Game of Solitaire or a *jeu de société*?' *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 14: 3 (June 2010), 247-56 (p. 248).

her figurative uses of the skin, which becomes expressive of society's intolerance of difference. It argues that, at this stage, Irène's story is reminiscent of feminist texts of the 1970s such as Marie Cardinal's *Les Mots*, discussed in my introductory chapter, which closes with its hysterical female protagonist finding her own voice through transcribing her experiences. However, as we will see, Nobécourt's text makes a significant departure from 1970s writing projects by ultimately calling into question the cathartic, and curative, potential of the act of writing. After the resurgence of her skin condition, Irène's attitude to her body evolves; she begins to revel in her condition rather than attempting to conceal or cure it. Furthermore, the rediscovery of her sexuality, which accompanies her newfound appreciation of her body (a further potential similarity with 1970s writing projects) is ultimately undermined through her insistence on troubling and marginalised sexual practices. This section argues, then, that Irène's move towards autonomous subjecthood only occurs after the *failure* of her writing project, and that it is through actively *choosing* to have '[un] corps comme une mauvaise machine' (D 96), rather than seeking to cure her 'madness' and re-integrate herself into society, that Irène's newfound freedom comes into being.

Before turning to *La Conversation*, this final section on *La Démangeaison* examines how Irène's newfound freedom is presented ambiguously through a discussion of the ending of the text, in which Irène throws into dispute the reliability of the entire narrative and ultimately finds herself in the unenviable position of 'madness' and incarceration. Ultimately, this section examines whether Irène is left, as it seems, with far fewer prospects for the future than her forerunner in Cardinal's text. On the one hand, although she succeeds in finding her own voice, she is eventually imprisoned for her deviant behaviour and can only exist in isolation. On the other hand, the narrator no longer *experiences herself* as marginalised, thus pointing towards the possibility of an

individual freedom from social and physical constraints accessible only through the body.

The analysis of *La Conversation* begins with a synopsis of the text, followed by a discussion of its unconventional narrative structure. Playing with the expectations of the reader, the text is not a conversation but a monologue which, far from straightforward, is circuitous and disjointed; lurching unexpectedly into new subjects without concluding those already under consideration, incorporating snippets of dialogue from surrounding conversations, and combining reality with dream and fantasy. This section examines how the orality of the narrative consistently recalls the reader to the body and ‘physicality’, as does the protagonist’s insistence on portraying her self through a fragmented list of physical sensations, rather than by narrating the events of her life in chronological order.

The following section examines the idea that language is at once a means of freedom and a limitation. Although speaking permits the narrator to express herself and to tell her own story, narrative conventions confine and dictate how this should be done. In particular, this section focuses on a discussion of the political diatribe with which *La Conversation* concludes in order to show how, for Irène, the body as opposed to language is consistently positioned as the sole locus of truth. It posits her refusal to produce a structured, chronological explanation of her motive and the events leading up to her crime as a reflection of her un-willingness to expose herself to the normalising power of language (of the Law). Ultimately, it argues that this ‘hysterical’ writing is performative of the narrator’s position of ‘madness’ and that the confusion and unreliability of the narrative not only ‘perform’ the disorder and changeability of the hysterical body, but also represent an attempt to break free of social constraints.



To conclude, these various discussions are drawn together to argue that Nobécourt's subversive writing style, her desire to escape classification, coupled with her narrator's reliance on bodily sensation over factual, chronological information, can be read as a linguistic 'breaking out', just as Irène's deliberate choice to embrace her disordered body in *La Démangeaison* was a physical 'breaking out' of social and familial constraints. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to understand how and why Nobécourt appears to call into question the idea that literature can be politically or morally significant. It asks whether, beyond the social isolation of her hysterical protagonists, her texts still have a social function, or remain characterised by 'madness' and the impossibility of successful communication.

### **Psychic and Physical Skins: *La Démangeaison* and Didier Anzieu's Theory of *Le Moi-peau***

Narrated in the first person by the hysterical protagonist Irène, *La Démangeaison* tells the story of a young woman whose severe psoriasis has marked her out as different since shortly after her birth. Throughout her childhood, Irène experiences her relationship with her parents as one of rejection and resentment. In an ambivalence characteristic of the hysteric, she comes to harbour a potent resentment towards her parents, whilst still craving their attention and affection. Her skin condition eventually becomes both a source of disgust to her family (causing them, in her mind, to reject her) and a symbol of her rejection of others: 'il me fallut moins de six mois pour voir surgir un psoriasis monumental, preuve de mon infamie et de ma différence' (*D* 14). As Katie Jones remarks, 'while "infamie" suggests the moral disapprobation Irène perceives as

being the attitude of others towards her, “différence” here suggests her own more positive attitude towards her condition’, which anticipates the development of her character during the course of the text.<sup>11</sup> By the conclusion of the text, Irène has re-situated herself in relation to both her skin condition and her difference, having learnt to embrace both over the course of the narrative. However, she has been sectioned to a mental institution from where, we learn, the whole of the text has been narrated. The narrative fluctuates confusingly between different periods in her life, calling into question the reliability of her statements about her family and experiences. This is not only a textual performance of the narrator’s hysteria, but a narrative strategy employed by Nobécourt to further underline the idea, discussed in the introduction to this chapter, that if language has the capacity to mislead, the body does not.

Much of the earlier part of the narrative focuses on Irène’s adolescence, during which she experiences increasing disillusionment with her family. As in Cardinal’s text, the narrator’s familial relationships are characterised by ambivalence. Despite her anger and disdain, she nevertheless craves her parents’ attention and participates in family life during her weekend visits from boarding school. This only serves to increase her frustration, and her sole relief comes from her private routines of scratching until she bleeds.<sup>12</sup> Even this, however, is characterised by ambiguity: ‘un bonheur et en même temps une répulsion de moi-même’ (*D* 58). Irène eventually turns to writing in order to express her rejection of her family, an act which symbolically transfers the marks from her skin to paper, and temporarily cures her psoriasis. She enjoys a brief

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<sup>11</sup> Jones, *Repulsion*, p. 121.

<sup>12</sup> This calls to mind the current trend of what researchers call ‘non-suicidal self-injury’ or NSSI. Some reports in the popular media have compared NSSI to eating disorders, as research has shown that self-harm is predominantly prevalent among adolescent females, most often occurs covertly, and is used as a way to relieve extreme emotional distress. This link between NSSI and anorexia is supported on the *NHS* website which provides information (last updated in 2013) on the various types, signs and causes of self-harm. See: NHS website, URL <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Self-injury/Pages/Introduction.aspx> [Accessed 01 Sept 2014].

spell of the long-desired ability to ‘passer inaperçue, anonyme, neutre’ (*D* 19), as her smooth skin permits her to rejoin the world of work and pass unremarked in social situations. However, her skin condition gradually returns, and with it the realisation that the real ‘enemy’ is not her family, but rather the ‘system’ in general.

After the reappearance of her psoriasis, Irène makes a conscious decision to embrace her condition, choosing to revel in her difference rather than seeking to hide or cure it. This newfound freedom entails a rediscovery of her sexuality, during which she takes a much younger lover, Rodolphe, visits peepshows and gives in to bodily urges to masturbate and scratch her skin to terrifying excess. However, this freedom is also presented ambiguously. Rodolphe soon disappoints her with his disinterest in the radical corporeal potential she has discovered, instead showing a disappointing desire to become like everyone else. Irène’s confinement in a mental institution occurs after she stabs Rodolphe in an attempt to liberate him, reasoning: ‘J’ai souhaité, alors, agiter le vertige, soulever quelque incroyable étau, pour susciter une minuscule folie sur Rodolphe misérable, reproduisant soudain l’ordre et la tranquillité’ (*D* 106). Whilst Irène claims to have liberated herself from social constraints, her assertion of this liberation ultimately results in her physical constraint. Furthermore, reader sympathy and comprehension are cleverly undermined through Irène’s violent act and her claim that she has lied repeatedly throughout her narration. Ultimately, it appears that Irène, unlike her forerunners in 1970s identity quests, is left with no hope for freedom in the future, as, although she succeeds in finding her own means of expression – through the body – she can only exist in isolation.

This section of my chapter now turns to Anzieu’s theory of *Le Moi-peau*. It begins by explaining the nine principal functions of the *Moi-peau*, and their related pathologies, in order to show how Irène’s psoriasis can be considered a physical manifestation of

psychological trauma – a hysterical symptom – in which the ruptures in her ‘psychic skin’, or *Moi-peau*, are transposed onto the surface of her physical skin. It then moves on to discuss how Nobécourt presents the narrator’s skin as a container for the self and a site of conflict upon which the narrator’s battle to develop a stable and autonomous sense of self is fought. Before entering in to these discussions however, it is first useful to consider why the skin might be deemed, in Robson’s words, ‘a privileged site’ – a locus of identity, testimony and selfhood.<sup>13</sup>

The skin is primarily a boundary between the bodily exterior and interior, an interface between the self and others. However, the skin cannot be simplistically reduced to this function of boundary in which the body, and by implication the self, is separated from the other. It is at once what protects us from others and simultaneously what exposes us to them. As Robson explains, ‘if it demarcates difference between people, it also represents a point at which they can come together’, the point ‘where difference is potentially dissolved’.<sup>14</sup> A site of paradoxes, then, as Anzieu notes;

La peau est perméable et imperméable. Elle est superficielle et profonde. Elle est véridique et trompeuse. Elle est régénératrice, en voie de dessèchement permanent. Elle est élastique mais un morceau de peau détaché de l’ensemble se rétrécit considérablement. Elle appelle des investissements libidinaux autant narcissiques que sexuels. Elle est le siège du bien-être et aussi de la séduction.  
(*MP* 39)

The skin appears on the embryo before any other sense system and its outward appearance varies enough to denote signs of sex, age, ethnicity and personality. It combines different organs, senses, the spatial and the temporal dimension, sensitivity to heat, balance, and movement:

par sa structure et par ses fonctions, la peau est plus qu’un organe, c’est un ensemble d’organes différents [...] Elle remplit des rôles annexes de plusieurs autres fonctions biologiques: elle respire et perspire, elle secrète et élimine, elle

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<sup>13</sup> Kathryn Robson, “‘L’écriture de peau’: The Body as Witness in Lorette Nobécourt’s *La Démangeaison*”, *Nottingham French Studies* 45: 3 (2006), 66-77 (p. 67).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

entretient le tonus, elle stimule la respiration, la circulation, la digestion, l'excrétion et bien sur la reproduction; elle participe à la fonction métabolique. (MP 35-36)

The skin, then, has a double surface: a protective one on the outside, and one which collects information and filters exchanges on the inside. It is both active and passive:

Elle nous fournit autant en douleurs qu'en plaisirs [...] La peau est solide et fragile. [...] Elle traduit par sa minceur, sa vulnérabilité, notre détresse originaire, plus grand que celle de toutes les autres espèces, et en même temps notre souplesse adaptative et évolutive. Elle sépare et unit les différentes sensorialités. Elle a, dans toutes ces dimensions que je viens de passer incomplètement en revue, un statut d'intermédiaire, d'entre-deux, de transitionalité. (MP 39)

In sum: 'De tous les organes des sens, c'est le plus vital: on peut vivre aveugle, sourd, privé de goût et d'odorat. Sans l'intégrité de la majeure partie de la peau, on ne survit pas' (MP 35). Of particular importance to this chapter, is the skin's ability to bear traces of rupture, where the division between bodily interior and exterior is undermined. The skin can be opened up, torn, or peeled off. Itching, blushing, scarring and other skin conditions, as we will see in *La Démangeaison*, exhibit how the skin may expose as well as protect.<sup>15</sup>

Skin, then, as a complex structure of surfaces, has given rise to a psychoanalytic focus on ideas of 'containment' in trying to understand the importance of the body to psychic life. As Anzieu notes, 'ce qui était refoulé dans le temps de Freud, dans les discours individuels et dans les représentations collectives, c'était le sexe' (MP 43). In the 1980s it was the body which was ignored and repressed, the stress on language producing a neglect of the body in psychoanalytic theory. As Naomi Segal notes, 'Anzieu's aim', in the 1990s, 'is to fill this gap', with a theory of psychic development

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<sup>15</sup> Naomi Segal has discussed Anzieu's theory in relation to the personal experiences and writing of André Gide in her book, *Consensuality: Didier Anzieu, Gender and the Sense of Touch* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), which examines human relations based on the sense of touch and pays specific attention to 'itching'.

based on the infant's experience of the surface of the body, to which this section now turns.<sup>16</sup>

### **A Skin for Thought: Didier Anzieu's Theory of *Le Moi-peau***

Fundamentally, Anzieu's 'skin-ego', or *Moi-peau*, is 'une figuration dont le Moi de l'enfant se sert au cours des phases précoces de son développement pour se représenter lui-même comme Moi contenant les contenus psychiques, à partir de son expérience de la surface du corps' (MP 61). The *Moi-peau* is developed, then, at the moment the infant differentiates its psychic self from its bodily self, although the two may remain confused on a figurative level. In its earliest days, the infant receives care and gives out signals to its mother. In the mother-child relationship the infant is not passive, but actively demands as much attention from the mother as it is given. Via facial expressions and noises, 'le bébé acquiert un pouvoir de maîtriser endogène qui va d'un sentiment de confiance dans ses entreprises à un sentiment euphorisant de toute-puissance illimitée'.<sup>17</sup> This sentiment of mastery is necessary for the infant to develop further affective and sensori-motor enterprises and, as touch is the first sense-faculty to develop embryonically, 'le développement des autres sens est rapporté à la peau, surface fantasmée "originale"' (MP 83). Anzieu argues that because touch is the only reflexive sense, it gives rise gradually to the reflexivity of thought.<sup>18</sup> The infant develops the

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<sup>16</sup> Segal, *Consensuality*, p. 44.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80. This sentiment of unlimited omnipotence experienced by an infant in its early stages is picked up in the final chapter of this thesis in relation to Nothomb's narratives of anorexia, in particular *Métaphysique*. Here, this state of mastery is posited as the ideal state to which her anorexic protagonist attempts to return through controlling and reducing her developing female body. Although Anzieu's theory is not referenced beyond the scope of this chapter, the discussions of ego-boundaries and the ideas of containment have resonance throughout my discussions of anorexia in the final two chapters.

<sup>18</sup> For a full discussion of Anzieu's theory and its implications, plus biographical information, see: Segal, *Consensuality*.

fantasy of ‘une peau commune à la mère et à l’enfant, interface d’un côté de laquelle se tient la mère, l’enfant étant de l’autre côté’ (MP 85). This *peau commune* echoes the double function of the skin in that it envelops the other whilst being enveloped by them. However, most importantly for my analysis of Nobécourt’s narrator, just as physical skin is susceptible to damage, this *peau commune* is vulnerable too, leading to pathologies of the infant’s *Moi-peau* and correspondent pathologies on the surface of the skin.

What then, are the functions of the *Moi-peau*, and their potential pathologies? Anzieu designates eight principal functions, with a ninth added as a later revision, which develop the link between skin and self, and establish a systematic parallel between the skin and the *Moi-peau* in order to delineate the correspondence between the organic and the psychic. The first function of the *Moi-peau* is ‘*maintenance*’ (MP 121). The infant internalises the nurturing touch of its mother and the way she supports the infant’s whole body. According to Anzieu, ‘la fonction psychique se développe par intériorisation du holding maternel. Le *Moi-peau* est une partie de la mère – particulièrement ses mains – qui a été intériorisée et qui maintient le psychisme en état de fonctionner’ (MP 121); the fear of losing this support is the underlying threat, as we will see in *La Démangeaison*. The second function is that of ‘containing’; ‘à la peau qui recouvre la surface entière du corps et dans laquelle sont insérés tous les organes des sens externes répond la fonction *contenante* du *Moi-peau*’ (MP 124). This function is exerted primarily through the maternal touch, during which the sensation, or imaginary image, of the skin as a containing ‘sack’ is awakened in the infant. An envelope of sound doubles up with that of touch, through the mother’s vocal and gestural responses to the infant’s cries, to provide a sense of surrounding continuity. A lack of such care

may lead the infant to feel, in Segal's words, 'like a kernel without a shell'.<sup>19</sup> This results in psychological difficulties in 'containing' thoughts and memories; 'l'enveloppe existe, mais sa continuité est interrompue par des trous. C'est un Moi-peau passoire; les pensées, les souvenirs, sont difficilement conservées; ils fuient' (MP 125). Here, Anzieu suggests that difficulties in developing this second function of the *Moi-peau*, due to insufficient or inadequate care from the mother, may inhibit the infant's understanding of the skin as a complete entity (a container), leading to the formation of an incomplete, permeable, psychic skin. This permeable psychic skin is a source of much anguish for the infant, who consequently has difficulties in establishing a complete, autonomous sense of self: 'L'angoisse est considérable d'avoir un intérieur qui se vide, tout particulièrement de l'agressivité nécessaire à toute affirmation de soi' (MP 125).

Anzieu goes on to discuss how these ruptures in the *Moi-peau* may be replicated on the surface of the skin, and cites a case study in which a patient with an incomplete psychic skin exhibited hysterical symptoms of excessive perspiration during analysis:<sup>20</sup>

Ces trous psychiques peuvent trouver à s'étayer sur les pores de la peau; l'observation à venir de Gethsémani montre un patient qui transpire pendant les séances et qui lâche ainsi sur son psychanalyste une agressivité nauséabonde qu'il ne peut ni retenir ni élaborer, tant que sa représentation inconsciente d'un Moi-peau passoire n'a pas été interprétée. (MP 203-11)

Here, the patient's physical symptoms directly replicate those of his psyche: just as thoughts and memories flow from his porous psychic skin, bodily fluid (perspiration) flows from the pores of his physical skin. According to Anzieu then, the lack of the containing function manifests itself as two forms of anxiety. Firstly, the anxiety of something internal which is diffuse, spread out and unreachable, which in general cannot be identified or contained, such as a nucleus without a surface. According to

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<sup>19</sup> Segal, *Consensuality*, p. 46.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. For a full discussion of this case study see: Anzieu, 'L'Enveloppe Olfactive', *Moi-Peau*, pp. 203-211.



Jorge Ulnik, ‘the calming of this kind of anxiety is attempted with an envelope of suffering, which is produced by either physical pain or psychic anxiety’.<sup>21</sup> Secondly; the anxiety of having an interior that empties itself. This ‘permeable’ skin which has difficulty retaining things is dubbed as ‘the sieve Ego-skin’.<sup>22</sup> Both anxieties result in a difficulty in establishing, and more importantly, asserting an autonomous self. This second function of the *Moi-peau*, then, its potential pathologies, and Ulnik’s idea of an ‘envelope of suffering’ in particular, should be borne in mind throughout this chapter as it will become particularly interesting within my discussion of the skin condition developed by Nobécourt’s hysterical narrator in *La Démangeaison*.

The third function of the *Moi-peau* is ‘protection against stimuli’, or, in Freud’s terms: *pare excitation*.<sup>23</sup> Just as the superficial layer of the skin protects the sensory layer (where nerve endings lie), and the infant in general, against physical aggressions, pressure, vibrations, and excess stimulation, the mother plays a similar role and stops the infant from needing to create a ‘crustacean’ or muscular ego.<sup>24</sup> When the excitation screen does not function properly, a paranoid anxiety appears in the form of either persecution (‘I am being robbed of my thoughts’), or influence machine (‘I am being made to think these thoughts’).<sup>25</sup> What is essential is the sentiment of being exposed or helpless, or in contrast, the sensation of invulnerability. The fourth function of the *Moi-*

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<sup>21</sup> Jorge Ulnik, *Skin in Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac Books, 2007), p. 59.

<sup>22</sup> See: Ulnik, p. 59 ; Segal, *Consensuality*, p. 47.

<sup>23</sup> For the following definition of Freud’s concept of *pare-excitation*, see: ‘Site officiel de la Fédération Freudienne de Psychanalyse’, URL: [http://www.psychanalyse.fr/fr/dico-psy/pare-excitation-voir-aussi-perception-conscience\\_216](http://www.psychanalyse.fr/fr/dico-psy/pare-excitation-voir-aussi-perception-conscience_216)) [Accessed: 20 March 2014]. ‘Terme introduit par S. Freud qui conçoit le pare-excitation comme un filtre mis au service de notre constitution biologique pour parer à des excitations exogènes si fortes qu’elles ne pourraient être ensuite déchargées. Autrement dit, l’organisme serait revêtu d’une “enveloppe protectrice” destinée à le protéger contre les excitations en provenance du monde extérieur. Le phénomène de pare-excitation s’inscrit dans une conception topique, mais plus qu’une localité corporelle, il consiste surtout en une fonction, celle de préserver l’équilibre psychique de l’individu en filtrant sa perception de la réalité extérieure. Une perception trop brutale d’excitations exogènes violentes crée un traumatisme’.

<sup>24</sup> This is when a rigid shell replaces the missing container and prevents those functions of the *Moi-peau* which should develop later from being triggered. See: Frances Tustin [1981], *Autistic States in Children* (Hove and New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> See: Ulnik, p. 60.

*peau* is *individuation*, which is similar to the way in which the skin presents individual differences (such as colour, texture, or odours) that characterise the individual.

According to Anzieu, these individual differences may be ‘narcissiquement, voire socialement surinvesties. Elles permettent de distinguer chez autrui les objets d’attachement et d’amour et de s’affirmer soi-même comme un individu ayant sa peau personnelle’ (MP 126). In turn, ‘le Moi-peau assure une fonction d’*individuation* du Soi, qui apporte à celui-ci le sentiment d’être un être unique’ (MP 126). Where this boundary of individuation fails, or is threatened, there are symptoms of schizophrenia, in which ‘toute la réalité extérieure (mal distinguée de la réalité intérieure) est considérée comme dangereuse à assimiler et la perte du sens de la réalité permet le maintien à tout prix du sentiment d’unicité du Soi’ (MP 126).

The fifth function is *consensualité*, or inter-sensoriality. This is a function of integration and interconnection between the different feelings against an imaginary backdrop, which could be the surface of the skin. In Anzieu’s words:

La peau est une surface porteuse de poches, de cavités où sont logés les organes des sens autres que ceux du toucher (lesquels sont insérés dans l’épiderme même). Le Moi-peau est une surface psychique qui relie entre elles les sensations de diverses natures et qui les fait ressortir comme figures sur ce fond originaire qu’est l’enveloppe tactile. (MP 127)

This is the function of ‘common sense’. The failure of this function could cause feelings of physical fragmentation, due to the independent and anarchic functioning of the sense organs: ‘À la carence de cette fonction répondent l’angoisse de morcellement du corps, plus précisément celle de démantèlement, c’est-à-dire d’un fonctionnement indépendant, anarchique, des divers organes des sens’ (MP 127). The multiple splitting spreads built-up parts of the self within a space which is neither internal nor external, which must later be contained by a muscular rigidity, motor agitation, or, as we will see in the case of *La Démangeaison*, physical suffering.

The sixth function of the *Moi-peau* is ‘sexualisation’, or *soutien de l’excitation sexuelle*. The infant’s skin is treated sensually by the mother who creates it as a backcloth to sexual pleasure:

La peau du bébé fait l’objet d’un investissement libidinal de la mère. La nourriture et les soins s’accompagnent de contacts peau à peau, généralement agréables, qui préparent l’auto-érotisme et situent les plaisirs de peau comme toile de fond habituelle des plaisirs sexuels. (*MP* 127)

The infant’s skin can thus be considered as an erogenous envelope, a surface upon which the privileged erotogenic zones are situated, and a source of global sexual excitation. The failures of this function of the *Moi-peau* are directly linked to hysteria in Anzieu’s writing. According to Anzieu, ‘si l’investissement de la peau est plus narcissique que libidinal, l’enveloppe d’excitation peut être remplacée par une enveloppe narcissique brillante, censée rendre son possesseur invulnérable, immortel et héroïque’ (*MP* 128). Anzieu explicitly identifies the hysteric with this glowing skin surface: ‘Cette double enveloppe (la sienne propre unie à celle de sa mère), est brillante, idéale’ (*LMP* 149). This extra envelope of excitation ‘caractérise non seulement le *Moi-peau* de l’hystérie mais constitue le fond hystérique commun à tout névrose’ (*MP* 249).

Concerning perversion, Anzieu writes:

Si le soutien de l’excitation sexuelle n’est pas assuré, l’individu devenue adulte ne se sent pas en sécurité suffisante pour s’engager dans une relation sexuelle complète aboutissant à une satisfaction génitale mutuelle. Si les excroissances et les orifices sexuels sont le lieu d’expériences algogènes plutôt qu’érogènes, la figuration d’un *Moi-peau* se trouve renforcée, l’angoisse persécutive majorée, la prédisposition accrue aux perversions sexuelles visant à inverser la douleur en plaisir. (*MP* 128)

So if the charge is more narcissistic than libidinal, the envelope loses its role as a source of reception and producer of erotogenicity, and becomes instead a glowing envelope which provides an illusory invulnerability or immortality. If the erotogenic orifices are a source of pain rather than pleasure, the pain and the pleasure amalgamate, giving rise to perversions. Often the product of a depressed mother, the hysteric is thought to inherit

from her distracted care an excess of external and internal stimuli, which s/he is unable to integrate into the still immature *Moi-peau*. Hysteria is thus blamed on a mother who has not sexualised her child in a genitally focussed way. The result is that:

L'hystérique se complaît à vivre dans une enveloppe d'excitation, érogène et agressive, au point d'en souffrir soi-même, d'en accuser les autres, de leur en tenir rancune, et de chercher à les entraîner dans la répétition de ce jeu circulaire où l'excitation engendre la déception qui ravive le besoin d'excitation. (MP 249)

Interestingly, concerning *La Démangeaison*, the narrator attributes her skin disorder, as we will see, to a lack of maternal affection and physical contact in particular. Similarly, in Chapter 3 we will see the narrator's anorexia, in *Petite*, explicitly related to the mother-daughter relationship; specifically to a period of depression experienced by the narrator's mother upon the death of her own mother. To return to *La Démangeaison*, the narrator's deviant sexual practices, which combine pleasure with the pain of deliberately scratching her skin condition, could also be attributed to a pathology of this function of the narrator's *Moi-peau*, something which will be discussed in due course.

The seventh function is that of *recharge libidinale*, maintaining inner energies and tensions in balance:

À la peau comme surface de stimulation permanente du tonus sensori-moteur par les excitations externes répond la fonction du Moi-peau de *recharge libidinale* du fonctionnement psychique, de maintien de la tension énergétique interne et de sa répartition inégale entre les sous-systèmes psychiques. (MP 128)

The failure of this function produces two types of anxiety: 'l'angoisse de l'explosion de l'appareil psychique sous l'effet d'un surcharge d'excitation' (for example an epileptic fit), or, 'l'angoisse du Nirvana, c'est-à-dire l'angoisse devant ce qui serait l'accomplissement du désir d'une réduction de la tension à zéro' (MP 128). The eighth function is that of signification, or *inscription des traces*. It is the function of awareness of external reality and of the object within the skin by means of sensitivity, for example heat, cold, pain, or touch. This function develops 'par un double appui', both biological and social:

Biologique: un premier dessin de la réalité s'imprime sur la peau. Social: l'appartenance d'un individu se marque par des incisions, scarifications, peintures, tatouages, maquillages, coiffures et leurs doublets que sont les vêtements. (*MP* 129)

Interestingly, this function, which concerns social belonging, is linked with the function of individuation. Anzieu describes the *Moi-peau* as 'le parchemin originaire', which functions to 'conserve, à la manière d'un palimpseste, les brouillons raturés, grattés, surchargés, d'une écriture "originaire" préverbale faite de traces cutanées' (*MP* 129). This idea of the skin as a palimpsestic 'parchment', upon which marks of difference (individuality) are drafted, scratched out, and overwritten in a language which is 'pre-verbal' (a bodily language), is something which I will return to in my discussion of the narrator's turn to writing in *La Démangeaison*. Anzieu writes that, 'Une première forme d'angoisse relative à cette fonction est d'être marquée à la surface du corps et du Moi par des inscriptions infamantes et indélébiles provenant du Surmoi' (*MP* 129). Here, Anzieu specifically references eczema, and goes on to introduce the idea of marks on the skin, or on the *Moi-peau*, as marks of 'transgression' (*MP* 129). This recalls Robson's discussion of the skin as a marker of individuality, in which she looks at the long history of the link between skin and identity and remarks; 'Slaves, criminals and other social outcasts for many centuries had their status branded – burned, or cut – onto their skin as a visual and legible sign of their difference, their stigmatisation'.<sup>26</sup> It is the 'visual' aspect which is of particular importance, as we have seen in the introduction to this study; the visual marks of disease have long been considered external manifestations of social deviance. In contemporary western society, skin disorders are still frequently invested with significance as evidence of immorality, sin, criminality, or some form of socially unacceptable secret. This may be seen in the abundance of first-person accounts of skin disorders in which the onset of skin disorders is linked with a

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<sup>26</sup> Robson, 'L'écriture', p. 68.

traumatic experience which has remained unspoken, and the surface of the body is figured as an outlet for that unarticulated experience. Traumatic memories which have not been (or cannot be) verbalised are inscribed upon the skin. Thus, as we will see in *La Démangeaison*, trauma is inextricably linked with descriptions of skin disorders.<sup>27</sup>

This brings us to the ninth function of the *Moi-peau*, which relates to the former, and illustrates the skin's capacity for self-destruction, or *activité toxique*. This toxicity of the *Moi-peau* represents its ability to destroy itself. All skin disorders present on the visible surface of the individual the kind of poisoning we identify, subconsciously, with life-threatening diseases. As Segal remarks, we once identified such visible disorders with 'the cannibalistic, "consumptive" effect of TB', but more recently, we associate them 'in a mode of unstoppable flow with the postmodern nightmare of AIDS'.<sup>28</sup> Segal adds that leprosy is 'the most traditional' of such stigmatising skin conditions, and interestingly, in Leviticus, 'what has been translated as leprosy (Hebrew *tzara'at*) was almost certainly psoriasis', the disorder of Nobécourt's narrator.<sup>29</sup> Leprosy causes acute disfiguration, affecting the face and other extremities, the voice as well as skin-colour, but what it shares with all skin conditions is its *isolating* effect; the separation of the affected individual from other people. This comes not so much from a fear of contagion, but from religious implications which posited visible skin disorders as a marker of inherent evil and, however archaic, still hold sway in our collective subconscious today. As Segal notes, 'the shedding of living tissue seems to cast "dirt" on the environment in an uncanny way, spreading the effect of an over-visible body that is also felt as tainted

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<sup>27</sup> This is particularly common in Holocaust literature, such as Anne Karpfe's *The War After: Living with the Holocaust* (London: Heineman, 1996) in which Karpfe's eczema appears to be a symptom of unspoken memories of her parents' traumatic experiences of the Holocaust. Segal links Andre Gide's experiences of his own skin as something which irritates with the psychosexual traumas he experienced as a young boy, and discusses his subsequent translation of this into writing in texts such as *Les Caves du Vatican* (1914), (*Consensuality*, p. 83).

<sup>28</sup> Segal, *Consensuality*, p. 84.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

from within'.<sup>30</sup> As the disordered skin is considered both familiar yet alien, it creates cognitive dissonance within the subject, due to the paradoxical sensation of being simultaneously attracted yet repulsed. This cognitive dissonance often leads to an outright rejection of the disordered skin, which the sufferer would rather reject than rationalise.

Each function of Anzieu's *Moi-peau*, then, finds its corollary in a function of the skin, and so far this section has begun to suggest how the potential pathologies of each function could be mapped onto Nobécourt's hysterical narrator. As Freud notes, and as we have seen through Anzieu's theory, 'The ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body'.<sup>31</sup> According to Elizabeth Grosz in her study *Volatile Bodies*, the surface of the body is in a 'particularly privileged position' to receive information and excitations from 'both the interior and exterior' of the body:

the information provided by the surface of the skin is both endogenous and exogenous, active and passive, receptive and expressive, the only sense able to provide the 'double sensation'. Double sensations are those in which the subject utilizes one part of the body to touch another, thus exhibiting the interchangeability of active and passive sensations, of those positions of subject and object, mind and body.<sup>32</sup>

The complexity and range of meanings identified with the skin thus allow for Nobécourt's metaphorical use of skin to express the varied experiences of her hysterical protagonist. This section now turns to *La Démangeaison* to examine how the surface of the skin is presented as a boundary between self and world. Just as Anzieu presents the *Moi-peau* as a container for the psyche, this section examines how Nobécourt presents the narrator's skin as a container for the self. It focuses on the first half of the text,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>31</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Ego and the Id', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 19 (London: Hogarth Press, 1923), p. 26.

<sup>32</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 35.

during which the protagonist regards her disorder as an affliction which must be cured in order to achieve ‘normality’ and social acceptance. It argues that, at this point in the text, the surface of the narrator’s skin is presented as a site of conflict, with each physical attack on the surface of her skin representing a correlative attack on her *Moi-peau*, or psychic skin. Through a discussion of how her difficult relationship with her parents is represented in terms of physical aggression, and her skin disorder is represented as a separate, autonomous being – ‘[une] bête venimeuse’ (D 46) – which invades her body (her self), it is argued that the narrator’s initial battle to develop a stable and autonomous sense of self fails, during this section of the text, as the narrator occupies a position of passivity. At this point in the text, her sense of self is built upon rejection and disgust of the other, and her hysteria is an assigned role, rather than an active ‘choice’, in the manner of Cixous’ rebellious hysterics. This discussion will begin to expose the ‘physicality’ of Nobécourt’s writing, how her graphic portrayals of scratching, scarring and wounding convey the narrator’s emotions through physical sensation and firmly focus the reader’s attention on the female body.

### ***La Démangeaison: The Skin as a Container for the Self***

Nobécourt’s use of skin as the central metaphor around which her protagonist’s identity develops permits her to express the ambiguity of her protagonist’s position as both a passive ‘victim’ and an active ‘subject’ at various points in the text. The text opens with an epigraph taken from Nietzsche’s *Daybreak*: ‘Le serpent mourrait s’il ne changeait de peau’.<sup>33</sup> This image of the snake actively shedding its skin and creating a new one suggests both the necessity of an identity-quest, and the potential liberation of finally

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<sup>33</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 228.



assuming one's own skin, hence foretelling the protagonist's development over the course of the narrative. This sheds light on the protagonist's initial attitude to her skin disorder, as something which must be discarded for a 'new' self to be born, and introduces the physicality of Nobécourt's writing. The text opens with the traumatic circumstances of the narrator's birth:

Et voila, je suis née paralysée. A demi. Pour moitié. C'est la médecine qui a omis de me retourner comme il faut. Paralysée pour moitié. On ne s'étonnera pas alors qu'*ils* aient voulu me supprimer; à ma naissance je savais tout, j'allais tout voir, tout dire. C'est simple: *ils* me tuaient ou je parlerais. Lutte à mort. (D 11)

The narrator is immediately positioned as isolated and attacked, and the reader is promptly plunged into a narrative world of struggle and bodily trauma. Irène's paralysis at birth marks her out as different from the outset; her difference is a physical symptom and her immediate marginalisation positions this bodily difference as threatening, in the manner of the Cixousian hysteric. Her claim 'je savais tout', and her threat to 'tout dire', suggests the underlying potential of her difference, the idea of a new kind of knowledge which can only be accessed through bodily experience.

It is in terms of physical violence that Irène's rejection is expressed: '*Ils* m'ont poussée vers les fenêtres, les fleuves, les chaussées; *ils* m'ont collé des maladies saugrenues comme autant d'excréments de folie à vivre sur ma peau. La mort ou la démence!' (D 11).<sup>34</sup> The ultimatum of death or insanity brings up cultural fears of both physical and mental 'abnormality', discussed in the introduction to this study, whilst the narrator's repeated emphasis of '*ils*' sets up the '*self* versus *Other*' dynamic of the text, in which the family are positioned on the side of society and 'normality'. As we have seen, Anzieu's first two functions of the *Moi-peau* – *maintenance* and *contenance* – rely on the nurturing continuity of the maternal touch to enable the infant to produce a

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<sup>34</sup> This violence within the family will be linked to hysteria in Chapter 3, in which Brisac's narrator takes her anorexia to new levels after a physical conflict with her mother.

fully formed *Moi-peau*, and in turn a secure, autonomous and ‘separate’ sense of self. Perhaps through a reluctance to aggravate her skin condition, or perhaps through repugnance, as Irène suggests, for the narrator, the supportive continuity of the maternal – and, in her case, paternal – touch is refused; ‘Car ma mère ne déposait aucun baiser sur mes joues roses d’enfant, et mon père, à aucun moment, ne me serrait gentiment dans ses bras’ (*D* 19). Irène links this lack of affection with her hysteria and replaces the affection of her parents with her own particular type of ‘caress’ – viciously scratching until she draws blood; ‘oui on peut devenir folle pour cela, je la sentais dans ma rage à me caresser moi-même, c’est-à-dire à me gratter jusqu’au sang’ (*D* 19). Her family, and their rejection of her, are also described in terms of physical attack and bodily emissions:

Et la famille; eux qui me tordaient de l’intérieur. Ah! cette vomissure, ce vivier de miasmes qui s’accrochaient les uns aux autres, se haïssaient, se dévoraient, la famille, vermines, miasmes d’arrière-pensées atroces qui ravageaient ma gueule d’enfant, qui agitaient mes nerfs pour me laisser extenuée, vaincue au bord du jour. (*D* 18)

It is as if the members of her family have morphed together into a single monstrous creature, as if they share one skin. Their rejection of the narrator is represented as a life-threatening assault on her infant body, as Irène describes her insides being twisted, deformed and devoured. Whilst ‘vermines’ attributes an animalistic status to her family, ‘se dévoraient’ suggests these animals are actively devouring her.<sup>35</sup> She herself is transformed into the abject matter, ‘cette vomissure’, to which she likens her family.

Such imagery of the digestive process foregrounds the idea of bodily boundaries. As, according to Julia Kristeva, abjection is a limit-experience which entails

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<sup>35</sup> In Chapter 4, we will see Nothomb’s anorexic narrator express a similar fear of being devoured, in this instance it is by the coy carp, which, as we will see, have a dual symbolism split between masculine (active, devouring) and feminine (passive, digested).

the dissolution of boundaries, she notes that it is unsurprising that Leviticus attributes impurity to skin disorders (specifically leprosy):

tumeur de la peau, atteinte à l'enveloppe de l'intégrité corporelle, plaie sur la surface visible, présentable. [...] cette maladie affecte la peau, frontière essentielle sinon première de l'individuation biologique et psychique. De ce point de vue, l'abomination de la lèpre s'inscrit dans la conception logique de l'impureté [...]: mélange, effacement des différences, menace de l'identité.<sup>36</sup>

The abject body is characterised, then, by this crossing of boundaries, 'comme si la peau, contenant fragile, ne garantissait plus l'intégrité du "propre", mais qu'écorchée ou transparent, invisible ou tendue, elle cédaient devant la déjection du contenu'.<sup>37</sup> According to Mary Douglas, if matter issuing from bodily orifices holds an abject status due to its ability to cross bodily boundaries, so also do 'bodily parings, skin, nail, hair clippings and sweat'.<sup>38</sup> The narrator's skin condition then, her 'pityriasis' (*D* 28) and 'plaques blanches' (*D* 18), derives abject status through the shedding of living tissue which was once, but no longer remains, part of the narrator's body, the discarded skin having crossed the boundary of the body. Abjection is dynamic, as Barbara Brook remarks, 'while culture works by regulations and rituals to contain the abject, the abject is continuously evading containment'.<sup>39</sup> Whilst Irène's skin condition 'evades containment' and renders her a source of physical abjection for others, their rejection of her also leads to her own rejection of them as morally abject, and her repudiation of her family is expressed in terms which relate to their bodies. Irène imagines herself being devoured and digested by her family, who are again represented as one monstrous entity, at the dining table:

Ce n'était pas tant cette façon odieuse qu'ils avaient d'ingurgiter les mets [...] il me semblait même que je tombais avec la nourriture dans leurs estomacs grossiers

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<sup>36</sup> Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 120.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>38</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 150.

<sup>39</sup> Barbara Brook, *Feminist Perspectives on the Body* (London and New York: Longman, 1999), p. 45.

avant de longer les méandres de leurs intestins, tandis que le côlon, large paroi visqueuse, commençait de digérer l'ensemble. Il n'est pas jusqu'à leurs excréments que je subissais en imagination, ainsi que leur anus écarté prêt à laisser sortir la merde. Tout cela me rebutait au plus haut point alors même que je ne pouvais m'empêcher d'y penser. (*D* 56-57)

Here, emotion is conveyed through a graphic focus on bodily processes which we will see to be a staple feature of narratives of hysteria. As in the above example, the digestive system epitomises the crossing of borders inherent in the abject – as food enters the body, is absorbed, and then ejected as waste matter. In this example, it is the narrator's position of passivity which is underscored.<sup>40</sup> She is consumed by the other, 'falling' into their stomachs alongside the food. Her skin, the bodily boundary of her self is dissolved and ingested, passing through the collective digestive processes of the family and ultimately transformed into waste matter. Tying this back to Anzieu's theory, such imagery of dissolution serves to further illustrate the failure of Anzieu's second function of the *Moi-peau*, 'la fonction *contenante*', which relies upon maternal care. The failure of this function leads to the creation of 'un *Moi-peau passoire*' (*MP* 125), an incomplete, permeable psychic skin which prevents the infant from establishing a secure, autonomous sense of self. Rather than an *active* 'subject', at this point in the text, the narrator is a *passive* 'victim'.

Irène's marginal position, at this point in the text, is a status which has been imposed upon her. As discussed above, she internalises her family's (and society's) rejection of her abnormal body to the point of self-destruction, repeatedly scratching until she draws blood. This deliberate self-harm recalls Ulnik's 'envelope of suffering', mentioned earlier, in which the anxiety provoked by a lack of a stable, autonomous

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<sup>40</sup> Such imagery of the digestive process as a metaphor for the alternate autonomy and dissolution of the self should be borne in mind for Chapters 3 and 4 of this study, which focus on narratives of anorexia and the fragmented subjectivity inherent in the disorder.

sense of self is combatted by the deliberate infliction of physical pain.<sup>41</sup> As Jones notes, special care given to Irène due to her skin condition is presented ambiguously.<sup>42</sup> When her younger sister is born, her parents employ a nurse with a growth impediment to look after Irène. For Irène, this nurse, who is ‘d’une difformité inquiétante’ (*D* 27), represents ‘le reflet de ma propre monstruosité’ (*D* 28). If the nurse provides Irène with a point of identification, she also underscores Irène’s difference from her ‘normal’ family, as their choice of nurse suggests their own assimilation of Irène with the nurse’s ‘abnormality’. Similarly, Irène’s private bedroom at boarding school, perhaps allocated to provide her with the privacy and comfort she would not be afforded in a shared dormitory, is regarded by Irène as a deliberate division from her ‘normal’ classmates. Whether this special treatment is motivated by kindness, or a fear of contamination, as Irène suggests, her marginal position nevertheless teaches her to be ashamed of her condition: ‘ma maladie de peau, symptôme visible aux yeux de tous et plus tard aux miens’ (*D* 15). The narrator’s hysteria, here, is presented as an assigned (feminine) role; ‘Folle, lépreuse, suicidaire, ainsi fut mon rôle’ (*D* 33).

Irène’s passive status goes hand in hand with her initial presentation of her psoriasis as an autonomous living being which actively invades her body:

Je sentais en moi comme une fleur venimeuse, bête vénéneuse [...] C’était une sorte d’animal-orchidée qui m’étouffait, particulièrement en hiver, à cause des radiateurs brûlants et du froid sec. Ma plante animal se développait autour de l’œsophage, je suffoquais parfois gentiment. Il me semblait que peu à peu cette présence grandissait, me rongeaient de l’intérieur et que les manifestations, elles, en étaient externes. Mon crâne chevelu se couvrait de plaques, ma peau s’effritait. (*D* 46-47)

This idea of the narrator’s disorder as ‘une sorte d’animal-orchidée qui m’étouffait’ is reminiscent of diagnoses of hysteria, discussed in the introduction, which relied on the belief that the womb was an autonomous ‘animal’ which strayed about the body and

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<sup>41</sup> Ulnik, p. 59.

<sup>42</sup> Jones, *Repulsion*, p. 125.

produced a sensation of suffocation. Just as Irène's family are described as hostile others, her 'psoriasis monumental' (*D* 15) is described in similar terms as '[cette] présence étrangère qui se jouait de moi selon son bon vouloir, dans un va-et-vient décidé par elle' (*D* 17).<sup>43</sup> Just as her family are, in her eyes, morally abject, her psoriasis, half-plant half-animal, is an abject figure of ambiguity and mixture. Her body is 'littéralement envahie par ce prurit immonde', which breaches her bodily boundaries and is 'impossible à maîtriser' (*D* 18). Consolidating the link between the skin and the self (the skin-ego and the body) Irène eventually finds herself completely at the mercy of her disorder. Lists of treatments, symptoms and physical attempts to control the disorder express the extent to which Irène's psoriasis has not only taken over the surface of her body, but also her sense of self;

mes vêtements, ma nourriture, mes bains et mes crèmes furent multiples et autres. A moi, il fallait des climats différents, des rites particuliers, une façon de vivre unique [...] Entre le sang qui coulait de mon tissu extérieur, entre mes cris la nuit, mes sanglots étouffés, ma rage à ne pas me gratter, à ne pas céder à cet envahissement de ma personne, j'avais les bains odieux, aux plantes venues d'ailleurs dont l'odeur était aussi désagréable que persistante. [...] J'avais les somnifères pour enfin m'endormir, mais la maladie revenait alors malgré moi et mes ongles griffaient ma peau dans mon inconscience. (*D* 38-39)

Here, bodily fluids, blood and tears, flow from her involuntarily and she has to control her bodily urge to scratch and to contain her rage against the active invasion of her body. In *Petite*, in Chapter 3, we will see listing, such as this, used as a narrative device by Brisac in order to create the overwhelming sense of accumulation so threatening to the anorexic self. Its significance, here, is to present the narrator as a passive 'victim' at the mercy of outside forces. This list of routines, medicines, and special requirements not only underlines her abnormality and adds to her isolation, but it also reveals the extent to which the narrator's autonomy is subsumed by her disorder. Daily life

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<sup>43</sup> This autonomous 'va-et-vient' of the narrator's disorder will be replicated in Chapter 3, in which the autonomous 'va-et-vient' of the digestive system echoes the fluctuation of the anorexic self between a sense of autonomy and a sense of fragmentation.

becomes a constant battle to regulate her disorder, and her inner world is overpowered by trying to control her bodily exterior. If the marks on her skin heighten her individuality, this individuality takes the form of a negative, highly visible outward marker of her difference: ‘maintenant je suis abominablement moi-même le plus que possible’ (D 23). The scars on her face add to the effacement of her identity: ‘Pendant mes rêves, j’achevais à me défigurer’ (D 39). Gradually, Irène’s psoriasis completely subsumes her identity: ‘Petit à petit, je suis devenue ma maladie, radicalement exposée aux autres, à fleur de peau’ (D 38). She *becomes* her disorder.

Irène’s skin, then, has multiple meanings. This section of my chapter has shown that, as a container of the self, Irène’s skin is at once a protective barrier against the world (which her family attempts to physically destroy), a surface for social inscription, acting as a visible outward marker of her inner difference, and something alien to her self, which is occupied and controlled by an enemy being. More often than not, the image of the skin as a container for the self is presented, in *La Démangeaison*, as limiting and confining, rather than supportive as in Anzieu’s theory. These differences in interpreting the functions of the skin reflect Grosz’s comments on its ‘double sided’ structure, where skin both defines and limits the body, and by correlation, the self. They also reflect Anzieu’s discussion of the *Moi-peau* as ‘[un] parchemin originaire’ (MP 128), upon which marks of difference are inscribed. Irène’s skin can be viewed in a similar way; the ruptures, scales and scratches can be read as an outer bodily manifestation of the inner psychic trauma of the narrator.<sup>44</sup> Skin thus figures as a site of interaction between the self and others, and the following section of this chapter will

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<sup>44</sup> The link between psoriasis outbreaks and psychological trauma is supported by medical literature which suggests that this skin disorder is triggered by stress. The NHS website (URL: <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Psoriasis/Pages/Causes.aspx>) and the *National Psoriasis Foundation* website (URL: <https://www.psoriasis.org/about-psoriasis/causes>) both cite stress as a trigger for the original onset and a recurrent flare-up of the disorder.

turn to the communicative function of skin, and the relationship between skin and language, in *La Démangeaison*.

### **A Skin for Language: Paper in Exchange for Skin**

Throughout *La Démangeaison*, the skin figures as a site of intercommunication between self and others and, as such, is inalienably linked to language. This section of my chapter examines the ‘physicality’ of Nobécourt’s writing through her use of bodily disorder as metaphor and through a discussion of her representation of the skin as a surface which can be written upon and read. As we have seen, during the first section of the text Irène regards her skin condition as an invasion of her body; she is represented as a *passive* ‘victim’. This section of my chapter examines how her obsessive scratching becomes an *active* means of inscription, ‘une écriture de peau’ (*D* 39), which denounces the social system and hypocritical family unit which rejects her. Through a discussion of how the narrator transcribes the marks from her skin on to paper in the production of her own literary text, which at first appears to cure her skin condition, this section positions Irène’s story as reminiscent of feminist texts of the 1970s. However, as we will see Nobécourt’s text ultimately calls into question the potential of the act of writing as cathartic and makes a significant departure from 1970s writing projects. It discusses the evolution of her attitude to her body, from something which must be concealed and cured, to something which provides access to a newfound freedom and understanding, and the ambiguous portrayal of the accompanying rediscovery of her sexuality. Ultimately, this section argues that Irène’s move towards autonomous subjecthood only occurs after the *failure* of her writing project, and it is through actively embracing her disordered body, rather than seeking to cure it, that Irène’s newfound freedom comes into being.



If the narrator's hysterical symptom isolates her, it also confers on her special status and knowledge. Irène gradually comes to regard her abnormality as a gift which permits her a deeper understanding of the world. Conversely, 'normality' (and the loss of individuality it entails) becomes threatening:

Et plus que tout je craignais, avec les trafics d'une opération douteuse, de me réveiller comme eux, c'est-à-dire sans la conscience de mon être. Car dans ma difficulté à exister, j'allais bientôt acquérir grâce à ma maladie, la certitude d'être toujours différente. (*D* 33)

Here, Irène's disordered body and her self are united against the Other; society, and the family in particular. Her marginalisation becomes a position of enlightenment, proof of her freedom from the oppressive social control unquestioningly accepted by 'normal' members of society. Although she remains passive in the face of a body which involuntarily exposes her emotions, the narrator begins to appreciate the language of her body and to recognise the potential freedom it could provide; 'Petit à petit, j'appris à aimer ma maladie, ses traces, comme autant de certitudes, de preuves d'être encore en vie' (*D* 41). As Robson discusses, 'in an attempt to speak beyond her skin', the narrator ends up 'inscribing her unspoken testimony on her skin'; through repetitive scratching which ruptures its surface and leaves a network of scarring.<sup>45</sup> The marks on her skin become a written rejection of 'l'horreur de l'homicide familial' (*D* 39). Her skin becomes a document as her rage is expressed via her body in 'un texte-fleuve' (*D* 39) which, she notes, 's'en imprimait sur mon épiderme, annonçait ma parole prochaine' (*D* 40). This compulsive scratching offers temporary relief from the relentless itch of her skin condition, but also symbolises the narrator's need to communicate what she cannot articulate; that which remains trapped inside her skin. She remarks, 'Je dénonçais sans cesse par cette écriture de peau, tout ce que j'avais à dire, tout ce que *j'allais* dire un jour, tout ce qu'il me serait donné de révéler' (*D* 39). In the manner of Cixous'

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<sup>45</sup> Robson, 'L'écriture', p. 71.

rebellious hysteric, whose discontent is made visible and legible through the body, Nobécourt's narrator denounces 'sans cesse' her discontent within the family structure, representative of wider society.

The narrator scratches to erase, or peel off, the marks of her difference; 'Éplucher ma peau, c'était mettre à nu l'horreur banale, sempiternelle du petit groupe affreux que sont les siens. Je grattais pour éteindre le noyau de cela, pour enfin m'en débarrasser' (*D* 40). Her damaged skin encloses her self and her rage; to peel her skin is to break out of the container and reveal and liberate the contents of her skin – 'l'enveloppe qui m'oppressait' (*D* 100) – through scratching and penetrating it; allowing unmediated contact between the inside and the outside. As Jones remarks, Irène 'experiences this as liberating because it is an act of vandalism'; in defacing her skin she 'prevents her body from fulfilling its socially designated function'.<sup>46</sup> As Irène herself notes, she is rendered '*économiquement dysfonctionnelle*' (*D* 96). Upon her body is inscribed her denunciation of society and the family which rejects her; in the manner of Anzieu's 'palimpseste' (*MP* 128), her skin's 'hiéroglyphes haineux' (*D* 17) signify the psychic trauma her marginalisation provokes.

As Jordan notes, speaking out 'involves scratching, scabbing and scarring the deceptively smooth surface of daily reality'.<sup>47</sup> For Irène, it means returning over and over to the root of the problem – in the manner of the hysteric who repeatedly returns to the traumatic event which provoked her unspeakable 'madness' – in order to keep it at the forefront of her consciousness. Anzieu has noted that this kind of compulsion is characteristic of those suffering from skin ailments, offering both pain and the pleasure of release. It also, however, constitutes a 'performance', which is intended to be highly visible (the significance of which was discussed in the introduction). As Anzieu notes:

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<sup>46</sup> Jones, *Repulsion*, p. 156.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

‘La démangeaison est celle d’être compris par l’objet aimé’ (*MP* 128). It represents at once a cry for help to the mother, and a reminder of childhood trauma. Anzieu continues, ‘le symptôme physique ravive, sous la forme primaire du “langage cutanée,” les frustrations anciennes, avec leurs souffrances exhibées et leurs colères rentrées’ (*MP* 128). The language of the skin, ‘langage cutanée’, functions to re-inscribe Irène’s childhood trauma; both the pain and suffering of her skin disorder and the deeper wounds of her rejection and physical abuse within the family. As ‘tous les mots s’étaient inscrits malgré moi sur ma peau’ (*D* 60), the narrator’s skin is linked to blank paper, upon which she can inscribe her testimony via traces rather than words. In the introduction to this study, it was suggested that the hysteric was a ‘blank page’ upon which the doctor (representative of the patriarchy) projected his fear of otherness, in this instance, it is the narrator who is free to ascribe meaning to her disordered body. As Jane Kilbey explains, ‘the act of self-harm renders skin a deeply eloquent form of testimony, where a plea is made for social recognition’.<sup>48</sup> However, as the narrator works to break down the barrier of her skin by damaging it, her scratching merely functions to emphasize her difference. As Jordan notes, this is ‘at once an alleviating and an exacerbating act’.<sup>49</sup>

Recognising the paradoxical nature of her ‘écriture de peau’ (*D* 39), the narrator adopts a less transgressive means of testimony, and her rejection of her family culminates in the writing of her own text in which she transcribes the marks of her skin on to paper. Her writing is, of course, still described by Nobécourt in physical terms of the body and of skin, the paper replacing the skin upon which her testimony is inscribed and her syntax derived from the rhythms of the body:

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<sup>48</sup> Jane Kilbey, ‘Carved in Skin: Bearing Witness to Self-Harm’, in Jay Prosser, *Thinking Through the Skin* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 124.

<sup>49</sup> Jordan, *Women’s Visions*, p. 225.

La chair devenait verbe. Et plus j'inscrivais sur mes pages d'écolière l'horreur des miens, plus ma peau retrouvait son élasticité première. [...] Le texte, le texte de ma peau éclatait en plein cœur de la page. Mon écriture se démenait nerveuse, je grattais, je grattais avidement le papier, la phrase me démangeait, tournait en tous sens dans ma tête avant que de venir s'écrouler sur ma feuille. Mes plaies, une à une, venaient mourir sur la blancheur de ces dizaines de pages que je volais à la réserve de papeterie pensionnat. Boucles de mots, encre liquide, enfin liquide, le liquide! (*D* 64-65)

Flesh becomes grammar and the marks upon Irène's skin begin to clear as they are transferred onto paper. Instead of her skin, the narrator scratches the paper with her pen; itching is replaced by searching for phrases which then pour onto the paper in the manner that her blood used to pour from her lesions. In a potent example of creative violence, the white scales of Irène's psoriasis blend into the whiteness of the page, and liquid ink flows to release the trauma previously blocked by scabs and scars on the surface of her skin:

Adjectifs, verbes, syntaxe, j'inventais des hapax, je tournais les termes, j'écorchais la langue, je dépouillais la grammaire, je fouillais, je raclais le fond de mon vocabulaire! Et les subjonctifs raffinés, aussi précis que l'étaient les crevasses immondes qui avaient poussé sur mon affreuse gueule, je les prenais avec joie, rage, subjonctifs imparfaits... la langue, la langue me démangeait... je détournais un monde... et l'encre noire coulait... coulait comme le sang d'hier de mon tissu ouvert, je déclinais mes plaies... Ah! vocables, lettres, voyelles, consonnes, orthographe, syllabes, accents, lexiques, dictionnaires, glossaires, synonymes... j'en crevais [...] le papier contre la peau, en échange de la peau! (*D* 65-66)

The format and style of this passage contrasts to the rest of the text. Full sentences are gradually simplified to lists which perform the free-flowing outpouring of Irène's writing, intimating speed and the sensation of deliverance that writing provides for the narrator. Nobécourt's use of repeated ellipses and the continuity of her writing, which is structured as one long paragraph spanning three pages, emphasises the sense of flow and release, whilst encouraging the reader to speed up in order to perform the sense of relief the narrator feels after years of pent-up anger and pain. Her skin is exchanged for paper and emotions are conveyed through physical sensation; tenses are compared to the

precision of the scratches across her throat as her writing flows as blood once did from her open wounds.

The ‘physicality’ of Nobécourt’s writing, here, represents an attempt to translate what is *inside* the body. In the manner of *écriture féminine*, Irène’s text is written in a language borrowed from the body so that her unspoken trauma can emerge in a legible form. Rather than writing *on* the body then, Irène is *writing* the body, and converting bodily knowledge into words, very much in the manner of 1970s writing projects. In so doing, Irène believes she is challenging the silence and marginality to which she has been condemned by society (and the family). According to Prosser’s study of autobiography and skin diseases, ‘Autobiography works like a skin; it is the skin the author sends out that at once conceals and reveals the self. Skin autobiographies form an alternative skin. Writing the skin is obviously an attempt to work out, to express (that is both to articulate and thus to expel) a stigmatized skin/sin’.<sup>50</sup> The ideas of an ‘alternative skin’ and writing as expulsion are crucial to Irène’s project. Writing, for Irène, has both a curative and a testimonial function; as she writes she feels her psoriasis disappearing. Her trauma has been translated into language, and her skin, it would seem, no longer bears the traces of unspoken and failed testimony.

Irène in fact presents the composition of her text as a political act of great significance, as she feels she is exposing truths, accessed through bodily experience, which patriarchal society would prefer to remain hidden. This is reminiscent of Cixous’ call for women to break out of their position of silence in patriarchal society, through writing. On one hand, Irène’s writing is depicted as an uncontrollable compulsion, comparable to her skin disorder but in which, as we have seen, the paper takes the place of her skin. On the other hand, the narration of this section shows how Irène is able to

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<sup>50</sup> Prosser, *Thinking Through*, p. 65.

take control, using writing to make sense of her experiences in her own terms. As Jones notes, the metaphorical substitution of the written page for Irène's skin 'extends to the expression of her past and future experiences in terms of grammatical structures'.<sup>51</sup>

Irène writes:

je me déchaînais, je riais, j'inscrivais là, sur les lignes, mon passé composé, composé avec eux, toujours avec eux... je rêvais de futur antérieur, de conditionnels avortés... et je plongeais là! dans l'impératif! impératif absolu d'enfin pouvoir parler [...] enfin, enfin je traduisais le texte de ma peau! (D 67)

Irène's discontent is no longer expressed through the involuntary (passive) language of the body. She has regained control through writing, in which she is able to actively express herself. The narrator's pleasure in writing underline the idea of emancipation from this passivity, which is replaced by the ability to make herself heard: 'Mon patois, mon dialecte, la langue vernaculaire de ma peau... Je conjuguais à mort. J'exterminais avec barbarismes l'exécration des miens!' (D 68) Irène's newfound autonomy goes hand in hand with her clear skin and she revels in her freedom and conformity:

Je me suis trouvée nue à moi-même, sans heurt, et avec la joie stupide, oui stupide, brutale lorsque j'ai su un jour que le texte arrivait à sa fin, lorsque enfin le décor a pris le relief qui était le sien. En perdant le tout j'ai enfin tout gagné [...] et mon corps, y compris, est devenu *politique*. Et je peux vous dire comme ce fut bon, parce que vivant. (D 75)

Stripped naked of its abnormality, her body is now a signifier of her normality. Now considered 'normal', her body is recognised by society, 'devenu *politique*', and able to participate; it is finally 'vivant'. Her difference erased, Irène can now interact with others, return to work, and wear clothes which reveal her clear skin:

Je restais quelques mois la peau lisse, tendue sur mon squelette, offerte à la rue comme un fruit goûteux. J'allais sur les boulevards, fière, dans des robes entrouvertes sur les autres. Ma haine tombait, s'effritait peu à peu. [...] Je devenais sociale, animal rodé pour la machine en marche. [...] Je vécus ainsi, sans souci, jusqu'en mars, avec la joie réelle, mais combien surprenante, de me sentir identique aux autres. (D 77-78)

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<sup>51</sup> Jones, *Repulsion*, p. 152.

Irène's development as a character is, up to this point, reminiscent of female protagonists in 1970s women's writing, which, as we saw in the introduction, sought to link the personal and the political and create points of identification for the female reader. As Jones notes, Irène's 'insistence on the rejection of oppressive patriarchal structures [...] and her gradual discovery, through writing, of an individual voice and language through which to denounce this oppression', can be seen as redolent of this tradition.<sup>52</sup> If the importance accorded to Irène's pleasure in letting bodily fluids flow and their transformation into words is reminiscent of Cixous' call for women to write their bodies, similarities with Cardinal's *Les Mots*, discussed in the introduction, are also easily recognisable. Both Nobécourt and Cardinal's respective narrators suffer physical manifestations of inner traumas which are, in both cases, attributed to a difficult mother-daughter relationship; a cathartic function is ascribed to writing in both texts, and for both narrators, the writing of their texts signified the symbolic murder of the family.

However, as the previous quotation from *La Démangeaison* perhaps belies, for Irène, the writing of her text does not signal the final deliverance and autonomy experienced by the narrator of *Les Mots*. As an 'animal rodé pour la machine en marche', Nobécourt's narrator is 'identique aux autres'; her individuality has been erased (the suggestion of animality suggests a pack mentality; a further loss of autonomy) and the disruptive potential she once possessed is now silenced. The itch soon returns and she is once again subsumed by compulsive scratching. Her writing project fails as it remains unread by her family, who 'ne lurent jamais le texte haineux' (*D* 76), thus her communicative potential is limited. Furthermore, her text was focussed explicitly on her family, but with the return of her psoriasis comes the realisation that

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

the true enemy is in fact ‘l’affreuse oppression d’un système, qu’ils [la famille] maintiennent dans un aveuglement qui n’a d’égal que leur capacité à se persuader du contraire’ (*D* 85). The narrator realises that, instead of liberating her, her writing project has confirmed her dependence on the oppressive regime and she has in fact contributed to its perpetuation:

moi ayant parlé j’avais vérifié que j’étais de cette pâte-là également, de celle fomentée de bassesse parcimonieuse, de mesquinerie sordide, car j’avais tant râlé, et tant maudit, mais hérité de tout ce qu’ils m’avaient transmis, et ma rage, ma colère, c’était aussi d’eux que je la tenais [...] A travers tous ces glaviots purulents que j’avais fièrement émis, je lisais mon affreuse dépendance, mon vaste aveuglement, le règlement cathartique de mon texte enfin exprimé, après l’avoir gratté comme on gratte la vérité sur ma couenne pleine de pus. Et tout cela avait donc été vain. Je m’étais battue, mais mon ennemi n’était point celui que j’avais cru qu’il fût. (*D* 85-86)

Irène’s fall from conformity to irrevocable difference is underlined through her use of the word ‘couenne’, meaning ‘rind’, which dehumanises her and signals her return to her previous marginalised position. In Chapter 2 we will see similar dehumanising strategies used by Darrieussecq to signal her protagonist’s movement towards the peripheries of society, as her body gradually morphs from an acceptable ‘idealised’ signifying body to its hybrid porcine form. In *La Démangeaison*, Irène’s written text has acted in the manner of Prosser’s ‘alternative skin’ (see note 53 above), by simulating cure but in reality serving to conceal her true identity. As Robson notes, her writing ‘contains, rather than articulating and expelling, her difference’.<sup>53</sup> From this point in the text, evading all attempts at containment appears to be Irène’s goal and, having rejected words, once again, as a means of liberation, she embraces her skin disorder as the truth of her difference and a means of radical self-expression. As Jones notes, she recognises her skin as a ‘surface for social inscription’.<sup>54</sup> Rather than liberating her, its unbroken surface conversely revealed her conformity and subservience to the system: ‘nue j’étais

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<sup>53</sup> Robson, ‘L’écriture’, p. 74.

<sup>54</sup> Jones, *Repulsion*, p. 155.



encore vêtue et nu le monde mentait encore. J'ai gratté ma peau comme j'ai gratté l'épaisse corne qui recouvre docilement la croyance' (*D* 156). Even naked, Irène is dressed in hypocrisy. In a desire to break out of the limiting container of her skin, and break down the barriers between inside and outside, Irène abandons herself once more to a paroxysm of scratching;

j'écorchais mon squelette, je rendais ma carnation plus profonde encore, je faisais sortir les chairs brûlantes, je mettais à vif toutes les muqueuses, je déchirais l'enveloppe de mon corps avec précision, j'atteignais des nudités extrêmes! [...] Il n'y eut pas une journée où je ne m'abandonnai à ma nouvelle insanité, celle de me laisser aller à l'invasion monstrueuse de cette maladie. Mon sang jaillissait à l'air libre, tous les liquides intérieurs se répandaient sur moi, je ne nommais plus rien, je ne cherchais aucune explication, je me délectais dans la sueur de mon mal, dans sa *suintance* perpétuelle. (*D* 89-90)

This is a violent, physical and abject 'breaking out' of the envelope of her body, scratching and ripping to reveal the raw flesh underneath. This idea of a new, redoubled kind of nudity – an 'extreme' nudity – underlines the raw potency of the body underneath. Irène's dysfunctional body is re-appropriated as a weapon, rather than a symptom of her alienation from the dominant social order; 'Je creusais la peau, parce que c'était la seule façon de refuser l'adhésion à un monde confus suintant l'abrutissement' (*D* 97). The narrator takes great pleasure from the scratching and tearing she used to fight against inflicting on her skin. She notes, 'L'horreur de ce bouillonnement désordonné, je la voulais, c'est elle que je ne cessais de traquer' (*D* 93), and later; 'Ma démangeaison que j'ai haïe avant de l'adorer, car elle seule a su m'écarteler, allumer mes chairs comme autant d'usines en pleine nuit, scintillantes sur mon derme' (*D* 95). She embraces her difference and deliberately seeks to augment it. Her itch is re-appropriated as proof of her freedom from the oppressive system to which others adhere through fear rather than agreement; 'En bonne santé, les autres l'étaient plus par terreur que par choix. Je retenais mon mal comme une définition' (*D* 94). Irène is no longer negatively defined by her disordered skin, instead she appropriates it as

proof of her uniqueness and a means of accessing knowledge which the system has sought to conceal:

mon art magistral, ma prevue absolue. J'interrogeais, dans mes nuits rampantes, le secret de mon enveloppe. Je décryptais l'énigme, je voulais comprendre ce que cachait la méconnaissable figure, le mensonge noir obscur, le plus sombre et le plus archaïque mensonge, celui de la servilité. (*D* 97)

This idea of a secret which the system has sought to conceal – ‘le plus archaïque mensonge, celui de la servilité’ – recalls Cixous and Irigaray’s assertion, discussed in the introduction, that the repression of the feminine must remain hidden to ensure the secure functioning of patriarchal society. In this light, ‘le mensonge noir obscur’ Nobécourt mentions is perhaps a metaphor for ‘le continent noir’ of the female body discussed by Cixous (*JN* 125).

The scars upon Irène’s skin become a new language, inscribed upon and through the body, which replaces the failure of written language to reveal and express her ‘truth’. Like her socially acceptable clear skin, written language is now presented as a limiting container:

Les réseaux fonctionnent à travers les générations! Que ma voix, la mienne propre, ne voie jamais le jour, que je continue sans cesse d'épeler les onomatopées de leur langage stupide! Langue de l'hypocrisie, du confort, des privilèges. Que je ne trouve jamais ma langue pour les raconter, que je ne passe jamais aux aveux, grand jamais; me supprimer comme l'autre, comme tous les autres! (*D* 72)

Although written language gives the impression of freedom, it actually reinforces the narrator’s subservience to the system; her silence. Her skin disorder is a new language, a bodily revolt; ‘le verbe s’est gravé malgré moi dans la chair, mais l’alphabet s’est incrusté dans ma peau. Il ne me restait qu’à trouver la grammaire, la syntaxe et l’accord dans les temps’ (*D* 72). Her embodied rebellion is aligned with that of Cixous’ rebellious hysteric who *deliberately* refuses what Jane Gallop terms the ‘politically healthy’ symbolic, in favour of a new bodily language which breaks social codes and

refuses existing social structures.<sup>55</sup> Finally in control of her actions, Irène states; ‘Je me savais lucide, en partance vers une pure intériorité, proche de l’indifférence, vers une toxicité insoutenable’ (*D* 94).

Irène’s newfound pleasure in abandoning herself to her body is accompanied by a rediscovery of her sexuality. This is reminiscent of *Les Mots* which, as noted in the introduction, sees Cardinal’s narrator explore a new-found sexual freedom, and can be considered a staple feature of 1970s writing projects. Irène frequents – ‘instinctivement’ – the peepshows of Pigalle where she masturbates whilst looking at ‘la peau lisse des filles’ (*D* 88). As Jones notes, her insistence on instinct leading her towards marginalised forms of sexuality ‘suggests self-reliance rather than adherence to social norms’.<sup>56</sup> Her position as a spectator in the peepshows is an assertion of her newfound subjectivity; she has left behind her position as a passive object of disgust, described in the earlier pages of the text, to become an ‘active’ spectator who objectifies others. Just as she has shed her sexual inhibitions she now sheds her skin in public, allowing herself to ‘plonger dans l’extase’ of scratching in plain view: ‘La démangeaison montait au coin d’un boulevard, d’une rue. Je me précipitais, soucieuse de satisfaire, dans les toilettes d’un bar ou sur la banquette d’un taxi qui me ramenait chez moi’ (*D* 88).

Her sexual relationship with Rodolphe, her young lover, involves a further attack on the boundaries of her body as she entreats him to scratch her skin and bring her to a point where pleasure and pain merge:

Je voulais qu’il déchire l’enveloppe qui m’oppressait, cette limite impossible, [...] Il pénétra ma peau et mon sexe ensemble, il frappait et grattait à la fois, écorchant ma blessure d’entre mes lèvres douces, arrachant l’épiderme de coups secs et pointus. [...] Il opérait dans mes chairs profondes, [...] il me scalpait, m’égrenait, me perçait, me perforait, raclait le derme, fouillait le ventre, remuait au fond des choses, explorant les abîmes de mon corps, tâchant de venir à bout de ma cuirasse, l’extérieur, l’intérieur se rencontrant soudain. (*D* 100-02)

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<sup>55</sup> Jane Gallop, ‘Keys to Dora’, in *Dora’s Case*, ed. by Bernheimer and Kahane, p. 218.

<sup>56</sup> Jones, *Repulsion*, p. 132.

This is the ultimate rupture of the skin as a container; all limits become blurred as the narrator struggles to, in her words, ‘[mettre] à nu l’obscénité de mes chairs intérieures’ in order to discover ‘cet indicible qu’on ne voit jamais’ (*D* 93). The boundaries between bodily interior and exterior have been destroyed, as though the skin can no longer contain the self. As Robson remarks, it is as if Irène ‘seeks the possibility of somehow transcending her skin not by shedding it but by penetrating beneath it, by stretching its limits’.<sup>57</sup> She has moved from *passive* ‘victim’ to *active* ‘subject’ solely through her newfound knowledge of her body and its limits. In her words; ‘j’ai accédé à une liberté inconnue que la démangeaison seule a donc su me donner’ (*D* 93).

This section of my chapter has shown, then, that Irène’s real development as a character – her self-realization – occurs only after the failure of her writing project. However, although her self-discovery occurred through a re-valuing of her body which enabled her to move beyond social and familial constraints, her attempts to share this new corporeal knowledge with others are invariably met with failure, such as when she impulsively attacks an attractive young woman in the street and scratches her face: ‘elle se couvrit le visage des mains, je recommençai de courir’ (*D* 106). Initially the narrator’s sexual relationship with Rodolphe is played out, as Robson notes, ‘almost exclusively on her body’.<sup>58</sup> However, after a brief separation, Irène attempts to initiate him into her experiences of ‘folie indécente’ (*D* 89) in order to break him out of what she regards as his disappointing conformity to established social norms. In an attempt to bring him, too, to the limits of pleasure and pain, she scratches him violently and then stabs him whilst masturbating him: ‘Il était désormais l’enveloppe déchirée, ouvert sur un autre infini’ (*D* 107). The idea of the skin as an envelope which must be broken out of in order to discover ‘un autre infini’ explicitly links Nobécourt’s vision of the skin as

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<sup>57</sup> Robson, ‘L’écriture’, p. 75.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

a container with Anzieu's theory. Here, the narrator is physically inscribing her 'écriture de peau' (D 39) onto the bodies of others; trying to rupture their sense of bodily integrity and break down the barriers between inside and outside in an attempt to provide them with the insights her 'abnormal' body has provided her. However, she is ultimately arrested and imprisoned for her transgression.

The ending of the narrative sees her refuse to communicate at all, as she mentions the doctor who 'tente de me faire parler' (D 109) and finally states that 'désormais je ne dirai plus rien de la vérité' (D 111). Despite the communicative potential depicted in the text, then, where skin is a surface that can be both inscribed and read, the possibility for Irène to communicate with others is ultimately limited. Her unread writing project fails as a means of communicating with others, she is imprisoned when attempting to share her insights with others, and this imprisonment means that her skin is no longer visible for others to read. Her choice to embrace her hysteria, her newfound bodily truth, has led to social withdrawal and ultimate isolation. The assertive phrases used during the narration of her acceptance of her skin condition are replaced by a return to the *self* versus *Other* dynamic of the opening pages; '*Ils m'ont dit [...] Ils m'ont dit encore [...] Ils m'ont dit enfin [...] Ils me forcent à m'asseoir des heures durant, dans une petite salle blanche, où un homme ridicule vient écouter, à mes côtés, le silence règne dans ces lieux*' (D 109-09).

Although Irène's rediscovery of her sexuality is couched in positive terms reminiscent of 1970s writing projects, her 'instinctive' recourse to the sex industry highlights her subservience to social norms and the commodification of the female body. In light of earlier discussions of Anzieu's theory, this suggests that Irène's instinctive tendency towards marginalised sexual practices and her urges to combine pleasure with pain could also be read as evidence of the failure of Anzieu's sixth

function of the *Moi-peau – soutien de l'excitation sexuelle* – in which the inadequate sexualisation of the infant by the mother gives rise to hysteria and ‘perversions’.

Although her narration is presented as a political act, it lacks a specific socio-political framework, so it becomes an unfeasible rejection of social systems in general, rather than a productive evaluation of a particular system. Here, another comparison with *Truismes* is useful. Although Darrieussecq’s protagonist shares some of the shockingly abject qualities of Nobécourt’s narrator, as we will see in the following chapter, *Truismes* takes place within a very specific and well recognisable socio-political regime which undercuts the more improbable aspects of the narrative to present a workable political critique.

To return to *La Démangeaison*, reader sympathy is also drastically undermined during the final pages of the text. In a clever twist, the reader is made to feel distant from Irène – even hostile towards her – rather than empathetic. Often in literature, readers are encouraged to side with the unfortunate by being provided with the necessary information to fully understand them. However, Nobécourt manipulates the reader to provoke the very responses (towards both the narrator’s body and her actions) which Nobécourt originally wishes to critique. Although readers may sympathise with the narrator during the earlier sections of the text, which deal with her marginalisation and physical suffering both at the hands of her parents and through her skin disorder, Irène’s violent acts towards others coupled with her explicit admission ‘j’ai menti déjà; beaucoup’ (*D* 111), in the final paragraph of the text, destroys the potential for reader identification which is typical of 1970s projects. As Jones notes, Irène’s path to self-development ‘cannot be considered exemplary’; it is not readily recuperable within a productive feminist framework.<sup>59</sup> Undermining the radical ‘breaking out’ – not only of

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<sup>59</sup> Jones, *Repulsion*, p. 119.

her own skin as a limiting container, but of social convention and her conception of her marginalisation as negative – the final pages also reveal that the whole text has been narrated from Irène's cell in the mental institution, a place which epitomises isolation, incoherence and restraint. The text's final emphasis is thus placed on her silence and exclusion from society. As Nathalie Morello notes; '*La Démangeaison* semble donc se solder par un double échec'; that of the language of the body coupled with the failure of written language.<sup>60</sup> This finally brings us to an analysis of *La Conversation*, in which the narrator attempts, instead, to reconcile the body with the spoken word.

### ***La Conversation: Reconciling the Body and Language***

This section begins with a synopsis of *La Conversation*, and then turns to an analysis of the unconventional structure of the text, in which a linguistic 'breaking out' is enacted through the subversion of traditional modes of writing, dialogue and language. It argues that language, in *La Conversation*, becomes the container, and Nobécourt's 'hysterical' writing breaks conventional form and plays with the reader's expectations, pushing language and speech to their limits in the manner that the body was pushed to its limits in *La Démangeaison*. At first glance, *La Conversation* takes up the story of Irène when she is about to stand trial for the stabbing of her lover Rodolphe at the end of *La Démangeaison*. Irène and her barrister, Anna, drink whiskey and eat steak tartare in a bar as Irène attempts to piece together the twenty-eight years of experience which have culminated in the court case the following day. Despite the misleading title, the narrative is in fact not a conversation; Anna's interjections are absent from the text.

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<sup>60</sup> Nathalie Morello, '*La Démangeaison* et *La Conversation* de Lorette Nobécourt: Quand "le parler chair" devient révolte...féministe?', *Romance Studies* 20 (June 2002), 65-76 (p. 70).

Instead, her comments and questions are integrated into Irène's monologue. For example; 'Il faudra que nous passions à la maison [...] pour que vous voyiez l'endroit où je vis. Cela peut être intéressant pour vous. Quand êtes-vous née? Non ce n'est pas loin. A cinquante mètres' (C 47). The monologue is generated by legal requirements and is rooted in a very definite sense of place; the activities of the bustling night bar in which it is set are foregrounded, as scraps of conversations from neighbouring tables, transcribed in italics in the text, periodically interrupt Irène's monologue. Not a conversation, then, but not a straightforward monologue, the status of Nobécourt's text is typically ambiguous.

Resisting convention and defying expectation appear to be the principal characteristics of both the text and the narrator. Nobécourt employs the dramatic device of the deferred confession which keeps the essential subject of the conversation (the attempted murder of Rodolphe) firmly in the background; 'je vais vous raconter un autre jour, une autre fois, et puis j'en viendrai à vous parler à un moment ou un autre de ce jeune homme, ce fameux jeune homme qui vous occupe, vous plus que moi' (C 96). Although Anna's primary purpose is to gather factual information for Irène's defence, this appears to conflict with Irène's own objective which is to narrate herself in her own way – this idea will be picked up again shortly. The correlation of events with *La Démangeaison* coupled with the continuing first-person narrative of Irène make it tempting to read *La Conversation* as a direct sequel, however it soon becomes apparent that this may not be as simple as it first appears. At the end of *La Démangeaison*, Irène is a single woman in her twenties, suffering acute psoriasis, who finds herself imprisoned after stabbing her (then) boyfriend. We meet Irène again, in *La Conversation*, after eighteen months in prison for the attempted murder of a young man (unnamed in this text). However, this Irène at first claims to be twenty-eight, then



underlines her ‘trente ans d’endurance’ (C 145), and later returns to reaffirm: ‘moi, Irène, presque trente ans’ (C 166). Mention is made, in *La Conversation*, of the numerous skin disorders suffered in her youth – ‘j’ai été atteinte par toutes sortes de maux bizarres’ (C 33) – however this narrator now appears to be completely cured. In *La Démangeaison*, Rodolphe was Irène’s only lover thanks to, in her words, ‘cette chose qui m’a gardée vierge tant d’années’ (C 15). However, in *La Conversation* the narrator claims to have known many men – although, it is worth noting, most of these encounters have been lived out through anguish, shame, abortion, rape and violence – and has a three year old daughter. Just as her text is characterised by ambiguity then, so it appears, is Nobécourt’s narrator.

The most significant discrepancy between the two texts, however, is that, whereas *La Démangeaison* ends with Irène’s declaration of silence, the later text, an unstoppable deluge of words, comes into being from the *opposite* of this statement. If *La Démangeaison* has achieved anything, then, it is to prove that Irène’s ‘truth’ cannot be expressed through conventional narrative. To borrow Nathalie Morello’s metaphor of blisters, another means of expressing Irène’s truth – ‘qui continuera certes de surgir par boursoufflures’ – must be discovered, explaining the unconventional format of *La Conversation* which is characterised ‘par boursoufflures orales incontrôlables’.<sup>61</sup> The disorderly torrent of Irène’s monologue defies the linear structure and purposive nature of a legal plea, which should emphasise causality and motive. Meandering and disjointed, Irène’s account jumps unexpectedly between different periods in her life, lurches unpredictably into new subjects, without closing those under consideration, and encroaches into dream and fantasy. If the narrative of *La Démangeaison* fluctuated between events and experiences, in *La Conversation* this has been taken to a further

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

extreme. As van Feggelen notes, at times the narrator can be found to introduce several topics in rapid succession, as in this instance:

Quinze ans chez les Ursulines, quand j'y pense... Mais je dois vous parler du jeune homme, et ce n'est pas si facile. Il s'en est sorti oui, sinon je serais morte. Il me disait qu'il aimait ma voix rauque et mes mains si petites, la générosité de ma curiosité. Non, je plaisante, il ne disait rien de tout cela. Deux ans durant, toutes les nuits, le jeune homme. Il fait doux ce soir, vous ne trouvez pas? Et j'aime ces banquettes de faux cuir marron. (C 21-22)

As van Feggelen sums up: 'in seven consecutive phrases, Irène talks about four unrelated subjects without any logical transition: her education as a child, the young man, the weather, and the interior decoration of the bar that she finds herself in'.<sup>62</sup> If the un-transitional nature of the text fails to disorientate the reader, uncertainty regarding what Rodolphe may or may not have said adds to its ambiguity. Irène's account is relayed in a stream of consciousness which evokes a multitude of details, events and opinions (most of which are directly linked to the body) and are positive and negative, simple and contradictory. This paradoxical, disjointed text, then, echoes the contradictory, erratic nature of the hysteric, in a 'hysterical' writing which is performative of the position of madness and marginalisation Irène occupies in society. Although discussed in relation to *La Démangeaison*, Anzieu's theory proves interesting here. Failures of the second function of the *Moi-peau* – that of 'containing' – risk the sentiment of something internal which is diffuse, spread out and unreachable, which in general cannot be identified or contained – the experience of having an interior which empties itself: 'the sieve Ego-skin'.<sup>63</sup> Irène's erratic changes of subject and unstoppable deluge of words perform this impossibility of containment.

The unreliability of language is underscored by the difficulty of pinning down Irène's account. Anna's implied interjections and attempts to guide Irène towards the

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<sup>62</sup> van Feggelen, 'Solitaire', p. 249.

<sup>63</sup> Ulnik, p. 59.

subject of Rodolphe's murder repeatedly draw the reader's attention to Irène's inconsistency and refusal to conform; 'De quoi voulez-vous que nous parlions?' she asks Anna, 'Du jeune homme oui, mais nous avons le temps n'est-ce-pas?' (C 26). Irène refuses to comply with the imposed format of the legal plea which Anna awaits, and instead imposes her own language, her own 'truth'. The result is a fragmented, 'shattered text', without continuity or logical progression, which recalls the fluidity and refusal of categorisation associated with Cixousian *écriture féminine*.<sup>64</sup> As Irène states: 'je dis le tout et son contraire', and in so doing she escapes any attempt at classification or definition (C 123). Indeed, she slides from one position to its opposite and her text is littered with contradictions; she expresses herself as both man and woman, including the stereotypical psychological characteristics (such as the association of femininity with submissive passivity, and masculinity with powerful mastery) associated with both genders: 'La femme en moi aime les tulipes [...], le vin, le tabac et les hommes, quand l'homme en moi aime l'honnêteté, les choses justes, l'ouvrage bien fait et la sobriété' (C 56). Just as the idea of bisexuality, of containing both sexes within the self, is discussed by Cixous in *La Jeune Née*, as we saw in the introduction, Freud also described the hysteric as simultaneously 'masculine' and 'feminine' during a hysterical attack. Similarly, Irène declares herself at once mother and daughter: 'La mère en moi deviendra folle, cette mère qui est la fille de l'enfant que j'étais' (C 55). Both powerful and vulnerable – 'Vous n'avez pas idée de la force qu'il y a en moi' (C 85) – yet, 'J'ai peur, au fond je suis encore si fragile, quelque chose en moi est incapable de devenir fort, solide de façon un peu sérieuse' (C 146). This contradiction between power and fragility epitomises the hysteric. Irène's attitude to motherhood, which she regards as at once 'un pouvoir répugnant' (C 27), as a means for women to justify their existence,

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<sup>64</sup> van Feggelen, 'Solitaire', p. 248.

and a source of ‘bonheur charnel’ (C 161) – the only thing which ‘[la] retient de mourir’ (C 117) – is similarly contradictory.

Instead of providing a factual, linear account of her crime, Irène compiles a fragmented list of the small and intimate physical sensations which define her. For example: ‘En sortant de la douche j’aime la trace de mes pieds mouillés sur le parquet clair. J’aime aussi le petit renflement de mon ventre’ (C 48), and ‘j’oubliais de me ronger les ongles des pieds, alors le plus petit venait se planter dans la chair du plus grand, et cela faisait une morsure de chien lilliputienne’ (C 12). This focus on bodily sensations coupled with the orality of the narrative, which consistently recalls us to the body and to human contact, underlines that, for Irène, it is the body which remains the sole locus of truth. These minuscule details, which are revealed in an unstoppable verbal barrage are, for Irène, the only ‘truths’ capable of expressing the complexity of her self. She repeatedly affirms this throughout the text; ‘Il existe cette part de vérité indiscutable de nos sensations’ (C 188); ‘mon corps est une unité’ (C 191), and; ‘Quand quelqu’un meurt, voilà ce qui me rend le plus triste: la disparition de ces minuscules détails qui font un être au même titre que tout le reste’ (C 169). The most striking example of this insistence on the primacy of the body in *La Conversation*, however, is in the narrator’s account of her abortion. What Jordan has termed Nobécourt’s ‘fascination with states of flesh’, begun in *La Démangeaison*, is carried through in Irène’s attempts to confront and describe foetal matter.<sup>65</sup> As Jordan notes, of all abject substances foetal body matter ‘is the most potent’ and heavily ‘laden with significance’.<sup>66</sup> Irène describes the blood which ‘coulait tranquillement entre mes cuisses’ (C 35), and ‘la vie me fout le camp entre mes cuisses, pfuit, c’est mou, c’est chaud, la vie à l’aube de *faisance*, la joie possible, pfuit, et ploc, le ploc d’une merde raisonnable qui tomberait à pic dans l’eau

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<sup>65</sup> Jordan, *Women’s Visions*, p. 231.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

glacée' (C 37). Her horror and sadness are described by evoking 'the everydayness of bodily expulsion and conflating the stuff of life itself with bodily waste'.<sup>67</sup> If the graphic imagery does not recall the reader to the functions of the human body, the onomatopoeic monosyllables which describe the 'frou, frou, frou' (C 36) of footsteps down the hospital corridors to the 'pfuit, et ploc' (C 36) of the foetal matter leaving the body and hitting the white porcelain of the toilet bowl are inescapable.

This unrelenting focus on the body in all its unruly, abject glory emphasises the impossibility of it ever being fully policed by the system. Language, on the other hand, proves to be inherently unreliable: '*Dans les conversations personne ne parle de soi. Il y a toujours le mensonge*' (C 17, Italics in original). Just as the narrator of *La Démangeaison* ultimately sought to break out of her signifying body, her socially acceptable clear skin, the undisciplined, unruly narrative structure of *La Conversation* enacts a linguistic 'breaking out' of the confines of narrative convention. Irène's unpredictable, volatile, eruption of words performs the disordered, uncontrollable, hysterical body laid bare in *La Démangeaison*. Contrasting to 1970s writing projects which emphasize the importance of finding a voice, silence, like the body, also becomes a weapon. Irène asks Anna 'Aurai-je un jour le courage du silence, la force de me taire?' (C 175). Rejecting the masculine symbolic, in favour of a position of 'silence', it is thus by recalling us to the body that Irène communicates the possibilities of a new freedom. According to Morello, 'dans cette lutte effrénée', it is the body which remains 'l'arme la plus efficace contre un système qui divise pour mieux régner, qui asservit à force d'étouffer la faculté d'éprouver librement, et donc de penser librement'.<sup>68</sup> Irène thus brandishes hers like a weapon; 'Mon corps est à moi maintenant, et je ne veux plus en laisser une miette à la machine' (C 49).

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Morello, 'le parler chair', p. 72.

Both texts, as we have seen, are characterised by a desire to escape classification, just as both texts share a common enemy: the system which functions to divide and conquer. According to Irène, ‘cette société de fragmentation’ ensures that ‘nos vies sont partagées en sexuelles, spirituelles, salariales, consciencelles, consommatoriennes tranches de rien’ (C 191). It is only the body which escapes ‘*la domination permanente de tous les individus dans toutes les sphères de leur vie*’ (C 191, Italics in original). Whereas Irène’s denunciation of the system in *La Démangeaison* lacked a specific focus, in *La Conversation*, the focus of Irène’s diatribe is expressly linked to World War II. According to Irène, ‘Tout est fragmenté, exactement comme l’étaient les camps qui fonctionnaient sur ce principe. Nous sommes dans un vaste camp totalitaire qui a pris le visage de son contraire’ (C 188). Similar to the extreme political regime inhabited by the hybrid narrator of Darrieussecq’s *Trusimes*, discussed in Chapter 2, Irène accuses the system, which is based upon isolation and exclusion, ‘à faire disparaître toutes les preuves de l’existence d’un autre mode de vie possible que celui qu’il propose, et ses opposants il les fait disparaître également’ (C 185). According to Irène, its members are ‘fanatisés par un système qui les prive d’expériences personnelles, de ces expériences qui pourraient leur faire souvenir qu’ils ont un corps, des sensations qui n’appartiennent qu’à eux’ (C 186). As Irène notes, ‘La négation de l’individu s’achève par la négation de son corps’ (C 192). Indeed, violent invasions into the body recur throughout the text in order to underline the extent to which the presence of unacceptable bodies and subjects both challenges and underpins the existing social system. Recalling the recurrent imagery, as we will see, of slaughtered animals and abattoirs in Darrieussecq’s text, in *La Conversation* images of bodies being violently attacked or dismembered recur in reality and in dreams. After her abortion, for example, Irène clings to ‘l’image de mon corps pendu par un crochet de boucherie planté dans le sexe’ (C 46) to distract

herself from other sources of pain. Returning to Anzieu once more, the failure of his fifth function – *consensualité* – could cause such feelings of physical fragmentation, however for Irène this fragmentation represents a positive release from the containment of everyday reality, potentially offering a new freedom from her marginalisation.

As with *La Démangeaison*, it is tempting to attribute to *La Conversation* a positive feminist message. However, as with the former, this is not so straightforward. The narrator undoubtedly evokes the specificities of the female body and a multitude of points of identification for the female reader. Emphasis is placed upon the fluidity of language, the multiplicity and endless sensations and meanings of the female body, recalling Cixous' attempts to escape the Cartesian dualism which characterises the masculine symbolic. However, Irène's assertion that 'mon corps est une unité' (C 191) – as Morello notes, 'une caractéristique généralement associée à une spécificité identitaire masculine' – is difficult to reconcile with feminist representations of the fluidity of the feminine.<sup>69</sup> Although the diversity of the narrator's sexual experiences could be considered liberatory, this too is thwarted through their associations with pain, perversion, violence and abortion.

However, just as the graphic 'physicality' of Nobécourt's writing, coupled with her narrator's deliberate choice to embrace her abject body in *La Démangeaison* enacted a physical 'breaking out' of her disordered skin as a container and as a signifier of her oppression, this analysis of *La Conversation* has shown how Nobécourt's subversive writing style, and attempts to thwart all forms of classification, coupled with her narrator's reliance on bodily sensation over factual 'truth-telling', enacts a linguistic 'breaking out' of language as a container and points to a new freedom which can only be accessed through the body. This chapter has shown how both *La*

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

*Démangeaison* and *La Conversation* engage with, yet ultimately reject, 1970s models in which writing by female protagonists was presented as a means of self-discovery, freedom and autonomy.

## Conclusion

The first section of this chapter focussed on the importance of the skin as a privileged site, a locus of identity, testimony and selfhood, as well as a boundary between exterior and interior. The discussion of the metaphors of peeling and itching skin in *La Démangeaison* exposed how Irène's psoriasis can be considered a hysterical symptom. We saw how, like hysteria, Irène's skin condition is a highly visible bodily expression of psychological trauma which finds its roots in difficult familial relationships, and the mother-daughter relationship in particular. Anzieu's theory of *Le Moi-peau* facilitated a deeper understanding of the links between psychic trauma and physical symptoms, and the impact familial relationships have on psychic development. Anzieu's notions of containment helped shed light on Nobécourt's depiction of the skin as a limiting and restrictive container in *La Démangeaison*. This in turn helped elucidate the violent, bodily 'breaking out' enacted in *La Démangeaison*, not only of the skin as a container, but of the marginalised position the hysterical narrator occupied in society, and indeed her conception of this position as negative. This chapter then examined the communicative function of the skin, as a site of interaction between self and others, and explored its link to language in *La Démangeaison*, through a discussion of Irène's turn to writing, in which writing at first appeared as a cathartic act (reminiscent of 1970s projects), but ultimately reaffirmed her subjugation to the system. The final section on



*La Démangeaison* discussed the ambiguity of the narrator's position at the end of the text, to which I will return in my concluding remarks.

The analysis of *La Conversation* focussed on the unconventional narrative structure of the text as a linguistic performance of hysteria. It then examined how the orality of the text, coupled with Nobécourt's insistence on recounting bodily sensation, consistently recalled the reader to the body. It turned to the idea of language as at once a means of freedom and a limitation (as, although language permits expression, narrative conventions confine and define how this should be done). This highlighted how Nobécourt consistently positions the body, as opposed to language, as the sole locus of truth. Finally, it drew these various discussions together to argue that Nobécourt's subversive writing style, her desire to escape classification, coupled with her narrator's reliance on bodily sensation over factual, chronological information, represents a linguistic 'breaking out', just as Irène's deliberate choice to embrace her disordered body in *La Démangeaison* represents a physical 'breaking out' of social and familial constraints.

To return to the original questions this chapter set out to answer: namely, why does Nobécourt call into question the idea that literature can be politically or morally significant? How successful are *La Démangeaison* and *La Conversation* in terms of employing motifs of hysteria to structure a workable feminist critique? And, do her texts fulfil a social function, or do they remain characterised by 'madness' and the impossibility of successful communication? The failure of Irène's writing cure in *La Démangeaison*, after a limited period of relief from her psoriasis, emphasizes the links between literature and the body, but ultimately negates the hope of any lasting positive effect. Likewise, in *La Conversation*, Irène's repeated assertions that 'Personne ne connaît exactement ma vie, ne la connaîtra jamais' (C 33), coupled with the novel's

epigraph from Juan-Carlos Onetti – which affirms that ‘personne ne comprend personne’ – suggests that Irène is condemned to incomprehension and negation from the outset. This is unsurprising given that the overall project of Nobécourt’s writing appears to be to escape all classification. Her protagonists exist in isolation and thus cannot be considered exemplary in the manner of those which inhabited women’s writing projects in the 1970s. Although motifs of self-discovery and voice are present, these are undermined by eventual silence. The universe Nobécourt paints across both texts is irremediably pessimistic, as both narrators face a fate decided by a system firmly entrenched in the eradication of difference, as Irène states towards the end of *La Conversation*; ‘Tout est là depuis le premier jour jusqu’au dernier, tout est foutu, tout est si triste et nous ne nous sauverons jamais’ (C 203). This system has eradicated difference to the point that it is no longer possible to envision – or to realise – another alternative, as Irène notes: ‘En supprimant le choix ce système a nié toute valeur à l’opposant’ (C 190-91).

As Morello notes, the text offers ‘aucune réponse donc, seulement des questions’.<sup>70</sup> However, if nothing else, Nobécourt’s texts have been successful in exposing the limitations and restrictions of language as a means of communication. Nobécourt’s refusal to offer alternative answers to the problems exposed through these two texts, then, is perhaps on the basis that, to be regarded as feasible, any solution offered would have to adhere to the cognitive models and narrative structures of the very system she critiques. Her un-willingness to expose herself to the normalising power of language (of the Law) remains consistent with the views expressed across both texts. That both narrators end up imprisoned and silenced – their disruptive potential cut off – highlights that the utopian solutions offered by 1970s writing projects are un-

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

viable. The ‘hysterical’ ambiguity and contradiction which characterise the accounts of both Nobécourt’s narrators better reflect the necessity to constantly re-think and re-position oneself *vis-à-vis* a system which continuously shores up its boundaries against social evolution.

Irène’s hysteria, figured in *La Démangeaison* as ‘ma nouvelle insanité’ (C 89), is presented as a means of accessing a new understanding of the world. Across both texts there is an insistence on the difference and ‘novelty’ of Irène’s attitude towards her body.<sup>71</sup> The celebratory tones of 1970s literature which celebrated fluidity and female sexuality are replaced by graphic, onomatopoeic descriptions of abject body matter and bodily processes. The motifs of hysteria implemented by Nobécourt may not sustain a workable feminist critique, but her texts undoubtedly succeed in fulfilling a social function by bringing the body in all its unruly reality back into mainstream literature and consciousness, enacting the ‘peeling’ away of ‘layers of routine perception’ to reveal the ‘utter lucidity’ about human existence discussed in the introduction to this chapter (see note 8 above). The negative endings of Nobécourt’s texts reflect the reality that the issues raised surrounding the effacement of the female body in contemporary culture remain, as yet, unresolved. This also explains Nobécourt’s consistent return to these themes throughout her oeuvre.<sup>72</sup> Although her narrators end up characterised by ‘insanité’ and incoherence, Nobécourt’s use of the motifs of hysteria may not offer revolutionary solutions, but do prove to be useful and effective as tropes which reflect the anxieties specific to women in contemporary society. The following chapter of this

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<sup>71</sup> In the following chapter we will see Darrieussecq base the success of *Truismes* on her narrator’s similar attitude to the excesses of the body.

<sup>72</sup> As we will see in the final chapter, this is similar to the trajectory of Nothomb’s work, in which a sense of irresolution is suggested by her repeated focus on themes of anorexia and embodiment. The following two chapters, however, deal with texts which represent the only exploration of ‘hysteria’ in the trajectory of their respective author’s work.

thesis, by contrast, will turn to a text which deploys the motifs of hysteria as a tool for constructive critique.

## Chapter 2

### Hysterical Mimesis in Marie Darrieussecq's *Truismes* (1996)

#### Introduction

Marie Darrieussecq's *Truismes* (1996) depicts a partially imaginary, dystopian society from the perspective of an uneducated and sexually exploited young woman who gradually transforms into a sow. This chapter reads the narrator's metamorphosis as a hysterical symptom of the oppressive and corrupt patriarchal socio-political system which governs the fantastical narrative world.<sup>1</sup> As Darrieussecq herself admits, her narrator 'a des symptômes typiquement hystériques, tels les problèmes liés aux hémorragies, à l'arrêt des règles, tout ce qui est lié à la transformation du corps. Ce sont des symptômes qu'auraient pu décrire Charcot'.<sup>2</sup> However, 'En tout cas', she writes, already suggesting a subversive potential, 'si elle est quelque chose dans le tableau clinique, elle n'est ni paranoïaque, ni obsessionnelle, ni perverse, ni même psychotique'.<sup>3</sup> If Darrieussecq's hybrid narrator, then, is a figure of excess, in a shifting and grotesque body which is the epitome of the threatening Other, and this transgressive body is not accompanied by the pathological psychological traits which shift this rebellion to pathology, she may appear as a contemporary equivalent of the celebratory figure of the hysteric imagined by Cixous. Nevertheless, the rebellious potentiality of this transgressive body appears to be, as we will see, repeatedly negated by the narrator's unquestioning collusion in the mechanisms of her repression. However, in

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<sup>1</sup> As we will see, this is a marked contrast to the following two chapters, in which anorexia is represented as a *conscious* rejection of the adult female body and all that it entails.

<sup>2</sup> Marie Darrieussecq, 'Interview with Darrieussecq', in 'Marie Darrieussecq', ed. by Gill Rye and Helena Chadderton, *Dalhousie French Studies* 98 (Spring 2012), pp. 51-64.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

light of Irigaray's strategy of subversive mimesis discussed in the introduction to this study, it is this very collusion which becomes particularly important to the examination, undertaken in this chapter, of how the motifs of hysteria can be successfully employed as a productive means of social and political critique.

Marie Darrieussecq is the prolific and controversial author of sixteen works published between 1996 and 2014, including several short stories and a collection of notes inspired by the birth of her son.<sup>4</sup> Her texts deal with themes of madness, disappearance, alienation, and death (particularly of children), as well as the ways in which women experience and articulate their changing bodies, the evolution of voice, and women's relationship to language. Thus, although Darrieussecq is keen to escape the label 'women's writer', it is clear that her texts all focus on issues which are particularly important for women, and her texts can be considered as intimate narratives of female individuation. In Darrieussecq's own words, in each of her texts:

Il y a une situation de départ – c'est très narratif – puis il y a une énorme rupture qui fait que le personnage est obligé de se mettre à penser seul. C'est quand même, pour moi, des livres sur la liberté. La dissolution, oui, mais c'est toujours des histoires de libération. Les personnages féminins sont, au départ, englués dans des situations aliénées [...] et tout à coup il y a un événement qui fait une rupture énorme et qui les oblige à se mettre à penser par elles-mêmes. Alors ça ne va pas sans douleur, sans crise.<sup>5</sup>

Darrieussecq, then, explores moments of intense crisis in the lives of her female protagonists, with an emphasis on trauma, loss, and the evolution of subjectivity such crises engender. Other enduring features of her writing projects include a preference for plural and unstable narrative voices, the use of experimental form – often (as in *Truismes*) mixing the real with the fantastic – and intertextuality, as a means of

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<sup>4</sup> All published in Paris by P.O.L, these works are: *Truismes* (1996) ; *Naissance des fantômes* (1998) ; *Le Mal de mer* (1999) ; *Précisions sur les vagues* (1999) ; *Bref séjour chez les vivants* (2001) ; *Le Bébé* (2002) ; *White* (2003) ; *Bébé* (2005) ; *Le Pays* (2005) ; *Zoo* (2006) ; *Tom est mort* (2007) ; *Précisions sur les vagues* (2008) ; *Le Musée de la mer* (2009) ; *Rapport de police* (2010) ; *Clèves* (2011) and *Il faut beaucoup aimer les hommes* (2013) .

<sup>5</sup> Darrieussecq in Jeannette Gaudet "Des Livres sur la Liberté": conversation avec Marie Darrieussecq', *Dalhousie French Studies* 59 (2002), 108-18 (p. 108).

questioning familiar categories and boundaries.<sup>6</sup> As we will see in *Truismes* Darrieussecq's writing often exhibits an exclusive reliance on bodily sensation to recreate emotion. Significantly, this is also a feature of Nobécourt's writing, as we have seen in the previous chapter, and it is a technique which we will see resurface in Chapters 3 and 4. Darrieussecq favours physical over psychological description as a more apt means of renewing our apprehension of complex experience and in turn renewing language. In her own words:

Je cherche à inventer de nouvelles formes, à écrire de nouvelles phrases, parce que c'est le seul moyen de rendre compte du monde moderne, dont le mouvement sinon nous dépasse sans cesse, demeurant illisible, incompréhensible.<sup>7</sup>

Her focus is thus on uniqueness and authenticity, a new means of expressing the specificity of personal experience in which everyday expression becomes redundant. Her texts often take place against a specific socio-political backdrop, as in *Truismes*, thus encouraging the reader to engage with the socio-political issues they evoke. Darrieussecq is nevertheless reluctant to associate her work with any particular politics and instead expresses a desire to 'écrire hors de tout système'.<sup>8</sup> In her pursuit of individuality and authenticity, her writing project is self-confessedly 'contre les clichés'.<sup>9</sup> Describing the cliché as 'le prêt-à-penser',<sup>10</sup> Darrieussecq notes:

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

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of Darrieussecq's use of the fantastic in *Truismes* see: Caine, Philippa, 'Marvellous Bodies? Strange Sex(es)? Fantastic Genre in Recent French Fiction', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 44: 4 (2008), pp. 427-44.

<sup>7</sup> Darrieussecq in Becky Miller and Martha Holmes, 'Interview with Marie Darrieussecq', Marie Darrieussecq Website, University of Arizona 2001, Accessed: 11/06/14], URL: <http://darrieussecq.arizona.edu/fr/entretien-r%C3%A9alis%C3%A9-par-becky-miller-et-martha-holmes-en-d%C3%A9cembre-2001>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

parler avec ses propres mots, on utilise les lieux communs, les lieux communs de la langue, du pays et de la société.<sup>11</sup>

*Truismes*, which owes its title to this fight against the ‘absence à soi-même’ created by the unquestioning acceptance of ‘le “on dit” général’, can be considered Darrieussecq’s most provocative attempt to combine these aspects of her writing project to date. Critics have disagreed on this text as feminist, essentialist, postmodern, pessimistic and politically incorrect.<sup>12</sup> It has attracted attention as an eating disorder narrative;<sup>13</sup> its intertextuality has led to comparisons with the work of (amongst others) Kafka, Ovid and Homer; and more recently it has raised questions concerning the extent to which disgust and the disgusting are representable and useful as a form of political critique.<sup>14</sup> In short, its ability to evade established generic categories has proved a source of enduring fascination and frustration.<sup>15</sup>

Like the other texts in this thesis, then, *Truismes* situates itself within an innovative tradition of female-authored texts which depart from second-wave celebratory models of the female body and instead explore the abject and monstrous. As in Nobécourt’s writing, and indeed all of the texts in this thesis, Darrieussecq’s text exhibits a firm focus on the female body as a site of conflict between an ideal femininity and the lived bodily reality of the narrator, whose position within a specific social and

<sup>11</sup> Darrieussecq cited in John Lambeth, ‘Entretien avec Marie Darrieussecq’, *The French Review* 79:4 (Mar 2006), 806-16 (p. 807).

<sup>12</sup> See: Nora Cotille Foley, ‘Métaphores, métamorphoses et retournements symboliques dans *Truismes* de Marie Darrieussecq: Mais qui finit à l’abattoir?’ *Women in French Studies* 10 (2002): 188-206 ; Jeanette Gaudet, ‘Dishing the Dirt: Metamorphosis in Marie Darrieussecq’s *Truismes*’, *Women in French Studies* 9 (2001), pp. 181-92 ; Shirley Ann Jordan, ‘Saying the Unsayable: Identities in Crisis in the Early Novels of Marie Darrieussecq’, *Women’s Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s*, ed. by Gill Rye and Michael Worton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 142-53 ; Catherine Rodgers, ‘Aucune évidence: les truismes de Marie Darrieussecq’, *Romance Studies* 18:1 (2000), pp. 69-81.

<sup>13</sup> Isabelle Favre, ‘Marie Darrieussecq ou lard de la calorie vide’, *Women in French Studies* 8 (2000), pp. 164-76 ; Julie Rodgers, ‘Body Politics in *Truismes*: “The Tyranny of Slenderness”’ in Helena Chadderton and Gill Rye (eds.), *Marie Darrieussecq*, Special Edition, *Dalhousie French Studies* 98 (Spring 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Jones, pp.173-218. Jones discusses Darrieussecq’s targeted use of disgust themes for the purpose of political critique.

<sup>15</sup> See: Michèle A. Schaal, ‘Le “je” comme “jeu”: genre féminin et performance dans *Truismes* de Marie Darrieussecq’, in ‘Marie Darrieussecq’, *Dalhousie French Studies* 98 (Spring 2012), pp 49-59.



political context is expressed largely through corporeal experience. What separates *Truismes* from the other texts examined in this thesis however (in particular those in the following two chapters) is the narrator's marked delight in the excesses of the fleshy, abject female body, despite the potency of abject imagery and misogynistic stereotypes. Darrieussecq herself has pinpointed this as:

une espèce de candeur qui a beaucoup désarmé les gens [...] Il y avait quelque chose dans le livre qui n'avait pas été dit sur la sexualité des femmes et sur une espèce de bonheur de l'excès du corps. Cela n'avait pas été dit de cette façon.<sup>16</sup>

This 'candeur' surrounding female sexuality has led to criticisms of her text as pornographic.<sup>17</sup> However, for Darrieussecq, 'C'est un livre pas du tout pornographique, car cela passe par le prisme d'une voix qui tient tout le temps à distance ce qui est décrit. Il y a une ironie très forte pour moi dans ce livre, c'est un livre comique surtout'.<sup>18</sup> The notational detachment which characterises a number of well-known later representations of the sexual female body and disavows such charges is absent in *Truismes*.<sup>19</sup> In the following chapter, we see how this notational detachment is taken to a further extreme in narratives of anorexia which document the body in pain as opposed to the body in pleasure. In particular, we will see de Peretti's use of a similar notational detachment to describe the 'biological' female body, stripped of its female sexuality. In *Truismes*, the detached narrative voice, 'qui tient tout le temps à distance', is instead characterised, as we will see, by an uncritical naivety designed to exhibit the extent to which the narrator is enmeshed within the repressive power structures of the society which she inhabits. That the narrator's bodily metamorphoses are involuntary, as flagged up in the introductory chapter, is a further feature of this uncritical naivety. If

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<sup>16</sup> Darrieussecq in Lambeth, 'Entretien', p. 814.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of this, see: John Phillips, *Forbidden Fictions: Pornography and Censorship in Twentieth-Century French Literature* (London: Pluto Press, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> Darrieussecq in Lambeth, 'Entretien', p. 814.

<sup>19</sup> For example, Catherine Millet's *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), Catherine Breillat's *Pornocratie* (Paris: Denoël, 2001) and Marie Nimier's *La Nouvelle Pornographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000).

Irène sought, in *La Démangeaison*, to exacerbate her symptoms in order to make visible her rebellion, Darrieussecq's narrator is, as we will see, wholly at the mercy of her unconforming body whose symptoms worsen or ease in response to the environment or social situation she finds herself in at a given time. In contrast to Nobécourt's hysterical protagonist, then, who attempted to enact a violent 'breaking out' of both the isolated position she occupied in society and her conception of this position as negative, Darrieussecq appears to have created a narrator who is unable and, most significantly, as we will see, *unwilling* to escape the oppressive binds of the nature/ culture dichotomy which entraps her. Darrieussecq's use of an 'ironie très forte' adds to the ambivalence of interpretation created by a text which deals with serious and often traumatic experiences in the manner of a grotesque comedy.

Indeed, ambiguity appears to underpin Darrieussecq's whole writing project in *Truismes*. As in Nobécourt's writing, Darrieussecq's text can be said to throw into doubt its own authority and engender confusion through alternately engaging with and rejecting aspects of 1970s writing projects. However, unlike the 'texte-fleuve' (LD 39) of Nobécourt's narrator in *La Démangeaison* which, as we saw in the previous chapter, was etched upon her skin in a syntax derived from the rhythms of the body, *Truismes* has, as Jordan has noted, 'none of the celebratory lyricism of 1970s writing such as that by Hélène Cixous'.<sup>20</sup> Quite the opposite, we will see that Darrieussecq's text appears, at times, to poke fun at *écriture féminine*'s insistence on the body and its biological rhythms, whilst the importance accorded to the maternal in much feminist writing is undermined through Darrieussecq's creation of a mother figure who attempts to slaughter her daughter for profit. Indeed, the text exhibits a distinct lack of female solidarity as the narrator exists in a position of rivalry or inferiority to the majority of

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<sup>20</sup> Jordan, *Women's Visions*, p. 88.

female characters within the text. Despite all this, the reader is undoubtedly encouraged to regard the narrator as representative of women in general and seek a coherent feminist message. How, then, can a text which appears to ridicule feminist goals offer any productive form of feminist critique? What message is to be taken from a text which appears to mock the serious issues it broaches, not only regarding women but also broader sexual, social and racial minorities? Indeed, how can *involuntary* bodily symptoms, which only serve, as we will see, to heighten the narrator's marginalisation, be regarded as any form of political engagement?

This chapter argues that Irigaray's strategy of 'subversive mimesis', discussed in the introduction to this study, can shed some light on some of these questions. No other critic of Darrieussecq's tale has analysed it through such a prism, yet it offers a productive framework for interpretation. Irigaray's concept allows us to argue that, far from representing what appears to be a pessimistic re-iteration of the narrator's biological entrapment, the narrator's fantastically hysterical body and unquestioning collusion in her own repression in fact enact – in the manner of Irigaray's subversive mimesis – a calculated *exaggeration* and hence *exposure* of the oppressive mechanisms of the society which she inhabits. The first section of this chapter begins with a synopsis of *Truismes* and then turns to a discussion of Irigaray's strategy of subversive mimesis which will build upon the ideas introduced, regarding this strategy, in the introduction to this study. Of particular importance are the relationship of Irigaray's strategy to notions of hysteria as performance, and her use of irony as a critical device. Before drawing links between Irigaray's writing project and that of Darrieussecq, this section examines how Irigaray deliberately re-iterates the 'paramètres masculins' (CS 23) of Western discourse in order to highlight its inherent contradictions. Ultimately, this

section will highlight the specific techniques and tropes of Irigaray's strategy that are pertinent to Darrieussecq's writing in *Truismes*.

In order to elucidate how Darrieussecq's text can be said to use the motifs of hysteria to enact a similar subversive strategy, the following section focuses on the hysterical body of Darrieussecq's narrator as an exaggeration and hence exposure of the conflicting ideals of femininity upheld by patriarchal society. Through an examination of how her symptoms initially accentuate a culturally acceptable 'wholesome' femininity, and gradually change to exaggerate the biological female body, this section examines her naive collusion in society's perspective of her body as an object for consumption and charts her body's gradual shift towards the abject. It argues that this society effects a separation between her self and her body, shown through the many mirror scenes which permeate the text, and then examines how her transformations begin to bridge this gap as she begins to know her own desires.

In addition to perpetuating the stereotypes which define women, Darrieussecq's narrator is inextricably bound up in the culture/ nature dichotomy which underpins misogyny. The following section begins with an examination of how the narrator's heightened affinity with nature is brought to the fore in order to further elucidate the hypocrisy of cultural ideals of a 'wholesome' femininity which exclude the natural, biological female body, which is instead presented as disgusting. It argues that the narrator's hysterical body is a physical amplification of the morally and politically corrupt society which she inhabits, and examines how her fluctuation between human and pig forms echoes the extremes she experiences within this society. Linked with this is a discussion of how the narrator's shift from acceptable bodily norms is accompanied by a concomitant shift towards the liminal spaces of the city. Whereas Irigaray's strategy of subversive mimesis aimed to highlight the contradictions of a femininity

prescribed by masculine parameters, then, this section focuses on how Darrieussecq's strategic exaggeration renders her protagonist emblematic, in the manner of a caricature, of an entire society based upon contradiction.

To conclude, the final section draws together these various analyses in order to posit Darrieussecq's text as a successful re-enactment of Irigaray's strategy of subversive mimesis. It discusses the ending of the text to posit the narrator's decision to write as the only aspect of the tale which offers some hope of a successful feminist critique. It argues that writing is linked to the search for subjecthood, and as such, offers a means of repositioning the narrator as a subject as opposed to an object for consumption. It argues that the naive narrative voice does not wholly frustrate the social and political critique which underlies the text, but is in fact a subversive strategy, similar to that of Irigaray, which permits Darrieussecq to avoid replacing one discourse of mastery with another. It argues that, despite the ambiguities deliberately and consistently raised throughout the text, the imagery of hysteria remains powerful; this power is used by Darrieussecq to engage in political discourses. Through her exaggerated hysterical narrator she is able to represent a society founded upon contradiction and characterised by repression. Although her text does not offer concrete alternatives, through irony and satire, and an extreme literalisation of stereotypical images of femininity and the female body, Darrieussecq invites reflection not only on her fantastical society but also on the contradictory principles and preconceptions which underpin existing Western consumerist society.

## Strategic Mimesis in Irigaray and Darrieussecq

*Truismes* tells the disturbing tale of a young woman who, by uncritically accepting sexual harassment and colluding in her own objectification, has secured a job in a *parfumerie*, which we soon discover to be a dubiously defined massage parlour. The narrator, who is never named, is overtly unreliable from the beginning of the text, where she underlines her difficulty in both remembering and articulating her experiences. This is an interesting contrast to Nobécourt's narrator in the previous chapter, whose unreliability is only revealed towards the end of the text, serving to undermine her political critique. However, in Darrieussecq's work, we will see that this inherent unreliability is foregrounded as yet another facet of her strategic mimesis. In keeping with this, the narrative style is characterised by a simplistic vocabulary, a reliance on stereotype over independently formed opinion, and an apologetic tone is frequently adopted regarding descriptions of sex and female desire. The narrative opens with a direct address to potential readers in which the narrator apologises for the distress her story is likely to cause, but nevertheless insists on the imperative to tell it. While the real-life reader is aware of the political situation in France in the mid-1990s, the narrator presents her story for the implied fictional reader who is familiar with the recent political events in the corrupt society which she inhabits. This enables Darrieussecq to gloss over the precise details of these events and present a naïve narrator who accepts much of the political violence and sexual abuse she experiences without question, forcing the reader to form their own conclusions regarding the issues raised. In addition, if Darrieussecq were to paint an authentic and exhaustive picture of these events, the text would risk becoming too far removed from the reader's everyday reality, and its subversive potential would be lost.

From the outset the narrator's body is positioned as a kind of currency and the narrative follows its decline in value through a series of disastrous events which culminate in her transformation into a pig. The narrator first loses her job, and subsequently her home with her boyfriend, Honoré. She becomes the face of a political campaign by a fascist politician, Edgar, has an affair with an Arab cleaner by whom she becomes pregnant, retires to the sewers after still-birthing hybrid half-piglet, half-human babies on the pavement, passes a short spell with a group of SDFs, is confined to a mental asylum, and experiences a brief love affair with a werewolf named Yvan, all the time changing intermittently between her human and porcine form. The narrator's transformations are accompanied by occasional withdrawals from society towards nature and the liminal spaces of the city. Although these withdrawals can be viewed positively, as they permit her short periods of recuperation during which she is able to regain her human form, they nevertheless leave her entrapped within the masculine/feminine, culture/nature, active/passive, form/matter dichotomies which underpin the narrative (and conceptual) world which she inhabits. Her sense of peace and joy when she is close to nature – for example in the park where, as we will see, she snacks on flowers and enjoys rolling in mud – aligns her with the 'negative' term in each binary and emphasizes her marginality and liminality.

Adding to the wider political critique of *Truismes*, the regime's systematic rejection of otherness, which, according to Irigaray, facilitates the secure functioning of patriarchal discourse, is cleverly underlined through the secondary characters who inhabit Darrieussecq's dystopian world. All are members of marginalised groups and as such are systematically killed or otherwise eradicated by the regime. The hybrid narrator initially identifies with all of them. The elderly lesbian client, who becomes the narrator's first friend, is abruptly and inexplicably assassinated. The African marabout

who gives the narrator medicine to help ease her symptoms, and partakes of her services – ‘ailleurs que dans la parfumerie’ as ‘un nègre c’était délicat’ (*T* 42) – eventually develops facial tumours as a result of skin-whitening creams. The illegal immigrant who secretes her in a hotel room to rest and shelter whilst her body attempts to recover its human form is deported as part of one of the regime’s new reforms, and burnt clothing and ashes are all that is left of the SDFs with whom the narrator regained ‘une certaine dignité’ (*T* 93) after hiding in the sewers while hunted by the police.

Although the text covers a range of specifically female experiences, such as menstruation, abortion, miscarriage, and female desire, to name but a few, there is a distinct lack of female characters in the text; the few that do appear are rarely developed and often positioned as superior to the narrator. The narrator’s attempts at female solidarity are vehemently rejected as (in her porcine state) she approaches a young mother only for her to flee, as we will see, ‘à toutes jambes’ (*T* 84). The aforementioned elderly lesbian client appears to be a noticeable exception for a brief period, providing the text’s only instance of feminine solidarity and a potential maternal substitute, until she too is mysteriously murdered. The narrator consistently compares herself to ‘chic’ working women, in relation to whom she feels ‘minable’ (*T* 57), and her female work colleagues, positioned as competitors, ‘étaient jalouses, surtout de mon derrière’ (*T* 34). The narrator’s mother is largely absent from the text, appearing only in the narrator’s recollection of her decision to abort her second child due to financial issues and later in her attempts to find her daughter when she appears to be in need of financial support; ‘Yvan a dit que tout ce que voulait ma mère c’était du fric’ (*T* 131). Finally, she reappears at the ending of the text which sees the narrator escape from her mother, who intends to butcher her for meat to sell on the black-market, to live out the rest of her days in a forest where she turns human from time to time in order to be able to write



(with great difficulty) her story. The narrator has undoubtedly achieved a certain level of self-awareness. However, she experiences this self-awareness in isolation, which does little to recuperate the frustrating lack of political insight up until this point. Although a seemingly positive alternative to the morally corrupt society from which she has escaped, the forest in which she winds up remains a problematic solution as it involves a rejection of society rather than an attempt to engage with it.

Significantly, this text erupted onto the French literary scene during a period which Darrieussecq has described as ‘une explosion sociale’.<sup>1</sup> In an atmosphere of unrest provoked by conservative reforms which threatened women’s rights and imposed welfare cutbacks, readers were unable to escape the disquieting sensation that the issues outlined above were not as comfortably far removed from actuality as the fantastical metamorphosis of her protagonist at first suggested.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the text’s fantastical narrative setting is readily identifiable as a futuristic Paris. The above synopsis suggests the speed at which the narrative progresses, as well as the way in which Darrieussecq prefers action to explanation. It also reveals how writing is foregrounded, as the narrative begins with the narrator’s difficulties of holding a pen when in pig form, and closes as she attempts to write in the forest. The culture/ nature binary is shown to underpin this text, throughout which the focus is on policing and controlling the unruly female body. Most importantly, we see that the narrative, after its prologue, begins realistically and slips into the fantastical as the narrator’s symptoms become

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<sup>1</sup> Darrieussecq in Lambeth, ‘Entretien’, p. 813.

<sup>2</sup> In an interview with Shirley Jordan, Darrieussecq discusses the varied reactions *Truismes* provoked from its readers, ranging from disbelief that such a text could be written by a woman, to anonymous letters ranging from sexist and racist insults to marriage proposals: ‘A l’époque des rumeurs ont couru qu’un homme avait écrit mon livre, que ce n’était pas possible que ce soit moi [...] Puis, autre aspect de la controverse, j’ai reçu quantité de lettres anonymes, des poils pubiens, du papier toilette, des insultes sexistes, des propos racistes, y compris deux demandes en mariage, une de Belgique et l’autre de Vienne! C’était un tourbillon’. ‘Interview with Marie Darrieussecq’, in *Marie Darrieussecq, Dalhousie French Studies* 98, ed. by Gill Rye and Helena Chadderton (Spring 2013), pp. 51-64.

increasingly severe. Throughout, the focus is on female bodily excess, political corruption and exaggeration to the point of ridicule.

*Truismes* has been discussed from a range of critical perspectives. Most recently Katie Jones has used affect theory to explore the interrelated themes of moralised disgust and animality in *Truismes*, whilst Amaleena Damlé's new study uses Deleuze's philosophy of becoming to explore the relationship between metamorphosis and gender parody presented in the text.<sup>3</sup> This study turns back to Irigaray whose pertinence for understanding Darrieussecq has not been adequately valued. As this chapter shows, a reading of *Truismes* in light of Irigaray's subversive mimesis permits a new and productive approach to Darrieussecq's text in terms of its hysterical themes. Irigaray's strategy of subversive mimesis, to which this section now turns, endorses a focus on excess and satirical exaggeration as a means of representing the feminine and the female body, without resubmitting women to the very discourses which oppress them, that can usefully be linked to the narrative strategies employed by Darrieussecq in *Truismes*.

As we have seen in the introduction to this study, Irigaray's writing stems from the premise that language, and masculine systems of representation, cannot translate female desire. She writes: 'la sexualité féminine a toujours été pensée à partir de paramètres masculins' (CS 23). Irigaray asserts that the familiar rules of (masculine) logic privilege (masculine) identities of unity and visibility and thus do not allow the expression of the feminine, which is plural, multiple, diffuse and therefore un-definable. In response, Irigaray suggests the creation of a *parler femme*, a feminine language which will escape the coherence and forcefulness of analytic argument in order to articulate specifically feminine experiences which are not permitted representation in

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<sup>3</sup> Here, I am referring to Jones' work *Representing Repulsion*, which has already been referenced. Amaleena Damlé, *The Becoming of the Body: Contemporary Women's Writing in French* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

the dominant discourse. In *Ce Sexe*, then, Irigaray argues that the feminine figured within the masculine/ feminine binary cannot be said to be feminine as such. Rather, this feminine is the ‘other’ of the masculine, its opposite, its *reflection*. The feminine is figured as ‘matter’ and associated with receptivity and passivity, whereas the masculine, figured as ‘form’, is associated with activity and rational mastery. As in any binary, one cannot exist without the other; in the absence of the feminine, then, the masculine would not exist. Irigaray, then, posits woman as the ‘*miroir de valeur de/ pour l’homme*’ (CS 173 ; emphasis in original). She critiques the privileged role of the visual in Western society and argues that this ‘specular’ economy privileges the visible, masculine sex over the feminine, which represents ‘*l’horreur du rien à voir*’ (CS 25; emphasis in original). She argues that the feminine exists solely as an object of exchange: it does not have any value in and of itself, but only as an equivalent to other objects of exchange: ‘*La femme n’a donc de valeur que de pouvoir s’échanger*’ (CS 172: emphasis in original). As commodities, woman are not equal, nor alike, nor different; ‘*Elles ne le deviennent qu’en tant qu’étalonnées par et pour l’homme*’ (CS 73). In order to have a relative value, a commodity has to be confronted with another commodity that serves as equivalent; its value is never found to lie within itself. She notes that the feminine, matter, can serve as a support for speculation; it can provide man’s reflection, but cannot itself speculate in any way, as for this ‘il faut être “sujet”’ (CS 173). In order to serve as such, then, woman ‘gives up’ her body to man as the supporting material of speculation: ‘*Elles lui abandonnent leur valeur naturelle et sociale comme lieu d’empreintes, de marques, et de mirage de son activité*’ (CS 173). Analogous to the tain of the mirror – ‘outside of any specular representation, although

on some level the material support of that representation' – woman, she argues, is expected to silently provide man's reflection at the expense of her own subjectivity.<sup>4</sup>

For this masculine economy to function, according to Irigaray (and Cixous, as we saw in the introduction), the complicity of the feminine is required. Masculine discourse only functions properly as long as woman's role, as matter, remains concealed by the system of discourse. Woman's functions, as Irigaray asserts, 'restées ininterprétées, assurant sa cohérence' (CS 73). Irigaray argues that it is language, the masculine symbolic, which underlies the idealised stability of this patriarchal economy, striving for logic, coherence and a fixed and final meaning. As an unknown (and purportedly unknowable) reality, feminine sexuality represents the irreducibly 'other' to masculine logic, and therefore discourse. According to Irigaray, feminine 'jouissance' must thus 'rester inarticulable dans le langage, dans son langage, sous peine de mettre en cause ce qui étaye le fonctionnement logique' (CS 75). As in *Truismes*, in which we will see the narrator's descriptions of sex and female desire repeatedly couched in apologetic tones, Irigaray notes: 'ce qui est, aujourd'hui le plus interdit aux femmes est d'essayer de parler leur jouissance' (CS 75). This leaves woman with no possibility of articulating her experience since, according to Ann Rosalind Jones, 'symbolic discourse (language, in various contexts) is another means through which man objectifies the world, reduces it to his terms, speaks in place of everything and everyone else – including woman'.<sup>5</sup> According to Irigaray:

Je peux donc parler intelligemment en tant que sexué(e) mâle (l'avouant ou pas) ou asexué(e). Sinon, j'entrerai dans l'illogique qui, proverbiallement, est attribué aux femmes. Tous les énoncés que je produirai seront donc ou empruntés à un modèle qui laisse mon sexe en reste [...] ou seront inintelligibles selon le code en vigueur. (CS 147)

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (California: University of California Press, 1994), p. 534.

<sup>5</sup> Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *l'écriture féminine*' in *Feminist Studies* 7: 2 (Feminist Studies Inc, 1981), p. 248.

In *Truismes*, we will see the narrator either naively repeat the masculine discourses which dictate acceptable female bodily norms whilst her body conforms, (she speaks ‘intelligemment en tant que sexu  (e) m  le’) or she becomes completely incoherent whilst her body is in its porcine form (she enters ‘dans l’illoquique qui, proverbiallement, est attribu   aux femmes’).

For Irigaray, it is hysteria which underlines the extent to which the female body belongs to the masculine symbolic order. As we saw in the introductory chapter, the hysteric’s symptoms do not conform to biology but to an idea of the body as it is described in language. The hysteric thus *pantomimes* what language is unable to describe in symptoms such as contortions and seizures; a visual display of a femininity (specifically of female desire) that cannot be admitted nor articulated in language. Irigaray believes that the hysteric’s symptoms *parody* the excessive feminine that is erased and excluded from the masculine/ feminine binary, which she considers to be the only specifically ‘feminine’ conception of femininity. Like the fantastical transformation of Darrieussecq’s protagonist which, as we will see, is the first step in the narrator’s eventual awareness of her repression, Irigaray sees hysterical mimesis as an initial phase, ‘un premier temps’ (CS 73), signifying woman’s repressed potential to speak for herself. In order for this repressed potential to become effective (brought into the sphere of politics), it must be translated into the very symbolic system which negates it. For Chisholm, it is this problematic which renders hysterical mimicry not a new and privileged means of communication, but a symptom of woman’s exclusion from language:

Woman’s hysterical mimicry is a symptom of the way discourse functions differentially for the sexes, and not just a telltale sign of her repudiation of femininity: that woman must mime discourse rather than speak it directly is a

logical and structural condition of a language system affording only one sex positive representation.<sup>6</sup>

For Chisholm, woman is forced to mime discourse as she can never be in a position of mastery over the symbolic. Irigaray, as we saw in the introduction, also recognises this problem. She writes: ‘parler *de* ou *sur* la femme peut toujours revenir ou être entendu comme une reprise du féminin à l’intérieur d’une logique qui le maintient dans le refoulement, la censure, la méconnaissance’ (CS 75). For Irigaray, however, mimicry provides a new place from which woman can speak directly neither as woman *nor* man, but as mimic. She takes inspiration from hysteria, then, as a performative strategy, to devise a means of permitting woman a return to the specificity of the female body through language, which does not resubmit her to the oppressive paradigms of masculine discourse: ‘Jouer de la mimesis, c’est donc, pour une femme, tenter de retrouver le lieu de son exploitation par le discours, sans s’y laisser simplement réduire’ (CS 74).

In Irigaray’s writing, the result is a fluid and sinuous style which enacts a systematic deconstruction of the familiar rules of logic through an insistence on the literal.<sup>7</sup> Her work becomes a feminist ‘revision’ of psychoanalytic theory in which she weaves prominent masculine discourses into the web of her own text’s unravelling. When she critiques texts of the Western canon (by Plato, Freud, Lacan, and Derrida, amongst others) more often than not, Irigaray directly cites without attribution. As Elizabeth Weed notes, it is as if ‘she ventriloquizes’.<sup>8</sup> In miming the discourses of these prominent thinkers, Irigaray leaves the reader searching for the line of demarcation which signals the beginning of her own discourse. Her writing style is similarly

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<sup>6</sup> Chisholm, ‘Irigaray’s Hysteria’, ed by. Burke et al, p. 265.

<sup>7</sup> As Elizabeth Weed notes: ‘her whole project is to be grasped through her style’, in ‘The Question of Style’, *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

confusing; she plays with syntax and punctuation and uses techniques of address, like those exhibited in Nobécourt's *La Conversation*, which inadequately represent the relations between (textual) interlocutors. As Weed comments: 'One must ask where it leads her, if she is not in the end miming the very process by which women's discourse is always caught within the recursive structure of man's'.<sup>9</sup> However, in re-iterating these discourses and taking them in their literal form, Irigaray's strategy of subversive mimesis *exposes* the 'masculine' logic behind these discourses and their concrete effects on real women. Whereas hysterical mimesis is a physical, symptomatic (and therefore 'incoherent') display of cultural contradictions, through Irigaray's subversive mimesis, she is able to write the symptoms of culture's contradictions from *within* the discourse she critiques.

Like *Truismes*, Irigaray's writing has presented challenges and possibilities to critics who have either disagreed on her work as restrictive, or opened up the possibility of using her work as a feminist resource. Irigaray's texts permit multiple and often contradictory readings, her rhetorical techniques are various and slippery, and, as in *Truismes*, at times deliberately misleading. These are not the only similarities between Irigaray and Darrieussecq's writing projects, however. Irigaray's focus on the literal is undoubtedly something we will see in *Truismes*. Just as Irigaray's writing is characterised by an 'intertextuality' which seeks to disrupt the authority of leading theoretical discourses, we will see that *Truismes* can be considered similarly 'hybrid' in its weaving together of aspects of different genres and recognisable literary conventions, in an attempt to invite ambiguity, launch a complex critique and escape the confines of classification. Irigaray's return to the specificity of the female body has been considered a reductive 'return to the crude essentialism, the phallic and ovarian theories of art, that

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

oppressed women in the past'.<sup>10</sup> Darrieussecq's text, in its unrelenting focus on the culture/ nature binary, is most notably situated within feminist debates which question deconstructive practices as ultimately leading to a reactionary essentialism.<sup>11</sup> Such critics argue that any reference to the female body is inherently limiting, as it inevitably invokes patriarchal preconceptions of materiality and receptivity and returns woman to her powerless position within the series of dichotomies based upon this masculine/ feminine binary, in which, according to Irigaray, 'le "féminin" est toujours décrit comme défaut, atrophie, revers du seul sexe qui monopolise la valeur: le sexe masculin' (CS 68).

However, Irigaray's calculated use of irony is a technique which can be said to combat accusations of essentialism and escape contradiction, and, as something which is often overlooked, is perhaps the most significant similarity between Irigaray and Darrieussecq.<sup>12</sup> As we have already seen, for Darrieussecq, her text contains 'une ironie très forte' which, despite her espousal of the literal, warns against taking her protagonist's horrifying experiences at the hands of patriarchy at face value.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Irigaray suggests that: 'Échapper au renversement pur et simple de la position masculine, c'est, en tout cas, ne pas oublier de rire' (CS 157). By using irony to

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<sup>10</sup> Elaine Showalter cited in Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 61. Quoting Showalter, Fuss is referring specifically to Irigaray's analogy of the lips which is a play on the Lacanian phallus intended to situate women's experience, and pleasure, in a different economy from the phallic.

<sup>11</sup> See: Linda Acoff 'Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory', in *Reconstructing the Academy: Women's Education and Women's Studies*, ed. by Elizabeth Minnich et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 257-88 ; Fuss, (1989) ; Jones (1981).

<sup>12</sup> As Maggie Berg notes: 'While Lacan is appropriated to the feminist cause by critics such as Jacqueline Rose who insist that his remarks about there being no such thing as a woman are ironic exposures of the social representation of femininity, Irigaray's irony (which is more obvious than Lacan's) is almost wholly overlooked', 'Luce Irigaray's "Contradictions": Poststructuralism and Feminism' in *Signs* 17:1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 51. Likewise, Darrieussecq believes the ironic tone of *Truismes* went unacknowledged in readings which sought a radical political viewpoint. In an interview with Darrieussecq, John Lambeth mentions 'des jeux de mots qui donnent un ton', to which she replies 'Oui, cela était très mal lu. [...] A ce moment-là en France, on avait besoin de quelque chose, de quelqu'un, un livre qui soit violemment contre Le Pen, contre le fascisme. La presse s'est jetée là-dessus. Alors pour moi c'était un aspect entre autres du livre', Darrieussecq in Lambeth, 'Entretien', p. 814.

<sup>13</sup> Darrieussecq in Lambeth, 'Entretien', p. 814.



highlight the absurdity underpinning masculine discourse, Irigaray hopes to ‘déconcerter le montage de la représentation selon des paramètres exclusivement “masculins.” C’est dire selon un ordre phallogratique’ (CS 67). In both Irigaray and Darrieussecq’s writing, then, irony should be associated with mimicry, and perceived as a way of masquerading the socially constructed position of woman in a *knowing* way. The remainder of this chapter will turn to *Truismes* in order to examine how this text can be considered to employ the motifs of hysteria to enact a similar subversive mimicry to that devised by Irigaray. The following section launches this analysis with a focus on the hysterical body of Darrieussecq’s female narrator.

### **From Reflection and Separation to Recognition and Reconciliation: Hysteria as ‘*un premier temps*’**

Bearing in mind Irigaray’s vision of hysterical mimesis as an initial phase signalling woman’s repressed ability to speak for herself, this section will argue that the narrator’s transformation enables her to overcome her marginalisation to the extent that she begins to recognise her own exploitation within a system which she has previously accepted without question. It begins with a discussion of the narrator’s collusion in the commodification of the female body, through an examination of the many instances in which the narrator appears entirely alienated from her body and its exploitation. Of particular importance is the motif of the mirror, which not only exposes the narrator’s separation from her body, but also underlines her collusion in masculine perspectives of the female body as currency, as discussed in relation to Irigaray in the previous section. This section charts her body’s shift from an idealised ‘wholesome’ femininity, to an abject, excessively ‘biological’ female body, and argues that, just as her body is caught

in a constant *va-et-vient* between her human and porcine forms, the narrator's attitude to her body is caught in a constant struggle between a newfound pleasure in her sexuality and bodily excesses, and a deep-seated espousal of masculine perspectives of this as negative. Although each episode in which the narrator seems to begin to escape the strict social restrictions placed upon her body and her sexuality is immediately followed by a frustrating reiteration of her naïve entrenchment within the system, this section argues that her hysterical symptoms are an involuntary physical rejection of this policed femininity, and serve to bridge the separation between her self and her body imposed by a society which treats it solely as an object for consumption. Ultimately, then, this section posits the hysterical body of Darrieussecq's narrator as a physical amplification and hence unmasking of the conflicting ideals of femininity upheld by patriarchal society.

The narrative world inhabited by Darrieussecq's narrator clearly exemplifies Irigaray's vision of a patriarchal society in which 'la femme ne serait jamais que le lieu d'un échange plus ou moins rival, entre deux hommes' (CS 31). The narrator's acceptance of her body as currency is elucidated within the first few pages of the text which see the narrator secure her first job, 'à une grande chaîne de parfumerie' (T 12), and meet her first boyfriend, Honoré, both of which the narrator attributes to her body's visible 'élasticité merveilleuse' (T 12). Accepting the advice of her new boss, that 'l'essentiel est d'être toujours belle et soignée' (T 13), the narrator is shown to collude in a society in which conforming to a certain image of femininity offers more hope for success than intelligence or skill. Although her job interview involves performing oral sex on her boss, the narrator appears more concerned with the anticipated improvements to her appearance offered by the beauty products to which her role will entitle her:

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. (T 13)

This is described in matter-of-fact terms which become characteristic of her narrative style and convey her acceptance of the sexual exploitation of women as the norm. Initially, the narrator sells cosmetics and performs massages for mainly female clients, but as her body becomes firmer and curvier – which she later recognises as the first symptoms of her metamorphosis – she becomes increasingly popular with the male customers, and begins to offer 'massages spéciaux' (T 19). She fails to recognise her occupation as prostitution, however, as she does not take money directly from her customers, claiming that: 'j'étais fière d'avoir la gestion la plus saine de toute l'entreprise' (T 24). Euphemistic descriptions of her sexual exploitation, such as 'pendant que je m'acquittais de ma besogne', above, expose a distance between the narrator and her body that is first made apparent by the cover of the *Folio* edition. This shows a partial view of a young woman displaying and observing her naked body, and, just as her face appears distorted to the viewer, the reflection of her pig tale appears absent to her self. This provides the first intimation that the narrator's bodily changes hold a significance of which she is not yet aware, nor yet, perhaps, capable of recognising.

The narrator's sense of self is entirely reliant on how her body is perceived, and valued, within this society, and the rise and fall of her body as currency is monitored by the narrator, and the reader, through the text's many mirror scenes. Her early bodily transformations are a source of pleasure to the narrator as they increase her seductiveness: 'Dans le miroir doré qui donne bonne mine, je me suis trouvée, je suis désolée de le dire, incroyablement belle, comme dans les magazines mais en plus appétissante' (T 15). The weight she puts on is 'harmonieusement reparti' (T 13) over

her figure, and without exercise her flesh is ‘plus ferme, plus lisse, plus rebondie qu’avant’ (T 13). As her weight gain increases, signalling the beginning of her transformation, she becomes concerned, but is reassured by her continued popularity: ‘Mais les clients continuaient à me trouver terriblement sexy, c’est tout ce qui comptait’ (T 24). Throughout the text, then, descriptions of the narrator’s body are consistently mediated via a reflected form. Significantly, it is the narrator’s mirror image which confirms her clients’ continued approval: ‘Je le voyais bien que j’étais comme ils disaient, il suffisait que je me regarde dans la glace, je n’étais pas dupe de moi même’ (T 34).

As in Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage, the narrator’s sense of self is formed by her reflection; her identity is confined to the dimension of images, which can never permit unimpeded access to *the Real*.<sup>14</sup> Lacan asserts that this fictional reflected form ‘ne rejoindra qu’asymptotiquement le devenir du sujet, quel que soit le succès des synthèses dialectiques par quoi il doit résoudre en tant que *je* sa discordance d’avec sa propre réalité’.<sup>15</sup> Although the narrator can see the image of herself, the two will never meet; the image will never be reconciled with the real subject. During her most dramatic transformations, it is to her reflection that the narrator turns in an attempt to recover a sense of her inner self: ‘J’étais tellement bouleversée par tout ce qui venait de se passer que j’ai ressenti le besoin de me regarder dans la glace, de me reconnaître en quelque sorte’ (T 55). However, as Irigaray writes, for women as commodities, the self, mirrored, ‘n’est pas “son” même, n’est rien de ses propriétés, ses qualités, “ses peau et poils”’ (CS 172), but merely a likeness which expresses nothing of the self, but the fabricated character of the commodity which is based, not on any innate uniqueness, but

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<sup>14</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je”, *Écrits* [1949] (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

on its worth as an object of exchange. Concomitantly, it is not her 'self' which the narrator truly seeks in the mirror, but to evaluate the damage done to her body as a commodity: 'J'ai vu mon pauvre corps, comme il était abîmé. De ma *splendeur* ancienne tout ou presque avait disparu' (T 55).

The loss of subjectivity inherent in this process of reflection and separation holds significance in Irigaray's writing, in which, as we have seen, she critiques the privileged role of the visual in Western society. She writes, woman's 'entrée dans une économie scopique dominante signifie, encore, une assignation pour elle à la passivité: elle sera le bel objet à regarder' (CS 25). As we have seen, in this specular economy, woman becomes a passive object of exchange. Her value does not lie within herself but in her symbolic worth to man: 'déracinées de leur "nature," elles ne se rapportent plus les unes aux autres qu'en fonction de ce qu'elles représentent dans le désir des hommes, et selon les "formes" qu'il lui impose' (CS 183). This can certainly be applied to Darrieussecq's narrator, whose self-worth plummets as her body deviates from the cultural ideal. The loss of subjectivity this entails is underlined by the narrator's descriptions of her own body, which are predicated on a perspective gained from the misogynist society she inhabits. Upon appraising her figure, she remarks 'mon seul atout, c'était mon côté pneumatique' (T 29). Whilst her clients 'disaient tous' that she has become 'extraordinairement saine', the narrator admits, 'Je devenais fière, je veux dire, fière de moi' (T 21), and later, regarding Honoré's disgust at her transformations, 'Je voyais bien qu'Honoré résistait à l'envie de me jeter dehors. Je lui sais encore gré de sa bonté, de sa patience, rien ne l'obligeait à me garder puisque je ne l'attirais plus sexuellement' (T 47). Darrieussecq's narrator is shown then, through these many mirror scenes, to collude in society's commodification of her body to the extent that she experiences a separation between her self and her body as an object. In Chapters 3 and

4, we will see the anorexic narrators exhibit a similar distance between the self and the body. In anorexia, as we will see, this is the product of a self-imposed split between the mind – associated with the (masculine) mastery and self-control the anorexic wishes to cultivate, and the body – associated with the abject loss of control engendered by natural (feminine) bodily drives. As Catherine Rodgers remarks, in relation to *Truismes*: ‘la narratrice a largement intériorisé les valeurs de cette société [...] ce qui la conduit à adopter une attitude misogyne, même envers elle-même’.<sup>16</sup>

As the narrator’s porcine transformations begin in earnest, the narrative tone begins to shift from the predominantly realistic opening, which merely hinted at the improbable events to follow, to outright fantasy as her female body comes to epitomise the Kristevan abject. Her weight gain and increasing hunger are swiftly accompanied by cravings, nausea and aversions – comically - to pork products, suggesting (like the cover image) knowledge located in the body as yet unrealised in the head.<sup>17</sup> The narrator’s periods stop, then return in an unstoppable flow which is mistaken for a miscarriage and unsympathetically dismissed as a typical feminine issue by her boyfriend – ‘Honoré m’a dit que les femmes ça a toujours des problèmes de ventre’ – whilst the gynaecologist inflicts unnecessary pain and treats her ‘de petite grue’ (*T* 23). Speaking from perspectives which uphold the cultural division between pure and impure, both Honoré and the gynaecologist position the female body as problematic and begin to hint at the link between femininity and some form of original sin which permeates the text.

Such links between female promiscuity, bodily deviance and moral corruption, discussed in the introduction to this study, recur throughout *Truismes*. Earlier in the text

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<sup>16</sup> Rodgers, ‘Aucune évidence’, p. 72.

<sup>17</sup> Jones likens this to Franz Kafka’s famous text, *The Metamorphosis* (1915), narrated in the third person, in which the insect body is the medium bearing the message which the man never quite realises (*Repulsion*, p. 196).

the narrator undergoes an abortion and admits to experiencing ‘des angoisses terribles à l’idée de cet avortement’, as ‘Ils ne sont pas tendres avec les avortées. On dit même qu’on ne gâche pas une anesthésie pour ces femmes-là, elles n’ont qu’à faire attention’ (T 30). The entire operation is conducted under a hail of abuse from an anti-abortion activist who handcuffs himself to the operating table and swallows the key. Abortion, in this represented world, is illegal, and those who undergo the procedure remain stigmatised by misogynist attitudes towards the sexually active woman. It is not only intimated that the narrator’s ‘bizarre’ uterus is the result of her lack of chastity, but she is followed back to work by the activist who castigates her as ‘damnée pour toujours’ and ‘une fille perdue’ (T 31). Later, we will see the narrator spend a night in the park after her full transformation into a pig, which will be discussed in the following section. Seeking solace, the narrator enters a church, only to be turned out by the priest who blames her symptoms on sexually transmitted diseases which ‘punissaient seulement ceux qui avaient péché’ (T 75). Such events not only usefully link the protagonist of *Truismes* back to antiquated understandings of female sexuality which shaped past understandings of the hysteric, discussed in the introduction, but their inclusion in Darrieussecq’s text is another facet of her strategic mimesis, designed to expose the extent to which the residues of such prejudices can still be seen in attitudes towards female sexuality in contemporary society.

Soon after her supposed miscarriage, the narrator’s periods stop again and her symptoms worsen. Further underlining the culturally imposed separation between the narrator and her body exhibited through the mirror scenes, the narrator is seen to consider her rebellious body as self-directed; ‘je sentais que c’était mon corps qui ne suivait plus, mon corps avec cette absence de règles. C’est mon corps qui dirige ma tête’ (T 26). Convinced her ever reddening complexion and swelling body is the result of

excessive blood retention, the narrator dreams of blood lettings to empty her body of this symbolically feminine fluid: ‘Je me disais, si mes règles revenaient enfin je me viderais de tout ce sang, je deviendrais à nouveau fraîche comme une jeune fille; et j’avais des envies de saignées’ (T 27). The narrator’s desire to ‘empty’ the body of menstrual blood, evoking notions of the female body as a passive ‘vessel’, and return to the ‘fraîche’ pre-pubescent body of ‘une jeune fille’ again underlines classical aesthetic ideals of a feminine beauty which excludes the reproductive function. This aesthetic ideal will become particularly important in Chapter 4, in which we will see Nothomb’s narratives of anorexia unerringly privilege a lithe, pre-pubescent female form, and concomitantly present the sexual adult female body as abject and disgusting.

In *Truismes*, the narrator is seen to find her body disgusting: ‘Ce n’est qu’à partir de ce moment où j’ai pris un peu trop de poids [...] que j’ai commencé à me dégoûter moi-même’ (T 26). Her excessive blood retention is accompanied by nightmares characterised by images of blood, butchery and a fear of being eaten: ‘La nuit il me venait de drôles de rêves, je voyais du sang, du boudin, et je me levais pour vomir. J’ai honte encore aujourd’hui de ces rêves saugrenus, mais c’était ainsi’ (T 28). In the contradictory manner characteristic of the hysteric, who repeatedly returns to the moment of trauma, the narrator is both obsessed and repulsed by blood: ‘D’un côté je rêvais de sang toutes les nuits, j’avais comme des envies de taillader dans du lard. D’un autre côté, la chair sanglante, c’est ce qui me répugnait le plus’ (T 53).

When Honoré surprises the narrator with a romantic dinner in an attempt to salvage their relationship, the narrator vomits at the site of the *charcuterie*: ‘Eh bien quand j’ai vue les rillettes je n’ai pas pu me retenir une seconde: j’ai vomi là, dans la cuisine. [...] De toute la soirée je n’ai pas pu me calmer. Je tremblais, j’avais des sueurs froids qui empestaient dans tout l’appartement’ (T 51). On the one hand, such imagery



serves to underline the narrator's porcine form as 'symptomatique d'une conception de la femme comme destinée à la fois à la consommation sexuelle et carnivore', and on the other, her physical reaction (vomiting) becomes an (albeit subconscious) symbolic rejection of this positioning of the female body as an object of consumption.<sup>18</sup> However, this episode is followed by a nightmare in which the narrator dreams of being eaten by her lover:

J'ai passé une nuit horrible. A peine m'assoupissais-je sur mon tabouret que des images de sang et d'égorgeement me venaient à l'esprit. Je voyais Honoré ouvrir la bouche sur moi comme pour m'embrasser, et me mordre sauvagement dans le lard. Je voyais les clients faire mine de manger les fleurs de mon décolleté et planter leurs dents dans mon cou. Je voyais le directeur arracher ma blouse et hurler de rire en découvrent six télines au lieu de mes deux seins. (T 52)

As in Nobécourt's texts, the image of being eaten underlines the narrator's position as a passive (feminine) object for (masculine) consumption. Disappointingly, however, this passage seems to undermine the possibility of the narrator's physical reaction (vomiting) as a symbolic rejection of the female body as an object for (physical and sexual) consumption, as it seems that, despite her horror of blood and the prospect of butchery, the thought of being consumed disturbs the narrator *less* than the idea that she could become unworthy of sexual attention. Any suggestion of potential freedom, then, is always immediately undermined. As Jordan notes, 'whatever the stage of her metamorphosis', the narrator's body 'is constantly up for grabs'.<sup>19</sup> Although her body no longer resembles the feminine beauty ideal she is bombarded with in magazines and advertising, the narrator remains seemingly irresistible to men:

Moi qui avais cru que mes bourrelets les dégoûteraient, eh bien pas du tout. Contre tout attente, tous, et même les nouveaux [...] tous semblaient m'apprécier un peu grasse. Il leur venait un appétit pour ainsi dire bestial. (T 33)

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<sup>18</sup> Schaal, "'je'" comme "'jou'", p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> Jordan, *Women's Visions*, p. 82.

Honoré, too, shares this insatiable appetite, ‘malgré son air un peu écœuré’, and constantly demands sex at home: ‘C’était tous les soirs maintenant, je n’avais pas le temps de me débarbouiller que déjà il fallait lui en donner’ (*T* 32). The narrator’s acceptance of social codes which forbid the expression of female desire is underscored by her apology to sensitive readers, which prefaces her admission:

Et puis il s’est passé quelque chose de bizarre et de tout à fait incongru, et encore une fois je supplie les lecteurs sensibles de ne pas lire ces pages. Je me suis mise à avoir très envie, pour appeler les choses par leur nom, d’avoir les relations sexuelles. (*T* 37)

The separation between her self and her body expressed through the mirror scenes, discussed earlier, is here taken to a further extreme with her experience of natural female bodily drives as ‘bizarre’. Whilst ‘incongru’ highlights the narrator’s acceptance of social prohibitions concerning female desire as ‘inappropriate’, her apology assumes that such views are shared by the reader. It swiftly becomes impossible to hide her increased sexual appetite from both Honoré, who prefers ‘des jeunes filles saines’ (*T* 16), leading to a breakdown in her relationship – ‘Très rapidement [Honoré] n’a plus rien voulu savoir de moi; il disait que je le dégoûtais. C’était ennuyeux pour moi, maintenant c’était toujours moi qui avais envie’ (*T* 40) – and her clients, from whom she fears complaints. Bringing to light the cultural taboo surrounding the expression of female desire, discussed by Irigaray, it is not the narrator’s metamorphosing body which ultimately changes the men’s desire into repugnance, but her newfound pleasure in her sexuality. Just as the hysteric pantomimes repressed female desire, so the narrator’s hysterical symptoms mimic an exaggerated female desire which has previously been violently repressed by the regime in which she is entrenched. In an exaggeration of Cixous’ evocation of the rhythms of the female body in writing, the ‘nouveau rythme’ of the hysterical narrator’s body eventually settles down into periods of sexual ‘chaleur’ when she is in heat and periods during which she loses interest in sex. Hypocritically,

the narrator's clients prefer her to be submissive – ‘une *petite fille* sage et docile [...] qui garde les yeux baissés sans un murmure’ (T 39 ; emphasis in original) – feminine, and ‘extraordinairement saine’ (T 21). She notes:

J'étais obligée, d'un côté de faire comme si j'étais constamment dans cet état d'excitation, de l'autre de simuler toujours la froideur. C'était fatigant. Je m'embrouillais dans mes états, dans les moments où il fallait que je simule ou que je dissimule. Ça n'était plus une vie. Je ne pouvais jamais être au *diapason* de mon corps. (T 46)

The narrator is forced to perform or conceal sexual pleasure and, constantly alternating between one extreme and the other; she finds her body in continual ‘disaccord’.

Women's magazines, which are otherwise seen to propagate misogynist attitudes towards the body and sexuality, warn against such bodily disharmony: ‘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*’ (T 46 ; emphasis in original). Again, however, female promiscuity is linked with disease, through the title of the magazine which collates ‘beauté’ and ‘santé’, and the threat of ‘un *développement anarchique des cellules*’. If, to return to Irigaray's earlier statement regarding the importance of laughter – ‘Échapper au renversement pur et simple de la position masculine, c'est, en tout cas, ne pas oublier de rire’ (*op. cit.* 157) – Darrieussecq is seen to poke fun at misogynist associations between feminine sexuality and immorality through the narrator's use of ‘le *gel micro-cellulaire spécial épiderme sensible contre les captions disgracieux*’ (T 46; emphasis in original).

Despite her naivety, the narrator realises that the cultural ideal of a wholesome, girlish *façade* of femininity does not include her female bodily functions. When her periods cease, she becomes concerned she is pregnant, noting: ‘les clients se seraient détournés de moi s'ils m'avaient devinée enceinte. Ils m'aimaient saine, mais pas à ce

point' (T 24). Forced to lower her prices due to her burgeoning physical transformations, her body's drop in monetary value affects her perceived accessibility and discourages her more refined clientele: 'Comme les prix baissent et que j'avais l'air moins chic, moins difficile aussi, les meilleurs clients se sont offusqués et sont partis' (T 49). As Jones remarks, it is almost impossible to distinguish between the masculine disgust directed at her porcine transformations, 'and that which she provokes as a sexually active woman', as the transformation into a sow functions to exaggerate her biological status as female.<sup>20</sup> This biological exaggeration of the female body, and the masculine disgust it elicits, is most shockingly exemplified in the narrator's last outing with Honoré to Aqualand (the leisure centre in which they first met):

Dans la cabine Honoré a fait un effort sur lui-même et il m'a sodomisée. Je crois qu'il ne pouvait même plus penser à mon vagin. Moi, penchée en avant, j'avais pour ainsi dire une vue imprenable sur ma vulve, et je trouvais qu'elle dépassait étrangement; je ne voudrais pas vous infliger trop de détails mais en quelque sorte les grandes lèvres pendaient un peu plus que la normale et c'est pour ça que je pouvais si bien les voir (T 58).

Again, the narrative technique of apologising for the supposed breach of convention in discussing female anatomy assumes the complicity of the reader in this view, and functions to highlight conventional attitudes which find women's bodies shameful and disgusting. As Jones explains, the narrator's embarrassment about describing her abnormal vulva, coupled with Honoré's repulsion, echoes 'classical aesthetic prohibitions against the depiction of protruding bodily parts and disgusting reminders of biological bodily functions'.<sup>21</sup> In a telling passage, a similar apology prefaces admissions of taking pleasure in sex, which she seeks to hide from her clients:

Or il est difficile de simuler quand des sensations vraies vous viennent dans le corps. Je ne sais pas si je me fais bien comprendre. Je conçois à quel point cela doit être choquant et désagréable de lire une jeune fille qui s'exprime de cette façon, mais je dois dire aussi que maintenant je ne suis plus exactement la même

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<sup>20</sup> Jones, *Repulsion*, p. 204.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

qu'avant, et que ce genre de considérations commence à m'échapper. En tout cas la vie devenait compliquée. En plus de devoir déguiser mes sensations je craignais de plus en plus mes anciens clients, les coups de fil choqués qu'ils pouvaient passer au directeur. Je n'avais plus du tout la confiance du directeur. (T 41)

Her concern that she may not be able to make herself understood, 'je ne sais pas si je me fais bien comprendre', recalls Irigaray's argument that language, and masculine systems of representation, are not able to translate female desire, which is the irreducibly 'other' to masculine logic and therefore discourse. Indeed, this passage is preceded by the admission; 'Je vais essayer de m'exprimer le plus clairement possible, parce que je sais que ce n'est pas facile à comprendre, surtout pour les hommes' (T 40). The idea that it is 'choquant et désagréable' to hear 'une jeune fille s'exprime de cette façon', reflects Irigaray's assertion, mentioned earlier, that what is 'le plus interdit aux femmes' is 'd'essayer de parler leur jouissance' (CS 75). Likewise, the narrator's fear that word of her 'forbidden' pleasure will reach the ears of her boss underlines Irigaray's argument that feminine 'jouissance' must 'rester inarticulable dans le langage, dans son langage, sous peine de mettre en cause ce qui étaye le fonctionnement logique' (CS 75).

At first glance, then, this passage appears to re-iterate the narrator's collusion in the oppressive social codes which police her body and forbid the expression of female desire. However, it also hints at the possibility that (whether she wills it or not) her bodily transformations are beginning to break down the separation between her self and her body, created through her collusion in its objectification, and thus release her from the restrictions placed upon it. Firstly, the narrator admits that something has changed within her, that she is 'plus exactement la même qu'avant', and therefore 'ce genre de considérations commence à [s]'échapper'; suggesting that the subconscious knowledge (of her repression) located in her hysterical body is beginning to creep into her consciousness. Secondly, that she has lost favour with her boss – a representative of the system which polices her sexuality – suggests that she is beginning to break free from

the social codes imposed upon her body and desires. Finding her ‘trop délurée maintenant’ (T 39) and accusing her of having ‘pris un mauvais genre’, her boss attempts to ‘correct’ her behaviour – ‘faire passer à jamais le goût de la gaudriole’ (T 39) – in an attempt to reinstate the separation between the narrator and her body which existed before her transformations began. He warns her there is no room in the *parfumerie* for ‘les chattes en chaleur’ (T 39; emphasis in original); emphasizing the necessity to police her threatening female sexuality and re-tame her newly unleashed bodily desires. As her value as a commodity plummets, so does her self-esteem, and her hormonal changes become increasingly excessive. Just as the separation between the narrator and her body discussed up to now is the result of exaggerated restrictions on the female body, her hysterical symptoms are an exaggeration of the unruly femininity these restrictions attempt to eradicate. Her periods return in ‘une ampleur exceptionnelle, un vrai raz de marée’ (T 45), and she develops coarse porcine body hair, ‘de longs poils fins, translucides, et solides, qui résistaient à toutes crèmes dépilatoires’ (T 49). At times this hair falls out ‘par poignées’, her skin suffers ‘des éruptions cutanées impossibles à dissimuler’, her eyes become ‘plus petits et plus rapprochés qu’avant’ and her nose ‘prenait un air porcin’ (T 48). Her skin’s former elasticity is replaced by ‘ces étranges taches grisâtres qui s’arrondissaient le long de l’échine’; on her stomach and thighs appears ‘un amas de cellulite’, but ‘un drôle de cellulite, à la fois pendante et tendineuse’ (T 55). Worst of all however, is the development of six tiny teats:

Le téton au-dessus de mon sein droit s’était développé en une vraie mamelle, et il y avait trois autres taches sur le devant de mon corps, une au-dessus de mon sein gauche, et deux autres, bien parallèles, juste en dessous. J’ai compté et recompté, on ne pouvait pas s’y tromper, cela faisait bien six, dont trois seins déjà formés. (T 55)

At one point, following a traumatic incident in which she draws blood whilst shaving her back, she loses the ability to support herself on two legs and finds herself ‘à quatre pattes’:

J’étais comme paralysée du derrière, à la manière des vieux chiens. Je tirais sur mes reins, mais il n’y avait rien à faire, je ne pouvais pas me mettre debout. [...] J’avais l’impression que la salle de bains était plein d’anciens clients ricanants, et pourtant je savais bien que j’étais seule. J’avais très peur. Enfin à nouveau il y a eu comme un déclic dans mon cerveau et dans mon corps, ma volonté s’est en quelques sort roulée en boule dans mes reins, j’ai poussée, j’ai réussi à me mettre debout. C’est le pire cauchemar que j’ai jamais fait de ma vie. (T 54-55)

Her physical trauma is combined with a hysterical hallucination in which her old clients ridicule her porcine form. This reiterates that it is less her physical symptoms which cause her concern than the notion that she has become sexually unattractive. Again, it is this notion, and not her bodily symptoms, which motivates her to regain her human posture.

Rather than recognising her position as an object of consumption in a society which upholds a misogynist perspective of the female body, this section has shown how the narrator shares in this perspective. Just as the text is continually caught up in a *va-et-vient* between the narrator’s human and pig forms, intimations that her transformations may open up new possibilities of freedom from the rigid social regulation of the female body are repeatedly undercut by reiterations of the narrator’s own collusion in her repression. Her noticeable reticence surrounding descriptions of sex and female desire, coupled with her fears that she will not be able to make herself understood, reflect Irigaray’s discussion of the impossibility of representing female desire in ‘masculine’ language. Her pleasure in her newfound sexuality is tempered with a sense of shame which is related less to her own delight in the excesses of her body than to other people’s negative perception of this delight. Her bodily symptoms exaggerate aspects of the biological female body which both masculine society and the narrator herself find

disgusting. Having explored the specific symptoms of the narrator's body in this section, the following section will discuss how this polluting body becomes emblematic of a corrupt society.

### **The Culture/ Nature Dichotomy, Marginal Spaces and Minority Characters**

This section focuses on the narrator's hysterical symptoms as an embodied critique of the social system in which she is entrenched. Just as the previous section explored how the narrator can be seen to perpetuate the stereotypes and social codes by which her female body and sexuality are defined and policed, this section begins by exploring how Darrieussecq can be said to entrap her narrator within the reductive nature/ culture dichotomy which underpins misogyny. As the narrator's metamorphosis becomes increasingly extreme, so does the political situation. As the narrator deviates from acceptable cultural ideals of femininity – as her body becomes ever more sexual, abject and 'biologically' excessive – her sexual encounters become increasingly traumatic, and she experiences a concomitant shift towards the liminal spaces of the city. This section examines how, after each hysterical episode, the narrator retreats to a site of marginality to recover and attempt to regain her human form. The marginalised secondary characters she encounters in these sites of marginality add to the broad political critique of the text. Ultimately, then, this section argues that the narrator's body becomes emblematic of a society characterised by corruption and contradiction.

Whilst the narrator's transformations still serve to enhance her 'wholesome' femininity, towards the beginning of the text her affinity with nature is underlined through similarly 'wholesome' imagery. The early stages of her transformation see her develop a preference for green spaces: 'J'avais des envies de vert, de nature' (*T* 22). The



square near her work, as a pocket of nature nestled in the city, has a stimulating effect on her senses: ‘pourtant j’avais faim, cela me venait quand j’arrivais au square, une fringale terrible; l’air, les oiseaux, je ne sais pas, ce qui restait de la nature ça me faisait tout à coup quelque chose’ (T 20). Evocative descriptions of eating mix the sights and smells of nature with sensual experience:

Il fallait voir comment je les mangeais, ces pommes. Je n’avais jamais assez de temps au square pour bien les croquer, pour bien les mâcher, ça faisait plein de jus dans ma bouche, ça craquait sous mes dents, ça avait un goût! Mes quelques minutes de répit dans le square avec mes pommes, au milieu des oiseaux, ça faisait pour ainsi dire le bonheur de ma vie. (T 22)

The crunch and crack of the apple against her teeth and the juices invading her mouth create a pleasurable excess of sensation in a *positive* affirmation of the female narrator’s link to the negative term in the culture/ nature binary. Wholesome, ‘organic’ foodstuffs which she digs from the earth become the focus of her cravings in line with her ‘organic’ bodily transformations: ‘je trouvais toujours des boutons d’or, c’était le printemps de nouveau, et je les mâchais lentement en cachette, je leur trouvais un gout de beurre et de pré gras’ (T 50). Tied to nature, her diet changes with the seasons:

à l’automne j’ai découvert les marrons. C’est bon, les marrons. [...] Je les écorchais facilement, les marrons, mes ongles étaient devenus très durs et plus courbes qu’avant. Mes dents étaient très solides aussi, je n’aurais jamais cru ça. Le marron se fendait sous mes molaires, ça giclait en un jus pâteux et savoureux’. (T 50-51)

Despite the potentially alarming developments to her body, such as her ‘[ongles] très durs et plus courbes qu’avant’ and her ‘[dents] très solides’, which belie a dangerous, powerful animality, a sense of peace and well-being imbues these passages, in which the narrator feels at one with nature. The image of a pig lazily chewing on buttercups and sniffing through the grass for chestnuts during the first spring sunshine presents a sharp contrast to the images of sexual violence which we see pervade the passages dealing with the narrator’s work and home-life. The narrator’s entrapment within the

culture/ nature binary is presented then, somewhat contradictorily to feminist goals, in *positive* terms, as infinitely preferable to the ‘masculine’ alternative of society.

In the previous section, we have seen how social codes forbid the expression of female desire and female sexuality, whilst moral discourses refute female promiscuity. The culture/ nature dichotomy is again employed to signal the battle between the narrator’s ‘feminine’ bodily drives and her shared ‘masculine’ conception of them as shameful. Whereas renunciation and self control characterise both Brisac and de Peretti’s texts in the following chapter, in which the anorexic seeks to destroy the link between the feminine and ‘nature’ by repressing bodily drives, Darrieussecq’s narrator abandons herself to sensory pleasures: ‘je voyais des champs et des fourrés, j’avais une envie comme qui dirait extravagante d’aller mettre mon nez là-dedans, de me vautrer dans l’herbe, de la humer, de la manger’ (T 23). Similarly, simple pleasures such as bird song have an exaggerated effect on her emotions: ‘Je regardais les oiseaux, il y avait des moineaux, des pigeons, des étourneaux parfois, et leurs petits chants pathétiques me tiraient des larmes’ (T 50). When her clients give her flowers, she is overwhelmed by ‘la nature du dehors qui entrait dans la parfumerie’ (T 35). It is with reluctance that she admits to eating these flowers:

ce 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. [...] C’était leur parfum, sans doute. Ça me montait à la tête, toute cette verdure, et la vue de toutes ces couleurs. (T 35)

Looking back upon her experiences whilst writing her story, then, the narrator is still plagued by an acute sense of shame surrounding her own bodily desires, only admitting to them in order to reveal the extent of her symptoms. There is no sense that she has gained an awareness of the patriarchal social codes within which she was enmeshed. Furthermore, her sense of oneness with nature only appears acceptable to her whilst in the spaces of nature. Whilst her moments alone in the park are remembered fondly, it is

when the two spaces collide – when ‘la nature du dehors [...] entrain dans la parfumerie’ – that the narrator experiences shame. The ‘feminine’ body has overtaken the ‘masculine’ self to the extent that controlling the urge to eat the flowers ‘demandait un grand sang froid’ (T 35). She notes, ‘c’était en quelque sorte une petite victoire sur moi-même’ (T 35). This idea of suppressing bodily urges as a ‘victory’ over the self will become particularly important in Chapters 3 and 4, in which the respective narrators of each text explicitly profess a sense of achievement surrounding successful food-refusal.

To return to *Truismes*, the increasing dominance of the narrator’s bodily desires encourages her remaining clients to develop ‘des habitudes fermières’ during their sexual encounters in a further instance of the narrator’s re-submission to the culture/nature dichotomy (T 27). Their bestial desire echoes her bestial body. Despite the ‘movements de gymnastique’ carried out by the narrator ‘en cachette’ (T 37), she is unable to divert attention of her clients from her growing derrière. As her body becomes more savage, their treatment of her becomes more savage. She finds herself ‘entièrement couverte de bleues’ (T 44), one of which transforms into a teat. Similar descriptions recur throughout the text as the narrator frequents the park during brief interludes of respite from the sites of her oppression, namely the home and the workplace: ‘vous comprendrez que j’aimais à me réfugier souvent dans le square, même s’il ne fait pas de doute que je manquais là aux règles les plus élémentaires du travail’ (T 50). That nature becomes a ‘refuge’, and that her need to take time out in natural spaces breaks the ‘règles les plus élémentaires du travail’ echoes the extent to which her natural body is policed in the workplace.

As her transformations lead her further and further away from cultural ideals of feminine beauty, sensual descriptions of wholesome foods and the beauty of the natural world give way to abject imagery of mixture and contamination. Apples and chestnuts

are replaced by a preference for mice and earthworms – ‘il m’arrive souvent maintenant de fendre d’un coup de dents un petit corps de la nature [...] Le plus facile, ce sont les souris, comme font les chats, ou alors les vers de terre mais c’est moins énergétique’ (*T* 54). Her earlier sense of shame is no longer present: ‘je n’en tire ni dégoût ni affectation’ (*T* 54). Although it is tempting to see the beginning of a liberation from prohibitive social restrictions, her continued collusion in other aspects of her repression remains in keeping with the pattern of the text which provides glimmers of hope only for them to be swiftly dashed.

The most exaggerated examples of the narrator’s unquestioning collusion in her own repression – and acquiescence to misogynist perspectives of her body as an object for consumption – serve to introduce the explicitly political aspects of the text. The narrator’s first full transformation into a pig occurs at the leisure centre where she and Honoré first met, and coincides with the introduction of Edgar, the leader of the extreme right-wing political party soon to come to power. Her porcine figure splits her new bathing suit, and Honoré abandons the narrator naked in the water and unable to swim. Eventually crawling behind a palm tree to hide, the narrator ends up as an uninvited guest at a party in honour of Edgar’s political campaign, where she hears him present his manifesto:

J’ai essayé d’écouter le discours qui a suivi, mais j’ai toujours eu du mal à me concentrer sur ces affaires-là, c’est parce que je n’ai pas fait tellement d’études. Ce que j’ai compris c’est que le monsieur disait que tout irait mieux; qu’on était dans une période de mutation très sale mais qu’avec lui on s’en sortirait. J’ai appris qu’il allait y avoir des élections. (*T* 64)

In typically uncritical fashion, the narrator dismisses his speech and remains focussed on her own predicament. Edgar’s extreme political reforms, which will come to impact significantly on the narrator, are not initially made clear. The reader is instead made aware of the corruption his political party espouses through the debauched nature of the

party. Upon emerging from her hiding place, the narrator is apprehended by security guards who decide her fate based upon her level of physical attractiveness:

Celui qui avait le plus gros revolver a parlé dans un téléphone portable et il a demandé ce qu'il fallait faire de moi. Il m'a regardée et il a dit: 'Non, pas terrible.' Ça ma fait mal. Ensuite il a raccroché et il s'est tourné vers ses hommes et il a dit cette autre phrase: 'Les patrons ne nous laissent que des boudins,' il a dit. Ça m'a fait encore plus mal. Mais les hommes m'ont regardée comme si ça leur avait fait mal à eux. (T 65)

The ironic reference to 'boudins', and the idea that the security guards are more insulted at her porcine form than she is at their misogynist appraisal creates a comic effect which is heightened by the narrator's outrage, not at the possibility of being shot, but at the prospect that the security guards do not find her attractive enough to spare her life. A scene which would otherwise have been traumatic is ridiculed. Like Irigaray, then, Darrieussecq introduces humour to comment upon misogynist attitudes to rape. The absurdity of such attitudes is further reinforced shortly after, during the most exaggerated example of masculine disgust at the narrator as an animal embodiment of female sexuality. When the security guards judge the narrator too unattractive for themselves, they instead encourage their dogs to rape her:

Finalement ils ne m'ont pas tuée. Ils se sont juste un peu amusés avec leurs chiens. Et puis ils ont eu l'air comme qui dirait écœurés et ils nous ont arrêtés juste au meilleur moment. Un des hommes a tiré son revolver et il a dit: '*il faut abattre cette chienne*', moi je n'avais vu que des mâles. C'est maintenant que je comprends le sens de cette phrase. (T 65 ; emphasis in original)

The euphemistic terms used to describe her rape ('ils se sont juste un peu amusés'), coupled with the comic effect of the narrator's misunderstanding of their sexist insult, again displaces the distressing nature of the scene to comic effect. It is interesting to note that, now the narrator's hysterical symptoms have reached the point of her full transformation into a pig, such descriptions of female desire and sexuality are no longer couched in apologetic terms. Her frank admission that 'ils nous ont arrêtés juste au meilleur moment' is a far cry from her earlier reluctance to discuss her own desire. This,

again, suggests the possibility that her hysterical symptoms have released her, if only slightly, from the restrictions imposed upon her body and its drives. Although the narrator's perception of her own desire may have altered, the guards' reactions remain consistent with the views upheld by the socio-political system presented in the text. If the men were not ashamed at considering the possibility of raping the narrator for their own pleasure, it is the prospect of her visibly enjoying being raped which they find disgusting. As Jones notes: 'When the narrator fails to conform to her expected role as unwilling victim, she is perceived by them as a disgusting animal, fit only to be slaughtered'.<sup>22</sup> Jones regards this episode as a comment on stereotypical attitudes 'about women secretly enjoying or desiring rape'.<sup>23</sup> Darrieussecq's use of humour serves to expose such attitudes as ridiculous. By re-presenting such attitudes in their literal form, in the manner of Irigaray's reiteration of patriarchal discourses, Darrieussecq conversely reconfirms the deliberately violent and domineering nature of rape.

Now the narrator has begun to openly express desire, it is from this point onwards that her hysterical transformations become truly threatening. Accordingly, the pace of the narrative becomes much more frenetic. Ironically, the narrator becomes the poster girl for Edgar's regime and photographs of her wearing a dress and lipstick in her fully porcine form, alongside his slogan '*Pour un monde plus sain!*' (T 67), appear on billboards around the city. The narrator can be likened, here, to Clément's hysteric who, as we saw in the introduction, represents impossible configurations which paradoxically

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<sup>22</sup> Jones, *Repulsion*, p. 206. Darrieussecq's inclusion of this episode in a text quite clearly set in Paris, undoubtedly evokes pervasive attitudes surrounding violence against women which would lead to the formation of the French feminist movement *Ni putes Ni soumises* in 2002. Although Darrieussecq's text was published much earlier, her inclusion of so many examples of violence and rape against her female narrator undoubtedly evokes the misogynist attitudes towards women underlying French society in the years building up to action being taken at a national level. Indeed, it was only in 1996, the year of *Truismes*' publication, that the *World Health Assembly* declared violence a major public health issue, and included in the subtypes intimate partner violence and sexual violence: two kinds of violence which are often perpetrated as violence against women.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

help reinforce the boundaries of what is considered ‘acceptable’ and ‘abnormal’.

Whereas, as we saw, Clément discussed this position in relation to Lévi-Strauss’ work on the structures of kinship, in his discussion of *Truismes*, Andrew Asibong introduces philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s concept of ‘bare life’.<sup>24</sup> Agamben’s *Homo sacer* occupies a ‘sacred’ position ‘in the sense of being outside both social and worldly categorizations and, instead, untouchably “post-human”’.<sup>25</sup> This figure can be linked to Darrieussecq’s narrator in that: ‘He is the exception that proves the rule, the statistic that does not really count, the trashy, deathly and dispensable embodiment of everything that the normal, healthy, human life of the ordinary citizen is not’.<sup>26</sup> If Agamben’s *Homo sacer* ‘occupies the limbo-like space of deathly exception precisely so that those whom the state considers legitimate subjects will never have to’, then so, too, does Darrieussecq’s metamorphosing narrator.<sup>27</sup>

In Edgar’s regime it is the female body which symbolises this ‘deathly and dispensable’ embodiment of threatening otherness. It follows that Edgar’s reforms focus most intensely upon the policing of this body, which comes to symbolise all that his political reforms wish to eradicate. However, the regime also encompasses a range of reforms from the exclusion of women from the workplace, the deportation of Arab immigrants and the elimination of the homeless and mentally ill, to widespread censorship of books and the media. The remainder of the text, to which this section now turns, sees these ‘sanitising’ social reforms impact upon the narrator in various situations which encompass each of these issues.

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<sup>24</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (trans.) Daniel Helier-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Asibong, ‘*Mulier Sacra*: Marie Chauvet, Marie Darrieussecq and the Sexual Metamorphoses of “Bare Life”’, *French Cultural Studies* 14:2 (2003), 169-77 (p. 169).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.170.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

The narrative begins to follow a pattern which sees the narrator retreat to a site of marginality after each hysterical episode. Each retreat permits her to recover and regain, to varying degrees, her human form. Cruelly evicted from Honoré's flat upon her return from Aqualand, we see the narrator return to spaces of nature to seek solace, as she spends the night in the square which is overlooked by his apartment and the *parfumerie*. This time however, at least initially, the celebratory tones of previous passages evoking the sights and smells of nature are absent. In her porcine form she is excluded from human society, all around her people pass without acknowledging her presence: 'Les gens partaient prendre le métro. Personne ne me regardait, pourtant les gens passaient juste avant le banc, ils contournaient mes sacs plastique' (T 70). Her inability to signify within this society which is symbolised by the clean and proper body is further underlined by secondary characters who fail to recognise her. The friend of her elderly lesbian client 'n'a pas eu l'air de [la] reconnaître', and the African marabout who partook of her services at the *parfumerie*, and later attempted to help her cure her symptoms, 'est passé devant [elle] sans [la] voir' (T 80).

Gradually, this exclusion begins to feel like freedom to the narrator, who remarks; 'J'ai senti la solitude au creux de la poitrine, là, avec violence, avec terreur, avec jouissance; je ne sais pas si vous pouvez comprendre tout ça en même temps. Il n'y avait plus rien qui me retenait dans la ville avec les gens' (T 81). Whereas natural beauty and fresh air had a profound effect upon the narrator during the early stages of her transformation, now it is polluting natural substances which incite a comparable pleasure: 'Mais la boue, je ne sais pas, ça me tournait la tête pour ainsi dire' (T 83). Images of the narrator frolicking amongst buttercups have been replaced with descriptions of dirt and bodily waste, as in the following passage:

Et puis j'ai vu une flaque, sous le banc. Une belle flaque avec de la boue bien tiède sous le soleil et de l'eau de pluie fraîchement tombée. Je me suis allongée



dans la flaque et j'ai étiré les pattes, ça m'a fait un bien fou aux articulations. Ensuite je me suis roulée plusieurs fois dedans, c'était délicieux, ça faisait du frais sur ma peau irritée et ça détendait tous mes muscles. (T 85)

Such imagery is narrated in similarly positive terms to those used earlier to describe the 'wholesome' aspects of nature. This signifies the narrator's newfound appreciation of her 'biological' femininity, and positions her symptoms as a release of her 'true' self. The reader's hopes that the narrator has come to realise the extent of her oppression, however, are immediately dashed as the narrator blames her entrapment upon her bodily symptoms: 'J'aurais pu m'envoler comme les oiseaux si je n'avais pas été si lourde. Mais mon derrière, mes seins, toute cette chair m'accompagnait partout' (T 81). As Jordan notes: 'If the purpose of feminist writing is for women to understand and shake off the assumptions by which they are framed [...], the narrator falls horribly short of this goal'.<sup>28</sup> It is the female body then, which is presented as inhibiting her freedom. In a further reiteration of the failures of feminism, the narrator approaches a young mother in the hope of finding solidarity. However, her porcine body incites such intense fear that 'La femme s'est mise à crier et le bébé, je ne sais pas s'il riait ou s'il pleurait [...] La femme a hurlé et elle est partie à toutes jambes avec le siège-auto dans les bras' (T 84). As her transformations become progressively alarming, the pace of the narrative picks up, and events become progressively fantastical. Concomitantly, the spaces the narrator occupies become increasingly liminal.

The ensuing police chase following her encounter with the young mother sees the narrator 'heureusement' (T 86) follow some giant rats into the sewers. Here, she shelters for the night in the 'bonne boue couvrante' whilst nibbling on the vermin (T 86). Like the park, the sewers become a safe haven from society, to which she later returns to lick her wounds after still-birthing hybrid piglet-babies onto the pavement: 'je

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<sup>28</sup>Jordan, *Women's Visions*, 86.

suis descendue sous terre [...] Je me suis roulée en boule et je n'ai plus pensé à rien' (T 92). The father of these still-born babies plays a brief role in the text which permits Darrieussecq to comment upon conflicting attitudes to racial difference. Although the narrator does not seem to actively share the widespread racial prejudice depicted, she nonetheless passively accepts it in typically uncritical fashion. During the narrator's first encounter with Honoré at Aqualand, she witnesses a sales girl spray perfume after a group of young Muslim women leave the changing room:

Toujours est-il que lorsque les musulmanes sont parties, en laissant pour près de cinq mille euros en Internet Card, la vendeuse très chic a vaporisé, sous nos yeux, des parfums aérosols dans tout le magasin. Jamais, ai-je dit à Honoré, jamais je ne me laisserais aller à une telle faute de goût si je tenais un magasin chic. (T 208)

The narrator's disapproval is not directed at the sales assistant's obvious racial prejudice, but at her 'faute de goût' in expressing it publicly. If the narrator's boss welcomed the money of the wealthy African marabout who wished to partake of the narrator's services earlier in the text, he would not allow this on the premises of the *parfumerie*. Although wealthy racial minorities are tolerated, to a certain extent, working-class immigrants are doubly marginalised. After her encounter with the young mother in the park, the narrator uses some of the money she earned doing the photo shoot for Edgar to procure a hotel room in order to take a shower and recuperate. Both marginalised individuals, the narrator and the Arab cleaner entertain a brief relationship which permits the narrator to mostly regain her human form, until the cleaner becomes another target of Edgar's 'sanitising' reforms and is eventually deported. It is the narrator's eviction from the hotel which results in her still-birth, yet of his deportation she merely states 'ça m'a fait de la peine, mais c'étaient les premières mesures du programme d'Edgar' (T 91). This disappointingly reiterates her total lack of interest regarding the ideologies behind the political decisions which have directly impacted, and as we will see, continue to impact, her life and the lives of those around her. Indeed,

this is repeatedly re-iterated ‘Je n’avais pas d’avis sur la question, je n’ai jamais eu d’opinions bien précises en politique’ (T 59).

Forced out of the sewers due to an infestation of piranhas, the narrator next winds up with a group of SDFs who provide her with relative security and shelter, to the extent that, as we have seen, the narrator notes: ‘J’ai retrouvé une certaine dignité à vivre avec eux’ (*op. cit.* 93). However, this dignity does not stem from the discontinuation of her sexual objectification, as even the homeless men ‘en ont profité, ça se comprend’ (T 93). The SAMU-SDF, who provide support and shelter for the homeless, are soon to be disbanded due to the systematic ‘elimination’ of minority groups implemented by Edgar’s regime. Once detained by them, the narrator learns that women are also being forced out of the job market; the only remaining work is for wet-nurses. After refusing the chauffeur’s offer to impregnate her to enable her to find employment, the narrator is bribed by police to inform on the whereabouts of her homeless comrades. Naively returning to their campsite, the narrator finds: ‘il n’y avait que des cendres et des bouts de vêtements calcinés au bord des rails’ (T 94). Not realising the deathly consequences of her actions then, the narrator ‘[a] cherché partout’, finally concluding; ‘sans doute les clochards étaient partis le long des rails comme ils parlaient souvent’ (T 94).

After witnessing the police kill a group of protestors gathering outside the now closed SAMU-SDF, the narrator’s porcine transformations begin again. Spared the police’s violence, she notes: ‘J’ai compris qu’ils avaient peur de moi, je reprenais à nouveau cette drôle de touche rose avec un gros pif et de grandes oreilles’ (T 95). The police take her to perhaps the most important liminal space the narrator occupies, in terms of its influence on her shaky quest for subjectivity – the asylum in which she is incarcerated for a brief period following her arrest. Before it is eventually burnt down in

the name of Edgar's reforms, here the narrator lets her animality run wild for a brief spell, before becoming desperate for food and attempting to eat the many books left lying around. Significantly, each instance of her metamorphosis so far has been accompanied by a hysterical loss of voice. She only succeeds in emitting 'une sorte de grognement' (T 87) whilst trying to communicate with the young mother and baby, and later wishing to console a young girl who had been sexually abused at the Aqualand party; 'aucun son articulé ne voulait sortir de [sa] bouche' (T 107). Such linguistic hysterical symptoms have been discussed by Hunter in relation to Breuer's famous patient Anna O., mentioned in the introduction. Hunter posits such linguistic symptoms as an 'expression' of cultural silencing, and describes hysteria as 'a self-repudiating form of feminist discourse in which the body signifies what social conditions make it impossible to state linguistically'.<sup>29</sup> In relation to *Truismes*, such a reading permits us to position the narrator's linguistic symptoms as a subconscious means of communicating her loss of voice within a society in which she finds herself increasingly marginalised.

As Darrieussecq's narrator finally attempts to read, instead of eat, one of the disused books, however, the power of language begins to return to her: 'J'ai eu du mal au debut et puis c'est revenu très vite, les autres lettres se sont formées rapidement' (T 97). With the return of language, the narrator begins to revert to her human form: 'Je me reposais, mes cheveux repoussaient. Parfois le matin je me levais trop vite et je me cognais la tête au plafond, j'avais de nouveau ce réflexe de me tenir sur les pattes arrière' (T 98). That she hits her head on the ceiling is perhaps a comic means of suggesting her unease at re-entering society, however, there is a momentary flash of hope for the reader, as the narrator who is now able to 'articuler à nouveau' (T 99),

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<sup>29</sup> Hunter, 'Anna O.', p.484.

realises she is in possession of highly dangerous anarchist literature in the form of a book written by Knut Hamsun, an author with Nazi affiliations.<sup>30</sup>

In typical fashion, this hope is swiftly dashed as, instead of applying these theories to her own situation, the narrator decides to turn the material in to Edgar, hoping to be given a job in recognition, and regain her place within human society. Upon arriving at the *le Service de la Censure*, the employees prove to be victims of the regime they uphold, as censorship means, in Darrieussecq's words: 'Ils ne savent pas si c'est pour ou contre eux'.<sup>31</sup> This integration of Knut Hamsun into the text serves to further undercut the momentary flash of hope which occurred with the narrator's realisation that she is in possession of anarchist literature, as the mention of his name recalls the reader to the text's epigraph. Taken from Hamsun's text *Benoni* (1949), the quotation deals with the final moments in a boar's life, in which finally understands his fate, and then realises this understanding has come too late: '*D'abord le verrat ne se rend compte de rien, il reste allongé quelques secondes à réfléchir un peu. Si! Il comprend alors qu'on le tue et hurle en cris étouffés jusqu'à ce qu'il n'en puisse plus*' (T Epigraph ; emphasis in original). The reader thus cannot help suspecting a similar fate will befall the unquestioning narrator.

It is her affiliation with nature which is once again brought to the fore to underline the seemingly insurmountable binds of femininity. All of the above mentioned protagonists accompany the narrator and occupy marginal zones at some point or other, the only exception is the narrator's werewolf lover Yvan. In his human form, Yvan is a successful and affluent business man; in his canine form he haunts the

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<sup>30</sup> Knut Hamsun was a Norwegian author awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1920. During WWII Hamsun expressed his support for the German war-effort on several occasions and met with Hitler. After Hitler's death, Hamsun published a short obituary in which he described him as 'a preacher of the gospel of justice for all nations'. He was detained by police on June 14 1945, for the commission of acts of treason but escaped imprisonment on the grounds of mental health and was instead fined a ruinous sum.

<sup>31</sup> Darrieussecq cited in Gaudet, 'Liberté', p. 113.

spectacular landmarks of Paris. As we have seen, descriptions of the deformed and dirty porcine narrator, who cannot resist the attraction of muddy puddles and rolling around in her own filth, paint a picture of abjection and marginalisation: ‘Personne ne voulait s’occuper de moi. Je ne pouvais plus du tout marcher debout et je dormais dans mon caca, ça me tenait chaud et j’aimais bien l’odeur’ (T 95). However, descriptions of Yvan, who represents the ideal embodiment of masculine strength and beauty, abound with language denoting refinement and power: ‘Yvan était gris argenté, avec un long museau à la fois solide et très fin, une gueule virile, forte, élégante, de longues pattes bien recouvertes et une poitrine très large, velue et douce. Yvan c’était *l’incarnation de la beauté*’ (T 120 ; emphasis in original). Whereas the narrator suffers painful and abject transformations, which leave her ugly and disgraced, ‘Yvan étincelait, on ne pouvait presque plus le distinguer dans ce halo qui l’embrassait’ (T 120). Although the narrator, as a pig, is relatively harmless, her porcine form nevertheless engenders fear and horror. Just as the young mother she approached earlier in the text was seen to scream and flee, the police officers who apprehend her outside the SAMU-SDF were too scared to deal with her. Yvan’s threatening power, on the other hand, is construed as graceful and beautiful. Although he is far more dangerous, his victims do not react with horror and disgust, but excitement and awe. About to be devoured, one victim ‘ne croyait pas à ce qu’il avait entendu, on sentait dans l’air qu’il était tout excité. Une onde de terreur et plus rien du tout. Pas même un cri’ (T 118-19). Such awe-inspiring descriptions of Yvan’s power contradictorily serve to reinforce the threatening power of the narrator’s female body. Although the masculine protagonist remains entrenched within a lexicon of strength and power, it is the biologically exaggerated female form which engenders the most terrified responses.

In typical fashion, even this threatening potential is undermined, however, through what Jordan terms the narrator's 'galling' re-inscription within 'commonplace gender stereotypes' as Yvan is heard to suggest, *vis-à-vis* her inability to regulate her transformations, 'that the fault lies in her emotionalism'.<sup>32</sup> If Yvan has appropriated the lunar cycles and learnt to 'adapter [son] propre rythme aux fluctuations de la Lune' (*T* 121), ironically, the narrator's 'rythme hormonal brouillait le jeu' (*T* 121). In addition, the narrator's transformations serve to further fragment her identity, as we saw earlier in the scene in which she is overcome by *le besoin* to look in the mirror to regain a sense of self. Yvan's transformation, however, serves to consolidate his sense of self, as Jordan notes, 'so conspicuously consistent is it with prevailing ideas of masculinity'.<sup>33</sup> As a hybrid form which contains the subversive potential to cross boundaries, however, even Yvan eventually ends up hunted and killed by the police. Despite being, himself, an outsider to society – 'Honoré n'avait aucune relation, il n'arriverait pas à s'en faire malgré son travail' (*T* 16) – it is the narrator's first boyfriend who appears to be the only one (aside from the narrator) who survives Edgar's 'sanitising' reforms. This can only be attributed to the fact that he occupies a position of relative security in society as a white middle-class male.

This section so far, then, has shown the narrator's seemingly inescapable entrenchment within the culture/ nature binary which sustains the misogynistic, morally and politically corrupt society which she inhabits. It has examined the narrator's shift from a willing participant at the heart of the system, to an ever more abject, disgusting and marginalised 'object' occupying the liminal spaces of the city. And it has pulled together aspects of the various political critiques which thread through the narrative and accompany the narrator's physical transformations. We have seen, then, that this text is

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<sup>32</sup> Jordan, *Women's Visions*, p. 83.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

inescapably characterised by duality. Each time a potential freedom is suggested, this is immediately undermined either by the narrator's collusion or her naivety. It can be argued then, that, echoing the embodied ambiguity of the narrator, Darrieussecq's writing project itself exhibits aspects of the hysterical in its 'textual hybridity'. Containing aspects of the political allegory, bildungsroman, fairy tale, fable, science fiction and horror genres, its refusal to fit in to straightforward genre classifications renders it performative of the crossing of boundaries inherent in the abject.<sup>34</sup> In addition, the uneasy deviation between the fantastic and the plausible echoes the narrator's bodily deviations between human and animal. As Caine points out, were Darrieussecq's narrative to be 'wholly mimetic, aspiring to an authentic replication of a realistic world', her portraits of an uncontainable female body 'would surely reinforce, without challenging, the persistent cultural comprehension of a "monstrous feminine" always in need of normalisation and (self-) discipline'.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, if the text were purely supernatural, removed from our everyday reality, then the extraordinary female body presented would lose all subversive potential, remaining in a distanced realm of sheer imaginary and posing no threat to discursive truth. It is precisely Darrieussecq's exaggerated, abject evocation of femininity, through her monstrous and hysterical female protagonist, which inscribes a 'rebellious deconstruction of the truisms of female corpo-reality' and patriarchal definitions of femininity in the manner of Irigaray's subversive mimesis.<sup>36</sup> To draw these ideas together, the conclusion to this chapter will entail a discussion of the ending of the text, which sees the narrator escape

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<sup>34</sup> See: Schaal, "'je" comme "jeu"', for an examination of how the *je* in *Truismes* becomes *un jeu*, 'performing' multiple genres, conventional feminine roles and gender stereotypes. These performances sometimes conform to socially prescribed norms, and at other times reject them. The *je* becomes a 'performance' of resistance as the heroine deviates from the prescribed social 'codes' of femininity.

<sup>35</sup> Caine, 'Marvellous Bodies', p. 435.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*



slaughter at the hands of her mother to live out the rest of her days in a forest on the outskirts of the city.

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, then, this section brings together the arguments explored above, to elucidate how the narrator's symptoms can be said to represent an embodied socio-political critique. It examines the narrator's decision to write as the only aspect of the tale which offers hope of a successful feminist outcome. It then argues that writing is resolutely linked to the search for subjecthood, and as such, offers a means of repositioning the narrator as a subject as opposed to an object of her story. It argues that the orality of the narrative firmly situates it on the side of the feminine, in the manner of Irigaray's *parler femme* which offers a certain freedom from the masculine written symbolic, and goes some way to fulfilling Irigaray's discussions of harnessing hysteria and rendering it productive. Finally, it draws together the various similarities between Darrieussecq's writing project and that of Irigaray, in an examination of Darrieussecq's 'textual hybridity', in order to argue that Darrieussecq's text enacts a similar strategy of subversive mimesis to that proposed by Irigaray in *Ce Sexe*.

As we have seen, the narrative is characterised by a relentless naivety which repeatedly reiterates the narrator's collusion in the mechanisms of her repression. As Jordan points out: 'The narrative voice, a peculiar combination of ribaldry, demureness and blind naivety, is as much a pointer to the heroine's uneasy hybridity as is her physical shape'.<sup>37</sup> However, it can be argued that the narrator can be said to have gained

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<sup>37</sup> Jordan, *Women's Visions*, p. 86.

a certain self-awareness towards the end of the text. This facilitates this chapter's reading of her hysterical symptoms as an unconscious manifestation of her rejection of a corrupt society, although, admittedly, the ending is not without its ambiguities. After Yvan is killed, the narrator finds herself locked in a pigsty belonging to her mother who plans to butcher her for profit on the black market:

Me retrouver dans la porcherie m'a fait du bien, j'ai pu me laisser aller. Je me suis couchée, je n'ai même pas réussi à me demander ce que j'allais devenir. J'avais la tête pleine d'odeurs, c'était doux, agréable, riche. Quelques cochons sont entrés et m'ont flairée, c'étaient de bons gros castrats assez sympathiques, il y avait aussi une grosse truie pleine qui a boudé dans son coin en me voyant. L'odeur franche et épaisse me réchauffait le cœur [...] Cette odeur ça me protégeait de tout, ça me revenait du fin fond de moi, j'étais en quelque sorte rentrée chez moi. (T 143-44)

If she admits that the company of other pigs 'me revenait du fin fond de moi' (T 92), and she appreciates the earthy smells, which are 'doux, agréable, riche' (T 92) and offer a stark contrast to the sickening, human 'odeur des citadins pas lavés' (T 92) experienced in the city, it is nevertheless clear that she is not wholly and unambiguously accepted into the animal world. That the male pigs are 'sympathiques' is perhaps to do with their status as non-threatening 'castrats', and the sow, as with the other female characters in the text, remains a rival. Likewise, her admission 'je n'ai même pas réussi à me demander ce que j'allais devenir' shows a disappointing lack of insight.

When her mother's associate arrives to perform the killing, however, the narrator recognises him, from the smell of his aftershave, as her former boss at the *parfumerie*. Overcome by repulsion, the narrator experiences a surge of self-awareness and agency as she deliberately regains her human form to open the door of the pigsty and escape:

Quelque chose m'a aidé. De très loin est arrivé un parfum. Du Yerling pour hommes. Ça s'approchait avec le camion. J'ai réussi à me mettre debout, ce parfum ça me rappelait ma vie d'avant, la parfumerie, le directeur de la chaîne. L'onde d'un très vieux dégoût m'a saisie, enfouie jusque-là profondément en moi. Ce parfum c'était le parfum du directeur de la chaîne le jour de mon entretien d'embauche. (T 145)

At the beginning of the text, the narrator experienced such a separation from her body that the sex acts she had to perform in order to seal the contract were narrated without comment. Her hysterical symptoms therefore, have bridged the gap – imposed by social codes which rigidly policed her ‘true’ femininity – between her self and her biological female body, to the extent that she now recognises her exploitation. She successfully escapes to the forest, but here she lives a liminal existence; although she has escaped the oppressive right-wing regime, her final lot is nevertheless marked by exclusion. She forsakes human interaction altogether and leaves behind the patriarchal order of the city, but her existence in porcine society is similarly pessimistic. Rejected by her new community just as she was by her old one, she finds herself doubly marginalised: ‘Je ne suis pas à la hauteur de leurs attentes’ (*T* 141). She is neither human, nor pig – signifying in neither humanity, nor nature – and as such cannot be censured nor approved according to the dictates for either category.

The final pages of the text, however, foreground the act of writing and see the narrator deliberately regain her human form in order to transcribe her story. As an inalienably human impulse to communicate and bear witness, her writing could be regarded as an act of political engagement, meaning that the narrator does not entirely reject the society from which she has withdrawn. Frustratingly, however, the reader’s hopes are once more dashed as the narrator fails to draw any political or social conclusions from her personal experiences regarding the collective position of women or other marginalised groups. The act of writing itself is obstructed by physical and intellectual difficulties, and the culture/ nature binary which threads through the text is further enforced by an interference of biology with intellect. The narrator’s urges to write remain tied to the lunar cycles, reiterating the idea that she is restrained by her female biology, and this is compounded with her obvious joy in her porcine behaviour:

La nourriture est bonne, la clairière confortable, les marcassins m'amuse. Je me laisse souvent aller. Rien n'est meilleur que la terre chaude autour de soi quand on s'éveille le matin, l'odeur de son propre corps mélangée à l'odeur de l'humus, les premières bouchées que l'on prend sans même se lever, glands, châtaignes, tout ce qui a roulé dans la bauge sous les coups de patte des rêves' (*T* 148).

Undoubtedly, then, the narrator's strongest sense of self is when she is in her porcine form and removed from human society. In addition, the staining fluids of ink and mud add to the physical difficulties of writing, threatening to erase or distort her story and firmly fastening her project to the abject. This leaves her firmly situated on the side of the irrational and natural. Although the narrator's eventual awareness of the shocking nature of her oppression promises a quest for collective understanding, then, any critique of her position appears to be lost in a reiteration of the *truisms* in which she was entrapped.

However, it is perhaps that Darrieussecq's narrator does not offer a conclusive critique which is most important here, as it represents Darrieussecq's deliberate refusal to supply an alternative answer. As Irigaray asserts, the aim is not 'simplement à renverser l'ordre des choses', by replacing patriarchal society by one in which women have usurped the 'masculine' position of mastery, as 'l'histoire reviendrait finalement encore au même' (*CS* 32). According to Darrieussecq, the aim of *Truismes* was not to supply workable solutions to the problems encountered by the narrator, rather:

C'était de montrer à quel point une femme peut être aliénée parce qu'elle est femme et de faire parler cette aliénation. Faire parler l'aliénation, c'est une forme de dénonciation. Mais il n'y a pas que ça. Ce n'est pas un pamphlet, c'est un roman.<sup>38</sup>

Just as Irigaray's writing was an attempt to expose, in her words, '[l]es silences' of masculine discourse, it is these very silences which Darrieussecq's text can be said to 'faire parler'. As Jordan notes, *Truismes* 'is not intended to be a constructive narrative',

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<sup>38</sup> Darrieussecq cited in Gaudet, 'Liberté', p. 111.

rather it deconstructs and parodies staple features of the feminist canon.<sup>39</sup> Through the oral format, which rushes and simplifies events and concepts, Darrieussecq invites the risk of incoherence through the avoidance of organised discourse, which Irigaray critiques as the site at which the feminine is erased. The choice to create such a deliberately ambiguous text is the choice to leave it open. As Gallop remarks, ‘to choose ambiguity is to choose to give up one’s masterful position’.<sup>40</sup> Darrieussecq’s hystericising parody of the cultural discourses on femininity in the fascist society inhabited by her narrator is similar to Irigaray’s strategic parody of masculine discourses in Western society, in that both writing projects display what is repressed for each society to function securely. By reciting masculine paradigms of femininity, and following them to their logical conclusions, Darrieussecq provides the reader with an awareness of the patriarchal investments at work in her futuristic, dystopian Paris. Just as Irigaray’s strategic mimicry is designed to push her readers into an identification with the hysteric’s refusal to accede to the feminine designated by masculine discourse, the excessive bodily symptoms of Darrieussecq’s narrator, which (although exaggerated) represent aspects of collective female experience – many of which (such as weight, body hair, menstruation, amongst others) women are still invited to conceal and ‘police’ – are designed to provoke a similar response from the female reader. Indeed, a critique levelled by Chisholm at Irigaray’s work, which could equally be applied to Darrieussecq’s text, concerns the risks entailed in exaggerating the oppressive nature of masculine discourses on femininity, which could elicit ‘a frustrated, muted or even “mad” response’ in a reader who has been made aware of her repression and denied a solution.<sup>41</sup> However, as Margaret Whitford comments concerning Irigaray’s work: ‘If as

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<sup>39</sup> Jordan, *Women’s Visions*, p. 89.

<sup>40</sup> Gallop, ‘Keys to Dora’, in *Dora’s Case*, ed. by Bernheimer and Kahane, p. 205.

<sup>41</sup> Chisholm, ‘Irigaray’s Hysteria’, ed. by Burke et al., p. 276.

a reader, you “resist,” then this resistance is itself worth analysing and exploring further’.<sup>42</sup>

The secondary characters who shared the narrator’s marginalised status, but who were unable to convert their trauma into a bodily symptom did not survive, as in traditional narratives of hysteria which typically see the threatening other imprisoned, killed or otherwise silenced. Darrieussecq’s hybrid narrator, however, survived because her bodily transformation functioned to bridge the split between her mind and her body imposed by a society which focussed on her body as an object for consumption at the expense of her subjectivity. Her monstrous, hysterical body came to epitomise the image of the abject feminine, physically transforming her culturally conforming body into all she psychologically attempted to repress and control. Thus, although Darrieussecq’s narrator may have inhabited the same sites of marginalisation as these secondary protagonists, much like Clément’s hysteric who mimes and metaphorises destruction in order to expel it, the narrator’s fantastic, if abject, body allowed her to be transformed by her experiences rather than be obliterated by them.<sup>43</sup> Her symbolic death, in her relegation to nature, thus represents opportunity and the chance for reinvention when compared to these *real* deaths.

Ultimately, the longstanding cure for hysteria has been to reconfigure it into an object of transmission, which Darrieussecq’s narrator undoubtedly manages to do, albeit in a painstaking, uncertain and uncritical manner. Although, as we saw in the introduction, this cure traditionally resulted in the hysteric’s peaceful re-insertion back into patriarchal society, Darrieussecq’s re-appropriation and re-configuration of the figure of the hysteric complicates this cure and instead underlines the revolutionary

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<sup>42</sup> Margaret Whitford, ‘Speaking as a Woman: Luce Irigaray and the Female Imaginary’, *Radical Philosophy* 43: 3(Summer 1986), p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> Here, I am referring to Clément’s discussion of the dance of the *tarantella* discussed in the introduction.

potential of this bodily mode of expression. Despite the apparent inefficacy of a disorder which is characterised by incoherence and contradiction, the mass nature of hysterical symptoms, affecting a particular social class of women, succeeded in provoking research and discussion. A body of knowledge has subsequently evolved which seeks to understand not only the plight of these women, but the evolutions of hysterical symptoms and social disorders to this day. Ultimately, it is to this process of exchange that Darrieussecq's text contributes. As noted by Darrieussecq herself, at the beginning of this chapter, although the narrator inhabits a disordered hysterical body, the accompanying negative psychological symptoms of hysteria are markedly absent. This has permitted Darrieussecq to foreground the body as the rebellious site of critique. Despite the ambiguities deliberately and consistently raised throughout the text, the imagery of hysteria remains powerful, and this power is used by Darrieussecq to engage in political discourses even as it is shown to be a double-edged metaphorical tool. Through her exaggerated, cartoon-like, hysterical narrator she is able to represent a whole society founded upon contradiction. Although her text does not offer concrete alternatives, through playful, ironic literalisation of stereotypical images of femininity and the female body, Darrieussecq invites reflection not only on her fantastical society but also on the commonplace 'truisms' of the society which the real-life reader inhabits.

## Chapter 3

### Hysteria and Anorexia I: Transcribing the Anorexic Body in *Petite* by Geneviève Brisac and *Thornytorinx* by Camille de Peretti

#### Introduction

The previous chapter focussed on a female narrator whose hybrid animality was a potent and highly visible exaggeration of female corporeality. The following two chapters turn to representations of female bodies in which this potent and highly visible female corporeality has been consciously and painstakingly obliterated. Like hysteria, anorexia nervosa is a psychological disorder which predominantly affects women and which manifests itself through the body.<sup>1</sup> Like hysteria, it too is characterised by contradiction. The following two chapters seek to position anorexia as a contemporary equivalent of the nineteenth-century ‘epidemic’ of hysteria discussed in the introduction to this study. To this aim, this chapter

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<sup>1</sup> National statistics invariably depend on rates of reporting cases of anorexia and are therefore based on estimates. According to a *dossier de presse* detailing government measures to combat anorexia in France, released in 2008 by the *Ministère de la Santé, de la Jeunesse et des Sports*: ‘Certains spécialistes estiment qu’il y a en France entre 30 000 à 40 000 anorexiques, dont 3 000 à 4 000 hommes’, ‘Lutte contre l’anorexie: Signature d’une charte d’engagement volontaire & Interdiction de l’apologie de l’anorexie sur internet’, (April 2008), URL: [www.sante.gouv.fr/.../Dossier\\_de\\_presse\\_anorexie](http://www.sante.gouv.fr/.../Dossier_de_presse_anorexie). This trend is echoed throughout Europe and the US. According to the latest UK figures, posted January 2014 by the *Health and Social Care Information Centre (HSCIC)*, there were nine times as many females as males admitted to hospital for an eating disorder in the year ending October 2013; this is similar to figures in the previous year. See: *HSCIC* website, URL: <http://www.hscic.gov.uk/article/3880/Eating-disorders-Hospital-admissions-up-by-8-per-cent-in-a-year>. It is commonly believed that anorexia, like hysteria, predominantly affects young, white women. In truth, relatively little research has been conducted amongst ethnic minority groups. The rate of reporting eating disorders is highest amongst young, white women; statistics may express this rather than an accurate picture of the demographic affected. See: *National Eating Disorders Association* website, URL: <http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/eating-disorders-women-color-explanations-and-implications>.



begins by examining the principal academic and clinical discourses which today converge upon the anorexic body, in order to expose how, like hysteria, anorexia is discursively constructed as at once a pathological consequence of social prescriptions of femininity, and a rebellious form of unconscious protest. This will provide the theoretical backdrop upon which the analyses of the primary texts undertaken in both chapters will draw. The primary texts discussed in this first chapter are two realist narratives of anorexia: *Petite* (1994) by Geneviève Brisac, and *Thornytorinx* (2005) by Camille de Peretti. The second chapter will discuss three works by Amélie Nothomb: *Biographie de la faim* (2004), *Métaphysique des tubes* (2000), and *Robert des noms propres* (2002), as texts which express the same contradictory constructions of anorexia, yet within a shifting and metaphorical ‘aesthetic’ of anorexia which is in many respects very different from the writing of the anorexic body explored in this first chapter.

The original aim of considering these narratives of anorexia was to explore how the literary figure of the anorexic, as presented by Brisac, de Peretti and Nothomb, could be considered a contemporary evolution of the Cixousian celebratory figure of the hysteric.<sup>2</sup> However, several striking divisions between these writing projects swiftly became apparent. Whilst the hyperbolic ‘anorexic beauties’<sup>3</sup> depicted in Nothomb’s texts easily, and productively, lend themselves to a comparison with the rebellious hysteric as imagined by Cixous, in Brisac and

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<sup>2</sup> It must be stressed here that this thesis is dealing with *literary* representations of the disorder as a potentially disruptive force, not the disease itself. This thesis argues that anorexia is a bodily expression of the conflicting social expectations faced by women in today’s society, and that it is through *writing* the disorder that these conflicts are exposed, and could potentially be resolved. It is not endorsing anorexia as a positive solution to the problems faced by women in contemporary society.

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Rodgers, ‘Nothomb’s Anorexic Beauties’, in *Amélie Nothomb: Authorship, Identity and Narrative Practice*, ed. by Susan Bainbrigge and Jeanette den Toonder (New York: Peter Laing, 2003), pp. 50-62.

de Peretti's texts, the elements of rebellion reminiscent of this configuration are tempered by a 'representative' exposure of the ravaging physical and psychological effects of anorexia. Whereas Nothomb's hyperbolic evocations of the lithe and slender female form are accompanied by a foregrounding of individuality and autonomy which, as we will see, appears to venerate the anorexic body and mindset, Brisac and de Peretti's writing is, instead, ostensibly motivated by a desire to achieve distance and closure.<sup>4</sup> Above all, what sets Brisac and de Peretti's narratives of anorexia apart from those of Nothomb is their use of performative writing strategies to recreate anorexia in writing. Although Brisac and de Peretti are undoubtedly concerned with transcribing anorexia in way which facilitates understanding and lucidity, *Petite* and *Thornytorinx* are not offered up as straightforward autobiographical testimonies to the lived, traumatic experience of anorexia, but are self-consciously stylised and fictionalised in order to push the boundaries of what can be represented. Each text is characterised by a different 'rhetoric of anorexia' which embodies the suffering, starving body, and fragmented subjectivity of the anorexic, who is caught in a perpetual fluctuation between the conflicting demands of the disorder. Each 'rhetoric' holds the suffering, starving body firmly at the forefront of the reader's imagination. Nothomb's writing, however, is permeated by an 'anorexic aesthetic' which, as we will see, seeks to erase the body.

The decision to divide these writing projects into two distinct and contrasting chapters, then, stems, from these fundamental oppositions. Whereas Brisac and de Peretti write from a position of 'recovery' – 'outside' of the

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<sup>4</sup> Here, it is important to highlight an awareness that this 'celebration' is, in typical Nothombian fashion, far from straightforward; however, a full discussion of this is for the following chapter.

disorder – and seek to position themselves in relation to their past experiences, Nothomb creates anorexic protagonists who are very much ‘inside’ the seduction and exhilaration of the disorder. More so than Nothomb’s ‘anorexic aesthetic’, Brisac and de Peretti’s respective ‘rhetorics of anorexia’ facilitate a clear understanding of the inherent contradictions of the disorder, and the clinical and theoretical discourses which surround it. For this reason, *Petite* and *Thornytorinx* are dealt with first.

The first section of this chapter provides the theoretical backdrop to both chapters. It highlights which aspects of the Cixousian celebratory model of the hysteric can be identified in contemporary representations of the anorexic, in order to expose the ways in which the anorexic’s body, like that of the hysteric, may be considered to be both expressive of the contradictions faced by women in a patriarchal society and a troubling figure of resistance to patriarchal authority. It moves on to discuss the numerous academic and clinical discourses which today converge upon the anorexic body to produce a range of differing constructions. Above all, this draws out ideas of control and autonomy, the construction of the body as a separate, closed entity, and the role of the mother-daughter relationship in the onset of anorexia to inform subsequent discussions of how all three authors attempt to reconstruct the disorder in their writing. In particular, it reveals how anorexia is characterised by a series of divisions, all of which contribute to the fragmentation of the anorexic subjectivity, and all of which stem from the fundamental masculine/ feminine binary much critiqued in second-wave French feminist writing. Ultimately, it illustrates the ‘discursive’ nature of anorexia, which (like hysteria) is simultaneously constructed as a debilitating, individual

pathology, an epidemic caused by conflicting social narratives of femininity, and a rebellious form of embodied protest.

The main body of the chapter focuses on how Brisac and de Peretti transcribe the split subjectivity of the anorexic through their respective ‘rhetorics of anorexia’ in *Petite* and *Thornytorinx*. The first section examines how Brisac makes clear the traumatic (at times overwhelming) struggle to resolve the fractured identity of the anorexic through a split narrative position. It argues that the alternation between narrative positions is indicative of the anorexic’s fluctuating sense of autonomy in its almost schizophrenic identification with, and alternate withdrawal from, the anorexic self. It examines how the split narrative position is further compounded by an ‘anorexic’ writing style which embodies the physical reduction, control and isolation of the anorexic self. Brisac’s use of listing is examined as a central trope of this ‘anorexic’ style. The remainder of this section turns to *Thornytorinx* to examine how what I term de Peretti’s ‘biological’ body writing performs the instability and alternation of the anorexic self. It examines de Peretti’s subverted conception of the digestive tract – which she renames the *thornytorinx* – as a central trope which presents the anorexic body as a tube. It argues that graphic descriptions of filling and emptying the *thornytorinx* – the body as tube – symbolise the alternate autonomy and dissolution of the anorexic subject.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> At this point it is important to explain the convergence of symptoms between anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Although both disorders bring about a fragmented sense of self and focus on an obsession with thinness, anorexics display noticeable and often severe weight loss, whilst bulimics typically maintain a constant weight. The symptoms of anorexia (literally meaning ‘lack of appetite’) are focused on self-starvation and excessive exercise, producing a dramatic and dangerous weight loss (such as that represented in *Petite*). Self-induced vomiting and laxative abuse are *also* symptoms of anorexia, amongst others, which include a variety of metabolic changes. Finding its etymology in the Greek word ‘boulimia’ meaning ‘ravenous hunger’, bulimia

The final section argues that the signs of splitting presented in each text, examined in the previous section, stem from a problematic mother-daughter relationship. It focuses first on *Petite* to examine how the narrator's too distant relationship with her mother produces the position of silence and isolation occupied by the narrator throughout the text. It examines how this position of silence can be read as a specifically feminine position, tying Brisac's text to feminist writing projects of the 1970s. It then turns to *Thornytorinx*, to posit the movement of consumption and expulsion which characterises the text as a parody of the fundamental fluctuation between the image her mother projects onto her, and a desire to break free of this image and constitute a separate self. It examines how the contradictions of Camille's relationship with her mother become most explicitly linked to her anorexia during her *stage* in Japan, in which the *bento* becomes symbolic of anorexic ideas of containment and contamination and Camille's rejection of food signifies a rejection of the mother.

Ultimately, this chapter will show how each author simulates the dualities of anorexia via a *performative* writing which attempts to reconcile body and subjectivity to enable each writer to re-gain a sense of understanding and autonomy. Before commencing the discussion of clinical and academic discourses on anorexia, the remainder of this section will introduce Brisac and de Peretti and

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nervosa entails a similar over-concern with body shape and weight and a strict policing of the body through repeated cycles of bingeing and purging. The narrator of *Thornytorinx* describes herself as 'une boulimique-anorexique' (TX, 39) and the text deals with the symptoms of both disorders. However, although alternating between symptoms of anorexia and bulimia is common, bulimia will *only* be diagnosed as a separate disorder when the behaviour is not a part of the symptom complex of anorexia nervosa: 'If a person also meets the diagnostic criteria of anorexia nervosa, then the diagnosis of anorexia nervosa takes precedence', Phillipa J. Hay and Josue Bacaltchuk, 'Extracts from "Clinical Evidence": Bulimia Nervosa', *British Medical Journal* 323: 7303 (2001), 33-7 (p. 33). For this reason, the theoretical background provided in this chapter focuses on anorexia nervosa, and both Brisac and de Peretti's narrators are considered anorexic.

draw out the specificities of their writing projects. This will set forth the principal themes which will be important throughout both chapters, and to begin to elucidate what it means to *write* anorexia.

Geneviève Brisac is the author of eleven novels, one of which, *Week-end de chasse à la mère* (1996), has won the *Prix Femina*.<sup>6</sup> She now writes short stories and children's literature and is a literary critic for *Le Monde*. *Petite* marks the only text in the trajectory of Brisac's work which draws on autobiographical details of her experiences of anorexia during her adolescence, suggesting, above all, a need to situate her (cured) self in relation to these experiences. *Petite* has attracted a certain amount of critical attention, notably by Barbara Havercroft, which has focussed on the relationship between artistic production and agency, and the problems of autobiography as testimony.<sup>7</sup> *Petite* is particularly important to this study as an exhaustive exploration of the paradoxical nature of the disorder and its ravaging physical and psychological effects. The narrative strategies Brisac employs in *Petite*, which is characterised by emaciation, control and candour, to construct the starving body in writing stand alone amongst the lyrical, fluid evocations of the female body encountered in other chapters. The originality of the approach undertaken in this chapter lies in its focus on *Petite* as a textual *embodiment* of the fragmented anorexic self and in its comparison to de Peretti's 'biological' body writing in *Thornytorinx*.

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<sup>6</sup> Geneviève Brisac, *Week-end de chasse à la mère* (Paris: Editions de l'Olivier, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> See: Barbara Havercroft, 'Pour une rhétorique de l'agentivité: anorexie et autofiction dans *Petite* de Geneviève Brisac', in *La rhétorique au féminin*, ed. by Annette Hayward (Québec: Éditions Nota bene, 2006), pp. 401-420 ; 'Paper Thin: Agency and Anorexia in Geneviève Brisac's *Petite*', in *Unfitting Stories: Narrative Approaches to Disease, Disability, and Trauma*, ed by. Valérie Raoul et al. (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2007), pp. 61-69. See also: Isabelle Meuret, 'Entre secret et sacré: l'écriture féminine de Geneviève Brisac et Liliane Atlan', *Revue des lettres et de traduction* 9 (2003), pp. 307-18.

Camille de Peretti is a little known author of popular fiction, and *Thornytorinx*, which draws on autobiographical details of her anorexia as a teenager and young adult, marks her first text. De Peretti has since published four fictional texts, none of which deal with her anorexia.<sup>8</sup> As noted in the introduction to this study, there is, as yet, little secondary literature focussing on *Thornytorinx*. Popular responses to this text, however, focus on its shocking honesty. Informal reader reviews have expressed a range of responses from admiration to outrage that such graphic details, and what could be perceived as eating disorder ‘tips’, are permitted to be published. The lack of critical attention paid to *Thornytorinx* since its publication reflects its less ‘literary’ status in comparison to the other texts covered in this thesis, but it is precisely because de Peretti’s text is not considered ‘high culture’ that renders it an important contribution. In an online interview for *Le Figaro*, de Peretti admits: ‘Le premier livre n’était pas censé être publié [...] pour moi, ce n’était toujours pas le but: je n’avais pas envie que la France me voie toute nue en train de vomir’.<sup>9</sup> As this chapter will explore, this lack of intended audience has permitted de Peretti to describe the episodes of vomiting which punctuated her daily life in unreservedly graphic detail. *Thornytorinx* is innovative in its unrelenting focus on the mechanisms of the digestive system as a means of expressing the overwhelming struggle of the anorexic self which is caught in a violent *va-et-vient* between body and mind. The explicit, visceral nature of de Peretti’s ‘biological’ body writing represents an

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<sup>8</sup> Camille de Peretti, *Nous sommes cruels* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2006) ; *Nous vieillirons ensemble* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2008) ; *La Casati* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2011) ; *Petits arrangements avec nos cœurs* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> De Peretti, ‘Interview de Camille de Peretti: Cruelle Parisienne’, by Dorothy Glaiman and Sophie Lebeuf for *Evene.fr*, (March 2007), URL: <http://evene.lefigaro.fr/livres/actualite/camille-peretti-nous-sommes-cruels-732.php>

important shift away from writing projects which have focussed on the sexual female body in similar graphic detail.<sup>10</sup> The inventiveness of such writing rests in its narratorial detachment, impersonality, and insistence on exhaustive recording, despite the highly intimate subject matter.<sup>11</sup> We will see that de Peretti's text, which is similarly forensic in focus and emotionally detached, is original in its *redirection* of this focus *inside* the female body.

A growing number of women's identity narratives have begun to focus on eating disorders as a potent force in forging 'self-definition' in the construction of identities freed from social norms and tend to present anorexia as a means of rebellion against overbearing family relationships or untenable social marginalisation.<sup>12</sup> Although elements of this can be seen in both texts, as each narrator uses anorexia to construct an identity which is free from the pressures of the mother-daughter relationship, *Petite* and *Thornytorinx* belong to a new category of narratives which have recourse to bodily sensation to convey the fragmentation of the anorexic self. In this chapter, the representations of spectacular outward bodily transformations which are typical of contemporary women's writing in French (and which we have encountered in Chapters 1 and 2 of this study) are replaced with explicit descriptions of the invisible *inner* functions of the female body. As we will see, bones, muscle, oesophagi, stomach acid, bile and vomit (to name just a few) are evoked in vivid detail alongside

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<sup>10</sup> Examples of texts which adopt an anatomical or physiological perspective on the minutiae of bodily processes to write the sexual female body include Catherine Millet's *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* (Paris: Seuil, 2001) and Marie Nimier's *La Nouvelle Pornographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> See: Shirley Jordan, 'Close Up and Impersonal: Sexual/ Textual Bodies in Contemporary French Women's Writing', *Nottingham French Studies* 45: 3 (2006), pp. 8-23.

<sup>12</sup> Examples include: Nina Bouraoui, *La Voyeuse interdite* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993) ; Sabrina Kherbiche, *La Suture* (Algeria: Laphomic, 1993) ; Delphine de Vigan, *Jours sans faim* (Paris: J'ai Lu, 2009).



associated bodily sensations. What *Petite* and *Thornytorinx* share is a ‘medicalising’ of representation which is, as we will see in Chapter 4, intentionally absent from Nothomb’s writing. This ‘medicalising’ is an innovative means of expressing issues and themes which have been central to women’s writing since Cixous’ re-conceptualisation of the figure of the hysteric, to which the following section now turns.

### **Bodies of Disruption: Cixous’ Rebellious Hysteric and Today’s Defiant Anorexic**

This section provides the theoretical backdrop which will be drawn upon and developed throughout the following two chapters. It comprises a discussion of which aspects of the celebratory model of the hysteric can be identified in contemporary representations of the anorexic, and picks up themes of rebellion and pathology, before turning to a discussion of the many academic and clinical discourses on anorexia. In the introduction to this study, we saw Cixous attribute a certain disruptive power to the figure of the hysteric through her reading of Dora as a rebellious figure. As ‘cette fille qui, comme toutes les hystériques, était privée de la possibilité de dire ce qu’elle percevait en direct’, for Cixous, Dora ‘a eu quand même la force de le faire savoir’ (*LJN* 283). In Cixous’ eyes, Dora’s hysterical symptoms become a powerful and effective bodily means of expressing what she was unable to explain through the (masculine) symbolic. Whereas hysteria was a psychosomatic response to emotional distress caused by the

limiting Victorian feminine role, anorexia is an excruciatingly physical transformation of the body in which the body is a signifier of the ‘policed’ femininity prescribed by contemporary culture. The sharp rise of cases of anorexia in recent years points to contemporary culture as *productive* of eating disorders. Indeed, there is a general consensus that in Europe diagnoses of anorexia have increased dramatically since the 1960s, reaching ‘epidemic’ proportions by the 1980s and continuing to increase during the 1990s.<sup>13</sup> The latest UK figures, posted January 2014, show a national rise of 8 per cent in the number of admissions to hospital for an eating disorder in the year ending October 2013.<sup>14</sup> Just as hysterical symptoms in the nineteenth century parodied the conflicting cultural prescriptions of femininity particular to that period, in many ways, the anorexic body which consumes and then purges itself of food imitates contemporary consumer capitalist society (constantly consuming and expelling, never fulfilled) and its commodification of the (female) body.

An analysis of hysteria which turns towards notions of rebellion is presented by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, who argues that the debilitating effects of hysteria functioned to prevent the woman from carrying out her traditional subservient role of ‘ministering angel’ to husband and children, and thus hysteria ‘became one way in which conventional women could express – in most cases unconsciously – dissatisfaction with one or several aspects of their lives’.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See: Helen Malson, *The Thin Woman: Feminism, Post-structuralism and the Social Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 1-7.

<sup>14</sup> See: HSCIC website, URL: <http://www.hscic.gov.uk/article/3880/Eating-disorders-Hospital-admissions-up-by-8-per-cent-in-a-year>

<sup>15</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenburg, ‘The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America’, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 208.

Though, as Smith-Rosenburg noted, the hysteric was often *unaware* she was making a political statement, through embodied as opposed to deliberate demonstration, she nevertheless exposed and indicted social narratives of femininity through their inscription in extreme and literal form.<sup>16</sup> It is not surprising, then, that the steady motif in feminist literature on female disorder is one of pathology as *embodied protest*. In *La Jeune Née*, Clément writes: ‘les hystériques accusent; par leurs paralysies, leurs dysosmies, leurs membres noués, elles désignent’ (*LJN* 84). The spectacular, disruptive body of the Victorian hysteric, which ‘pointed out’ the cultural pressures exerted over the Victorian woman, is not a far cry from the highly visible transformation of the anorexic body today, which arguably reflects what Naomi Wolf has termed ‘a cultural fixation on female thinness’.<sup>17</sup> According to Wolf, this cultural fixation ‘is not an obsession about female beauty but an obsession about female obedience’.<sup>18</sup> Arguing that the distinctive personality traits of those with eating disorders are ‘passivity, anxiety and emotionality’, Wolf concludes; ‘it is those traits, and not thinness for its own sake, that the dominant culture wants to create in the private sense of self of recently liberated women in order to cancel out the dangers of their liberation’.<sup>19</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have discussed the ways in which patriarchal socialisation ‘literally makes women sick, both physically and mentally’, and drawn parallels between Victorian hysteria and today’s anorexia as

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (London: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 187.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 188

diseases of ‘maladjustment’ to the ‘physical and social environment’ which did and do strike ‘a disproportionate’ number of women.<sup>20</sup>

A number of feminist writers have similarly interpreted anorexia as a form of unconscious protest. Much like the hysteric who, as discussed above, was often unaware of the political message expressed through her disordered body, the anorexic enacts a similar unconscious embodied demonstration. Whereas Susie Orbach terms it a ‘hunger strike’, Malson discusses the idea of anorexia as an ‘individualistic rebellious stance’, and Susan Bordo introduces the metaphor of ‘the body as battleground’.<sup>21</sup> Opinions appear to converge on the view that food-refusal and dramatic weight-loss express ‘with [the] body what [the anorexic] is unable to tell us with words’; her disgust at a culture which disdains female appetite and demands that women dramatically reduce and rigidly police their ‘unruly’ bodies.<sup>22</sup> As Bordo notes, it is as though anorexic bodies are ‘speaking to us of the pathology and violence that lurks just around the corner, waiting at the horizon of “normal” femininity’.<sup>23</sup> In each of the texts discussed across the following two chapters – in *Petite, Thornytorinx* and *Robert* in particular – we will see that, although food-refusal is highlighted (at least initially) as a considered and deliberate act, the wider political implications of this act are only consciously acknowledged in retrospect.

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<sup>20</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 53.

<sup>21</sup> Susie Orbach, *Hunger Strike: The Anorectic's Struggle as a Metaphor for our Age* (New York: Avon Books, 1988), p. 102 ; Malson, p. 153 ; Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 263.

<sup>22</sup> Orbach, p.123, Bordo, p. 176.

<sup>23</sup> Bordo, p. 175.

Numerous studies of anorexia, such as that by Professor of Psychiatry Hilde Bruch (1979), argue that anorexia should be understood as an individual reaction to the confusion and contradictions of female maturation.<sup>24</sup> In *Petite and Robert* in particular, we will see an emphasis placed on a fear of the adult female body. According to Bruch, anorexia most commonly begins during puberty; faced with new bodily changes, anorexics ‘react with severe anxiety to what they sense as indications of losing control’.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, amongst those in Bruch’s study, the ‘flight into dieting and undoing the bodily aspects of adolescent changes through excessive thinness interrupted a development in which they felt troubled [...] Their own bodies became the arena for their only exercise of control’.<sup>26</sup> As we will see, this control is necessarily problematic. Leslie Heywood has discussed it as an ‘agency of negation’, which she describes as ‘a position where, deprived of all alternatives, a woman says “I negate what you make me (a powerless woman). I will show you I have power and agency by taking control of my body, the existence you say I don’t own, by destroying it.”’<sup>27</sup> On the one hand, the anorexic’s ability to survive on minimal food intake leaves her feeling powerful in a world, as Orbach describes it, ‘from which at the most profound level [she] feels excluded’.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, as Moi has warned in relation to hysteria, the danger is to romanticise a dangerous pathological disorder which, in primary reality, leaves the sufferer ‘gagged and chained to the feminine role’, as a

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<sup>24</sup> Hilde Bruch, *The Golden Cage: The Enigma of Anorexia Nervosa* (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1979).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Leslie Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 147–48.

<sup>28</sup> Orbach, p. 103.

reproducer of the docile body of femininity.<sup>29</sup> This theme of control is central, not only in each of the primary texts, as we will see, but to the academic and clinical discourses surrounding eating and embodiment to which this section now turns.

As Malson explains, in anorexia, control is ‘discursively produced’ in a specific way.<sup>30</sup> The thin body is not valued solely for aesthetic concerns (contrary to popular opinion); but as physical evidence of self-control. The thin body is construed as something which is ‘achieved through abstinence’, particularly through food-refusal, so that not eating becomes an ‘assertion of individual control’.<sup>31</sup> According to Malson, for the anorexic, the thin body signifies not a romantic (patriarchal) ideal of femininity, but *ultimate* control (weight control, self-control, autonomous self-government).<sup>32</sup> Yet, as noted above, this construction is also permeated by a theme of *restricted* control in which food and body weight feature as the *only* arenas in which control is possible. As Gilbert and Gubar point out: ‘in the words of Jane Austen’s Henry Tilney – “a woman’s only power is the power of refusal.”’<sup>33</sup> The defiance of taking control through food-refusal, then, is necessarily (always and already) undermined. As played out in Brisac, de Peretti and Nothomb’s texts, the positive subjectivity signified by the thin body is accompanied by a sub-textual subjectivity of *failure*. The anorexic body may signify the feminist subjectivity of an autonomous woman, but, as

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<sup>29</sup> Moi, ‘Representations of Patriarchy’, p. 192.

<sup>30</sup> Malson, p. 122.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> We will see this in both *Petite* and *Thornytorinx*. However, in Nothomb’s writing, which focuses on the thin body as aesthetically attractive, we will see that this idea is problematised.

<sup>33</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, p. 58.

Malson points out, in reality, this ‘control is restricted to the traditional arena of female domesticity, to food and the body’.<sup>34</sup>

Paradoxically, this theme of restricted control is overwritten by a theme of control that extends beyond the body, rendering the controlled body the signifier of a controlled life. According to Malson, not eating and being thin quite explicitly signify a total control and appear plausible ‘because they are embedded in the culturally dominant discourse of Cartesian Dualism’.<sup>35</sup> As played out in each text discussed across the following two chapters, this discourse produces the self as essentially dichotomised into the spiritual (the mind) and the physical (the body). Here, a direct link can be drawn to Cixous and Irigaray’s critique of the binary structures of Western discourse, discussed in the introduction to this study, of which the mind/ body division represents a further instance. Whilst the mind is privileged in anorexia, the body is constructed as alien, as an enemy that threatens any attempt at control and must itself be controlled.<sup>36</sup> If, for the anorexic, thinness signifies the mind’s triumph over the body and its desires, then the menstruating, reproductive, fleshy adult female body is concurrently construed as the epitome of Kristeva’s threatening abject. As the unruly ‘other’, the body threatens to overwhelm the self and disrupt autonomy and self-integrity. The body, then, is produced as the target of control, and, as we will see in each text, body management becomes dangerously over-valued as the only means to self-integrity.

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<sup>34</sup> Malson, p. 123.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Bordo argues that eating disorders represent a ‘crystallization’ of such divisions ‘within Western Culture’, which are sustained through a variety of cultural practices, and cultural imagery such as media images, movies, and advertising (*Unbearable*, p. xxi).

It is within this discourse that eating becomes constituted as a bodily, and therefore alien, desire. It is something which occurs when the mind is not vigilantly in control of the body; the bodily experience of eating becomes dissociated from the experience of self. As Malson explains, this relationship between ‘the self/mind and the alienated body is discursively produced as a relationship of conflict’.<sup>37</sup> The desire to eat is constituted as the body’s invasion of self/mind integrity, and, as we will see in *Petite* in particular, food becomes the invasive substance. It is constituted as simultaneously desired (by the body) and feared (by the mind). The anorexic consequently develops an association between the body as something which is alien to the self – particularly the fleshy, sexual adult female body, as an entity with a propensity to accept the other into the self – and the abject. Food is similarly construed as poisonous and threatening. To give in to this bodily temptation is to lose control. As Malson notes, ‘it is to pollute the purity of the mind/self and disrupt or even destroy self-integrity’.<sup>38</sup> Thus, as we will see in each text, the anorexic produces a concept of the body as a space which must be closed off, *contained*. Its boundaries must be *policed* against the threat of dissolution represented by permitting food (the other) to enter the body. Despite this discursive construction of food as poisonous, food is nevertheless life-sustaining and physically necessary for survival. As Malson remarks, ‘because “you have to eat to live” the tensions created in the dualistic construction of food are inescapable’.<sup>39</sup> Malson links this inevitable dependence on food with other forms of dependence and argues that food functions as ‘a metaphor for the

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<sup>37</sup> Malson, p. 125.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.



ambivalences of social and emotional relationships that similarly may be both desired and feared'.<sup>40</sup> Malson suggests one of the many meanings of food-refusal might, then, be a 'resistance to constructions of "the self" as (femininely) dependent'.<sup>41</sup>

The ambivalence of the mother-daughter relationship resonates with this interpretation. Just as the mother-daughter relationship was central to 1970s writing projects, such as Cardinal's *Les Mots*, it is also an important theme in Brisac, de Peretti and Nothomb's writing. As Gill Rye notes, adolescence, when anorexia most commonly occurs, is perhaps 'the most challenging time in the mother-daughter relationship', as it is the period in which 'the dynamics of identification and individuation are at their most intense'. Indeed, this intense dynamic of identification and individuation should be borne in mind as it will become particularly important in the final section of this chapter. The prominence of 'the mother' in much of the literature on anorexia, both medical and personal accounts, indicates a cultural dominance of discourses which constitute the mother as provider of food. Drawing on psychoanalytic theories, feminist theorists have provided gender-sensitive explanations of how mothers may be implicated in their daughters' anorexia by locating the family as the 'transmitter of an inferior psychology of women'.<sup>42</sup> It is within the family, particularly within the mother-daughter relationship that the daughter first learns the outlines of her social role.

As Orbach notes:

The mother-daughter relationship is inevitably an ambivalent one, for the mother who herself lives a circumscribed life in patriarchy, has the

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Orbach, p. 40.

unenviable task of directing her daughter to take up the very same position that she has occupied.<sup>43</sup>

Both explicitly and unconsciously, the mother psychologically prepares her daughter to accept the strictures that await her in womanhood. Orbach argues that developing femininity successfully requires meeting three principal demands. The first of these is that she must defer to others, the second that she must anticipate and meet the needs of others, and the third, that she must seek self-definition through connection with another.<sup>44</sup> The consequence of these demands is that, in denying themselves, women are ‘unable to develop an authentic sense of their needs or a feeling of entitlement to their desires’.<sup>45</sup> Orbach concludes that this ‘imperative of affiliation’, the cultural demand that a woman must define herself through association with another, means that ‘many aspects of the self are underdeveloped, producing insecurity and a shaky sense of self’.<sup>46</sup> This is supported in Bruch’s studies of young female anorexic patients, whom she noticed appeared to have ‘no conviction of their own inner substance and value’, and were instead ‘preoccupied with satisfying the image others have of them’.<sup>47</sup> All of the above is particularly pertinent, as we will see, in both *Petite* and *Thornytornix*.

According to Bruch, although few anorexics in her study expressed it openly, ‘they had felt throughout their lives that being a female was an unjust disadvantage, and they dreamed of doing well in areas considered more respected and worthwhile because they were “masculine.”’<sup>48</sup> As Bruch notes, their ‘over-

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 41

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Bruch, p. 45.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

slim appearance’, and their ‘remarkable athletic performances, with perseverance to the point of exhaustion’, give them ‘the proud conviction of being as good as a man’.<sup>49</sup> It is the sexual adult female body which becomes associated with the strictures and ‘disadvantages’ of the female role and the anorexic consequently projects her refusal of this role onto the body. Aside from producing a ‘masculine’ body in which feminine curves and the reproductive capacity are eradicated through extreme weight loss, this also entails a concomitant horror and refusal of normal sexual development and sexual contact. As we will see, this is particularly evident in both Brisac and Nothomb’s writing, adding to the isolation of the respective narrators, which is conversely presented, in each text, as a position of superiority.

The above discussion of the anorexic’s inability to distinguish personal aspirations from those projected by others flags up the significant role of silence within the disorder. The desire to please, due to an intense fear of disapproval, often involves severe emotional restraint in which the anorexic’s own feelings of anger or disappointment are stringently repressed. Bruch cites a particularly interesting case study in which a patient’s ‘whole life had been something of a performance’, as she would only show ‘the sweet, compliant, submissive behaviour’, which, in an outburst of honesty, ‘she spoke of as “the great put-on.”’<sup>50</sup> Whilst this recalls Victorian views of hysteria as performance discussed in the introduction to this study, here, the notion of performance is further complicated. Whereas, as we have seen, Charcot’s hysterical patients were considered ‘deceitful’ in their apparently contrived performance of hysterical

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

symptoms, here, it is the anorexic's 'performance' of normality which is considered 'deceitful'. The anorexic's repression of emotion is tied up with feelings of guilt surrounding natural emotion. Over-conscientious, over-studious, and compliant performance take the place of social relationships and lead to isolation and, more importantly, nonparticipation in crucial stages of adolescent development. Whilst silence plays a particularly important role in *Petite*, we will see Brisac and de Peretti's narrators gradually withdraw from friends and classmates.

This section has outlined the key points of connection and convergence between the celebratory model of the hysteric and the literary figure of the anorexic in order to link the 'modern epidemic' of anorexia to that of hysteria in the Victorian era, and begin to expose how written representations of the anorexic could hold a potentially revolutionary power. The subsequent discussion of clinical and academic discourses explored the numerous perspectives which converge upon the anorexic body. Of particular importance were the formation of an unstable sense of self, the correlation between food and the mother, and the role of silence, all of which will be drawn out throughout the following two chapters in ways specific to each text. Above all, we have seen how the dualist construction of the self as separate from the body plunges the anorexic into a perpetual struggle for control over the two conflicting poles, and that the paradoxical nature of this control leaves the anorexic permanently fluctuating between autonomy and dependence, rebellion and pathology. It has also become obvious that, throughout history, women's responses to the strictures of their social role, as transmitted by the mother, have been performed in the symbolism

of that social role. Today, this is through reactions to food and the development of eating disorders. Food, then, represents the mother, and she is accepted or rejected through it. The following section turns to discuss how each of these themes is played out in a specific way in each narrative through an analysis of how Brisac and de Peretti transcribe the fragmentation of the anorexic self via the creation of differing ‘rhetorics of anorexia’.

### **‘Performing’ the Divided Anorexic Self: Motifs of Fluctuation in *Petite* and *Thornytorinx***

We have seen, then, that anorexia is characterised by duality. *Petite* and *Thornytorinx* perform this duality in differing ways. Whilst language and style, in each text, replicate the control and discipline which characterise anorexia, the negation of this control, which anorexia also necessarily involves, is performed through motifs of fluctuation. Beginning with a synopsis of *Petite*, this section first examines Brisac’s split narrative position as a textual performance of the unstable autonomy of the anorexic, in its almost schizophrenic identification with, and alternate withdrawal from, the anorexic self. It posits the fluctuation between narrative positions as an attempt to make clear the traumatic, and at times overwhelming, struggle to resolve the fractured identity of the anorexic. It then examines how Brisac’s ‘anorexic’ writing style performs the physical reduction, control and isolation of the anorexic self. It examines the device of listing as a central feature of this ‘anorexic’ writing, and posits the metaphorical replacement of food with words as a further expression of the mind/ body split discussed

above. The remainder of this section will turn to *Thornytorinx*, to examine how de Peretti conveys the instability of the anorexic subject via a subverted configuration of the digestive process. It examines her presentation of the body as a tube, which is repeatedly filled and emptied, and eventually overwhelmed by the motion of crossing boundaries. It argues that the sense of fluctuation which characterises de Peretti's text performs the anorexic struggle between autonomy and dependence in the manner of Brisac's split narrative position, to which this section now turns.

Brisac's autofictional text *Petite* is an account of the author's three-year battle with anorexia during her adolescence, recounted some thirty years after her recovery. Brisac's narrator is distressed by a distant relationship with her parents, discussed above as a typical trigger for eating disorders, and driven by a desire for love and stability. Her anorexia is explicitly presented as a bodily means of taking control of her destiny through the refusal of food. The text begins with the narrator's declaration 'Je n'aurai plus jamais faim, me suis-je dit' (P 9), and promptly sets about presenting food-refusal as a groundbreaking idea and the beginning of an enriching journey of discovery. The onset of the narrator's anorexia is accompanied by a money-making scheme in which the narrator saves the coins designated for food throughout the day. The opening pages are pervaded by evocative descriptions of cakes and other treats, setting up the dichotomy surrounding food (as something desired and forbidden) for the remainder of the narrative. The anorexic dichotomy between the self and the body is just as swiftly introduced, as each successful food-refusal is treated as a personal victory. The emphasis is firmly placed upon the narrator's singularity and superiority.

Throughout the text the narrator's interactions with adults frequently leave her feeling confused, ridiculed, or persecuted (by her mother in particular). She makes various attempts to solicit the attention and affection of her parents, which are consistently met with silence. Her mistrust of adults and the adult world is compounded by her horror of the adult female body which is introduced via an account of an English exchange program during which the narrator's 'peur de la fille aînée' (*P* 16) of her host family is put down to the girl's confident experiences with boys and her 'très gros [...] seins, accrochés sur son torse maigre' (*P* 16). This fear of adult female sexuality, and specifically the reproductive function, has a knock-on effect in her relationships with her peers. Isolated and shrouded in silence, she often finds herself the odd one out, fearful or embarrassed of things other children find curious or amusing. Interestingly, we will see a similar pattern in Nothomb's texts in the following chapter.

In *Petite*, the narrator's anorexia begins as a means of taking control in a world in which she feels adrift and insecure. However, the illusory agency and singular 'identity' offered by her anorexia is soon shattered as the disease gains control. Her anorexia rapidly shifts from rebellion to an utter negation of her autonomy. As the narrative progresses, the perilously thin narrator becomes increasingly isolated. She cuts ties with her best (and only) friend, Joëlle, who does not measure up to the narrator's new ideals, and begins to experience the dulling of emotion which is a symptom of advanced starvation. This is typical of advanced anorexia. In an interview with Malson, a sufferer of anorexia discusses her deliberate use of anorexia to become 'numb' to abuse she experienced as a

child: ‘by having anorexia I didn’t have to face and think about that because everything inside me was concentrated on anorexia’ (p. 168).

In *Petite*, the narrator is eventually ‘tricked’ by her parents, who are positioned as the enemy throughout, and committed to a psychiatric clinic for treatment. Her treatment emphasises the self versus other dichotomy which permeates the text, as the nursing staff and doctors (representatives of the establishment) attempt to impress upon the narrator the dishonest nature of her actions. The position of silence within which the narrator is embedded throughout the text is further reinforced.

The narrator eventually makes a conscious effort to gain weight in order to earn privileges such as writing materials, permission to spend time in the garden and, most significantly, books. Reading proves the narrator’s salvation. She initially prefers genres ‘qui ne font rien, qui ne touchent à rien, qui anesthésient un peu’ (P 97), texts which symbolically ‘fill up’ her body with nothing. However, upon her release from the hospital she is given a book (the prison novel *Une journée d’Ivan Denissovitch*<sup>51</sup>) the principal themes of which are food, work, and the struggle against oppressive authority. The inescapable message is that it is the duty of a human being not to resign and give up the struggle for survival. The conclusion of the text sees the narrator eventually return to her family (after a series of foster homes) to find comfort not in her parents, but in her grandfather who provides the stability she had tried to substitute by controlling her eating habits.

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<sup>51</sup> A novel written by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, first published in a Soviet literary magazine in 1962. Set in a 1950s Soviet labour camp, it describes a single day in the life of an ordinary prisoner, Ivan Denisovich Shukhov. Its publication was an extraordinary event in Soviet literary history as the first account of Stalinist repression to be openly distributed.



Brisac's text, then, is an attempt to understand what she calls 'le temps où j'étais folle' (*P* 63), and its title hints at the paradoxes contained within. Just as the anorexic hides the true extent of her disorder, Brisac's deliberately elusive title entails a similar strategy. The term 'petite' suggests childhood and slightness but, as a term of endearment, it deceptively conceals the fraught familial relationships and suffering contained within the text. The cover image of the Points edition marries a traditionally feminine colour (pink) with the image of a yellow tape measure spiralling down the right hand side. This reveals female body weight to be the focus of the narrative, whilst belittling the traumatic and complex nature of the experiences contained within.

The above synopsis has begun to reveal which aspects of the clinical and medical discourses discussed above are woven into Brisac's narrative. Alongside the staple mind/ body, self/ other, masculine/ feminine dualities, difficulties in the mother-daughter relationship, a fear of the adult female body, and the association between the anorexic and (feminine) 'deceit' immediately come to the fore. In order to express the fragmentation of the narrator's subjectivity between these various aspects of the disorder, Brisac refuses a singular, stable viewpoint in favour of a continuous oscillation between narrative positions: *je*, *elle*, 'Nouk' and Geneviève'. *Je* refers to both the cured narrator and the anorexic *petite*, depending on the context. *Elle* and 'Nouk' are interchangeable, and refer to the anorexic adolescent self, whilst 'Geneviève' encompasses both the anorexic adolescent and the cured adult author. The majority of the narrative unfolds via *elle* and 'Nouk'. This represents an attempt, on behalf of the cured narrator, to place the anorexic adolescent self at a distance; it is not *je* who was caught up in this destructive

behaviour pattern, but *elle*. *Elle* and ‘Nouk’ undermine the illusory authority of the anorexic self and are employed each time the narrator’s autonomy is overwhelmed by the disorder. For example:

Nouk vomit tout, les rivières se mêlent. Jeûner devient un esclavage. Le corps de Nouk est meurtri par froid, ses bras s’allongent et ses dents lui font mal, ses pieds se couvrent d’engelures, sa bouche se craquelle, et ses ongles se cassent, les os de ses fesses saillent et lui font mal quand elle s’assoit. Elle est un esprit qui marche. (*P* 70)

Here, the anorexic body is described in terms of abject mixture and decay; rivers of vomit mix together, the narrator’s teeth are rotting, her skin and lips are cracked, her nails are broken, and her exposed, skeletal frame is cold and brittle. Designating this suffering body, this former self, as *elle* or ‘Nouk’ holds it at a distance from the cured author. As Antoine Jurga and Jean-Christophe Planche suggest, Brisac appears to ‘se réfugier derrière l’utilisation de la troisième personne’.<sup>52</sup> The final sentence, ‘elle est un esprit qui marche’, however, deploys a characteristic double bind. Underlying this image of the young narrator as a weak, ghostly figure is a reiteration of her force. It is her willpower alone which, in spite of such acute suffering, has all but forced her physicality to disappear.

At other times, the third person highlights the extent to which the autonomy of the narrator is subsumed by the mechanical, repetitive compulsions of the disorder. It is not *je* who consciously, and continuously, binges and purges and deceives the family, it is *elle* who is subject to the tyrannical disorder. What is particularly interesting in the following description of the narrator purging her body of food is the construction of the body as a container:

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<sup>52</sup> Antoine Jurga and Jean-Christophe Planche, *Écritures Autobiographiques: “Petite” de Geneviève Brisac* (Calais: CRDP du Nord, 1997), p. 38.

Nouk est dans la salle de bains, elle se lave encore et encore, elle boit, et elle rince l'intérieur de son corps. Elle est, elle sera bientôt propre. Elle croit percevoir son corps, le dedans et dehors, séparés par une mince cloison, elle récure avec brutalité cet objet intenable. (*P* 76)

The skin becomes a thin partition separating the interior and exterior.

Interestingly, a comparable construction of the body as a container was discussed in Chapter 1. A similar construction is central, as we will see, to de Peretti's representation of the anorexic body, which is described, in *Thornytorinx*, as a 'tube'. This idea of the body as a tube will also reappear in Nothomb's *Métaphysique* in Chapter 4.

For the narrator of *Petite*, the routine act of bathing is redirected *inside* the body – 'elle rince l'intérieur de son corps'. The body is something which must be purified or 'cleaned out'. Whilst the phrase 'récure avec brutalité' conjures a body being vigorously scrubbed, inside and out, 'elle se lave encore et encore' adds a sense of obsessive repetition. The narrator's description of her body as 'cet objet intenable' draws these images together to exemplify the mind/ body split discussed by Malson. This is reinforced by that of the interior/ exterior, and both are compounded by the use of the third person.

The autonomy of the first person *je* frequently interrupts the narrative, and can be seen to fulfil a double function; it expresses both *control* and *crisis*. In terms of control, *je* represents a synthesis between the cured author's sense of independence and control *now*, at the time of writing, and the initial sense of control she experienced *then*, before her autonomy was subsumed by anorexia. The mastery Brisac now wields over her own story, through writing, is akin to the mastery she experienced over her own destiny through the decision to refuse food: 'Je ne grandirai plus, m'étais-je dit. Je ne mangerai plus que le minimum. Ce qu'il

faut pour durer. Cela faisait comme un champ d'exploration immense, la découverte d'un territoire sauvage et secret' (P 9).

This incongruous construction of self-starvation as a visionary feat is compounded by a description of the legendary figure of *St. Geneviève de Paris*, an historical female figure famed for her courage and slenderness. This marks the point in the text when the young narrator's shared identity with the author is unmasked: 'Je me lève, toute seule, sur une île déserte, toute rouge, bouleversée par ce destin. Je m'appelle Geneviève, c'est mon véritable prénom [...] Je ne mange plus, avec talent, avec discrétion' (P 13). The thin body and admirable achievements of *St. Geneviève* are linked to the anorexic narrator through the autonomy of the first person. This *je* denoting control, however, is repeatedly undermined by a *je* denoting crisis. It is also through the first person that Brisac relives her most painful experiences. In particular, what she sees as her parents' treachery. The following passage, which represents a turning point in the text, exemplifies the rapid switch between subject positions and encompasses several aspects of the disorder discussed so far:

On frappe. Elle a peur. Elle tire le verrou avec le plus sang-froid possible, comme une criminelle prise sur le fait qui essuierait dans son dos des mains pleines de sang, un vampire saisi par la lumière du jour.

De quelle police ai-je peur? À mes pieds, git la balance. Mon père m'ordonne de m'y poser, je tremble, et je refuse et je pleure. Je dis qu'on n'a pas le droit de me peser par surprise, j'évoque les droits élémentaires de la personne, ne pas être pesée par surprise, c'est un piège ignoble, c'est un piège et je suis dedans. Je crois qu'alors, comme une condamnée, on me hisse sur la balance, et que je résiste encore, je me débats. (P 76)

The narrator's likeness to 'une criminelle' presents her anorexia (in short, her difference from the norm) as threatening and somehow illicit.<sup>53</sup> This dangerous potential is firmly situated in the body via the image of the narrator's 'mains pleines de sang'. The idea of the anorexic as 'un vampire' (traditionally thought to be a corpse possessed by a malevolent spirit) provides a link with the dangerous demoniacal figure of the hysteric discussed in the introduction to this study and represents a further reiteration of the mind/ body split. As Bruch explains, patients frequently consider their anorexia to be 'caused by some mysterious force that invades them or directs their behaviour'.<sup>54</sup> This secret but powerful 'invasive' force is usually experienced as a 'personification' of 'everything they have tried to hide or deny as not approved by themselves or others'.<sup>55</sup> It is suggested that Brisac's narrator is possessed at several points throughout the text. For example: 'Nouk [est un] robot squelettique et méchant, possédée du diable' (P 68). According to Bruch, when the anorexic defines this mysterious invasive force, it 'seems always to be a male'.<sup>56</sup> Significantly, the traditional figure of the vampire – a pale, gaunt figure with grey skin, dark rimmed sunken eyes, and a secretive demeanour – is also typically male.

The sudden switch to *je* plunges the author back into the still raw experience and abruptly undermines the distanced, omniscient narration of the previous paragraph. Like a frightened animal caught in a trap, Nouk struggles

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<sup>53</sup> For a narrative of anorexia which pursues this construction of the anorexic as criminal, see Valère (1978). Valère's anorexic narrator likens her treatment on a psychiatric ward to incarceration; her 'crime' is her attempt to control her own body. She writes: 'Mais quel crime ai-je donc commis? Ai-je tué quelqu'un et perdu ensuite la mémoire? Ai-je tué, volé? [...] "Il est interdit de disposer de votre personne à votre gré, mademoiselle, vous ne vous appartenez pas, votre corps est à nous"' (9-10).

<sup>54</sup> Bruch, p. 58.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

against her parents who force her onto the scales. Similar animal imagery is used to describe the narrator at various points throughout the text, notably to evoke her 'peur animale' and sense of being 'traquée' (P 49). Criminality and animality are similarly linked in *Les Mots*, in which Cardinal's narrator notes, 'On m'avait toujours dit, en parlant de quelqu'un de grossier ou d'un criminel: "Il s'est conduit comme un animal, comme une bête, comme un chien!"'.<sup>57</sup> To return to *Petite*, at first glance such a description of Nouk as an animal caught in a trap could be read as an indication of the narrator's loss of autonomy. However, there remains an underlying emphasis on the disruptive force of the narrator's disorder as something which must be controlled and contained. Later, the psychiatric hospital to which Nouk is sent as a result of this consultation is likened, with its 'grille en fer à l'entrée d'un park', to 'cette maison où la mère de ma mère a disparu'; the mysterious (in Nouk's eyes) nursing home in which her grandmother was sent to 'disappear' (P 79). We have seen this idea, then, that hysterical bodies must be restrained or eradicated by the Law (initially introduced in Clément's writing) in all of the primary texts studied so far.

In the above passage, the narrator's secret purging is positioned as being just as rebellious as her violent physical struggle against her parents. Legal references to 'les droits élémentaires de la personne' reassign the anorexic to the position of victim; the immediacy of *je* is necessary to communicate the fear and outrage provoked by what she experiences as 'un piège ignoble' set by her parents. The overall sense of this passage is that of a rebellion being quashed. The double function of *je* also consolidates the anorexic fluctuation between rebellion

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<sup>57</sup> Cardinal, *Les Mots*, pp.130-1.

and pathology. During moments of autonomy, *je* summons the rebellious force of the hysteric. During moments of crisis, *je* summons panic and hurt from which the cured author is unable to distance herself.

Whereas the split narrative position enacts the divided subjectivity of the anorexic, stylistic devices embody the physical emaciation of the anorexic. The bare bones of the dangerously thin anorexic body are grafted together through Brisac's use of many, very basic, short sentences. This stylistic emaciation exaggerates the (patriarchal) cultural ideal of a slim body in a purposeful attempt to bring language closer to the lived reality of the female anorexic. Havercroft has described this as a 'skeletal'<sup>58</sup> style which is characterised by 'une syntaxe sans gras'.<sup>59</sup> Whereas Havercroft reads this slim style as an attempt to speak in a manner which befits the young adolescent narrator, or 'une hésitation à tout dire'<sup>60</sup> on the part of the author, it should also be understood as an attempt to eradicate the subject. The focus of Brisac's short, basic sentences is often the body, rather than the self. For example, the narrator's reaction to her parents' 'piège' is narrated in short fragments: 'je pleure, assise par terre, à côté de la balance. Les bras ballants, la tête brûlante, les yeux brûlants, je ne sais plus rien' (*P* 77). Intense emotion is conveyed through concise, clipped descriptions of the body.

This pared down narrative style enacts a (masculine) reduction of the (feminine) body and frequently takes the form of lists. At certain points in the text, Brisac uses listing to entirely omit the subject from the narrative. In a telling

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<sup>58</sup> Havercroft, *Paper Thin*, p. 65.

<sup>59</sup> Havercroft, 'Pour une rhétorique', p. 403.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 409.

passage the subject is removed, leaving a list of actions which are focused on reducing the body: 'Marcher dans Paris au gré des cafés, nourrir sa sœur à outrance. Manger des dragées et vomir les repas qu'on lui impose. Vendre de beaux livres pour acheter des brochures hideuses aux noms absurdes' (P 66). This eradication of the subject further reinforces the distance created by the author between herself and her unstable narrator, producing a controlled and detached account which displaces the chaotic lived experience of the disease onto an almost mechanical narrative. It also exposes the extent to which the narrator's autonomy has been subsumed by the disorder, as these actions focus solely on facilitating her illness.

Listing becomes a textual parody of the anorexic preoccupation with order and reduction. Recalling Kristevan discussion of abject qualities of admixture and confusion, the narrator frequently expresses disgust at the amalgamation of different varieties of food. Her growing sense of horror at the variety of groceries purchased by her mother is exposed through a list expressing accumulation:

On débarque dans la maison, dans des cartons, rangés au carré, des paquets de lessive et de gâteaux, des tablettes de chocolat et de détergent, des emballages de fruits, de légumes, de produits lactés étiquetés, datés, couverts des chiffres qui les définissent, en joules, en calories, en vitamines, en sels minéraux. (P 69)

Such lists of diverse types of food which create a sense of volume are undercut by lists expressing excessive elimination: 'J'ai éliminé les pâtes, les pommes de terre, sous toutes leurs formes, le riz, le sucre, le pain, la confiture, les gâteaux, évidemment, le camembert et les glaces' (P 27). Nouk 'se sent envahie par cette avalanche' and dreams of a regulated diet of only one type of food:

Elle imagine un monde où on ne mangerait que d'une seule chose, un seul plat, d'une seule couleur. Elle observe les gens qui mangent, en pensant aux



mélanges répugnants des aliments qui, d'avoir été trop contraints dans leur emballages, se dévergentent, odeurs démultipliées. (*P* 70)

The difficulty of containing and regulating food is underlined through this representation of 'mélanges répugnantes des aliments' bursting out of packaging, after being 'trop contraints', and 'corrupting' the room with multiple invasive smells. Food becomes a figure of excess and in response the narrator attempts to simplify her own diet, spending hours battling with confused notions of contamination: 'Il lui semble moins dangereux de manger, par exemple, une pêche seule. Un yaourt blanc' (*P* 104).

This desire for simplification also extends beyond food. The narrator discusses her appreciation of 'cette accumulation de détails que sont les listes fournies par le lycée' before the beginning of each school year. For the narrator, 'les gommes encore blanches, les crayons vierges, les nouveaux cahiers, le stylo et son encre, et surtout les livres font comme un nid' (*P* 43). These lists enable her to create 'un nid' to protect herself from the unknown challenges of the year ahead. The significance of numbers to the anorexic (whose body is regulated by calorie counting, measures and scales) is compounded by the narrator's focus on money management. Money designated for food is saved by the narrator: 'Je compte l'argent qu'on m'a donné, j'achète un carnet minuscule pour y inscrire comme convenu mes dépenses en fournitures, je fais des colonnes au crayon, bien droits' (*P* 44). Long, straight columns filled with neat figures, reflect the thin, straight lines of the emaciated body, and echo the narrator's perception of her body as regulated and under control. The double action of accumulation and eradication fulfilled by lists is demonstrative of anorexia's dual nature, and becomes a rhetorical tool used by Brisac in the reconstruction of her anorexic

body in text. As Havercroft notes: ‘l’ énumération aide la narratrice à fabriquer un corps textuel qui reflète la complexité de l’anorexie’.<sup>61</sup>

In a characteristic double movement, as her savings increase, her weight drops: ‘Mes moyennes augmentent et mon poids baisse’ (P 21). The narrator’s ‘rigueur monétaire’ (P 45) is a reflection of the ‘rigueur’ imposed on the appetites of the body. Her sentiment that this enterprise ‘ressemble à la liberté’ (P 45) suggests the sense of achievement stems from the ‘masculine’ nature of ‘cette entreprise plutôt compliquée’ (P 45). Such ‘masculine’ control is further exhibited through the narrator’s thorough approach to her schoolwork: ‘Je passé des heures à confectionner les listes de vocabulaire, je me saouïe d’algèbre, de dates. Avant le dîner, je recalcul, chaque jour, ma moyenne dans chaque matière’ (P 21). Vocabulary relating to food and satiation, such as ‘confectionner’ and ‘saouïe’, suggests a replacement of food with knowledge, a theme which we will find to be consistent with Nothomb’s writing in the following chapter. Brisac’s narrator prepares vocabulary lists as she would prepare a meal and, instead of food, words and numbers satisfy her hunger. As Maud Ellmann points out, ‘reading and writing mime the process of eating and excreting’, thus providing a form of replacement for food.<sup>62</sup> Repetitive actions combine with the narrator’s focus on intellectual nourishment, obsessive listing and calculations, to further emphasise control and reduction: ‘Je peux maintenant entourer mon biceps de mon pouce et mon majeur noués. Je répète ce geste cent fois par jour, comme une vérification de moi-même’ (P 38). Measurements become a verification of her existence.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 417.

<sup>62</sup> Maud Ellman, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, Imprisonment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 29.

Later, during her treatment, the relationship between knowledge and food endures as reading becomes almost *synonymous* with eating, and the narrator (now desiring to gain weight) wills her intellectual nourishment to influence her physical weight: ‘Des livres gras dont elle espère qu’ils font grossir. Elle lit, n’importe quoi, elle lit les livres quatre fois de suite’ (*P* 87). Whereas reading previously replaced food to nourish the mind at the expense of the body, it now supplements food to nourish both.

What the stylistic devices discussed above have in common, then, is that they all fulfil a double function. Lists express accumulation as well as eradication, order as well as chaos; they instil a sense of calm or add a sense of panic. Words can replace food to strengthen the mind over the (empty) body, or supplement food to add an impression of weight gain. Coupled with the text’s failure to sustain a singular, stable viewpoint, these stylistic devices expose the lingering effects of being split by a disorder characterized by duality. This section, so far, has shown how the ambiguity of the title, coupled with the split narrative position and stylistic emaciation of the text throw into relief the anorexic divisions between masculine and feminine, mind and body, past and present which problematize the task of assimilating the paradoxical disorder into an acceptable symbolic order. The split between mind and body is nowhere more evident than in *Thornytorinx*, to which the remainder of this section now turns, in order to examine de Peretti’s strategy of ‘biological’ body writing as an alternative, yet similarly effective, expression of these fundamental dualities.

*Thornytorinx* recounts the double life of the narrator, Camille, ‘une boulimique-anorexique’ (*TX* 39) in private and a successful career woman in

public. The narrative follows her experiences from childhood through university, her first serious relationship, and the beginning of a career in finance in which she feels adrift and insecure. The prologue immediately plunges the reader into the throes of Camille's disorder with graphic descriptions of vomiting in numerous places and situations. In a structural performance of the splitting and fragmentation which are integral to the narrative, the text is then divided into four sections which each cover a different stage of her disorder from onset to cure. When combined, the epigraphs to each section create a sense of progression from disintegration to understanding, foretelling unison through narrative.<sup>63</sup>

The first section deals with the onset of Camille's anorexia which is positioned as a coping mechanism in the face of the increasing pressures of college, work and home life. Camille's focus is instead redirected at the body, and reducing it provides the sense of control and achievement lacking in other areas. Vomiting becomes a symbolic means of rejecting 'la vie [...] inadmissible' (TX 33) which awaits her. The first pages introduce Camille as the model pupil and daughter, however, Camille – nicknamed 'squelette' at school – fits perfectly 'le profil type de l'anorexique' (TX 27). This recalls Bruch's warning that, 'in many ways', youngsters typical of the anorexic profile 'fulfil every parent's and

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<sup>63</sup> The epigraph to the first section of the text, taken from Surrealist writer Louis Aragon's *Les Voyageurs de l'impériale* (1942), is of particular interest. It reads: 'Je suis à la roulette de mon corps et je joue sur le rouge, Tout me distrait indéfiniment, sauf de ma distraction même' (TX 15). Aragon believed that if one followed the hysteric's example of bodily expression 'one might be able to liberate mind and body from the brittle strictures of a repressed, conventionalized society', Amy Lyford, *Surrealist Masculinities: Gender Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Post-World War I Reconstruction in France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 132-3. This epigraph neatly encapsulates the paradoxes of anorexia, as its provenance ties de Peretti's text to notions of hysteria (and therefore anorexia) as rebellion whilst its content forewarns that Camille is 'à la roulette de [s]on corps'. By the end of this section of the text Camille's anorexia has become a dangerous gamble in which the stakes (her body and her life) are perilously high.

teacher's idea of perfection, but they do it in an exaggerated way'.<sup>64</sup> Throughout *Thornytorinx*, such an ideal of exaggerated perfection is oft-repeated via Camille's recurrent aspiration to become 'une princesse' (TX 175), fairy-tale talk of destiny, and Camille's symbolic desire to become 'une bulle de savon' (TX 175). De Peretti's narrator is troubled by a complex relationship with her mother who also has a history of disordered eating. This *too close* relationship stifles the narrator's sense of self and adds to the conflicting pressures of contemporary life. Her close relationship with her mother, who idealises the narrator, is tempered with a sense that Camille sacrifices her own desires solely 'pour faire plaisir à [sa] mere' (TX 20). Camille's decision to forego an acting career for one in finance is the point at which her anorexia begins. Discussions of her mother's bulimia are swiftly followed by the narrator's account of her own descent into the disorder, as regular vomiting from excessive alcohol consumption, 'en toute innocence' (TX 26), at weekend college parties rapidly turns into a deliberate act: 'Au lieu de vomir l'alcool dans une euphorie inconsciente, j'avais vomi mon dîner exprès. Ce n'était pas si compliqué' (TX 39). In contrast to Nothomb's writing, as we will see, the narrator expresses disgust for her pre-pubescent underdeveloped female body, 'ce qui a été la cause de [s]es premiers complexes' (TX 28). However in a typical anorexic paradox, when the moment arrives for Camille to grow up, the refusal of her adult body becomes her only means of escaping its associated challenges. Camille's relationship with her first long-term boyfriend, Jade, is introduced in this section of the text and swiftly shown to echo the

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<sup>64</sup> Bruch, p. 59.

miscommunication of her relationship with her mother, as Jade fails to notice – or at least acknowledge – Camille’s eating disorder.

Throughout the second section of the text Camille’s anorexia is positioned as a means of control. The pressures of a mandatory *stage* in Japan force her anorexia to new extremes as she struggles to cope with academic pressures and the distance between herself, her mother and Jade. As we will see, the divide between her private, disordered, self and her outward public image is drawn out through an unrelenting focus on bodily processes. Themes of autonomy and pathology are important throughout this section of the text, during which the rhythms of consumption and expulsion structure the narrator’s daily life and emphasise her increasing divergence from the norm. This isolation is compounded by her immersion in Japanese culture and her difficulties in negotiating Japanese customs, language and social hierarchy. The alternate consumption and expulsion of food enact the narrator’s fluctuation between autonomy and subservience to her disorder.

The third section of the text focuses primarily on the contradictions and paradoxes of her relationship with her mother and with Jade, as the focus is again placed on the schism between Camille’s private struggle and her public facade of success. The hidden rhythm of anorexic life, punctuated by bingeing and vomiting (periodically described through the device of listing, as in *Petite*), continues, and specific examples of vomiting as a symbolic refusal of difficult situations are drawn out. In contrast to *Petite*, in which the narrator professes an overwhelming sense of gratitude to the first person who gives her malaise a name, she notes: ‘Je ne connais pas ce mot, mais je lui suis reconnaissante de l’avoir prononcé. Encore

aujourd'hui, j'éprouve pour cette scène de la falaise une reconnaissance spéciale' (*P* 61) – this section of *Thornytorinx* situates Camille as one (silent) sufferer amongst many. After several years of vomiting in secret her disorder reaches a shockingly graphic climax which forces Camille to seek professional help.

The final section deals with the narrator's attempt to come to terms with her experiences through therapy. This, however, proves far from straightforward as the narrator is plagued by setbacks. One such setback is of particular interest, as Camille's bodily symptoms evolve from those of anorexia to a skin disorder. In a reiteration of the link between psychological distress, the skin and the mother suggested in Chapter 1 of this thesis, Camille eloquently summarises: 'mon esprit avait trouvé un nouveau moyen de traumatiser mon corps' (*TX* 171). Issues of guilt and blame, focussed on the mother-daughter relationship, recurrently plunge Camille back into cycles of purging and dramatic weight loss. Despite this, her happiness in a new relationship with a partner who openly communicates with Camille regarding her disorder, points towards reconciliation of the conflicting parts of herself and the possibility of achieving distance and understanding. By the end of this section Camille has learnt that vomiting is an intense expression of anger and it suffices to admit the cause of her anger for it to dissipate. If given the choice between having a relationship with her mother and vomiting, or not having a relationship with her mother and being cured, Camille prefers the former. However, the epilogue implies that the circle continues, as Camille's mother comments on her little sister's weight whilst Camille and her boyfriend exchange a look of concern. This synopsis of the text has begun to expose how the academic and clinical discourses on anorexia discussed earlier are raised in de Peretti's

narrative of anorexia. In particular, it has flagged up the inherent contradictions of a disorder characterised by duality, the schism between mind/ body, public/ private, autonomy/ subservience, and the importance of the mother-daughter relationship. All these aspects will be drawn out across this chapter, which now turns to an analysis of how de Peretti, like Brisac, strives to recreate the divided anorexic self in writing.

The text's title – a term coined by de Peretti to single out the digestive tract as central to her project – is explained in the epigraph to the prologue which contains a purportedly 'scientific' definition of this invented word, which in fact exposes a distorted understanding of how the digestive organs combine and function:

THORNYTORINX [tɔrniɔrɛks] n.m. (gr. *thôrakus*, cuirasse). Anat. Chez l'homme, série d'organes du système digestif qui se coordonnent pour concourir à un résultat pathologique. (TX epigraph)

This neologism immediately conjures images of the chest cavity, throat, thorax and larynx, and presents a new configuration of the digestive tract which encompasses all the muscles and organs involved from the moment food enters the body, to its exit. Whilst the adjective 'pathologique' seems unusual to qualify the product of a 'série d'organes', the false etymology provided attempts to give the weight of scholarship to de Peretti's definition. Of particular interest is the word 'cuirasse' (meaning 'armour') which Hippocrates used in the sense of 'torse'. De Peretti's 'anorexic' reconception of the digestive tract is accompanied by a reconception in which the role played by the digestive process in anorexia is reversed. Interestingly, according to Bruch, anorexics typically misinterpret their bodily sensations. If de Peretti's neologism re-conceptualises the digestive tract as



something which *protects* the body, then the digestive process is seemingly reversed. The digestive tract becomes ‘armour’ which *prevents* food from being absorbed into the body, thus denying the breach of bodily boundaries which is so threatening to the anorexic self, by ensuring it is, instead, safely expelled. The effects of the narrator’s disorder are confined to the inside of this new organ which is described as ‘près d’exploser’ (TX 98), and only referenced during moments of physical pain. For example: ‘je souffrais déjà assez dans mon thornytorinx’ (TX 81), and ‘ça fait mal dans le thornytorinx’ (TX 65). Food is construed as the enemy within, and the *thornytorinx* battles to contain and then expel it.

Throughout *Thornytorinx*, the instability of the anorexic subject, who is caught between a sense of rebellion or control, and a potentially fatal pathological disorder, is primarily expressed through metaphors of fluctuation rooted in bodily processes. This begins in the prologue, with a first-person catalogue of episodes of vomiting:

J’ai vomi partout. Partout où j’ai pu. Autant que j’ai pu. N’importe où, n’importe quoi, n’importe quand. J’ai vomi avec mon index et mon majeur agrippés au fond de ma gorge. J’ai vomi à Paris et à Londres, j’ai vomi à Tokyo. J’ai vomi au réveil, sous le soleil et sous la pluie. En plein jour. Je me suis relevée jusque tard dans la nuit pour vomir. J’ai vomi dans les toilettes de la maison de ma mère, dans les toilettes des appartements de mes copines, dans celles de mon école et dans celles des boîtes de nuit. Puis les toilettes elles-mêmes sont devenues obsolètes. Alors j’ai vomi partout. Dans les rues. (TX 11)

The repetition of ‘j’ai vomi’ coupled with a list of places, times, countries, and even weather conditions in which the narrator has vomited represents an attempt to normalize the action. In reality, it serves to reinforce the alarming nature of this behaviour. It thus remains an abrupt and shocking introduction to the compulsions

of an anorexic. This launches de Peretti's exhaustive documentation of the motion of crossing boundaries by eating and excreting, and focuses the narrative inside the body – on digestion, hunger, and physical pain – in order to make clear the violent and overwhelming struggle of an identity fractured between body and mind. The accumulation of examples above displaces the act of vomiting from a violent, unnatural reversal of the digestive process, to an anchor in an unstable world. The repetition exemplifies how vomiting punctuates the narrator's life, as it will punctuate the text, and the mechanical prose of the passage is pared down, like that of *Petite*, to the bare bones of Camille's compulsion. The physical act of regurgitating food is carefully reproduced with a dispassionate, even-toned explicitness, which sets a precedent for the remainder of the narrative:

Je vomissais debout, le bras gauche tendu sur la carrosserie, deux doigts de la main droite enfoncés dans le gosier. Le vomi mettait un long temps avant de s'écraser au sol dans un bruit de vase terrible et flasque. Ça éclaboussait mes chaussures. (TX 11)

From the position of Camille's fingers in her throat to the sound of her vomit hitting the floor, nothing is left to the imagination. This clinical explicitness is a sharp contrast to the somewhat nuanced accounts of purging in *Petite* which instead focus, as we have seen, on the symbolic purification of the body.<sup>65</sup> It is also, as we will see in Chapter 4, a stark contrast to Nothomb's metaphorical narratives of anorexia.

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<sup>65</sup> The cover illustration offers a similar contrast between the clinical explicitness of *Thornytorinx* and the nuanced elements of *Petite*. The Seuil edition of *Petite* portrays a dainty little girl, and the Pocket edition of *Thornytorinx* depicts the bowed head and shoulders of a thin young woman kneeling over a toilet bowl. Whereas the pastel coloured cover of *Petite*, as we have seen, minimises the trauma contained within the text, the image on the cover of *Thornytorinx* screams isolation and vulnerability. However, the latter image is also somehow aestheticized. Although the private is brought into the public sphere, the abject nature of the scene is neutralised using a clinical colour scheme, and the young woman's face remains hidden. Her identity and her distress are concealed, subordinated.

Throughout *Thornytorinx*, Camille fluctuates between a strong sense of personal agency and a complete loss of autonomy. Affirmations of the narrator's strength of identity – 'J'étais la reine du monde, rien ne pouvait m'atteindre' (TX 12) – are undercut by moments of crisis during which her body, regarded as 'vil' and 'bassement naturel, animal' (TX 33), triumphs over her willpower. The act of purging the body of food can be construed as a form of agency in which the narrator allows us to see the pressures which weigh heavily upon her. Vomiting becomes an attempt at self-affirmation through the body, an effort to take control and voice discontent. Heywood's 'agency of negation' (*op. cit.* 147-48), discussed earlier, is exemplified in *Petite* and *Thornytorinx*, in which both narrators express a sense of achievement after successfully vomiting in secret. In *Thornytorinx*, the double bind of this agency is neatly conveyed:

Je tirais la chasse [...] J'ouvrais la porte avec précaution, quelle joie quand il n'y avait personne, c'était comme à la fin d'un film d'espionnage quand on sait que le héros est hors de danger [...] Je remontais l'escalier, triomphante. [...] Mission accomplie. (TX 96)

'Joie' and triumph seem incongruous in a description of vomiting in secret. The narrator's apparent control over her bodily drives is undercut by the idea of the narrator as the hero of 'un film d'espionnage', which sends up previously discussed notions of performance and suggests that, in this instance, it is herself that Camille is deceiving. Although, as in *Petite*, Camille's vomiting began as a deliberate act which left her feeling 'lavée, purifiée, hors de toute atteinte' (TX 42), in the deepest throes of her illness, vomiting subsumes her autonomy. She recalls, 'Je me souviens que je vomissais beaucoup, tous les jours, plusieurs fois, mais cela avait perdu tout son sens, je vomissais machinalement' (TX 110). This recalls Brisac's description of her anorexic narrator as '[un] robot squelettique'

(*op. cit.* 68) mentioned earlier. For de Peretti's narrator, purging the body has shifted from a deliberate process, to an action which Camille's body carries out without her volition. This concept of the illness as a series of mechanical movements performed by the body, as distinct from the self, is repeatedly expressed: 'Je me vois encore un soir à genoux, comme en prière, un sac plastique à la main' (TX 66). Detached from her body, the narrator observes it execute these mechanical movements. In the ultimate example of Heywood's 'agency of negation' (*op. cit.* 147-48), discussed earlier, the *thornytorinx* is eventually accorded its own autonomy, separate from that of the narrator. She admits: 'Je ne voulais plus le faire. Mais mon thornytorinx avait pris l'habitude de fonctionner à l'envers' (TX 116).

As her anorexia progresses, Camille's autonomy is overwhelmed by this constant movement between inside and outside. The majority of the text sees the instability of the subject exposed through a *je* which is mixed up in the motion of crossing boundaries, the movement of displacement, borne out by the anorexic body through the process of eating and purging. However, the text also situates the narrator and her experience within the wider context of the disorder through 'representative' descriptions of the anorexic body: 'Le corps de la boulimique-anorexique est un vase communicant. Ça rentre et ça sort, on ne sait plus très bien pourquoi ni comment. À ce jeu-là on perd toute notion de ce qui nous a traversé' (TX 66). De Peretti's unstable *je* is replaced by *on* as personal experience is subordinated in this evocation of the collective bodily experience. However, this anatomical representation is distorted. The whole body is assimilated into de Peretti's subverted concept of the digestive tract – the *thornytorinx* – as protective

armour which keeps food separate and contained before it is safely expelled. This impermeable, tubal body makes an interesting comparison to the fluid, continuous, and boundary-less female body celebrated in *écriture féminine*. In de Peretti's writing, notions of fluidity and continuity are appropriated to describe the repeated filling and emptying of the policed female body. This body is reduced to the organs involved in the process of eating and excreting, to the exclusion of the reproductive organs, yet these organs do not fulfil their natural function. Instead of absorbing food, the sole function of the body is to eject it. This body, this 'vase communicant' in Camille's words (which should be borne in mind for the following chapter), repeatedly fills and empties itself of its own accord: 'on perd toute notion' of what passes through it.

The narrator's loss of autonomy is doubly reinforced through the shift between personal and shared experience. The 'identity' the narrator has created for herself (as an anorexic) is undermined through representative descriptions which drown Camille's personal distress in a flood of shared experience with other sufferers. She remarks: 'moi qui allais bientôt me mettre deux doigts au fond de la gorge pour me persuader que j'étais plus forte que les autres, j'étais si banale' (TX 95). Her voice becomes one of many: 'En France, une femme sur cinq est ou a été boulimique-anorexique, jugez donc de la banalité de la chose' (TX 41). It becomes a struggle for the narrator to cling to her sense of control and individuality:

Au bureau j'avais découvert un site internet dédié aux filles dans mon genre, avec des témoignages et des descriptions médicales [...] Je n'étais pas comme ces filles-là. Bien sûr, ma gorge me grattait, et puis quand je me brossais les dents le dentifrice devenait rose du sang de mes gencives. Bien sûr, j'avais mal partout, mes membres fous étaient en douleur [...] Bien sûr, mon corps se déglinguait peu à peu. Il avait perdu l'habitude de digérer quoi

que ce soit; je saignais de partout. [...] Mais je n'étais pas comme ces filles-là. (TX 113)

In this passage, the narrator refutes the similarity of her symptoms with 'filles dans [s]on genre' in a refusal to admit that her means of coping is a recognised mental illness. The repetition of 'je n'étais pas comme ces filles-là' belies her fear of losing the singular 'identity' her illness has fleetingly provided her with. The extent of the damage she has done to her body is narrated in a dismissive tone which only serves to underline its severity. Above all, what comes across is the impression that the narrator is rushing headlong into disaster. In Chapter 4 we will see that this is a stark contrast to the anorexic protagonists of Nothomb's writing, who are set on the path to perfection.

Like Brisac's, de Peretti employs the stylistic device of listing in order to enact the dualities of the disorder. Camille, too, uses lists to order her chaotic lived experience: 'Des listes pour tout et n'importe quoi, pour mes calories, pour ce que je devais acheter, pour ce que je devais faire, pour qui je devais appeler et à qui je devais écrire' (TX 69). Such lists expose her growing sense of fragmentation, but also represent an attempt to assimilate the conflicting focuses, between which Camille finds herself torn, into a coherent whole. It is in the register of food that the idea of a whole being split into sections is expressed:

Ma vie ressemblait à un tas de petite morceaux; pas comme un puzzle [...], mais comme des rondelles de carottes plutôt, toutes à la file indienne, ce qui fait que chaque bout est nécessaire pour que la carotte garde sa forme de carotte. Comme si chaque mot inscrit avait son utilité propre. (TX 69)

If one piece is displaced, the remaining pieces are rendered incoherent. As the text progresses, lists created by Camille to re-instate a sense of control are set aside for

lists that reinforce the mechanical routine of a disease which overthrows the autonomy of the subject:

Les cours, le grand couloir, dire bonjour aux gens, le RER, la banque, taper sur un clavier d'ordinateur des suites de chiffres sans aucun sens, le journal, le téléphone, sourire, Jade, notre amour, nos scènes, Ed l'Épicier, la lessive, le rangement, ma mère, le poulet du dimanche, et le vomir [...] Vomir, toujours vomir, toujours. Ne pas penser surtout, ne pas poser de question, attendre, subir. (TX 104)

Here, the subject is completely omitted, in a technique akin to Brisac's mechanical notation of the reduction of the body in *Petite*, leaving a list of banal daily activities and chores. The final addition of 'le vomir' is an attempt to position vomiting as an equally banal part of daily life. As suggested by 'attendre' and 'subir', the narrator is a passive bystander in a life governed by her disorder. This deliberate detachment, however, is forcefully interrupted during a particularly painful and disgusting episode of vomiting which represents a turning point in Camille's illness. After dining with her friends, Camille parks her car to purge by the roadside, as per her usual routine, but the food she has eaten proves particularly difficult to regurgitate:

Les pâtes avaient gardé leur forme initiale et sortaient douloureusement du fond de ma gorge dans l'ordre inverse où je les avais englouties. Alors je me suis surprise à aller les chercher. Je les tirais une à une du haut de mon gosier. Il fallait les coincer entre l'ongle de mon majeur et le bout de mon index. Je les jetais sur le trottoir, horrifiée. J'ai reculé, toute droite et crispée, les tagliatelles glissaient parfois, il ne fallait pas les laisser s'échapper. Je les sentais remonter le long de mon thornytorinx et s'offrir à mes petits doigts, qui les déroulaient lentement en faisant bien attention à ce qu'elles ne cassent pas. Elles scintillaient au clair de lune sur l'asphalte comme des vermisseaux blancs. (TX 115)

The strips of tagliatelle have retained their shape and Camille is forced to fish them out of the back of her throat with her fingertips. The abstract detachment of previous accounts of vomiting is exchanged for a portraiture which brings to life

self-disgust, horror and physical pain. The reader can almost hear the slap of the slippery, regurgitated pasta strips as they hit the road and lie glistening in the sun. De Peretti leaves nothing to the imagination, from the position of her fingers to the sensation of the tagliatelle being pulled back up and out of her body, and her careful efforts to ‘les déroulaient lentement’ lest they snap and disappear back down her *thornytorinx*. This horrifyingly graphic description exposes the rationale behind the text’s title in a sharp contrast to the cool scrutiny of previous instances of vomiting. Sensation and disgust (usually absent) are foregrounded in explicit detail, and Camille’s body and subjectivity are forcefully reunited. She notes:

Jamais je n’avais été si proche de mon corps, jamais je ne l’avais si bien compris. Des relents de crème aigre filtraient entre mes molaires. J’ai vu du sang sur mes phalanges, je suis tombée. Gisante sur le capot de ma voiture, je me suis réveillée, l’esprit excessivement clair. (TX 115)

The physical act of gripping intact strips of tagliatelle and extracting them from the back of her throat pulls her back from the clutches of the disease as her body and mind are finally reunited in rebellion against its tyranny. A renegotiation of subjectivity is achieved through this final contestation of bodily boundaries.

The expression of divided subjectivity inherent in anorexia is bound up, in *Thornytorinx*, then, in the description of bodily processes. This foregrounding of anatomy is designed to bring language closer to the bodily experience of the anorexic as the graphic descriptions of filling and emptying the body point to the vulnerability and lack of self-containment of the anorexic psyche. Just as the split narrative position and stylistic devices in *Petite* are characterised by fluctuation and duality, de Peretti’s text is characterised by the powerful, all-consuming, *va et vient* of the *thornytorinx*. In both *Petite* and *Thornytorinx* these devices and narrative strategies form comparable ‘rhetorics’ of anorexia which perform the



anorexic body and experience in writing. The following section will turn to an examination of the mother-daughter relationship and its role in the onset of anorexia in both *Petite* and *Thornytorinx*, in order to argue that each of the dualities discussed above is a further instance of the fundamental duality which underlies this pivotal relationship: the desire for both identification with, and separation from, the mother.

### **The Fundamental Division: The Mother-Daughter Relationship in *Petite* and *Thornytorinx***

The mother-daughter relationship, as we have seen throughout this study, is commonly positioned as the root cause of hysterical symptoms. The central importance of the mother to the narrator of Cardinal's *Les Mots*, discussed in the introduction, is conveyed through imagery which shows signs of splitting in a way which emphasises the desire for both similarity with and difference from the mother. In Chapter 1, we saw Irène, in *La Démangeaison*, regard her skin condition as a symptom of a fraught mother-daughter relationship. This was supported by Anzieu's theory of *Le Moi Peau*, in which he argued that a lack of maternal affection could result in diffuse ego boundaries and an unstable subjectivity. Chapter 2 discussed a text, *Truismes*, in which the mother was largely absent, only appearing when in need of financial support from Darrieussecq's narrator or attempting to butcher her pig-daughter in the final pages. If the role of the mother was minimised, it was to emphasise the way in

which patriarchal society produces the mother-daughter relationship as one of rivalry. In this chapter, both Brisac and de Peretti present anorexia as a strategy for coping with a difficult mother-daughter relationship. Whether this relationship is too distant or too close, both narrators experience it in terms of anxiety and physical suffering. As Bruch explains, the anorexic ‘is constantly concerned with being found wanting, not being good enough, not living up to “expectations,” in danger of losing their parents’ love’.<sup>66</sup> We saw above that the identity of each narrator is divided by a disorder which commands a constant fluctuation between autonomy and dependence. This section posits this fluctuation as a performance of the shifting identification with and rejection of the mother. It focuses first on *Petite*, and examines how the narrator’s *too distant* relationship with her mother can be said to produce the narrator’s position of silence and isolation. It examines how Brisac presents this position of silence as a specifically feminine position which envelops three generations of women in the narrator’s family. It then turns to *Thornytorinx*, in which a very different dynamic is afoot; Camille’s relationship with her mother is *too close*. It argues that the movement of physical expulsion which characterises *Thornytorinx* echoes the fundamental fluctuation between the image her mother projects onto her, and a desire to break free of this image and constitute a separate self. It examines her relationship with her boyfriend, Jade, as a further instance of the mother-daughter relationship, in which Camille is unable to distinguish her own desires as unified or self-directed. The contradictions of Camille’s relationship with her mother become most explicitly linked to her anorexia during her *stage* in Japan, as the dualities of her disorder are

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<sup>66</sup> Bruch, p. 41.

compounded by the rituals and customs of Japanese culture. It examines the tradition of the *bento* as symbolic of anorexic ideas of containment and separation, the mother and the female role.

From the early pages of *Petite*, a specific family dynamic is made clear. According to Bruch, ‘all anorexics are involved with their families in such a way that they have failed to achieve a sense of independence’.<sup>67</sup> A common feature of such a family dynamic is what Bruch terms a ‘confusion of pronouns’, in which, when seen together, ‘it is rare that any one member speaks in direct terms about his or her own ideas and feelings’.<sup>68</sup> Each member instead speaks for another, thereby disqualifying or silencing the individual’s own voice. According to Bruch, the anorexic experiences these ‘interpretations’ as indicating that they themselves do not know their own thoughts.<sup>69</sup> This dynamic instils a negative construction of ‘the self’ as lacking an identity and often leads to a fear of non-existence stemming from ‘the feeling of being literally intertwined with [the] mother’.<sup>70</sup> Anorexia can be understood as an attempt to produce an identity (as an anorexic) in the face of overbearing relationships which control and subordinate the individual’s aspirations and desires. In the early pages of *Petite*, Brisac’s narrator remarks: ‘J’ai l’impression que toute personne à qui je confierais mon secret serait tentée de faire la même chose [...] Ce qui en fait l’intérêt, c’est que je suis seule au monde à avoir eu cette idée’ (*P* 14). Before the onset of her anorexia, Brisac’s narrator desperately seeks ‘un destin digne de [ses] parents’ (*P* 17). Her desire to become ‘championne de dos crawlé’ (*P* 17), reflects Bruch’s assertion that many

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

anorexics feel they do not have ‘the right to be anything other than outstanding’; they regard their parents as over-achievers and are desperate to do anything ‘worthwhile’.<sup>71</sup> The anorexic consequently becomes unable to envision a future; Bruch cites a case in which a patient ‘was frightened by the fact that the concept of the future was a big blank’.<sup>72</sup> In *Petite*, Nouk expresses a similar sentiment: ‘je ne vois rien devant moi, je ne vois rien, je n’ai aucun espoir’ (*P* 57). Her identification with her parents’ aspirations is so strong that she is unable to imagine a future which they have not designated for her. Nouk supplements her efforts in sport and schoolwork with gifts and notes targeted to win their affection: ‘Ils seront heureux de leur fille aînée si aimante, si parfait’ (*P* 21). Disappointingly, ‘ils ne repondent jamais’ (*P* 57).

Although Nouk remarks, ‘Il me semble que nos parents ne sont jamais satisfaits [...] Il est difficile d’attirer leur attention’ (*P* 22), the distance between mother and daughter is soon specifically singled out. Upon the death of the narrator’s maternal grandmother, Nouk’s mother enters a deep depression which is never discussed:

Un jour, nous montons dans la DS bleu. Nous allons à Malesherbes, voir la mère de maman qui est très malade. Quelques jours après, elle meurt. Cela met maman dans un état d’immense fatigue, et elle s’en va à son tour se reposer dans une sorte de jardin très triste, rempli d’écrivains malades. [...] Nous allons la voir. Nous marchons sans bruit dans les allées, le gravier crisse, les écrivains ont l’air des fantômes et maman aussi. (*P* 22-3)

Her mother’s state of ‘immense fatigue’ (implying heavy medication) and the ‘jardin tres triste’ filled with ‘écrivains malades’ recalls the institutions, like the Salpêtrière, inhabited by Victorian hysterics. This image of the narrator walking

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<sup>71</sup> Bruch, p. 157.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

‘sans bruit’ amongst patients (including her mother) who have ‘l’air des fantômes’ foregrounds the silence which separates mother and daughter. Upon the death of her paternal grandmother, the narrator’s father withdraws from her mother, and the narrator and her siblings are doubly excluded: ‘Nous ne demandons rien, ni quand elle est morte, ni où [...] Nous faisons exactement comme si rien n’était’ (*P* 23). The narrator is blanketed in a fog of silence: ‘Il y a une sorte de nuage qui empêche de dire les choses’ (*P* 23); this ‘nuage’ appears to engulf the female members of the family in particular. Her maternal grandmother is silenced by her inability to communicate with her husband: ‘Elle aimait bavarder en regardant le paysage, mais il devenait sourd [...] Il y avait le bruit du moteur, et elle s’exaspérait de ces conversations absurdes, elle avait l’impression qu’il faisait exprès de ne pas comprendre’ (*P* 24). This relationship is characterised by unsuccessful communication which is in turn transmitted through the family. The narrator and her siblings spend weekly visits in silence with their grandmother: ‘Avec ma grand-mère, nous passons deux heures, chaque dimanche matin. [...] Nous sommes concentrées sous son regard comme sous une lampe, très silencieuses’ (*P* 25).

The female members of Nouk’s family, then, share a (feminine) position of silence. The idea of this silence as inherited is underlined through recurrent references to the narrator’s Jewish heritage, ‘un héritage biologique aussi lourd’ (*P* 19). Shedding new light on her anorexia as a means of taking control, Joëlle’s assertion that ‘nous sommes tous [...] de misérables moutons que sauve le Berger’ is painful to the narrator, to whom it recalls ‘une phrase qui traînait dans l’air, les Juifs se sont laissés tuer comme des moutons’ (*P* 18). Two women later remark

upon Nouk's skeletal frame: 'on dirait qu'elle sort de Dachau. Ou d'Auschwitz' (P 46). The narrator does not possess the courage nor the words to confront the women: 'On ne parle pas de ces choses-là chez nous. C'est indécent, et c'est dangereux [...] Parce que cela échappe à la raison' (P 48). This idea of an inherited silence also recalls Irigaray's argument in *Ce Sexe*, discussed in Chapter 2, that patriarchal society separates mothers from daughters and places them in a position of rivalry, thwarting successful communication. Irigaray writes: 'Elles sont "objets" pour et entre hommes et ne peuvent, par ailleurs, que mimer un "langage" qu'elles n'ont pas produit' (CS 183). The incident above is immediately followed by a trip to the doctor, during which Nouk must wait outside whilst her fate is discussed without her: 'on m'évacue dans la salle d'attente [...] pendant qu'ils confèrent ma mère et lui [...] j'ai l'impression d'être menacée, presque prisonnière, accusée en tout cas' (P 48-9). Just as Nouk is distanced from her own heritage, she is made remote from decisions involving her immediate future. Vocabulary such as 'évacue', 'prisonnière' and 'accusé' carry through the Holocaust imagery. The prejudice she faces in public is compounded by her doctor's misapprehension of her disorder:

Il dit que je suis inquiétante, que je pourrais être tellement jolie, mais pas comme ça, squelettique. [...] Il s'adresse à moi sérieusement, il me parle en adulte, je ne dois pas me laisser entraîner par une mode ridicule, par les magazines, par ce mannequin, Twiggy. Le charme féminin, ce sont des formes. (P 49)

The doctor attributes her anorexia to a superficial concern with appearance. Overwhelmed by a sentiment 'de mépris', the narrator asks herself 'comment peut-on m'accuser de copier des conseils magazines, on me prend trop au sérieux, on me menace, on ne me prend assez au sérieux, comme si je faisais un régime

pour être mince' (P 49). Just as Freud arguably disappointed Dora in his failure to draw out the potentially transgressive underlying threads of her story, discussed in the introduction, the deep-rooted conflicts which fuel the narrator's anorexia remain buried. This confirms the narrator's earlier sentiment that 'parler est une perte de temps' (P 21). After this episode 'le malentendu est total' (P 50), and, perhaps as Dora once found herself, Nouk winds up 'extrêmement seule' (P 50).

Although the extreme emaciation of the narrator can account for the simplistic comparison between the narrator and an Auschwitz detainee, by linking this image to the anorexic narrator's lack of control over her immediate future, Brisac raises the question of the meaning of starvation in the Jewish collective conscience. As Isabelle Meuret discusses, Holocaust references in narratives of anorexia may lead one 'to speculate whether the trauma a whole people experienced is transmitted to the flesh of further generations'.<sup>73</sup> Just as the narrator's heritage is transmitted through her flesh, so is her position of impotent silence. A meta-textual comment highlights the difficulty the author herself faced in narrating personal experiences which were shrouded in silence and violently repressed:

En écrivant ces lignes, alors que presque trente ans ont passé, j'ai peur, je le fais parcimonieusement, avec une prudence excessive. Je le fais parce qu'il me semble que c'est nécessaire. Je ne peux évoquer ces années-là sans peur, sans honte, ni sans que mon cœur batte idiotement, trop fort. (P 30)

Telling her story, and learning to communicate her trauma, are necessary not just on a personal level (in order to forget and move on), but on a collective level (to adequately bear witness for those who have not survived anorexia). As Robson

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<sup>73</sup> Isabelle Meuret, *Writing Size Zero: Figuring Anorexia in Contemporary World Literatures* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 108.

explains in reference to Holocaust survivor narratives, ‘the story of [...] survival is inextricably bound up in the narrative of others’ deaths’.<sup>74</sup> Through this meta-textual interruption, then, the author exposes an awareness of the double bind presented by writing anorexia.

The idea that transcribing her anorexia is ‘nécessaire’ also recalls 1970s goals of bringing repressed female experience into the sphere of representation. As Cardinal wrote: ‘Il faut que les femmes ouvrent [les mots] si elles veulent exister’.<sup>75</sup> In *Les Mots* it is not just a question of the narrator learning how to communicate her repression, but learning how to communicate with her mother, particularly concerning the female body and female experience. In *Petite*, as in Cardinal’s text, the cultural taboo engulfing the female body (specifically menstruation) is transmitted to the narrator via the mother. Brisac’s narrator notes:

Elle m’en avait parlé, avec difficulté, je ne pense pas que cela lui était facile. Il était question de coton à se mettre entre les jambes. J’ai vu se sang sur les bords de cuvette des toilettes, et je n’en aime pas l’odeur, aurais-je pu dire, dans un monde où j’aurais dit ce que je pensais. Ce monde n’existera, je le crains, jamais. (*P* 30)

Just as the narrator’s mother has difficulty openly discussing the female body, the narrator is unable to express her opinions. This frustrated communication characterises the mother-daughter relationship and results in violence, a violence which pushes the narrator to further extremes:

Un jour, je découvre que je peux vomir la nourriture suffisamment liquide [...]. Je découvre cette ruse diabolique, un jour de violence. Nous avons tous trois couru autour de la table du dîner, pour un silence de trop, un bout de côtelette. Une gifle a volé. Je ne pourrais pas dire si c’est ma mère qui m’a frappée ou si c’est moi qui ai levé la main sur elle. [...] On ne m’a jamais giflée, hurlé-je. Les gifles, ce n’est pas comme les fessées, les larmes

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<sup>74</sup> Robson, *Wounds*, p. 135.

<sup>75</sup> Cardinal, *Les Mots*, p. 53.



jaillissent sans qu'on le veuille. [...] Les gifles sont de la haine, pensé-je. Et désormais la haine et la ruse m'habitent. (*P* 52)

The anorexic sensation of being 'literally intertwined' with the mother, mentioned earlier, reaches a dramatic climax as the narrator is unable to tell who struck the first blow. Silence and deceit are explicitly linked through terminology such as 'ruse diabolique' and 'un silence de trop'. 'La haine et la ruse' inhabit her body alongside the autonomous force of anorexia. Silence is replaced by open hostility between Nouk – 'le vilain petit canard' (*P* 95) – and her parents, as her identification with their wishes shifts to open rejection of them. Although the narrator appears to have found a means to voice her oppression within the family, according to Bruch, this stressful and noisy struggle after the illness has become manifest is merely an 'exaggeration' of the power imbalance which has existed throughout the anorexic's life.<sup>76</sup> The narrator winds up in isolation on a psychiatric ward, where her silence is doubly reinforced: 'elle se tait complètement, sauf parfois, pour demander l'heure, ou le jour' (*P* 90).

Although the narrative focuses on both parents, at certain points the mother is specifically targeted (as in the episode of violence discussed above), and at others it seems to be suggested that the narrator's inability for constructive self-direction is the outcome of generations of interactional patterns which shroud the women of the family in silence and cut off their potential for self-assertion. For the narrator, silence is a natural state: 'C'est un silence intolérable, je m'en rends compte des années après, c'est pour Nouk un silence normal. Je n'ai rien à dire et mes mots ne valent rien' (*P* 78). Silence is learnt within the family, specifically

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<sup>76</sup> Bruch, p. 38.

via the female line. Differing from the rebellious, disruptive protest of Cixous' celebratory hysteric, then, the anorexic's protest appears to collapse into itself, ultimately reinforcing her position of silence within the family and wider patriarchal culture.

The agreeable compliance exhibited by Nouk during the early pages of the text concealed the fact that she had been deprived by her parents of the right to direct her own life. In *Thornytorinx*, we see a similar dynamic, as Camille foregoes her own aspirations in favour of her mother's: 'J'ai toujours voulu être actrice [...] Mais pour une mère avide d'ascension sociale comme la mienne, voir sa petite surdouée vivre une vie de bohème, ça ne passait pas' (TX 18). We soon learn that conforming to her mother's image of her entails maintaining a certain body weight. For her mother, who 'a toujours eu en horreur' (TX 32) the idea that one day her daughter could become 'rondement difforme' (TX 32), Camille remarks 'on n'est jamais trop mince' (TX 32). The narrative swiftly shifts from the narrator's 'profil type de l'annorexique' (TX 27), to her mother's own bulimia: 'je l'avais vue se peser trois fois par jour pendant toute mon enfance' (TX 31). It next broaches the narrator's first diet 'au sens maternel du terme' (TX 33), and finally turns to anorexia as a collective disorder. This brief synopsis of the transition of the narrative from her mother's disorder to her own reflects the speed at which Camille's autonomy is subsumed within violent routines of bingeing and purging. As the following passage sums up, in *Thornytorinx*, the mother-daughter relationship is the opposite of that described in terms of distance and neglect in

*Petite:*

Ma mère contre laquelle je n'avais jamais pu être en colère et à laquelle j'avais tout cédé. Ma mère qui m'avait tout donnée, et qui avait fait tant de

sacrifices pour moi que j'ai fini par vouloir le lui rendre à la puissance un million, pour qu'elle soit fière de moi, quitte à oublier mes rêves [...] Trop d'amour, peut-être, trop d'espoirs rassemblés sur la tête d'une seule enfant, sûrement, trop de souffrance à soulager pour avoir le temps de vivre ses propres maux. Une mère tyrannique et merveilleuse. Une mère qui pardonnerait tout à ses enfants pour mieux les culpabiliser. Impossible de lâcher cette mère-là. (TX 90-91)

This relationship is experienced in terms of suffocation and guilt. The problem arises in the pattern of interaction. As Bruch explains, 'all these good things were bestowed without being specifically geared to the child's own needs or desires'.<sup>77</sup> The narrator thus feels unworthy or ungrateful, even guilty for desiring something different for herself. Just as opportunities presented are perceived as restrictions rendering them unable to 'vivre ses propres maux', forgiveness is perceived as an attempt to 'mieux les culpabiliser'. The metaphors of fluctuation within the text, then, echo the contradictions of a relationship with 'une mère tyrannique et merveilleuse'.

Camille's failure to forge a separate, self-directed identity from the mother is recreated in each of her relationships. Her best friend Marie is described as an extension of her self – 'ma meilleure amie de toujours, avec qui je vivais en parfait symbiose depuis la seconde' (TX 21). When this 'symbiose' is interrupted, she feels hopelessly 'perdue' (TX 41). The most severe loss of autonomy outside of the mother-daughter relationship is experienced in her relationship with Jade, during which Camille's individuality recedes into the background: 'Je ne lisais plus de journaux et encore moins de romans, je n'allais pas au théâtre ni aux expositions, je suis devenue un encéphalogramme plat' (TX 45). The image of a brain x-ray, 'encéphalogramme' is a calculated evocation of a body which has

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

been all but erased. Camille has become a lifeless, colourless copy of herself and neither Marie nor Jade notice her purging, which increases in frequency as her course progresses: ‘j’ai vomi plus gros, plus souvent, et de plus en plus vite. Jade ne voyait rien. Marie ne voyait rien’ (TX 47).

The increased frequency of her vomiting reflects the increased frequency of stressful moments in Camille’s career and relationships, instilling a sense of momentum which exaggerates the sense of fluctuation already permeating the text. The consistently detached narration of the damaging and highly private act of vomiting, often in public places, such as the toilets ‘toute en marbre noir’ (TX 93) of her new office, compounds the split between her outward image of success and her inner sense of disintegration. The inherently secretive nature of the disorder coupled with the inability to express the physical and mental trauma it entails forces the narrator to keep up a pretence of normality which leads to the sensation of leading a double life. She notes: ‘Nous sortons beaucoup, nous étions la jeunesse dorée. En repensant à cette période, je ne sais pas comment j’ai fait pour autant rire en public en même temps que je pleurais en privé’ (TX 99). This performance of normality feeds into previous discussions of deception as Camille remarks: ‘Cela faisait bientôt un an que je trichais en souriant. Ne plus rien faire, juste faire croire’ (TX 103). Just as the words ‘trahir’, ‘tromper’, ‘faire croire’ and ‘mensonge’ (P 77) were applied to the narrator of *Petite* upon her ‘arrest’, in *Thornytorinx*, Camille’s mother hurls similar accusations of deceit and treachery: ‘elle m’a répondu qu’elle était déçue, que je l’avais leurrée. Elle utilise souvent ce mot, leurrer, “Tu te leurres les autres, Camille,” c’est un verbe à elle’ (TX 192). As the guilt engendered by the mother-daughter relationship becomes unbearable,

she notes: ‘Elle me fait culpabiliser, elle m’appelait cinq fois par jour, elle me disais “Tu me manques,” et moi je courais aux toilettes’ (TX 90). This is repeated in situations which echo the paradoxes of the mother-daughter relationship: ‘Nous prenions le métro, moi en tailleur noir et lui en costume bleu marine avec son ordinateur portable à la main. Il descendait à Châtelet en me disant “À ce soir, mon petit chat.” J’arrivais au bureau et je courais aux toilettes’ (TX 93). The miscommunication which thwarts the interactions of Brisac’s narrator is echoed in Camille’s relationship with Jade when, after blocking the shower with vomit, she is forced to confess all. She notes: ‘Il m’a répondu que ce n’était pas grave [...] J’avais crié à l’aide et il n’avait rien voulu entendre. L’homme que j’aimais ne comprenait rien’ (TX 93).

The contradictions of the mother-daughter relationship become most explicitly linked to the narrator’s anorexia during her *stage* in Japan. The strict codes of conduct of Japanese culture produce an interesting point of comparison to those self-imposed by the narrator. As Camille comments, individuality is curbed in favour of collective identity:

Les Japonais sont tous pareils, mais surtout ils sont contents de l’être. Ils ne fonctionnent pas en tant qu’individus mais en tant que membres d’une société, à eux seuls ils sont une entité [...] c’est le groupe qui compte, il ne cherche pas à se différencier, il n’a pas besoin d’exister à travers un pronom et moins encore moins à être ‘personnel’ (TX 61)

This disciplined culture at once suppresses her individuality and exaggerates her difference from the norm. Rigid codes of conduct are observed during meal times. The *bento* (a Japanese lunchbox) symbolises the anorexic preoccupation with order and containment, and entails a gendered aspect which symbolises the anorexic struggle to forge a separate identity from the mother. Before leaving each

morning for college, the narrator's Japanese mother performs the traditional female role of preparing Camille's *bento*. The *bento* must be both nutritional and aesthetically pleasing:

Il s'agit d'une petite boîte que vous ouvrez à l'heure du déjeuner, tous les aliments y sont disposés de manière gracieuse et leurs couleurs se correspondent afin de faciliter votre digestion. Les Japonais sont un peuple d'esthètes, tout doit être beau chez eux. (TX 63)

Colour coded and compartmentalised, the *bento* is a perfect example of the anorexic desire 'de simplifier les aliments' (*op. cit.* 41) expressed by Nouk in *Petite*. Anthropologist Anne Allison has researched this tradition in relation to gender roles and posits the *bento* as a gendered 'ideological state apparatus'.<sup>78</sup> It originates as a means of permitting the mother to manufacture something of herself for the child to carry into the (potentially threatening) outside world. According to Allison, the tradition of the *bento* 'situates the producer as a woman and mother'.<sup>79</sup> Both mother and child are watched and judged, and in some sense constructed through how the *bento* is made and eaten actions are carried out. Most significantly, the key element of the *bento* is regulation. As Allison explains, 'presentational style is the guiding principle by which food is prepared in Japan'; particular emphasis is placed on 'smallness, separation, and fragmentation'.<sup>80</sup> No large portions are permitted; all food is served in small amounts and separated by dividing walls which are removable and adjustable to isolate each element. Just

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<sup>78</sup> Anne Allison, 'Japanese Mothers and Obentōs: The Lunch-Box as Ideological State Apparatus', *Anthropological Quarterly* 64: 4, 'Gender and the State in Japan' (1991), 195-208 (p. 195).

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

as, in anorexia, bodily boundaries are clearly delineated and any transgressions are refused; in the tradition of the *bento* ‘it is the containment that is stressed’.<sup>81</sup>

The *bento* is thus filled with the gendered meaning of mother and home. Camille’s rejection of Japanese rituals surrounding food can thus be read as a rejection of the stifling relationship she maintains with her mother. Again her body becomes the medium through which she expresses her discontent, and Camille turns to vomiting as a symbolic means of rejection:

Je vomissais leur politesse et leurs infinies courbettes [...] Je vomissais ma solitude, je vomissais leur froideur, je vomissais les appels de Jade, je vomissais encore et toujours des pots de glace à la vanille de quatre cent cinquante millilitres. (TX 78)

This physical movement of expulsion which characterises the text becomes not only a symbolic rejection of her mother and the life her mother has chosen for her, but of Jade and the sentiment of restriction engendered by the path upon which she has been forced.

The discussion of the mother-daughter relationship in *Petite* and *Thornytorinx* has shown how each narrator’s anorexia can be considered a means of achieving a defined and powerful identity through deprivation, an attempt to free the self from feeling ‘literally intertwined’ with the mother.<sup>82</sup> Anorexia, then, provides an identity and an escape from (maternal) identity. However, as this chapter has shown, the disorder is also quite clearly damaging and inextricably associated with both psychological and physical distress. Anorexia can thus be understood as self-*productive*, as a physical and discursive process of producing a clean and controlled identity (an identity which is separate from the mother), and

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Bruch, p.13.

self-destructive, as a means of destroying the self both literally and metaphorically. In tension between these two poles, the anorexic subjectivity is divided and caught in the perpetual oscillation which characterises both Brisac and de Peretti's transcriptions of the disorder.

### Conclusion

The first section of this chapter explored how both Brisac and de Peretti have each created a textual body tailored to reflect the reduced, disordered anorexic body depicted in their texts. In *Petite*, the fluctuation between the third and first person throughout the narrative echoed Brisac's identification with her anorexic self at moments of control and crisis. Whilst the former represented a deliberately distanced and dissociated narrative perspective, the latter signalled a sense of ongoing trauma. This was coupled with a stylistic emaciation which reincarnated the anorexic body in text. As Barbara Havercroft comments: 'Par moments on dirait même que le style du texte et le physique de la narratrice visent un dessèchement commun'.<sup>83</sup> In *Thornytorinx*, de Peretti's innovative focus on the mechanisms of the digestive system became a metaphor for the divided anorexic self. The split between body and mind was accompanied by that between autonomy and dependence, personal and collective experience. In both texts these divisions threatened the new, separate, and ultimately illusory 'identity' created

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<sup>83</sup> Havercroft, 'Pour une rhétorique', p. 404.



by the anorexic narrators, identities which were created to escape the sense of being intertwined with the mother. The latter sections of this chapter examined the role of the mother-daughter relationship in the onset and continuation of anorexia. We saw how food-refusal and deliberate vomiting became a symbolic means of rejecting this traumatic relationship, whether it was one of distance or over-attachment. In both texts, conflict was localised around food as symbolic of the mother, as the anorexic was seen to fluctuate between a desperate desire to resemble the mother (in order to be loved by her) and an equally fraught desire for severance and singularity.

Although both texts are characterised by struggle and self-effacement, for both authors, the transcription of bodily suffering into text provides an agency which is not subsumed by the (false) autonomy once supplied by the disorder. This new agency, wielded in writing, permits each author to understand and comment upon their suffering, from a position of retrospection. Through re-enacting the paradoxical logic of the disorder, writing participates in the reconstruction of the subjectivity which was fragmented by this very logic. As Havercroft observes, the resultant rhetoric of anorexia ‘becomes a rhetoric of agency’.<sup>84</sup> The act of writing anorexia, and the emotional and physical suffering it entailed, permitted Brisac and de Peretti to re-trace their steps and re-unite the various facets of the self which were fragmented during anorexia. To return to the register of food, and borrow de Peretti’s metaphor of ‘des rondelles de carottes [...] toutes à la file indienne’ (*op. cit.* 69) it is as if each word, in *Petite* and

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

*Thornytorinx*, permits each fragment of each author's self to find its proper place in the structure of the whole.

To return to the initial question of whether the literary figure of the anorexic can be celebrated as figure of rebellion in the sense of Cixous' hysteric, the answer, in the case of *Petite* and *Thornytorinx*, would have to be no. Just as any hint of rebellion is promptly subsumed within the extremes of the disorder, in both texts, any intimation of the anorexic's force is immediately undermined by a 'representative' depiction of the suffering, debilitated anorexic body. However, by throwing into relief the very dualities these representations attempt to surmount, writing permits chaotic lived experience to be woven into a complete and coherent narrative, which finally assimilates body and subjectivity. Transcribing the disorder ultimately offers the experience to others, and, in this sense, propagates anorexia's disruptive potential through exposing the underlying social constructions that the disorder embodies. Brisac's re-creation of the anorexic body in writing provides her with distance, autonomy, and agency and leaves her standing in relation to a completed reconstruction of her body in text, a body over which she has reclaimed ownership. Although de Peretti's narrator is left still vomiting from time to time, writing has permitted her a degree of understanding and a means of positioning herself in relation to her trauma. Transcribing the disorder through the subverted functions of the *thornytorinx* has allowed experiences and sensations which were previously *outside* language to be articulated and transformed. Writing may not have constituted a cure, but it has permitted de Peretti to create a place from which she can reframe and manipulate

her perception in a way which was not possible before. As her narrator concludes:

‘Je mène ma vie comme je l’entends pour une fois’ (*TX* 176).

## Chapter 4

### Hysteria and Anorexia II: Amélie Nothomb's Aesthetic of Anorexia

#### Introduction

The previous chapter examined how Brisac and de Peretti each created a performative 'rhetoric of anorexia', which engaged with central themes of hysterical discourses in a realist narrative style, and which brought to light a concern to create a 'representative' picture of anorexia. The focus was on each writer's need for distance and understanding, their desire for closure. Elements of rebellion, in these texts, were consistently overwritten by graphic depictions of the ravaging physical and psychological effects of the disorder. This chapter examines how Amélie Nothomb's fantastical narratives of anorexia are expressive of many of the same themes, but within a shifting and metaphorical 'aesthetic of anorexia'. In these texts – *Robert des noms propres* (2002), *Biographie de la faim* (2004) and *Métaphysique des tubes* (2000) – elements of rebellion are foregrounded through a focus on singularity, autonomy and empowerment. Just as *écriture féminine* endows the literary figure of the hysteric with 'une certaine force dérangeante' (JN 289), in Nothomb's writing, the figure of the anorexic appears to acquire a similar potential. However, in what we will see to be typical Nothombian fashion, this is not as straightforward as it may at first appear. Despite clear continuities with the traditional model of the hysteric, Nothomb's

anorexic also embodies many striking discontinuities; it is this ambivalence which will be the primary focus of this chapter.

Amélie Nothomb is the author of twenty-one novels to date, published since her first novel *Hygiène de l'assassin* in 1992.<sup>1</sup> Since then, she has released approximately one novel per year and has been awarded numerous prizes, including the *Prix Alain-Fournier* and the *Prix René-Fallet* in 1993, and the *Grand Prix du roman de l'Académie française* in 1999. Nothomb's writing is not only critically acclaimed, but widely and enthusiastically read as popular fiction. This suggests that her strong vision of the conflicts lived out by her female protagonists clearly strikes a chord with readers all over the world. In contrast to de Peretti, and, to a lesser extent, Brisac, Nothomb's status as a celebrity author has attracted critical attention to the autobiographical and autofictional spaces of her œuvre, in which her narratives of anorexia can be included.<sup>2</sup> Her work has been discussed in terms of the contrast between beauty and ugliness, and her repeated focus on visceral, monstrous, and excessive bodies.<sup>3</sup> In much of Nothomb's writing, the idea of the voluptuous, sexual female body as physically repulsive is oft-repeated, and – by extension – lithe, beautiful, asexual protagonists are idealised. In the three texts which form the focus of this chapter, however, this voluptuous, sexual female body is deliberately and conspicuously absent. It is this which renders these texts a particularly interesting addition to this

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<sup>1</sup> Amélie Nothomb, *Hygiène de l'assassin* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> See: Laureline Amanieux, *Amélie Nothomb: L'éternelle affamée* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005) ; Michel David, *Amélie Nothomb: Le Symptôme Graphomane* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> See: Lenaïk La Garrec, 'Beastly Beauties and Beautiful Beasts', in Susan Bainbrigge and Jeanette den Toonder (eds.) *Amélie Nothomb: Authorship, Identity and Narrative Practice* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 64-70; Catherine Rodgers, 'Nothomb's Anorexic Beauties' (Ibid., pp. 50-62.) Jones (*Repulsion*, pp. 69-116) also contains a chapter entitled 'Disgust and the Gendered Body' which deals with Nothomb's presentation of the disgusting body in *Hygiène de l'assassin* (1992), *Attentat* (1992) and *Journal d'Hirondelle* (2006).

study, a study which has, until this point, expressly dealt with texts in which the organic, disordered female body has been the central focus. We will see throughout this chapter that, although the female body and female experience remain central in *Biographie, Métaphysique* and *Robert*, it is a ‘masculine’ conception of the female body which is privileged. The ultimate fantasy appears to be not the thin body, but the non-existent body, a purified, inanimate ‘container’ for an unusually intelligent, talented and unique spirit. Nothomb’s texts are short and her style is clipped, like *Petite*, but playful, fast-paced and littered with inter-textual references. What Rodgers terms an ‘anorexic sensibility’ is undoubtedly present in Nothomb’s works and perhaps stems from her own experiences of anorexia during her adolescence.<sup>4</sup> In an interview with Nathalie Journo, Nothomb talks candidly of her experiences and reveals: ‘Ma sœur et moi nous avons été anorexiques en même temps. Ne pas quitter l’enfance était un bon moyen de rester ensemble à jamais, alors on a cessé de manger’.<sup>5</sup> This idea of not wanting to leave childhood behind is particularly important in Nothomb’s writing, as we will see in each of the texts discussed in this chapter.

If Brisac and de Peretti transcribed their experiences of anorexia in order to gain closure, and *Petite* and *Thornytorinx* comprised the only works in each writer’s œuvre dealing with anorexia, a very different agenda appears to underpin Nothomb’s writing projects. A self-professed ‘graphomane’, she consistently returns to the same themes, images and ‘anorexic sensibilities’. As Rodgers remarks:

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<sup>4</sup> Rodgers, ‘Anorexic Beauties’, p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> Nothomb in Nathalie Journo, ‘Quasi modeste’, *Libération* (Oct. 1997).

Needless to say, characters in fiction are not automatically to be identified with their authors, but when the same sensibility is carried across from text to text, one may at least infer that it is part of an author's vision.<sup>6</sup>

The sheer volume of texts which explore issues surrounding female (dis)embodiment suggests that something profoundly unresolved in her experience of anorexia still evades her command. Whereas Brisac and de Peretti's texts were written, then, from a perspective 'outside' anorexia – a perspective of 'recovery' – Nothomb's repeated return to associations of thinness with virtue and fatness with evil suggests she is still very much 'inside' the seduction and exhilaration of the disorder. Although Nothomb no longer suffers from anorexia, her protagonists are 'complicit' with the patriarchal ideals of femininity which the disorder exposes; it is this which makes her texts particularly difficult to pin down in terms of a feminist reading. As Wolf notes, 'the anorexic may begin her journey defiant, but from the point of view of a male dominated society, she ends up the perfect woman. She is weak, sexless and voiceless [...] the woman has been killed off in her'.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Nothomb's writing projects may begin as an exercise in female creativity, a fulfilment of 1970s feminist goals to bring women to writing – as Nothomb herself remarks, 'c'est vrai que politiquement, historiquement, ça signifie quelque chose: les femmes n'ont pas toujours eu la possibilité d'écrire, et cela a signifié beaucoup' – but the contents of her texts appear to endorse a patriarchal ideology.<sup>8</sup> In Chapter 1, Nobécourt's texts were presented as an attempt to combat what she regards as contemporary culture's 'effacement' of the body. In Chapter 2, we saw 'une espèce de bonheur de l'excès

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<sup>6</sup> Rodgers, 'Anorexic Beauties', p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> Wolf, *Beauty Myth*, p. 191.

<sup>8</sup> Nothomb, 'Interview', in Bainbrigge and den Toonder, p. 198.

du corps [qui] n'avait pas été dit de cette façon', as Darrieussecq's hybrid narrator explored her excessive female body and sexuality.<sup>9</sup> In what way, then, can Nothomb's apparent denial of the female body, and answering idealisation of the anorexic self, be considered to contribute to the 'revalorisation du corps féminin' which is evidently a preoccupation of women writers today? If her texts focus on representations of the disordered body as a consequence of unrealisable patriarchal narratives of femininity, her anorexic protagonists contradictorily appear to endorse these patriarchal narratives. Does Nothomb, then, use the figure of the anorexic to make a legitimate evaluation of the conflicts and contradictions faced by women in contemporary society? Or do her texts ultimately point to the limits of the feminist appropriation of the hysteric (here, the anorexic) as a radical figure?

The first section of this chapter argues that, whereas *écriture féminine* imagines the hysteric's body as a re-inscription of female desire (a writing of the body), Nothomb privileges a disembodied aesthetic that presents a 'masculine' fantasy of the female body which all but erases the feminine. This disembodied aesthetic is, as we will see, a far cry from the starkly organic focus of Brisac and de Peretti's writing in Chapter 3. This section focuses primarily on *Biographie* and *Robert*, as texts which best exemplify the ways in which Nothomb presents childhood as an idealised state of purity, beauty and fairy-like sexless innocence. It begins by arguing that anorexia is situated, in these texts, as a conscious rejection of the adult female body and its associated restrictions, and a concomitant means of maintaining the childish body. Of particular interest, in

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<sup>9</sup> Darrieussecq in John Lambeth, 'Entretien avec Marie Darrieussecq', *The French Review* 79:4 (Mar 2006), p. 814.



*Biographie*, is the figure of *la Déesse Vivante*, as a figure who compounds the anorexic narrator's fears of puberty. In *Robert*, the importance of the mother-daughter relationship – discussed in Chapter 3 – re-surfaces, as the narrator's anorexia represents a fear of the separation from the mother that adulthood will necessarily engender. It then moves on to posit the desire for a body as inorganic artefact, as presented in *Robert*, as an example of how Nothomb's writing adheres to an 'aesthetic of disembodiment' which privileges art over life.

The second section of this chapter turns to the ways in which Nothomb's texts express the anorexic preoccupation with the boundaries of the body, as discussed in Chapter 3. Whereas, as we have seen, Cixous sees a fluid relationship between the (female) self and the other, the anorexic takes a 'masculine' stance, in which the boundaries of the female body must be rigidly 'policed' in order to constitute the self as separate and 'closed-off'. In Nothomb's writing, however, these constructions are further complicated, as both the *maintenance* of bodily boundaries and the *transgression* of these boundaries can be seen as a means of constructing an independent self. This section focuses first on *Robert*, in which the narrator's food-refusal at once signifies the anorexic desire to maintain a separate self – to constitute the body as a distinct, closed-off and regulated space – and contributes to an identity which is confused with that of the mother. This section argues that, for the narrator of *Robert*, food-refusal does not provide her with independence and agency, but blurs her identity with that of the mother. Eating, on the other hand, permits her to break away from the mother-daughter relationship and attempt to forge a path for herself, by herself. This section then turns to *Métaphysique*, in which the formation of identity is also played out

through food. It discusses the narrator's 'tubal' body (similar to that presented in *Thornytorinx*, in Chapter 3) as an expression of the anorexic preoccupation with bodily boundaries. Of particular interest is the recurrent motif of the koi carp as a symbol which compounds this preoccupation. Just as *Petite* and *Thornytorinx* were characterised by fluctuation – a fluctuation which echoed the alternate (masculine) autonomy and (feminine) dependence of the anorexic self – Nothomb's texts are permeated by water imagery which is closely linked to notions of identity and gender. This section, then, closes with a discussion of how water is represented, in all three of Nothomb's texts, as both a *source* of (feminine) identity, and a *threat* to it.

The final section examines Nothomb's subversive relationship to language. It discusses Nothomb's presentation language, in all three texts, as a tool for control in its capacity to simultaneously *create* and *destroy*, to both *sicken* and to *cure*. It links this 'masculine' construction of language, with anorexia (as a form of controlling the body), and argues that language, in Nothomb's texts, embodies an anorexic aesthetic of duality which we first encountered in Chapter 3. As this outline has suggested, by way of keeping the various constructions of the hysteric and the anorexic encountered throughout this study at the forefront, each section will begin by outlining which particular construction Nothomb has incorporated, developed or departed from, in order to discuss the similarities and points of divergence between *écriture féminine* and Nothomb's writing in *Robert*, *Biographie* and *Métaphysique*. The first section, to which this chapter now turns, correspondingly begins with a reminder of Cixous' focus on the female body.

## **Writing the Body in *Écriture Féminine*: Erasing the Body in Amélie Nothomb**

As we have seen, Cixous sought to bring women to writing through a reconnection with their bodies, in order to create the potentiality for large scale social change. In her seminal text *Le Rire de la Méduse* (1975), Cixous writes: ‘Écris-toi: il faut que ton corps se fasse entendre’.<sup>10</sup> For her, a feminine writing can only be accessed through a rediscovery of lived female bodily reality. Bringing women’s bodies back into the sphere of representation could lead to a break-down of pervasive phallogocentric logic, thus producing new ways of thinking and living. Whereas *écriture féminine* called women to write their bodies into text in order to re-write, or indeed un-write, masculine representations of femininity – as Cixous notes, ‘Il faut tuer la fausse femme qui empêche la vivante de respirer’ – Nothomb’s disembodied protagonists adhere to cultural narratives of femininity which erase or reduce the female body.<sup>11</sup> In *écriture féminine* the role of the mother’s body is stressed. Cixous suggests that the rhythms of the maternal body have an effect of continuation and fluidity; the inscription of these rhythms may interrupt or shake up the rigid codes of the patriarchal symbolic. In anorexia however, the reproductive body signifies an uncontrollable and dangerous insecurity. According to Malson, the mind/ body split, discussed in Chapter 3, ‘consolidates the discursive construction of the (feminine, menstruating) body as eruptive, threatening and alien to the self’.<sup>12</sup> As a former sufferer of anorexia, Nothomb has expressed her personal experience of this. In an

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<sup>10</sup> Cixous, *Le Rire de la Méduse* (Paris : Grasset, 1975), p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>12</sup> Malson, p. 119.

interview with Susan Bainbrigge and Jeanette den Toonder, she describes her fear of adolescence:

Enfant, j'étais vraiment dans mon élément: je sentais que j'étais faite pour être enfant, ce que mon corps me convenait parfaitement. Et à l'adolescence, le corps m'échappait complètement. Et c'était une perte, et pas seulement une perte physique: c'était une perte de l'ordre de l'intensité, et la découverte aussi d'une véritable hostilité, de l'ennemi intérieur.<sup>13</sup>

Here, Nothomb talks of losing the connection between her 'self' and her 'body'; whilst she remained the same, her body 'échappait complètement'. The overwhelming sense is of a loss of control, 'une perte de l'ordre'. The idea that her body contains a hidden 'véritable hostilité', an 'ennemi intérieur', recalls not only 'la chose' which invades the body of Cardinal's narrator in *Les Mots*, but 'la plante animal' (*op. cit.* 46) of Irène in *La Démangeaison*. Nothomb suggests that the body has always contained this repressed potential to turn on the self. By refusing to nourish this body, anorexia is an attempt to control it. As the body becomes thinner, in anorexia, eventually menstruation ceases. As Malson explains, 'the amenorrhea-ic, anorexic body thus acquires the positive connotations of "not being a woman any more", of escaping the femininity signified by menstruation'.<sup>14</sup> Anorexia, then, is a means of creating a body which is 'discursively constituted as non-feminine'.<sup>15</sup> Like Nothomb herself, each of her anorexic protagonists expresses anxiety surrounding the onset of puberty and the development of an adult female body.

Of the three texts under consideration, *Biographie* and *Robert* best express the themes discussed above. In both texts, art is privileged over life, creating a

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<sup>13</sup> Nothomb, 'Interview', in Bainbrigge and den Toonder, p. 188.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

‘disembodied aesthetic’ in which the childish body is idealised. This chapter turns first to the narrator’s encounter, in *Biographie*, with *la Déesse Vivante* of Nepal, and moves on to discuss how anorexia is presented, in this text, as a conscious attempt to maintain the security of the childish body. It then turns to *Robert*, in order to discuss how the narrator exhibits a similar fear of adolescence. In this instance, however, this represents a fear of separation from the mother. Of particular interest in terms of the aesthetic of disembodiment will be the narrator’s desire for a body as inorganic artefact.

*Biographie* is a reportedly autobiographical text which covers the narrator’s life from her childhood in Japan, through puberty, to age twenty-one. The text recounts the narrator’s experiences of different countries and cultures as the daughter of a Belgian diplomat. Each country or particular city comes to represent a different period of her life and experience of her changing body. If Japan represents an idealised childhood, China represents a disruption of this. Whilst the excesses of New York represent the narrator’s final push to make the most of childhood, Bangladesh embodies the confusion, fear and disgust of the adult body. Throughout the text, the narrator exists in a permanent state of ‘surfaim’ and searches to fill the emptiness which she claims to be her ‘spécificité personnelle’ (*BF* 19-20). This ‘surfaim’ is not only related to food, but is characterised by a desire for beauty. Through descriptions of her mother and her sister, Juliette, beauty is presented as a stable constant, and consistently adheres to a ‘masculine’ ideal of femininity. Whilst her mother’s beauty is almost religious (a spiritual notion of beauty which leaves behind the body), her sister, in particular, is admired for ‘un corps délicat’ (*BF* 19), and ‘des cheveux de fée’ (*BF*

20). This adoration of beauty stems from its inexhaustible nature: ‘Consommer la beauté ne l’altérerait pas’ (*BF* 20). For the same reason, water, as we will see, acquires a similar status, as does sugar, perhaps as a substance devoid of nutrients, consisting of ‘empty’ calories. This adoration of water is not confined to its consummation; as we will see, rainfall, lakes, rivers, seas and oceans all form part of a recurrent motif of fluidity. Whereas water represents purity, and as such, is never denied, sugar and alcohol are forbidden pleasures.

Throughout the text language, as we will see in the final section, is presented as a means of control. Its ‘double’ function echoes that of water; both are presented in terms of creation and destruction. Reading, in particular, plays a significant part in the narrator’s anorexia, linking her anorexia with both language and identity. The ending of the text sees the narrator turn to writing, with her enrolment in university in Brussels. Writing at first enables her to understand her experiences and finally move on from them, at which point it becomes an experience of pleasure: ‘une nécessité voluptueuse’ (*BF* 184). As this synopsis has shown, themes of childhood, beauty, fluidity, (feminine) identity and language are paramount. The ‘biographie de la faim’ contained within this text then, is not an account of physical hunger (like *Petite* or *Thornytorinx*), but a biography of desire. It is already possible to see how the suffering, starving bodies and fragmented identities seen in Chapter 3 are replaced, in Nothomb’s writing, with a disembodied depiction of anorexia as an ethereal, metaphysical ‘experience’, an experience which transcends the body.

The first few years of the narrator’s childhood in Japan are presented as a paradisiacal experience of beauty and pleasure, compounded by the adoring gaze

of her Japanese governess, Nishio-san. Moving to China at the age of five ‘se révéla désastreux’ (BF 55) for the narrator as the first of many ruptures from the carefree security of childhood, and imagery of death pervades these passages which deal with the narrator’s oncoming puberty.<sup>16</sup> Amélie’s sense of impending demise increases with each birthday approaching her teenage years, and finally comes to a crescendo during a trip to Nepal, where she visits the temple of *la Déesse Vivante*. *La Déesse Vivante* is an infant chosen at birth, according to a combination of astrological social and karmic criteria, and submitted to various tests which prove her divinity.<sup>17</sup> Once it has been decided that the infant is inhabited by *la Déesse*, she is enthroned within the temple, isolated from society, worshipped by the public as well as royalty and forbidden to place her feet (considered ‘holy’) upon the ground. For Amélie, the significance of this figure is that her innate divinity only lasts until the little girl turns twelve. When she enters puberty and begins to menstruate, *la Déesse* is thought to have vacated her now impure body: ‘Ce manège durait jusqu’aux douze ans de l’enfant. Le jour de son anniversaire, elle perdait son statut de divinité et était soudain priée d’aller se faire

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 55. Nothomb has attributed her fascination with themes of beauty and ugliness to the split she experienced in her childhood between the beauty of Japan and what she described as the ugliness of China: ‘Le Japon est quand même le pays qui a le plus élevé l’exigence esthétique, et je suis née en plein dedans [...] dans la montagne, dans une maison japonaise: autour de moi tout était beau... et cela me paraissait naturel [...] j’ai brutalement quitté le Japon pour la Chine populaire [...] à l’époque Pékin était d’une laideur, c’était horrible!’, ‘Interview’ in Bainbrigge and den Toonder, p. 204.

<sup>17</sup> For more information on *la Déesse Vivante*, known in Nepal as the goddess of Kumari, see: Michael R. Allen, *The Cult of Kumari: Virgin Worship in Nepal* (Kathmandu: Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University, 1975). A particularly interesting article regarding the Kumari tradition in India and Nepal appeared in *The Guardian* in March 2014, and raised questions concerning the empowerment of girls and the relationship between such female deities and women’s rights. See: Monica Sarkar, ‘Feminism for Goddesses: Does Kumari worship empower girls? Could the reverence given to Hindu goddesses translate into a higher status for India’s women or does it hold them back?’ *The Guardian* website (05/04/14), URL: <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2014/mar/05/india-hinduism-goddesses-feminism-global-development>.

pendre ailleurs' (*BF* 157). The little girl is released into the world without any family connections or social skills. As Amélie notes: 'On relâchait dans la nature une fillette obèse, incapable de se servir de ses jambes et dont la famille avait perdu le souvenir. Personne ne semblait se soucier du devenir de cette nouvelle humaine' (*BF* 157).

The idea of this girl as 'une nouvelle humaine' upon the loss of her divinity, contrasts sharply with 'la jeune née' imagined by Cixous and Clément. Until recently, these girls were refused education and, according to Monica Sarkar, the correlative practice in India sees these newly released girls 'unable to marry and forced into prostitution'.<sup>18</sup> Far from representing a 're-birth' then, the beginning of a 'new' emancipated life, it is as if the subjectivity of these girls has already been set aside; what is left is a (developing) body, an object, to be exploited. Visiting the temple at age twelve, Amélie cannot help but feel a sense of kinship with this little girl who is on the edge of uncertainty and fear:

J'avais douze ans quand je vis le temple de la Déesse Vivante. C'est peu dire que j'en fus bouleversée. [...] quelque chose en mon cœur la comprenait si bien. Bizarrement, dès ma prime conscience, j'avais toujours su que la croissance serait une décroissance et qu'il y aurait à cette perte perpétuelle des paliers atroces. Le temple de la Déesse Vivante me mit nez à nez avec une vérité qui était mienne depuis mon aube: c'était qu'à douze ans, les petites filles étaient chassées. (*BF* 158)

Whilst Sarkar's reading holds the sexual adult female body firmly in mind, Amélie's notion that leaving her childhood body behind can bring nothing but new levels of loss and uncertainty is compounded by the fate of this little goddess, who faces rejection and hardship upon reaching puberty. The idea that 'la croissance serait une décroissance' supports the notion, above, that the adult

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



female body somehow reduces the ‘force’ of the subject. At seven years old Amélie fixes the age of her death at twelve, in order to die before she enters adulthood. She notes: ‘Je fixai mon décès à douze ans. Un soulagement profond s’empara de moi. Douze ans, c’était un âge idéal pour mourir. Il fallait partir avant le début du processus de décrépitude’ (BF 77). For Amélie, *la Déesse Vivante* is living proof that puberty heralds the beginning of a decline towards death and the end of the carefree, pure and beautiful existence of childhood. The maturing body becomes a source of horror for Amélie:

Mon corps se déforma. Je grandis de douze centimètres en un an. Il me vint des seins, grotesques de petitesse, mais c’était déjà trop pour moi: j’essayai de les brûler avec un briquet, comme les amazones s’incendiaient un sein pour mieux tirer à l’arc; je ne réussis qu’à me faire mal. (BF 162)

It is at this point in the text that the narrator’s anorexia begins. Amélie’s refusal of food is a refusal of adulthood. Significantly, recalling *Thornytorinx*, anorexia offers the only constant in the narrator’s unstable world: ‘Les déplacements ne m’affectaient plus: l’anorexie était transportable’ (BF 173). Throughout the text, this is consolidated via the symbolism of countries and political borders which come to represent physical changes: ‘Le Bangladesh sombra dans la dictature militaire. Je sombrai dans la dictature de mon corps. La Birmanie, Albanie asiatique, vivait en autarcie. Je fermai mes frontières’ (BF 162). Her body becomes a dictator, and closing its boundaries becomes Amélie’s only means of gaining freedom from it.

A similar fear of adolescence is expressed by the narrator of *Robert*. A contemporary fairy tale which tells the story of the unusual Plectrude, the narrative begins with the traumatic circumstances of Plectrude’s birth and follows her extraordinary journey through childhood and adolescence. After shooting

Plectrude's father for selecting an average name for their unborn daughter – as, in her opinion, 'Vouloir appeler son enfant Tanguy ou Joëlle, c'est vouloir lui offrir un monde médiocre, un horizon déjà fermé' (*RNP* 20) – Plectrude's mother is sent to prison. Here she gives birth to Plectrude, ensures she is christened with a name that will make certain an unusual destiny, and swiftly hangs herself. Plectrude is left to be raised by her aunt Clémence, whom she believes to be her mother. As her birth mother intended, Plectrude is an extraordinary child and Clémence creates a fairytale fantasy world which mother and daughter secretly share during the hours Clémence's husband and two biological daughters are at work and school.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout the text the focus is on individuality, and the exceptionally beautiful Plectrude walks a fine line between being considered '[un] messie' (*RNP* 29) and '[une] cancre' (*RNP* 73); however, it is worth noting that this is not just any 'cancré' but 'la cancre le plus estimée en France' (*RNP* 73). Her school-life is filled with anxiety, as her unique conceptualisation of the world around her often leads to confusion, whilst her home-life is filled with a sense of security, as Clémence appears to go out of her way to accommodate Plectrude's extraordinary tastes and interests. Food is swiftly presented as a site of conflict, as her first encounters with it are characterised by caution and fastidiousness, later giving way to disgust and distress (introducing the ideas of containment and contamination discussed in Chapter 3).

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<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of the fairytale aspects of the text, see: Siobhán McIlvanney, "'Il était une fois...': Trauma and the Fairytale in Amélie Nothomb's *Robert des noms propres*", *Dalhousie French Studies* 81 (2007), pp.19-28.

As in *Biographie*, language is presented as a tool for control and, as we will see in the final section, Plectrude uses it as a means of ordering the confusing world around her. The narrator is shown to prefer art to real life, as she attempts to ‘stage-manage’ her life to aesthetic effect. Just before she reaches puberty, Plectrude is sent to a Parisian ballet school to follow Clémence’s unfulfilled childhood dream. It is here that Plectrude truly comes into her own, as her talent at ballet is presented as an innate, creative ‘gift’. The ballet school’s strict physical and dietary regime cements Plectrude’s difficult relationship with food, as she attempts to stave off puberty and its associated threats and weaknesses through anorexia. Her extreme dietary regime eventually leaves her crippled and unable to dance again, at which point Clémence rejects her adoptive daughter and reveals the traumatic circumstances surrounding her birth. It is only by distancing herself from Clémence and beginning to eat again, that Plectrude eventually matures into womanhood and takes control of her own destiny. As this synopsis has suggested, the concern with recreating a ‘representative’ picture of anorexia discussed in Chapter 3 is noticeably absent, replaced with a focus on uniqueness and individuality. The mother-daughter relationship, however, remains a consistent theme. As in *Petite* and *Thornytorinx*, Plectrude’s anorexia is attributed to this relationship, to which this section now turns.

In Chapter 3, Bruch’s ‘confusion of pronouns’ was used to explain how the young anorexic learns to be more responsive to other’s perceptions of her needs than to her needs themselves.<sup>20</sup> The mother of the anorexic was seen to be the particular focus of this confusion, which has a twofold effect: firstly, to

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<sup>20</sup> Bruch, *op. cit.* p. 36.

conceal the anorexic's own inner states from herself, as the desires of the mother take precedence; secondly, the anorexic comes to view her body as a reflected image of the desires of others. In *Robert*, this first effect is made most explicit upon Plectrude's acceptance into Clémence's ballet school of choice: 'Plectrude reçut sa lettre d'admission. Ce fut le plus beau jour de la vie de sa mère' (*RNP* 133). In terms of the second instance, Plectrude's image of herself is shown to be based upon her mother's fairytale projections: '[Clémence] – Tu vas voir comme tu es belle. Retenant son souffle, la petite regardait son reflet dans le miroir [...] En cette image insensée d'elle-même, elle se reconnaissait' (*RNP* 37). It is only when she conforms to the image her mother projects on to her (that of an imaginary and, most significantly, unrealisable, fairytale princess), that Plectrude is able to recognise herself. Although she cannot *become* the princess her mother imagines, through anorexia Plectrude can hormonally and behaviourally succeed in avoiding maturity. Her deliberately emaciated and vulnerable appearance represents an attempt to force her mother to continue to care for her as an infant, behaviour which she revels in before the onset of her eating disorder:

La danseuse alla se blottir dans les bras de sa mère. Celle-ci la cajola, la dorlota, lui dit des petits mots d'amour, la frictionna – lui prodigua les mille tendresses exquisés que les meilleures des mères donnent à leurs filles (*RNP* 92-93).

Here, Plectrude's dependence on her mother's contact and affection is highlighted. Plectrude fears the separation from Clémence that adulthood will bring: 'aucun amour, pensait-elle, ne pourrait lui plaire autant que celui de sa mère. Être dans le bras d'un garçon, ça ne la faisait pas rêver. Être dans les bras de Clémence, c'était l'absolu' (*RNP* 93). The threat of separation from her mother is not solely attributed to the natural progression towards self-sufficiency which

adulthood will bring, however, but to the fear that her mother will reject her abject adult female body: ‘Oui, mais sa mère l’aimerait-elle toujours autant quand elle serait une adolescente boutonneuse? Cette idée la terrifia. Elle n’osa pas poser la question’ (*RNP* 93). Retaining her pre-pubescent body appears to be the only solution enabling Plectrude to avoid the unattractive, spotty, hormonal teenage body which risks evoking her mother’s disgust and disapproval. In response, Plectrude deliberately cultivates her childish qualities: ‘Dès lors, Plectrude cultiva son enfance [...] Elle se coiffait de nattes ou de coquettes, se vêtait exclusivement de salopettes, se promenait en serrant un ours en peluche sur son cœur, s’asseyait sur le sol pour nouer les lacets de ses Kickers’ (*RNP* 94). She ensures that both her dress and mannerisms are childlike, nurturing an image of innocence and vulnerability.

Like Amélie in *Biographie* – who experiences ‘rien que de l’effroi’ (*BF* 134) in the face of ‘le dernier anniversaire enfantin’ (*BF* 146) – Plectrude expresses regret at reaching her last birthday before entering her teens: ‘C’était la première fois qu’un anniversaire lui donnait un vague pincement au cœur [...] Douze ans, c’était comme une limite: le dernier anniversaire innocent’ (*BF* 92). In both *Biographie* and *Robert*, then, the last birthday before puberty is foregrounded. In *Robert*, Plectrude’s twelfth birthday is the last birthday she feels secure enough to enjoy. The idea of turning thirteen fills her with horror:

Treize ans, elle refusait d’y penser. Ça sonnait horrible. Le monde des teenagers l’attirait aussi peu que possible. Treize ans, ce devait être plein de déchirures, de malaise, d’acné, de première règles, de soutiens-gorge et autres atrocités. (*RNP* 92)

The onset of puberty represents a violent wrench away from the comfort of childhood. The narrator’s anxiety is rooted in bodily transformation, specifically

the ‘atrocités’ of menstruation, breasts and hormonal skin changes. In response, the childish body, which has none of these negative qualities, is cherished: ‘Elle caressa avec délectation son torse plat comme le parquet’ (*RNP* 92). In both *Biographie* and *Robert*, anorexia is presented as what Malson terms ‘a psycho-biological retreat into childhood’.<sup>21</sup> In the former, this desire to ‘retreat’ into childhood stems from a fear of the adult female body and the perceived loss of stability it threatens to engender. In the latter, we have seen this to stem from a fear of separation from the mother. The comparison, above, between the narrator’s childish, ‘plat’ body and ‘le parquet’ brings us to the second focus of this section; the desire for a body as inorganic artefact.

In both texts, but in *Robert* in particular, a preference for art over life is exhibited. Nothomb’s notion of the body as an inorganic artefact is, in certain respects, far removed from *écriture féminine*’s notion of female flesh as a source of creativity. As we have seen, *écriture féminine* echoes the female body’s cyclical and overflowing capacities in a subversive writing which is neither chronological nor contained. Cixous writes of women:

Orageuses, ce qui est nôtre se détache de nous sans que nous redoutions de nous affaiblir: nos regards s’en vont, nos sourires filent, les rires de toutes nos bouches, nos sangs coulent et nous nous répandons sans nous épuiser, nos pensées, nos signes, nos écrits, nous ne les retenons pas [...] nous nous inspirons et nous nous expirons sans essoufflement, nous sommes partout!<sup>22</sup>

Above all, Cixous’ vision evokes the *liberation* of a female body. This body is vibrant, organic, fleshy, fluid and unhindered; it is a body whose vitality both incites creativity and constitutes a metaphor for a poetic ‘feminine’ writing. In Nothomb’s texts, however, a controlled, empty, inorganic ‘non-body’ is depicted.

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<sup>21</sup> Malson, p. 117.

<sup>22</sup> Cixous, *Rire*, p. 42.

This ‘non-body’ is an empty figuration evacuated of the unruly, messy femininity and female flesh so celebrated in Cixous’ vision of *écriture féminine*. In certain respects, however, it could be considered to have a subversive edge which is very much in the spirit of *écriture féminine*. By way of elucidating this ambiguity, this section turns to *Robert*, in which Plectrude repeatedly expresses a preference for art over life. It examines how the narrator strives to achieve an idealised inorganic form and argues that the instances in which she attempts to manipulate reality – to turn it into art – exemplify the anorexic desire for ‘total control’, discussed in Chapter 3.<sup>23</sup> It then examines how this disembodied form could be considered subversive. In particular, it discusses Nothomb’s focus on Plectrude’s eyes as an attempt to signify a powerful (feminine) subjectivity which is construed *without* the body.

Nothomb’s disembodied aesthetic entails a construction of the female body as a work of art. As Anna Kemp discusses, a particular understanding of a work of art is at play here.<sup>24</sup> Kemp argues that Nothombian childhood ‘is a space without body that is entirely colonized by the constructed, artificial, and aesthetic’.<sup>25</sup> For Kemp, the ‘freedom’ of the Nothombian child ‘is first and foremost the freedom of the artist; an artist, moreover, who produces herself as her own master-work’.<sup>26</sup> As we will see, in the following discussion, Plectrude recreates life in the image she prefers. In this text, art represents a means of controlling and re-constructing messy reality. This is most evident when Plectrude

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<sup>23</sup> Malson, p. 123.

<sup>24</sup> See: Anna Kemp, ‘The Child as Artist in Amélie Nothomb’s *Robert des noms propres*’, *French Studies* 66: 1 (2012), pp. 54-67.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

and her best friend, Roselyne, decide to build snowmen. In a performance of the anorexic's risky quest to transcend the body, Plectrude's determination to transform her body into an artwork reaches deathly proportions: 'Faire un bonhomme de neige, c'est trop facile, avait-elle décrété. Il faut devenir un bonhomme de neige, en restant debout sous les flocons, ou un gisant de neige, en se couchant dans un jardin' (*RNP* 81). Not content with merely *building* a snowman, Plectrude strives to *become* one. Plectrude and Roselyne, who dutifully follows her friend's example, remain inert beneath the snowflakes. It is not long before Roselyne tires of the cold, but Plectrude remains (literally) frozen still. Just as anorexia effects a dramatic reduction of the body, Plectrude reduces her body to a lifeless statue:

Le gisant, lui exultait. Il avait gardé les yeux ouverts, comme les morts avant l'intervention d'un tiers. En se couchant par terre, il avait abandonné son corps: il s'était désolidarisé de la sensation glaciale et de la peur physique d'y laisser sa peau. Il n'était plus qu'un visage soumis aux forces du ciel. (*RNP* 81)

In this description, Plectrude loses her identity to that of the statue; she 'abandons' her body and sensation leaves her as the icy cold sets in. Although the use of the masculine pronouns *il* and *lui* necessarily refer to *le gisant*, their repetition nevertheless produces a sense of de-feminisation. Plectrude's identity is sublimated to that of the snowman. She is reduced from a fleshy, living female body to a masculine image, and finally nothing more than a face abandoned to the elements. Whilst 'désolidarisé' suggests her body is somehow pleasurable dispersed, the idea of rising above the 'la peur physique' suggests escaping the confines of her body. She transcends her body to become genderless and discorporate. Any trace of femininity is obliterated and covered by the blank



white canvas of snow: ‘Sa féminité d’enfant de dix ans n’était pas présente, non qu’elle fût encombrante: le gisant n’avait conservé que le minimum de lui-même afin d’opposer le moins de résistance possible au déferlement livide’ (*RNP* 82). Plectrude has kept only a minimum of her ‘self’, surrendering the body to the elements. The white of the snow represents the purity of a spirit freed from the ties of the body. Plectrude blends in with her surroundings; any trace of her female form is erased by ‘la morte blanche’ (*RNP* 82) as ‘la mince silhouette du gisant était presque indiscernable, à peine un accident dans l’amalgame blanc du jardin’ (*RNP* 83). Her body gradually closes off, fulfilling the anorexic aspiration to attain a body with clearly demarcated, closed boundaries, discussed in Chapter 3: ‘Les orifices qui jusque-là étaient restés libres autour des yeux se refermèrent’ (*RNP* 85). This provides her with a new perception of the world, which becomes abstract and fragmented, ‘en puzzle, pièces détachées d’un mystère immense’ (*RNP* 82). As Kemp remarks, in this scenario the narrator is ‘entirely self-identified with her own creation’.<sup>27</sup>

The scene is rendered all the more pleasing to Plectrude because her life is saved by another, as her friend eventually comes to her rescue, leading Roselyne to question ‘si [Plectrude] n’eût pas été capable de se laisser mourir plutôt que d’enfreindre les lois héroïques de son personnage’ (*RNP* 88). Throughout the text, Plectrude repeatedly plays out make-believe scenarios in which she strives for aesthetic perfection, often to the detriment of the other protagonists and frequently posing a palpable risk to her own life. After each instance in which her life is endangered, Plectrude justifies her actions in the name of art. Upon being rescued

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 59

from the snow, she comments: ‘C’est encore plus beau comme ça’ (*RNP* 87).

When Roselyne pulls her from the path of an oncoming bus, she notes: ‘A cet instant précis, la danseuse avait une expression bouleversée de plaisir’ (*RNP* 89).

A less dangerous instance of this is a make-believe wedding in which Plectrude or Roselyne marry a boy from their class. Plectrude, however, stage-manages each wedding to a compulsory tragic finale. The wedding becomes an ‘empty’, aesthetic production. Just as Plectrude strives to render her body a ‘non-body’ – an empty, inorganic artefact – these scenarios replicate a hollow version of the ceremony, which is evacuated of any troublesome, unpredictable emotion. In the image of the anorexic body, the ceremony is all form, no content. In a similar way, food is often sublimated to become an aesthetic experience across Nothomb’s works. In *Robert*, Plectrude (as will be discussed in the following section) rejects the mundane, stodgy food provided by the school canteen and prefers the ‘empty’ calories of the attractive, sugary treats provided by her mother. In *Biographie*, Amélie discusses her never-ending quest for sugar over nutritious foods. Likewise Amélie’s obsession with drinking both water and alcohol are sublimated from bodily experiences to intellectual ones, in her positioning of water as ‘her element’ and alcohol as the epitome of excess and creativity: ‘L’eau s’adressait à une autre soif que l’alcool; si ce dernier parlait à mon besoin de brûlure, de guerre, de danse, de sensations fortes, l’eau, elle murmurait de folles promesses au désert ancestral contenu dans ma gorge’ (*BF* 47).

The mother-daughter relationship, as depicted in *Robert*, however, can be seen as the ultimate example of the Nothombian preference for art over life. In *Robert*, this relationship is a construct. Clémence is not Plectrude’s biological

mother, but an adoptive mother chosen specifically for her. In this constructed relationship, as Kemp explains, ‘love does not flow unconditionally from the maternal heart but must be earned and deserved’.<sup>28</sup> In order to be loved, Plectrude must produce herself in the image Clémence projects on to her. In both the mother-daughter relationship and the wedding scenario Plectrude stage-manages; the uncontrollable (emotion) becomes controllable (sublimated). Plectrude’s construction of herself in this image, her ‘cultivation’ of childhood, mentioned above, and her transformation into *le gisant* represent attempts to become both creator *and* artwork. As Kemp notes, Plectrude wishes to create an impenetrable ‘closed circuit’, in which the reality is constructed in the narrator’s own interest.<sup>29</sup> Plectrude’s fear of the unpredictability of the adolescent body, mentioned at the beginning of this section, then, can be read as a fear of its potential to interrupt this ‘closed circuit’.

A similar privileging of art over life permeates *Biographie*, in which Amélie emphasises a preference for New York’s false, man-made buildings and structured lifestyle to Bangladesh, which she perceives to be dirty, comparatively ‘uncivilised’, dangerous and ‘other’. Amélie’s descriptions of Bangladesh represent it as an embodiment of disorder and abjection. In Bangladesh, the narrator is confronted daily with starvation and death. She describes people lying on the street ‘en train de mourir’ (*BF* 134), driven in a fight against the agony of starvation, their bodies emaciated or deformed. Amélie is enraged and disgusted by these bodies, which are so different from her own and which provoke a guilt (as the daughter of a wealthy diplomat) which she cannot adequately understand

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<sup>28</sup> Kemp, ‘Child as Artist’, p. 57.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

or reconcile. Instead, she notes, ‘Je me mis à haïr la faim, les faims, la mienne, les autres, et même ceux qui étaient capable de la ressentir. Je haïs les hommes, les animaux, les plantes’ (*BF* 135). Associating the ‘living’ body – people, animals, plants – and its need for food with these feelings of revulsion and hatred, ‘seules les pierres étaient épargnées’ from Amélie’s disgust. Significantly, Amélie wishes to *become* one of them, a faceless, emotionless, inanimate object: ‘J’aurais voulu être l’une d’elles’ (*BF* 135). It is in Bangladesh that the narrator’s anorexia begins as a means of coping with the sense of displacement she experiences in this world so different from her own. Significantly, it is at this point that Amélie, exhibiting a preference for literature over reality, turns to reading to escape the horror of the outside world (this idea of reading as an escape will be returned to). In *Robert* and *Biographie*, then, art and anorexia are linked as both share the aspiration to transcend uncontrollable reality.

If, as the above discussion has exposed, Nothomb’s disembodied aesthetic is, in many respects, a far cry from the explicitly embodied aesthetic of *écriture féminine*, at times, this aesthetic may be seen to have a subversive edge which is in keeping with *écriture féminine*. Firstly, Nothomb’s anorexics may appear as subversive outsider figures. Throughout *Robert*, Plectrude’s alterity is exaggerated. Nothomb, however, takes pains to underscore that this alterity is not wrong, just different. Whilst fairytale vocabulary seeks to position this difference as a ‘gift’, descriptions of her physical appearance seek to communicate an underlying spiritual power. Above all, it is Plectrude’s eyes which take precedence in such descriptions:

Cette nouvelle née petite et maigre plantait sur sa cible un regard énorme – énorme de dimension et de signification. Ses yeux immenses et magnifiques

disaient à Clémence et à Denis: ‘Aimez-moi! Votre destin est de m’aimer! Je n’ai que huit semaines, mais je n’en suis pas moins un être grandiose! Si vous saviez, si seulement vous saviez...’. (*RNP* 24)

Plectrude’s eyes communicate a spiritual power which is greater than, and separate from, her physical body. The emphasis on her eyes, which have long been depicted in poetry and culture as ‘the window to the soul’, signifies a powerful subjectivity which is construed *without* her body. As Anna Kemp remarks, Plectrude has all the signs of idealised feminine beauty without the affliction of the body: ‘It is not sex but text’.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the suggestion of a ‘masculine’ spiritual freedom from the ‘feminine’ ties of nature, however, the eerie connotations of a cerebral power which permeate the descriptions of her eyes conversely reinsert her into archaic stereotypes of a devious and deceitful femininity associated with mysticism and witchcraft. The controlling power behind her gaze is attributed to the traumatic ‘circonstances de sa naissance’ (*RNP* 24) which have instilled in her a magical quality: ‘la petite dernière était hors norme – splendide, intense, énigmatique, loufoque’ (*RNP* 25).<sup>31</sup> Underlying these enchanting qualities resides a brooding silence, a preference for darkness over daylight, and the intimation of an innate and not wholly pleasant power: ‘Elle était étrange jusque dans sa façon [...] de ne jamais pleurer, de dormir peu la nuit et beaucoup le jour, de montrer d’un doigt décidé les objets qu’elle convoitait’ (*RNP* 25). Calling to mind the transformations of Clément’s sorceress, discussed in the introduction, Clémence’s transformation

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>31</sup> As Kemp notes, this is a further example of the mother-daughter relationship as a construct: ‘If the relationship between Plectrude and Clémence is privileged over the natural intimacy of mother and child, it is [...] because this relationship is imagined to have the transcendental qualities of a work of art’ (‘Child as Artist’, p. 57).

into a fairytale sorceress (a ritual which has become routine whilst mother and daughter are alone together) transpires under the commanding gaze of Plectrude: ‘Sous le regard fixe de l’enfant, la jeune femme de vingt-huit ans laissait sortir de son sein la fée de seize ans et la sorcière de dix mille ans qui y étaient contenues’ (*RNP* 34). Whilst Plectrude’s ‘regard fixe’ is a far cry from the look of frivolous delight one might expect from a child in such a situation, ‘la sorcière de dix mille ans’ adds a subversive mythical weight to their fancy-dress play.

In one instance, Plectrude is sent home from nursery because her menacing gaze ‘fait pleurer les autres enfants’ (*RNP* 32). Even the adult teacher shares their unease, and confesses: ‘je dois dire que je les comprends, quand c’est moi qu’elle regarde je suis mal à l’aise’.<sup>32</sup> The menacing quality of Plectrude’s gaze could be understood to privilege the feminist reading of the hysteric as a rebellious figure. Plectrude’s apparent power to communicate outside of the masculine symbolic is praised by Clémence who, ‘folle de fierté, annonça aux gens que sa fille avait été renvoyée de l’école maternelle à cause de ses yeux. Personne n’avait jamais entendu une pareille histoire’ (*RNP* 33). Plectrude is not the object of the gaze, in these examples, but the agent. Her innate power is threatening to the existing social order, and through her neighbours’ comment – ‘C’est un démon la petite dernière’ (*RNP* 33) – she becomes a contemporary instance of the demoniacally possessed hysteric discussed in the introduction to this study.

As Rodgers remarks, however, ‘Nothomb’s insistence on the beauty of the face [...] is a cerebral notion of beauty, highly stylized, close to being

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

disembodied'.<sup>33</sup> It is a clear departure from original goals of *écriture féminine* which advocate a celebration of the female form. Nothomb's denial of the female body reflects the staple mind/ body split of anorexia, enacted in *Petite* and *Thornytorinx* in Chapter 3. Rather than re-writing the female body back into her text, Nothomb's focus on Plectrude's eyes effects the eradication of the female body which this phallogentric binary produces. Nothomb's narrator exhibits an almost misogynistic disgust for the adult female body and a preference for 'masculine' ideals of femininity. For example, when Roselyne lifts her t-shirt, confronting Plectrude with evidence of her burgeoning adolescence, 'Plectrude hurle d'horreur' (*RNP* 141). Plectrude, instead, embodies a 'masculine' fantasy of femininity which is constructed as a disembodied aesthetic.

This section has drawn out the ambiguities of Nothomb's disembodied aesthetic to show how her eradication of the body rejects *écriture féminine's* notion of the female flesh as a source of creativity (instead effecting a dramatic eradication of femininity), whilst maintaining a subversive edge, through the presentation of her anorexic protagonist as the bearer of an innate, disruptive 'feminine' force, which could be considered reminiscent of Cixous' rebellious hysteric. The following section moves on to Nothomb's portrayal of the anorexic preoccupation with the separation of the self, the desire for a body which refuses the fluid relationship between the self and other advocated by *écriture féminine*.

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<sup>33</sup> Rodgers, 'Anorexic Beauties', p.60.

## Boundaries of the Body: Individuating the Self

As we have seen, *écriture féminine* can be accomplished only through a reconnection to the lived experience of the female body, which would explode the phallogocentric mind/ body binary that locates subjectivity, creativity, and intellect in the mind. According to Cixous, when reconnected to the body women experience it as '[un] corps sans fin, sans "bout", sans "parties" principales'.<sup>34</sup> A woman can experience herself as 'capable de perdre une partie d'elle-même sans être perdue'.<sup>35</sup> As the masculine bodily experience 'gravite autour du pénis, engendrant ce corps [...] centralisé, sous la dictature des parties', the 'masculine' mode of writing is defined by division and hierarchy.<sup>36</sup> Women's bodies, on the other hand, are continuous and boundary-less, multiple, menstruating, overflowing and always extending. *Écriture féminine* is thus fluid and continuous. It is characterised by a poetic style which pays particular attention to rhythm and sound and engenders multiple, proliferating meanings. This overflowing fluidity and lack of clear boundaries is what the anorexic relentlessly struggles to control. As we have seen both Malson and Bruch assert in the previous chapter, within the discourse of anorexia the female body is construed as alien and in need of regulation. The anorexic body is concomitantly constructed as *the* regulated body. Eating becomes an alien desire (as a desire of the body which is alien to the mind) and must be forbidden.<sup>37</sup> As we saw in Chapter 3 (in *Thornytorinx* in particular), the anorexic construes the act of consuming food as an activity which belongs to

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<sup>34</sup> Cixous, *Rire*, p. 60.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Malson, p. 124.



the body and not the mind. In *Thornytorinx*, Camille explicitly expresses this: “Craquer”, mot emprunt de la plus atroce des culpabilités, où l’esprit se trouve à la merci du corps et, ce dernier une fois rassasié, on se sent terriblement faible. On s’en veut d’avoir cédé à un besoin si vil et bassement naturel, animal, et on différencie encore un peu plus le corps de l’esprit en les mettent en concurrence pour qu’ils finissent par se détester franchement l’un l’autre’ (TX 33). For the anorexic, food becomes an alien substance and in a typical contradiction, it is both desired and abjected. It becomes a polluting substance which holds the power to disrupt the integrity of the self. The anorexic thus seeks to police the boundaries of the body, refusing entry to this polluting substance and maintaining a strict division between self and other. Food-refusal, then, is a means of establishing a powerful, independent (and disembodied) subjectivity.

This section examines how the above construction of food-refusal is complicated in *Robert* and *Métaphysique*. Both texts express an anorexic preoccupation with the strict policing of bodily boundaries, which is offered as a means of individuating the self. However, just as the *policing* of bodily boundaries is presented as a means of individuating the self, in both texts, the *transgression* of bodily boundaries (through eating) is also construed as a means of constituting an independent subjectivity. In order to elucidate this ambiguity, this section begins with an examination how food-refusal is presented, in *Robert*, in terms of the anorexic desire to constitute the body as a distinct, closed-off and regulated space. It then discusses how food-refusal also, contradictorily, contributes to an identity which is fused with that of the mother. It argues that, for Plectrude, anorexia does not provide her with independence and agency, rather, it

blurs her identity and desires with that of her mother. Eating, on the other hand, permits Plectrude to break away from the mother-daughter relationship. This section then turns to *Métaphysique*, in which Amélie's entry into subjecthood (and language) is brought about by her first experience of desire through eating. After introducing the text, it discusses the narrator's 'tubal' body as an expression of the anorexic preoccupation with bodily boundaries, and then turns to the recurring motif of the koi carp as a symbol which further elucidates this preoccupation. To conclude, this section examines the water imagery which permeates all three texts, as this ties together Cixousian and Nothombian notions of identity and femininity. Whereas Cixous advocates the fluidity of the feminine, and posits water as the female element linked with the mother, in *Robert*, *Métaphysique*, and *Biographie* water is also strongly linked to identity, but, in an ambiguity which has become a staple feature of these two chapters, it becomes both a 'source' of (feminine) identity, and a 'threat' to it.

In *Robert*, lunch time in the school canteen proves to be a traumatic affair for Plectrude, for whom: 'Le pire fut atteint à l'heure du déjeuner' (*RNP* 50). Accustomed to spending meal times surrounded by 'la lueur des chandelles' (*RNP* 51) and 'des tenures de velours rouge' (*RNP* 51), and served colourful sweet treats and delicacies by 'une maman belle et vêtue avec magnificence' (*RNP* 51), the noise and smells of the school canteen inspire a horror in Plectrude which cements her difficult relationship with food. For Plectrude, food becomes irrevocably associated with panic and confusion. Plectrude experiences a loss of identity as her classmates are collectively herded into the canteen and forced onto large shared tables: 'Les élèves furent conduits dans une vaste cantine où régnait une

odeur caractéristique, mélange de vomi de même et de désinfectant’ (*RNP* 50). Abject and overpowering smells, such as vomit and potent disinfectant, mingle amongst large numbers of bodies and the odours of unidentifiable foods. The food itself is a confused mixture of colours and textures: ‘Des dames apportèrent des plats au contenu et aux couleurs non identifiables. Paniquée, Plectrude ne put se décider à mettre ces corps étrangers dans son assiette’ (*RNP* 51). Plectrude’s panic here recalls the panic of Brisac’s narrator when faced with an overwhelming variety of groceries. In *Robert*, whilst morsels of food are described as ‘corps étrangers’ (*RNP* 50), the other children are described as ‘moches et sales’ (*RNP* 50). The room is ‘laide’ and ‘sentait bizarre’, and mushy, unappetising food is carelessly ‘jetait dans son assiette’ (*RNP* 50). If Plectrude is free to decide how much (or how little) she eats at home, at school, ‘on lui signifiait qu’elle ne quitterait pas la cantine sans avoir tout avalé’ (*RNP* 51). Describing the whole ordeal as ‘ce cauchemar’ (*RNP* 52), Plectrude vomits the food in a physical and symbolic rejection of the admixture and confusion of the abject: ‘A mi-parcours, elle vomit dans l’assiette et comprit l’origine de l’odeur’ (*RNP* 52). As in *Petite* and *Thornytorinx*, these passages are pervaded by a sense of confusion and overwhelming accumulation. Vomiting is not only a reaction to a stressful situation, but also Plectrude’s only means of expressing her discontent.

When Plectrude leaves school and begins ballet training at *l’école des rats*, her relationship with food becomes increasingly complex. The ballet school strictly endorses ‘masculine’ conceptions of the female body which, in line with the anorexic conception of the body, present it as something to be reduced, policed and controlled. If Plectrude had previously clung to her childish body and childish

mannerisms in an attempt to halt the onset of puberty, the regime of her ballet school effectively executes ‘une éviction de l’enfance’ (*RNP* 119). Whereas her childish body was previously cherished and nurtured, regarded as ‘[une] plante aimée’ (*RNP* 120) whose growth was ‘un merveilleux phénomène naturel’ (*RNP* 120), now, her body is something to be perfected and punished:

Là, du jour au lendemain, on les arrachait à ce terreau humide et elles se retrouvaient dans un monde sec, ou un œil âpre de spécialiste extrême-oriental décrétait que telle tige devait être allongée, que telle racine devait être affinée, et qu’elles le seraient, de gré ou de force, car, depuis le temps, on avait des techniques pour cela. (*RNP* 120)

The strict regime of the ballet school places a focus on weight reduction.

Plectrude’s assertion, ‘on n’était jamais trop squelettique’ (*RNP* 121), recalls Camille’s statement, in *Thornytorinx*, that in her mother’s eyes, ‘on n’est jamais trop mince’ (*op. cit* 32). Concomitantly, meal times become a source of torment for Plectrude, who admits: ‘Les professeurs avaient tant diabolisée la nourriture qu’elle en paraissait alléchante, si médiocre fût-elle’ (*RNP* 122). The ballerinas regard food ‘avec terreur’, and sense that: ‘Une bouchée avalée était une bouchée de trop’ (*RNP* 122). Despite her hunger and growing isolation, Plectrude nevertheless experiences a sense of agency through her food refusal; ‘Elle bénissait son existence dure et ses privations: elle au moins, elle allait vers quelque chose’ (*RNP* 139). Like the narrator of *Petite*, Plectrude feels superior to those who do not regulate their bodies to such an extreme extent; policing her body is presented as a means of achieving her goals.

From the above, it is clear that body management has become central to Plectrude’s self-integrity. As we saw in Chapter 3, in relation to *Thornytorinx* in particular, the dualistic construction of food as both dangerous and tempting can

function as a metaphor for the ‘ambivalence’ of the mother-daughter relationship.<sup>38</sup> Although it is the traditional nurturing maternal figure which, according to Malson, is ‘a culturally overdetermined presence’ in women’s relationships to food, in *Robert*, this is complicated, as Clémence fails to fulfil this role.<sup>39</sup> During the school holiday, Plectrude’s father and sisters disapprovingly remark upon Plectrude’s ‘visage en lame de couteau’ (*RNP* 137), Clémence, however, ‘fut la seule à s’en émerveiller’ (*RNP* 137). For Clémence, Plectrude’s success as a ballerina takes priority over matters of health: ‘elle eût tellement voulu être ballerine et, grâce à Plectrude, elle assouvissait cette ambition par procuration. Peu lui importait la santé de son enfant à cet idéal’ (*RNP* 143). When Plectrude eliminates dairy from her diet, she begins to experience terrible pain in her legs. Upon confessing all to Clémence, who remarks upon her courage, Plectrude is disturbed by her mother’s lack of concern: ‘en son for intérieure, elle eut l’impression que sa mère eût dû lui dire quelques chose de très différent. Elle ne savait pas quoi’ (*RNP* 149). As Plectrude experiences the mother-daughter relationship as a construct, as discussed above, in which love is not freely given but earned by conforming to a particular image, Plectrude is unable to envision the appropriate response. In Nothomb’s text, then, not eating is shown to be associated with the mother’s praise. The nurturing maternal role, discussed by Malson, is subverted.

As Plectrude associates her anorexic body with determination and achievement, her recovery from her injuries portends a ‘healthy’ body which is unable to dance. The life-saving nutrients injected into Plectrude during her

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<sup>38</sup> Malson, p. 127.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

hospital treatment breach the rigidly policed boundaries of the anorexic body: ‘Dans son lit d’hôpital, elle regardait le goutte-à-goutte qui la nourrissait: elle avait vraiment la conviction qu’il lui injectait du malheur en guise d’aliment’ (*RNP* 153).<sup>40</sup> For Plectrude, the anorexic body is associated with her mother’s happiness and pride, whereas the healthy body is associated with her mother’s misery and disappointment. If food-refusal typically signifies a *rejection* of the mother and an attempt to attain a subjectivity that is separate and independent, for Plectrude, refusing food is a form of *identification* with her mother. Like Nouk, in *Petite*, Plectrude’s identification with her mother’s wishes is so strong that, without the possibility of becoming a ballerina, ‘elle n’avait plus de destin’ (*RNP* 162). By achieving a body which conforms to the drastic weight restrictions of the ballet school, Plectrude’s agency is subsumed within that of her mother. It is conversely when she begins to eat, that this represents a *rupture* with that identification, and the birth of an independent subjectivity. After Clémence pronounces the catalytic words ‘tu me dégoûtes’, Plectrude:

regarda l’œil glacial de la femme qui venait de lui lancer une telle condamnation. Elle ne voulut pas croire ce qu’elle avait entendu et vu. Elle s’enfuit aussi vite que ses béquilles le lui permettaient.

Plectrude tomba sur son lit et pleura autant que l’on peut pleurer. Elle s’endormit.

Quand elle s’éveilla, elle sentit un phénomène invraisemblable: elle avait faim. (*RNP* 157-58)

It is thus only when Plectrude is rejected by Clémence, and hence free of the responsibility of fulfilling her aspiration to become a ballerina, that Plectrude regains a normal appetite. So far, then, we have seen how the anorexic

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<sup>40</sup> This idea is frequently expressed in narratives of anorexia which deal with treatment. In de Vigan’s *Jours sans faim* the narrator notes: ‘Quelques centaines de millilitres d’angoisse envahissent son corps en ronronnant. Elle panique, elle suffoque, elle sanglote’ (p. 19).

preoccupation with policing the boundaries of the body is presented in *Robert*. The ambiguous construction of food-refusal presented in this text, in which both eating and not-eating play a significant role in the formation of identity, has been explored. The remainder of this section now turns to *Métaphysique* to examine how Nothomb's representation of a 'tubal' body can be considered expressive of the same anorexic preoccupation, and how the formation of identity is similarly played out through food.

*Métaphysique* is a reportedly autobiographical account of Nothomb's life from birth to age three which can in fact be read as a metaphor for puberty and the trauma of leaving behind the androgynous, prepubescent body idealised in each of the texts discussed so far. The infant narrator of *Métaphysique* begins her existence as a god, in a state of absolute satisfaction before the construction of subjecthood. The narrative depicts the first three years of her life in Japan from the perspective of an internal monologue which charts her fall from divinity in to subjecthood, which is instigated by her first experience of desire and her subsequent entry into language. The narrator's body is imagined as a tube, in a similar construction to the *thornytorinx* imagined by de Peretti in Chapter 3. As a tube, the narrator spends the first few months of her life in a permanent state of passivity. Despite various attempts on behalf of the tube's parents to elicit reactions or emotion from the tube, this state of unshakeable passivity is only broken by the narrator's first experience of desire, an experience provided through eating. This experience marks the narrator's entry into language. With her entry into subjecthood the narrator, formerly figured as 'Dieu', becomes 'Amélie'. If her tubal state constituted a utopian space which escaped gender difference, her

entry into language is necessarily followed by her realisation of normative feminine difference, a theme which is explored throughout the remainder of the text.

In *Métaphysique*, the infant narrator's body passively exists as an open ended container which digests and excretes without taking anything from the matter which passes through it:

Les seules occupations de Dieu étaient la déglutition, la digestion et, conséquence directe, l'excrétion. Ces activités végétatives passent par le corps de Dieu sans qu'il en aperçoive [...] Dieu ouvrait tous les orifices nécessaires pour que les aliments solides et liquides le traversent. C'est pourquoi, à ce stade de son développement, nous appellerons Dieu le tube. (MT 7)

Similar to the *thornytorinx*, in Chapter 3, this tubal figure, which reduces the body to the digestive function to the exclusion of the reproductive function, effectively erases any trace of femininity. The slim, hollow, clear-cut lines of the tube represent an anorexic reduction of the body; excess flesh is replaced by straight lines and empty spaces. Although this construction is undoubtedly a further instance of Nothomb's aesthetic of disembodiment, as in *Thornytorinx*, the imagery is nevertheless unmistakably organic. The idea of the body as a container seen in Nobécourt, and in Brisac and de Peretti, once again comes to the fore, as Nothomb writes:

Les tubes sont de singuliers mélanges de plein et de vide, [...] une membrane d'existence protégeant un faisceau d'inexistence [...] Dieu avait la souplesse du tuyau mais demeurait rigide et inerte, confirmant ainsi sa nature de tube. [...] Il filtrait l'univers et ne retenait rien. (MT 7)

This image highlights the divisions which we have seen to be a staple feature of anorexia: inside/ outside, pure/ impure, container/ contained. The tubal body,



then, encapsulates the anorexic preoccupation with crossing boundaries in its status as a clear demarcation between inside and outside.

An interesting contrast with this starkly organic concept of the body as a tube is Camille's desire to become 'une bulle de savon' in *Thornytorinx* (TX 175). The bubble is a metaphor which has an even greater degree of separation from the biological body than the image of the tube, or thornytorinx. Clean, clear, genderless and epicene, bubbles are characterised by emptiness and purity. They are formed of a thin but definite demarcation between inside and outside, and possess an ability to float away. The image of the tube, on the other hand, brings focus back to the organic body. Although the aesthetic purity and fragility of the bubble is perhaps closer to Nothomb's ephemeral representation of the female form in *Robert*, it also captures the anorexic preoccupation with boundaries of the self discussed here.

The focus on the digestive function in *Métaphysique*, the repetitive action of filling and emptying the tube, echoes the anorexic ideal: an entity which permits the abject to pass through it without being altered by it. As a tube, the narrator does not experience desire and has no emotional connection to or dependency on her parents, who exhibit a growing concern in the face of her inertia. The tube prefers to be bottle-fed over her mother's breast because she feels that the bottle, as an inanimate container, is closer to her conception of herself than her mother: 'le biberon correspondait mieux à sa nature de tube, qui se reconnaissait dans ce récipient cylindrique [...] L'alimentation divine relevait de la plomberie' (MT 13). Vocabulary relating to divinity further enforces the idea, discussed earlier, that anorexia becomes an idealised state in Nothomb's writing.

Upon withholding food to try and provoke some form of response, the tube's mother is forced to relent, as it appears its impassivity extends to the matter of its own death. The tube is not hungry as it feels no lack. It exists in a state of blissful plenitude and complete satisfaction. Whereas, in Chapter 3, anorexia was presented as a means of forging an individual identity, the tube represents an eradication of individuality. The tubal narrator is unaware of itself as a separate entity, and considers everything it comes into contact with as part of itself. This state of unlimited omnipotence experienced by an infant in its early stages recalls discussions of Anzieu's theory of *Le Moi-peau* in Chapter 1. For the tube, the first step toward subjecthood is the visual recognition of the self as a separate entity (the process of 'specularization' discussed in relation to Irigaray in Chapter 2). However, in recognising the self as separate, the tube is forced to recognise the uncontrollable nature of its surroundings and, as Mary Jane Cowles notes, this 'necessarily signifies the fall from godhood'.<sup>41</sup> As Nothomb remarks:

Le regard est un choix. Celui qui regarde décide de se fixer sur telle chose et donc forcément d'exclure de son attention le reste de son champ de vision. C'est en quoi le regard, qui est l'essence de la vie, est d'abord un refus. Vivre signifie refuser. [...] Dieu n'avait rien refusé parce qu'il n'avait rien choisi. C'est pourquoi il ne vivait pas (*MT* 17).

According to Cowles, the separation which constitutes subjectivity has to be *chosen*: 'Life is not constituted by the experience of plenitude, but by separation, choice, refusal'.<sup>42</sup> However, it is not refusal which plays a significant role in the formation of identity in *Métaphysique*, but the acceptance of the other into the self. When the tube finally does awake from its state of passivity through the

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<sup>41</sup> Mary Jane Cowles, 'Close Encounters of the Abject Kind: The Intercultural Female Body in Amélie Nothomb's Japan', *Women in French Studies* 19 (2011), 94-107 (p. 96).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

above choice, its passivity is replaced by a violent rage: ‘Il s’apercevait que ces objets existaient en dehors de lui, sans avoir besoin de son règne. Cela lui déplaisait et il criait’ (MT 24). This rage stems from the instability engendered by this newfound separation from the plenitude and satisfaction constantly experienced as a tube. The infant’s rage is only quelled by the experience of desire, which comes through *eating*.

In an attempt to sooth the narrator, her grandmother offers her Belgian white chocolate. With her first taste: ‘la volupté lui monte à la tête, lui déchire le cerveau et y fait retentir une voix qu’il n’avait jamais entendue: – C’est moi! C’est moi qui vis!’ (MT 30). Just as Plectrude in *Robert* achieved a sense of individuation from her mother through regaining a healthy appetite, in *Metaphysique*, it is through eating that the tubal narrator enters into being and language. She stops referring to herself as god and becomes gendered: ‘Je ne suis pas “il” ni “lui”, je suis moi!’ (MT 30). As in *Robert* then, both eating and not-eating play a significant role in the formation of identity.

Although, at this point in the text, the tubal body is left behind; the anorexic preoccupation with tubal figures and bodily boundaries continues. Its most explicit manifestation is the recurrent motif of the koi carp. This motif is introduced alongside the narrator’s first perception of the social consequences of gender difference. In Japan, the month of May is designated as the month of boys and signified by the symbol of the red koi carp. Whilst there is a flag and a month

dedicated to masculinity, according to the narrator, there is no corresponding celebration for femininity.<sup>43</sup> She notes:

J'avais certes déjà remarqué qu'il y avait une différence sexuelle, mais cela ne m'avait jamais perturbée. [...] Il me semblait que femme ou homme était une opposition parmi d'autres. Pour la première fois, je soupçonnai qu'il y avait là un sacré lièvre [...] En quoi évoquait-elle davantage mon frère que moi ? Et en quoi la masculinité était-elle si formidable qu'on lui consacrait un drapeau et un mois [...] Alors qu'à la féminité, on ne dédiait pas même un fanion, pas même un jour! (*MT* 82)

In her desire to understand this celebration of masculinity Amélie pays close attention to the carp. Her parents mistake her curiosity as 'une passion ichtyologique' (*MT* 86), and present her with three carp as a gift. However, it rapidly becomes clear that Amélie's fascination with the carp stems, in fact, from disgust. Upon considering the carp as a symbol of masculinity, Amélie remarks:

C'était peut être ça, le point commun à l'origine de cette symbolique: avoir quelque chose de vilain. Les filles n'eussent pas pu être représentées par un animal répugnant [...] Les Japonais avaient eu raison de choisir cette bête pour emblème du sexe moche. (*MT* 86)

Her disgust, then, can be understood to represent a horror of the male sex organ. Whilst the feminine sex is hidden, the masculine sex is external and visible. The carp become a symbol for the masculine, and Amélie's fear of them is expressed in dreams in which they devour her:

La nuit, dans mon lit, je peuplais l'obscurité de bouches béantes. [...] les gros corps écailleux et flexibles me rejoignaient entre les draps,

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<sup>43</sup> In fact, there is a correlative celebration of femininity, but it is steeped in patriarchal ideology. Hinamatsuri, the Japanese Doll Festival, or 'Girl's Day' is held on 3 March. Ornamental dolls representing the Emperor, Empress, attendants, and musicians in traditional court dress of the Heian period (when the custom began) are customarily displayed by each household with a daughter. The dolls were originally believed to contain evil spirits, which explains the practice of floating them down the river and out to sea, thereby removing troubles or evil spirits from the family. Interestingly, the dish traditionally served on this day (a soup containing clams) is symbolic of marriage; the clam shells are left intact as no pair but the original pair may do. If the dolls are displayed past 4 March, this will result in a late marriage for the daughter. See: Haruo Shirane, *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons: Nature, Literature, and the Arts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

m'étréignaient— et leur gueule lippue et froide me roulait des pelles. [...] Le mouvement de valvule de ses mandibules [...] me violaient les lèvres pendant des éternités nocturnes. (*MT* 138)

As in *La Démangeaison*, in Chapter 1, such images of the narrator being devoured present the feminine as passive; she becomes food for the masculine. Despite the phallic symbolism of the carp, it is '[la] bouche béante' which disturbs Amélie the most: 'Ce n'était pas son estomac qui me dégoûtait, mais sa bouche' (*MT* 138).

Just as the motif of the carp has gendered connotations, the figure of the mouth, in *Petite*, has inescapable sexual connotations. In *Petite*, the darkened cave entrances in the narrator's drawings are symbolic of bodily orifices:

Je dessine des dinosaures sortant de leur grotte, toujours le même dessin. [...] c'est tellement drôle, cette petite fille inquiète qui dessine des sexes, des glandes, des verges, des testicules et des cavernes à la symbolique si grossière. (*P* 34)

Her repetitive composition of the same image suggests these drawings are subconscious projections of her fear of adult sexuality. If the mouth represents the female sex, her refusal to let food pass through the bodily boundary of her mouth represents a fear of sexual penetration. She explicitly expresses this fear following the above description of her drawings: 'Dans ma petite tente, le soir, j'ai peur des bruits, et peur qu'un homme entre' (*P* 35). Similarly, Amélie's description, above, of being 'violated' by the mouths of the carp suggests her fear of the carp is a fear of adult sexuality. As Margaret Higgonet points out, rape represents a 'total devaluation' of the feminine.<sup>44</sup> If rape is affiliated with the ultimate breakdown of autonomy and a fragmentation of identity, then Amélie's dream links the sexual adult female body with an utter loss of autonomy.

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<sup>44</sup> Margaret Higgonet, 'Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century', *Poetics Today* 6:1/2, *The Female Body in Western Culture: Semiotic Perspectives* (1985), p. 109.

The carp, then, cannot be simply reduced to the masculine. Despite its phallic shape, ‘la bouche béante’ of the carp represents the female sex. In *Petite*, the shared symbolism between the mouth and the female sex is suggested through the narrator’s horror of kissing: ‘La conviction aiguë et brutale que c’est par la bouche qu’on fait les enfants. [...] Je n’aurai jamais d’enfant’ (*P* 15). If the open mouth represents the female sex, then the closed mouth comes to represent a refusal of the other. As the disease progresses Nouk’s mouth becomes ‘plus petite’, and her teeth become ‘plus serrées’ (*P* 51), until eventually, ‘elle n’est qu’une bouche’ (*P* 70). Just as Nouk repeatedly draws the same image, Amélie repeatedly returns to the fish pool:

Je jette des fragments de bouffe. Le bouquet de gueules se lance dessus. Les tuyaux ouverts avalent [...] Leur gorge est si béante qu’en se penchant un peu on y verrait jusqu’à leur estomac [...] normalement, les créatures cachent l’intérieur de leur corps. Que se passerait-il si les gens exhibaient leurs entrailles? (*MT* 145)

The mixture and confusion of the abject is evoked through the carp’s open mouth which breaks the boundary between inside and outside. This threat of instability is further underlined by the ambiguity of the carp symbolism, which at once represents masculinity (as that which devours the feminine) and also feminine lack (symbolised by the emptiness of the gaping mouth). This ambiguity is compounded by their dual symbolism, in Japanese culture, as both sacred and impure.

Amélie is overcome by the notion that the fish are eating her own flesh (her female body), and, rather than nourish herself and in turn nourish the carp, Amélie begins to deprive her body of food. Cowles regards this as ‘the desire for

union with the maternal in a return to a tubal existence'.<sup>45</sup> However, as the narrator was shown to feel no affinity with her mother in her tubal state (as we saw, above, 'le biberon correspondait mieux à sa nature de tube' (*op. cit.* 13) this desire to return to her tubal form represents the desire to return to a form which is asexual. Amélie's disgust for the carp equates to a disgust of the body and responsibilities of the adult woman. In this way her disgust is self-directed as a disgust of her own female body. Amélie's identification with these disgusting tubal bodies forces a recognition of herself as disgusting. She reminds herself:

Tu trouves ça repugnant? A l'intérieur de ton ventre, c'est la même chose. Si ce spectacle t'obsède tellement, c'est peut-être parce que tu t'y reconnais. [...] Souviens-toi que tu es tube et que tube tu redeviendras. [...] La vie c'est ce que tu vois: de la membrane, de la tripe, un trou sans fond qui exige d'être rempli. La vie est ce tuyau qui avale et qui reste vide. (*MT* 145-46)

Choosing to confront her abjection and discover its truth, 'il faut que je l'affronte pour le comprendre' (*MT* 146), Amélie refuses her approaching puberty, and the adult life ahead of her, and attempts suicide in order to free herself:

Entre la vie – des bouches de carpes qui déglutissent – et la morte – des végétaux en lente putréfaction –, qu'est-ce que tu choisis? Qu'est-ce qui te donne le moins envie de vomir? Je ne réfléchis plus [...] Je ne lutte plus. Hypnotisée, je me laisse tomber dans le bassin. (*MT* 146)

Food and bodily processes are tied up with death, as being swallowed by the carp is equated with being digested by the earth in death. The adult female body is implicitly linked with both food and death. This section, then, has explored the links between food and identity and it has drawn out specific examples of the anorexic preoccupation with bodily boundaries in *Robert* and *Métaphysique*. The focus of this chapter so far has been on containment, separation, regulation and reduction. A preference for asexual, inanimate entities has been exhibited through

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<sup>45</sup> Cowles, 'Close Encounters', p.100.

representations which seek to eradicate the fleshy, fertile feminine imagined in *écriture féminine*. In the remainder of this section, the focus will shift from the ‘masculine’ aspects of the text, to a trope of femininity in Nothomb’s writing which could be considered reminiscent of *écriture féminine*. This trope is water and this section, then, closes with a discussion of how water is represented, in all three of Nothomb’s texts, as both a *source* of (feminine) identity, and a *threat* to it.

The ‘feminine’ text, as imagined by proponents of *écriture féminine*, is spontaneous, non-linear, and disruptive. It is part of a continuing process; it subverts syntactic and semantic writing styles and does not strive to become the regulated, closed ‘whole’ of the ‘masculine’ text. It is, in short, characterised by ‘fluidity’ and irrevocably connected with a ‘feminine’ identity. In Nothomb’s writing, water is tied to notions of identity, although, as this section now examines, this relationship is typically one of ambiguity. In *Métaphysique*, the author’s own affinity with water is indirectly confirmed as her narrator Amélie notes: ‘Ce n’était pas pour rien que mon prénom, en japonais, comportait la pluie’ (*MT* 109). The relationship between identity and water is illustrated as Amélie swims in ‘la petit lac vert’ during heavy rainfall:

Je plongeais dans le lac et n’en sortais plus. Le moment le plus beau était l’averse: je remontais alors à la surface pour faire la planche et recevoir la sublime douche perpendiculaire. Le monde me tombait sur le corps entier. J’ouvrais la bouche pour avaler la cascade, je ne refusais pas une goutte de ce qu’il avait à m’offrir. L’univers était largesse et j’avais assez de soif pour le boire jusqu’à la dernière gorgée. L’eau en dessous de moi, l’eau au-dessous de moi, l’eau en moi. (*MT* 109)

Here, water is represented as a source of pleasure. It is beautiful, ‘sublime’.

Elsewhere, rain is described as ‘tiède et belle’ (*MT* 99), ‘pléonastique’ (*MT* 101)



‘fascinant’ (MT 100) and of ‘[une] beauté [...] effarante’ (MT 100). Floods are vividly illustrated as ‘un rituel’ in which Amélie revels: ‘La saison des pluies me ravissait à plus d’un titre’ (MT 101). Amélie’s attempt to open her body to the rain and drink as much as possible is one instance amongst many of the narrator’s penchant for excessive water consumption which is a motif of both *Métaphysique* and *Biographie*. In *Biographie*, the narrator’s ‘potomania’ suggests a notion of *embodying* pleasure: ‘j’appris une soif qui n’avait rien de métaphorique: quand j’avais un accès de potomanie, je pouvais boire jusqu’à la fin des temps’ (BF 47). Clean, clear, pure and cleansing (essentially, the opposite of food), water embodies the anorexic ideal of a substance which passes through the body without altering or taking anything from it. It fills the body with, essentially, ‘nothing’. For Amélie: ‘L’eau désaltérait sans s’altérer et sans altérer ma soif. Elle m’enseignait l’infini véritable, qui n’est pas une idée ou une notion, mais une expérience’ (BF 49). Water, here, is an intellectual, aesthetic ‘expérience’, ahead of a life-giving and life-sustaining substance.

This is perhaps indicative of a more sinister side to water as a recurrent theme as, in Nothomb’s writing, water is linked to hunger. For the anorexic, excessive water consumption is a means of temporarily ‘tricking’ the body’s hunger pangs, and a means of ‘tricking’ the doctor’s scales. As the narrator of *Biographie* admits: ‘Je la trompais de huit kilos [...] en me livrant, une vingtaine de minutes avant la pesée, au supplice de l’eau: je me faisais avaler trois litres en un quart d’heure’ (BF 174). For Amélie, hunger represents a void, a fundamental lack: ‘Par faim, j’entends ce manque effroyable de l’être entier, ce vide tenaillant,

[...] là où il n'y a rien, j'implore qu'il y ait quelque chose' (BF 20). In

*Biographie*, this fundamental lack is irremediably linked to the identity quest:

L'homme se construit à partir de ce qu'il a connu au cours des premiers mois de sa vie: s'il n'a pas éprouvé la faim, il sera l'un de ces étranges élus, ou de ces étranges damnés, qui n'édifieront pas leur existence autour du manque. (BF 21)

If, for Nothomb's narrator, 'l'affamée est quelqu'un qui cherche' (BF 20), it is unsurprising that the fragmentation of her identity is often elucidated through imagery of hunger. It is immediately after the narrator's description of her father's insatiable appetite, that her identity is subsumed within his:

Il mange à une rapidité effrayante, ne mâche rien, et avec une telle angoisse qu'il semble n'y prendre aucun plaisir. [...] Ma mère décida très vite que j'étais mon père. Là où il y avait une ressemblance, elle vit une identité. Quand j'avais trois ans, j'accueillais les hordes d'invités de mes parents en leur affirmant d'un ton las: 'Moi, c'est Patrick'. (BF 29)

In this passage hunger and identity (or lack of) come together. In *Métaphysique*, Amélie, similarly, claims water as 'her' element: 'l'eau, mon élément ami, celui qui me rassemblait le plus, celui dans lequel je me sentais le mieux' (MT 105). 'A son image', Amélie feels at once 'précieuse et dangereuse, inoffensive et mortelle, silencieuse et tumultueuse, haïssable et joyeuse, douce et corrosive, anodine et rare, pure et saisissante, insidieuse et patiente, musicale et cacophonique' (MT 109). The contradictory nature of water, as beautiful, peaceful, silent, yet powerful, tumultuous and dangerous, is in keeping, as we have seen across these two chapters, with the contradictory nature of anorexia. In *Biographie*, the narrator admires the sea for its dual motion of flux and reflux, what she describes as its 'beauté apocalyptique' (BF 150). Entertaining a similar relationship to water as the anorexic has to food, Amélie is, at first, both terrified and full of desire for the sea. In all three texts, imagery of water as beautiful is interspersed with

incidents of water's destructive power, and distressing events are played out either within water or using imagery of water. This is similar to *Les Mots*, in which the mother, as noted in the introduction, is depicted using images of clean or dirty water. This represents the narrator's desire for her mother's love, and her simultaneous rejection of the mother-daughter relationship as damaging.

In *Métaphysique*, Amélie's world is turned upside down when her beloved governess Nishio-san hands in her resignation; 'J'étais dans la mer, j'avais perdu pied, l'eau m'avalait' (MT 123). In *Biographie*, the narrator is swimming in the sea when she finds herself held hostage by 'les mains de la mer' in an apparent account of rape:

Autour de moi, personne. Ce devait être les mains de la mer. Ma peur fut si grande que je n'eus plus de voix. [...] Les mains de la mer remontèrent le long de mon corps et arrachèrent mon maillot de bain. [...] Autour de moi, personne. Les mains de la mer écartèrent mes jambes et entrèrent en moi. (BF 151)

Here the sea functions as a metaphor for masculinity and the 'corps minces et violents' (BF 152) of the young men seen fleeing along the beach at a distance. This introduces the significance, mentioned above, of Amélie's attempted suicide in water in *Métaphysique*. After the metaphorical rape of the carp scene, suicide represents an attempt to cleanse the body. Amélie thus embraces the arrival of her death:

Délicieusement sereine, j'observe le ciel à travers la surface de l'étang. La lumière du soleil n'est jamais aussi belle que vue par dessous de l'eau. [...] Je me sens bien. Je ne me suis jamais sentais aussi bien. [...] Je souris de bonheur. (MT 147)

The water is calming, peaceful and beautiful; its violence is hidden. The notion of the water *digesting* her – 'Le liquide m'a à ce point digérée que je ne provoque plus aucun remous' (MT 147) – links her tubal body with 'her' element, presenting her

death in water as a return to her ‘true’ self. As Higonnet comments, ‘suicide serves magically to purge the assaulted body, in a sense displacing responsibility for the violation’.<sup>46</sup> In *Métaphysique*, it also represents a rebellious refusal of the adult body. However, the considered and deliberate rebellion behind Amélie’s suicide is silenced. In a manner reminiscent of Bruch’s ‘confusion of pronouns’,<sup>47</sup> Amélie’s mother tells Amélie her suicide attempt was an accident:

– Tu nourrissais les poissons, tu as glissé, tu es tombée dans le bassin. En temps normal, tu aurais nagé sans aucun problème. Mais dans ta chute, ton front a cogné contre le fond en pierre et tu as perdu connaissance. Je l’écoute avec perplexité. Je sais très bien que ce n’est pas ce qui m’est arrivée. (*MT* 153)

Deciding that disputing this would be pointless, Amélie confirms her mother’s version of events and is rendered complicit in her own silencing: ‘Je comprends qu’il ne faut pas lui dire la vérité. Je comprends qu’il vaut mieux s’en tenir à cette version officielle’ (*MT* 154). Just as her rebellion is taken away from her, Amélie realises her body does not belong to her either. Trying to explore the wound on her head – ‘Fascinée, je trempe mon index dans la plaie béante, sans savoir que je souligne ma propre folie. [...] Je veux entrer par le trou dans me tête et explorer l’intérieur’, – the nurse stops her. This leads Amélie to conclude: ‘on ne possède même pas son propre corps’ (*MT* 155). As Higonnet explains; ‘A woman may choose death after defilement [...] to reaffirm her autonomy’.<sup>48</sup> It is in the water that Amélie experiences pain, fear and near death, but also joy, beauty, oneness and peace. Although water is the site of rape and near death, it is also a site in which her identity is consolidated; the mind/ body split is reconciled as she is

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<sup>46</sup> Higonnet, ‘Suicide’, p. 109.

<sup>47</sup> Bruch *op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>48</sup> Higonnet, ‘Suicide’, p. 109.

reabsorbed, ‘digerée’ (*MT* 147) and melted, ‘fondu’ (*MT* 147), back into water. As Amélie notes, ‘[n]’était-il pas logique, d’ailleurs, que j’ai risqué de mourir dans celui des éléments qui parlait le mieux ma langue?’ (*MT* 105).

In *Biographie*, Amélie experiences ‘un tsunami de révolte’ when her mother attempts to stop her drinking too much water: ‘Ce fut de colère que j’explosai. On cherchait à me séparer de l’eau, mon élément. On voulait me mettre à l’écart de ma définition. Un barrage intérieur céda, je roulai des torrents de fureur’ (*BF* 130). Similarly, the narrator of *Biographie*’s passion is also silenced: ‘Il en irait de cette passion comme de toutes les autres: je la vivrais dans la clandestinité [...] La liste était déjà longue des comportements qui exigeaient qu’on se cache’ (*BF* 130-31). According to Désirée Pries, Nothomb ‘evokes the biological female body in disgust, yet redefines the body and her identity through the symbol of water in her writing’.<sup>49</sup> In this way Nothomb’s writing reconstructs the duality of the anorexic body. By endorsing a masculine disgust at femininity, but embracing the fluidity and changeability of the feminine, Nothomb’s narrator finds her own voice through the motif of water which encompasses this contradiction: ‘Ce dont je me souviens avec certitude, c’est que je me sentais bien, quand j’étais entre deux eaux’ (*MT* 157). The following section will return to themes of control and regulation in its examination of Nothomb’s presentation of language as a tool for control across all three texts.

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<sup>49</sup> Désirée Pries, ‘Piscina’, ed. by Bainbrigge and den Toonder, p. 33.

## Language as Control and Appropriation

This section outlines Cixous' notion of *écriture féminine* as a means of thwarting recognised structure and genre classifications. It argues that Nothomb's relationship to language can be described as 'masculine', through a discussion of Nothomb's presentation of language, in all three texts, as a tool for control. It argues that Nothomb presents language as simultaneously *creative* and *destructive*, as both *sickening* and as *curative*. It argues that her use of language as a means of control can be linked with anorexia as a form of controlling the female body, and as an embodiment of the anorexic aesthetic of duality which permeates her œuvre.

Nothomb's texts entertain an ambiguous relationship to language and writing, and appear to advocate certain aspects of *écriture féminine*, such as intertextuality and the desire to break down conventional genre boundaries. As Philippa Caine comments, Nothomb's use of dialogue and erudite philosophical and literary allusions, often mixed with humour and 'couched in structured and polished prose', creates an impossibility of homogenising or compartmentalising her œuvre 'according to traditional literary genre conventions'.<sup>1</sup> Her texts combine features of numerous literary genres, from autofiction to tragi-comedy and fairytale, and blend well-publicised autobiographical details from her own experience into the exploits of her protagonists. The resultant blurring of

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<sup>1</sup> Philippa Caine, "'Entre-Deux" Inscription of Female Corporeality in the Writing of Amélie Nothomb', ed. by Bainbrigge and den Toonder, 71-84 (p. 72). For a discussion of Nothomb's use of dialogue, intertextuality and philosophical form, see: Shirley Ann Jordan, 'Amélie Nothomb's Combative Dialogues: Erudition, Wit and Weaponry', *Ibid.*, p. 93-104.

boundaries between reality and literary invention creates what Alex Hughes has termed a ‘narrative undecidability’.<sup>2</sup> Although this ‘undecidability’ could be read as an attempt to thwart traditional literary classifications and adopt the principles of *écriture féminine*, in other respects, Nothomb’s texts concomitantly appear to endorse a ‘masculine’ vision of writing and the power of language. Throughout her texts, language is employed by her protagonists as a means of power, control, and appropriation. Opposing *écriture féminine*’s notion of fluidity, continuity and freedom, Nothomb’s texts exhibit a preoccupation with order and containment. Language becomes a means of regulating chaos, and each of her protagonists turns to language as an escape from the threatening instability of lived experience. As Jordan remarks, ‘physicality is always near the surface in Nothomb, threatening to submerge the intellect’.<sup>3</sup> Language is presented as the principal means of containing and controlling this eruptive ‘physicality’. In each of her texts, the moment of the protagonist’s entry into language is highlighted. This entry is often marked by a disruption, a threat of chaos, which language must bring back to order. In *Robert*, to which this section will first turn, language is attributed a predictive role. Plectrude’s destiny is, as we will see, ‘created’ by her name. If language can create, we will see that it can also command, as Amélie uses language to assert dominance in *Métaphysique*. In *Biographie*, we will see that language’s capacity to create is equalled by its ability to destroy, as words become weapons capable of inflicting ‘physical’ wounds. If language may

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<sup>2</sup> Alex Hughes, *Heterographies: Sexual Difference in French Autobiography* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 1999), p. 3. For a discussion of Nothomb’s ‘entre-deux’ writing style, see: Philippa Caine, “‘Entre-Deux’”, p. 72-84.

<sup>3</sup> Shirley Jordan, ‘Combative Dialogues’, p. 96.

‘sicken’ in this way, it may also cure; this section closes with a discussion of the curative power of writing.

In *Robert*, language is attributed a predictive role. As Siobhán McIlvanney notes, ‘prefiguration’ is characteristic of the fairytale genre.<sup>4</sup> In *Robert*, Plectrude’s exceptional destiny is ‘created’ by her name: ‘Dans la bibliothèque du grand-père, [Lucette] avait pris une encyclopédie du siècle précédent. On y trouvait des prénoms fantasmagoriques qui présageaient des destins hirsutes’ (*RNP* 9).<sup>5</sup> Plectrude’s biological mother, Lucette, chooses a name to perform as ‘un talisman’, ensuring she is ‘assez forte pour qu’elle se défende’ (*RNP* 22). However, if this name is protective, it is also harmful. A throng of representatives of society and the law, ‘de matrones, de psychologues, de vagues juristes et de médecins plus vagues encore’ (*RNP* 21), attempt to intervene in order to convince Lucette that this name will, conversely, ‘destroy’ Plectrude’s future: ‘Ça ne lui posera que des problèmes. [...] Ce prénom est grotesque et votre enfant sera la risée des gens’ (*RNP* 22). Naming, in *Robert*, is the ultimate form of control. Naming Plectrude was Lucette’s final act before her suicide: ‘Elle fit baptiser le bébé en prison pour être sûre de contrôler l’affaire’ (*RNP* 23). She marks Plectrude’s destiny as a dancer whilst she is still in the womb: ‘Ce sera un danseur ou une danseuse, avait-elle décrété, la tête pleine de rêves’ (*RNP* 10). Plectrude is shown to inherit this predictive power. Later in the text, she names her acting partner as the father of her unborn child, and ‘la nuit même, elle le prit au mot’ (*RNP* 174). As McIlvanney comments, ‘it is not for nothing that Nothomb quotes

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<sup>4</sup> McIlvanney, “‘Il était’”, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, a Saint Plectrude (or Plectrus) did exist. She died in 717 as the wife of Pepin of Herstal, mayor of the palace and duke of the Franks. Plectrude is described as politically active and influential upon her husband and his reign.



from Ionesco's *La Leçon* in *Robert des noms propres*,<sup>6</sup> as Ionesco's warning 'La philologie mène au crime' precedes the narrator's own prophecy 'qu'il serait le père de son enfant' (*RNP* 173). Notions of control and destiny are linked to anorexic ideas of containment through the title of the text. A dictionary 'contains' a whole language, which is alphabetised into a regimented order. The idea that language has a prescriptive power suggests that destiny is contained within writing; destiny is somehow regulated by language, which is in turn regulated and contained within a dictionary. In addition, this 'masculine' fantasy of language as pure, contained and ordered, echoes the anorexic ideal of the body as a strictly regulated, 'closed-off' figuration and represents a further instance of Nothomb's disembodied aesthetic.

Language's capacity to create and control can be witnessed in *Métaphysique*. If the subject is created through its entry into language, for Amélie, her sense of self is linked to the self's linguistic sign; 'Le plaisir profita de l'occasion pour nommer son instrument: il l'appela moi – c'est un nom que j'ai conservé' (*MT* 33). As discussed earlier, before Amélie's first sounds she was inert, lifeless, passive, genderless: '[le tube] n'avait jamais rien dit, il n'avait même jamais produit le moindre son' (*MT* 15). Amélie is only considered alive – 'L'enfant était enfin vivant' (*MT* 23) – after uttering her first sound in what is described as '[une] scène mythologique' (*MT* 22). Without language, the world is unattainable: 'Le monde est inaccessible aux mains et à la voix de Dieu' (*MT* 28). Before her entry into language, Amélie, as a tube, 'avait observé que les parents et leurs satellites produisaient avec leur bouche des sons articulés, bien précis: ce

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<sup>6</sup> McIlvanney, 'Il était', p. 21.

procédé semblait leur permettre de contrôler les choses, de se les annexer' (*MT* 25). The recurrent idea of separation, previously discussed in relation to the body, is reintroduced in terms of language here, where language is presented as a means, 'bien précis', of regulation. In the manner of the *bento* in *Thornytorinx*, in which substances are separated by dividing walls, here, it is language which enforces this separation, as a process which permits the speaker 'de contrôler les choses, de se les annexer'. Language, then, is also form of appropriation.

In *Métaphysique*, a dualist construction of language is expressly articulated. In Amélie's words: 'parler [est] un acte aussi créateur que destructeur' (*MT* 43). Reflecting upon language's *creative* potential, Amélie notes:

Il est vrai que dire les choses à haute voix est différent: cela confère au mot prononcé une valeur exceptionnelle. On sent que le mot est ému, qu'il le vit comme un signe de reconnaissance, qu'on lui paie sa dette ou qu'on le célèbre. Voiser le vocable "banane", c'est rendre hommage aux bananes à travers les siècles. (*MT* 38)

The idea that voicing words attributes to them 'une valeur exceptionnelle' can perhaps be linked to the primacy of the voice in Cixous' writing, in which she advocates 'un privilège de la voix' (*JN* 170). When pronounced out loud the word becomes 'ému', or celebrated. As David Gascoigne expounds, 'Nothomb places the voice, and language, firmly under the aegis of passion, be it pleasure or anger, viewing language as the channelled response to an overflow of feeling'.<sup>7</sup> Naming something, then, is a celebration of its existence. Amélie initially discovers its power upon naming her sister Juliette for the first time, an act which provokes an ecstatic reaction:

– Juliette! clamai-je en la regardant dans les yeux.

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<sup>7</sup> David Gascoigne, 'Amélie Nothomb and the Poetics of Excess', in Bainbrigge and den Toonder, p. 127.

Le langage a des pouvoirs immenses: à peine avais-je prononcé à haute voix ce nom que nous nous prîmes l'une pour l'autre d'une folle passion. Ma sœur me saisit entre ses bras et me serra. Tel le philtre d'amour de Tristan et Iseut, le mot nous avait unies pour toujours. (*MT* 41)

The reference to the legend of 'Tristan et Iseut', a tale of adulterous love made popular in French medieval poetry, gives language a mythical, 'historical' quality whilst the final sentence, 'le mot nous avait unies pour toujours', suggests their sisterly love transcends the body. Language, here, is a further instance of Nothomb's 'disembodied' aesthetic; it is not biology which binds the sisters, but words. Amélie's hateful brother is deliberately denied the honour of being named: 'Pour le punir, je ne le nommerais pas. Ainsi, il n'existerait pas tellement' (*MT* 42). Her brother's friend Hugo is accorded a similar disdain: 'Je décidai de ne pas nommer Hugo, pour le châtier' (*MT* 65). As naming is a key part of Amélie's strategy to assert her dominance, language becomes 'un prelude au combat' (*MT* 43).

It is in *Biographie*, however, that language's *destructive* potential is most explicitly suggested, as the word 'non', baptised 'parole de mort' (*BF* 119), is accorded the physical capacity to kill. When Amélie's governess, Inge, refuses a dinner date with a neighbour she has long admired from afar, this word becomes a bullet aimed to kill: 'Je vis l'impact du non entrer dans la poitrine de Clayton Newlin' (*BF* 117). Simultaneously wounding Clayton, and Inge, who, from this moment, becomes the living dead – 'Plus jamais je ne la vis sourire' (*BF* 119) – Amélie discovers the destructive power of language: 'on peut rater sa vie à cause d'un seul mot. [...] nul doute que le mot "non" est celui qui a le plus de cadavres

à son actif' (*BF* 119). Amélie's brother likewise employs words to wound. For Amélie, there are three words which are insupportable:

Je devins folle. Ces mots m'étaient réellement intolérables. La sonorité compassée du verbe "souffrir" me faisait grimper au plafond. La préciosité du mot "vêtement", soulignée par cet accent circonflexe, me donnait des désirs de meurtre. Le sonnet de l'horreur était atteint avec "se baigner", syntagme abstrait qui avait la prétention de designer ce que l'être peut accomplir de plus beau sur cette planète: aller dans l'eau. Je me mis à avoir des crises de rage quand on les employait en ma présence. (*BF* 107)

In keeping with the 'bodily' focus of anorexia, each word, which is related in some way to the body, provokes a physical reaction of disgust or anger. As Gascoigne notes, throughout Nothomb's writing the origins of language are 'the most basic and intense human emotions: euphoric pleasure, anger, repulsion, cruelty, love, jealousy, the delectation of power', all that is emotive and instinctive 'rather than rational or intellectual'.<sup>8</sup> This idea that words have a physical effect on the body is echoed in *Robert*, in which food and words are equated: 'Elle mettait à parler la même parcimonie philosophique qu'elle mettait à manger. Chaque nouveau mot lui demandait autant de concentration et de méditation que les nouveaux aliments qui apparaissaient dans son assiette' (*RNP* 29). Just as Plectrude appraises each morsel of food which enters her body – 'elle le portait à son nez pour en évaluer le parfum, puis elle l'observait encore et encore' (*RNP* 30) – she is shown to '[conserve] en elle les nouveautés verbales et les examinait sous leurs coutures innombrables avant de les ressortir' (*RNP* 31). When tasting new foods, trust is firmly placed in her 'masculine' mind over her 'feminine' senses: 'Normalement, quand un enfant a horreur d'un aliment, il le

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

sait dès qu'il l'a effleuré avec sa langue. Plectrude, elle, voulait être sûre de ses goûts' (*RNP* 31). Words (like foods) are able to sicken, to poison the body.

The equation between food and words is a recurrent motif in Nothomb's writing. As we saw in *Petite*, this represents the choice to nourish the 'masculine' mind over the 'feminine' body. In *Biographie*, as in *Petite*, the narrator digests words instead of nutrients. Linking the anorexic narrators of *Biographie* and *Robert*, it is the dictionary which the narrator of the former reads to satiate her hunger:

Puisqu'il n'y avait plus de nourriture, je décidai de manger tous les mots: je lus le dictionnaire en entier. L'idée était de ne sauter aucune entrée: comment décider par avance que certaines n'en vaudraient pas la peine? La tentation était forte de faire des allées et venues d'une lettre à l'autre, comme n'importe quel utilisateur du dictionnaire. Il s'agissait de le lire dans l'ordre strictement alphabétique, histoire de n'en perdre aucune miette. (*BF* 168)

The allusions to order and hierarchy suggest her desire for a control which she is no longer experiencing over her body. The alphabetisation of the dictionary fulfils the anorexic need for order, whilst refusing to read like 'n'importe quel utilisateur du dictionnaire' fulfils the need for discipline. Like language, reading, in *Biographie*, performs a dual function. If it provides Amélie an escape from the troubling reality which has led to her disorder, it also confirms her disgust at her body. The fictional texts which Nothomb includes in Amélie's reading repertoire entail 'masculine' constructions of the female body as alien and threatening. Significantly, Kafka's *La Métamorphose* is designated by Amélie as 'mon histoire', who feels an affinity with the protagonist: 'L'être transformé en bête, objet d'effroi pour les siens et surtout pour soi-même, son propre corps devenu

l'inconnu, l'ennemi' (*BF* 176). Likewise, Montherlant's *Les Jeunes Filles* confirms Amélie's suspicion that 'il faut tout devenir, sauf une femme' (*BF* 177).

The ultimate instance of language's power can be found in the closing pages of *Robert*, which see the author herself enter the narrator's fictional universe. Shocked by Plectrude's traumatic experiences, Nothomb asks 'Comment pourriez-vous ne pas devenir meurtrière?' (*RNP* 189). Plectrude promptly shoots the author dead, apparently confirming the predictive power of words; but this ending cannot escape Nothomb's characteristic ambiguity. McIlvanney has read this symbolic murder of the author as the narrator's ultimate assumption of responsibility for her own destiny: 'Plectrude will no longer passively dance to the tune of another – whether Clémence's or Nothomb's – but will speak her own text'.<sup>9</sup> However, as Kemp has pointed out, 'in contrast to the drive and confidence of the body of the narrative, the text ends on a note of hesitation [...] rather than striding out into the world to fulfil her destiny as a woman, she is left hovering around the body of her creator'.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, at this point Plectrude has already hesitated and then reneged on her decision to commit suicide to free her newborn son from the 'nocif' (*RNP* 80) maternal bond. If the 'body of the narrative' was, in Kemp's words, characterised by 'drive and confidence', it was perhaps because these pages dealt specifically with the anorexic body. In this final scene, the narrator is now a woman, possessing a woman's body. As we have seen across all three texts, the adult female body and death are persistently linked. Just as the narrator of *Biographie* envisions adult femininity as '[une] perte perpétuelle' (*op. cit.* 158), the narrator of *Métaphysique*

<sup>9</sup> McIlvanney, 'Il était', p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Kemp, 'Child as Artist', p. 63.

attempts suicide rather than face the prospect of an adult female body. If, in *Robert*, the control and certainty which pervaded the earlier pages of the text appear to have died along with the author, perhaps killing the author does not provide the narrator with a newfound autonomy, but finally unleashes, once and for all, the threat of uncertainty (or death) engendered by the adult female body.

If Plectrude's future hangs in the balance, in *Biographie*, Amélie's turn to writing offers a potential salvation. Returning us to language's curative power, towards the end of *Biographie*, Amélie (like the narrators of *Thornytorinx* and *Petite*) turns to writing in order to reconstruct her anorexic body in language: 'Je connaissais ce corps que j'avais décomposé. Il s'agissait à présent de la reconstruire. [...] Cet effort constitua une sorte de tissu qui devint mon corps' (*BF* 197). The idea that transforming the anorexic body into language permits the anorexic narrator, who shares the author's name, to regain control over her experiences and her body, is a further link between the author's own experience of anorexia and that of her protagonist. The dual functions attributed to language in each of these texts—as *creative* and *destructive*, as *sickening* and *curative*—reproduce the anorexic aesthetic of duality which permeates Nothomb's œuvre. Nothomb's subversive relationship to language, which might be described as typically 'masculine', posits language as a tool for control and re-appropriation. Rather than endorsing a feminine writing which leaves behind masculine ideals of regularity and lets loose the fluidity and changeability of the feminine, Nothomb emphasises language's potential to contain, regulate and protect, representing a break with *écriture féminine* which takes issue with language as a masculine ordering of the world.

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, this section returns to the question raised at the beginning of this study, namely: what ways can Nothomb's apparent denial of the female body, and answering idealisation of the anorexic self, be considered to contribute to the 'revalorisation du corps féminin' which is evidently a preoccupation of women writers today? Can Nothomb be said to make use of the figure of the anorexic to make a legitimate evaluation of the conflicts and contradictions faced by women in contemporary society? Throughout this study it has become apparent that the historical constructions of female sexuality, as deviant or immoral, discussed in the introduction to this study, can be seen to endure in contemporary attitudes to the female body. In each of the texts so far, such prejudices are exploited via protagonists who are shown to collude in them or openly reject them. Nothomb's adherence to a disembodied aesthetic undoubtedly calls attention to the current body ideal in contemporary society. As Caine explains, 'adult women in Western society are constantly enjoined to overcome their recalcitrant bodies in order to re(at)tain the socially sanctioned completeness of a smooth, contained and youthful physique'.<sup>1</sup> The resultant battle between 'self' and 'body' is a discourse which is not solely attributable to anorexia, but one which shapes the experience of the contemporary woman in general. If Brisac and de Peretti's texts rooted the mind/ body split specifically within the context of the disorder, Nothomb's disembodied aesthetic may be read as representative not just of anorexia but of a wider social paradigm. In their desire to create a

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<sup>1</sup> Caine, 'Entre-Deux', p. 76.



‘representative’ picture of anorexia, Brisac and de Peretti deliberately tempered the ‘agency’ initially offered by the disorder with the ultimate loss of autonomy it eventually enforces. Their texts focus on the routines of the disorder and describe days punctuated by vomiting; a self-repudiating act which offers only a momentary release from a relentless anxiety and physical discomfort.

If Nothomb’s narratives of anorexia bypass this trauma, to focus instead on the (impossible) ideal of disembodiment – of transcending the body altogether – then perhaps they are representative of a wider paradigm of female corporeality. In terms of what this contributes to a ‘revalorisation du corps féminin’, Nothomb’s writing may not contribute any solutions, but it certainly engages with and brings into play common stereotypes and attitudes which shape contemporary female bodily experience. In terms of whether her representation of the anorexic can be said to make a legitimate evaluation of the conflicts and contradictions faced by women in contemporary society, the answer is decidedly pessimistic. Whilst Brisac and de Peretti’s narratives are ostensibly concerned with communicating lived experience in a way which would facilitate a greater understanding of these conflicts and contradictions (and anorexia as a symptom of them), Nothomb’s narratives are concerned with transcending this lived experience. Whilst some critics have sought to attribute a subversive weight to Nothomb’s valorisation of female slenderness over the horror of the adult female body,<sup>2</sup> others have remained understandably troubled by Nothomb’s apparent adulation of the anorexic body and mindset.<sup>3</sup> Such varying perspectives of Nothomb’s narratives

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<sup>2</sup> Philippa Caine, for example, has argued that Nothomb’s parodic narratives subvert misogynist stereotypes (‘Entre-Deux’, p. 71-84)

<sup>3</sup> See: Rodgers, ‘Anorexic Beauties’, pp. 50-62.

of anorexia nevertheless suggest that, on the whole, they successfully escape the dangers of being taken at face value. If Nothomb herself does not offer a legitimate evaluation of the conflicts and contradictions faced by women in contemporary society, she certainly invites the reader to evaluate the cultural constructions of femininity which underpin the overstated associations of female slenderness with beauty, and female corpulence with abjection, contained within her texts.

## Conclusion

This study is situated within a field of academic enquiry, contemporary women's writing, which has recently seen a renewal of interest in representations of the disordered body. It has provided a significant contribution to this field in its consideration of how the particular features of hysteria interact with narrative structures, and what a reading in terms of hysteria may add to the understanding of literary texts. The study has also opened up several avenues of enquiry relating to the possibility of representing personal and collective female identity through motifs of disorder. If nothing else, the recurrence of the figure of the hysteric in contemporary women's writing suggests that it is useful in providing new ways of conceptualising contemporary experience, or at least inviting critical reflection on the mechanisms which shape this experience. Above all this thesis has shown that careful consideration of narratives of hysteria has a significant contribution to make in drawing attention to the cultural constructions of femininity which produce these hysterical bodies.

The introduction to this study raised questions regarding the problems of representing hysteria and the hysterical, the motivations behind such representations, and the type of relationship that occurs between narratives of hysteria and their readers. It considered the complexities and ambiguities inherent in the mechanisms of hysteria itself, which this study has shown to be a disorder that at once produces a forceful, disruptive (feminine) subjectivity, and necessarily undermines this subjectivity. The analyses which followed offered comparative readings of recent fictional and autofictional works by five female

authors writing hysteria within the specific context of contemporary women's writing in French. These analyses made it possible to identify a particular relationship between hysteria and literary representation, in which literary representations of the hysteric serve a number of distinct purposes. Ultimately, the range of texts discussed shows that although hysteria can be evoked to varying degrees of intensity, the motivations behind the use of hysterical motifs in women's writing can be traced back to an implicit intention to 'shock' the reader out of his or her complacency regarding the specific socio-cultural and political situations represented. Often these fictional situations are not far removed from the reality of the reader, inviting reflection upon the issues raised. The centrality of issues surrounding female corporeality suggests that it is the female body, whether celebrated or disordered, which holds the power to interrupt the 'distance' between the reader and this represented world. Although the goals of the writing projects studied here may have evolved from those of their 1970s forerunners, it is clear that the usefulness of representing the female body in order to achieve these goals remains.

The most notable evolution is the texts' insistence on minute physiological detail of bodily sensation and bodily processes. Whilst such strategies may appear as attempts to provoke reader identification, more often than not they illicit a disgust from the reader which is not immediately recuperable within a feminist project. As we have seen across each chapter, the motifs of hysteria tend to overlap significantly with misogynistic stereotypes of femininity and the female body. In Chapters 1, 2 and 3 in particular, the hysterical narrators were arguably unable to extricate themselves from the double binds of their respective disorders.

The transgressive body of Nobécourt's *La Démangeaison* was eventually hidden from view, just as the linguistic transgressions of *La Conversation* were silenced, upon the incarceration of the shared narrator. Whilst the body of Darrieussecq's hybrid narrator unleashed a potent, exaggerated femininity, this ultimately led to her exclusion from society. In Brisac and de Peretti's texts, anorexia constituted a highly visible rejection of patriarchal imperatives, but this was a 'rebellion' which necessarily ended in silence (death) or successful reinsertion into patriarchal society (cure). In Chapter 4, Nothomb herself appeared to endorse these misogynistic stereotypes of femininity and the female body, apparently poking fun at the preoccupations of her 1970s forerunners by creating protagonists in the very image of the restrictive femininity from which they wished to break free.

The analyses in each chapter, then, have exposed a recurring difficulty in the use of hysteria for the purposes of critique, due to its specific structure and the cultural framework within which it exists. It is caught between autonomy and pathology, liberation and restriction, repulsion and fascination. It is expressed physically, yet experienced psychologically. Literary representations of hysteria are necessarily ambiguous; they are at once transgressive, in their representation of cultural taboos, and deeply conservative for, by inviting the readers' disgust or derision, they invite consensus on what should be rejected as 'abnormal'.

Chapters 1 and 2 offered the best examples, in which *La Démangeaison* and *Truismes* constituted critiques of a morally disgusting society, but did so using narrators whom the reader was invited to reject. In both these instances it was female sexuality which was particularly problematic. The transgressive sexuality of these female narrators invites the very reactions they wish to critique in their

readers; however this strategy comes dangerously close to reinforcing and perpetuating these responses.

Despite the potency of hysterical motifs, then, a tension remains in attempts to use hysteria for the purpose of social or political critique. In the introduction, the following question was raised: if these writers recognise the pitfalls of presenting the hysteric as a revolutionary figure, then why does she remain a recurrent figure in contemporary women's writing? The analyses undertaken suggest that the reason for the recurrence of this figure lies in its usefulness as a means of adequately reflecting the individual or cultural malaises experienced by women today. The hysteric undoubtedly encourages the reader to question certain assumptions about the role of women and the female body in contemporary society. By inviting the very responses in the reader that they wish to critique, these texts may lead the reader to question his or her own responses, thus giving the literary figure of the hysteric a productive effect in the real world. If these texts *perform*, rather than question the problems which many women today appear to find insurmountable, it is perhaps to avoid offering utopian solutions to enduring concrete problems.

After initially questioning whether the hysteric ever gets cured or remains caught in an endless repetition, upon conclusion of this study it has become clear that the question of cure is beside the point; it does not matter. What does matter is that each repetition reveals something new about the position of women in contemporary society and the range of responses that women have to this position. It is through *reading*, and not through curing these hysterical bodies that a real-life

'cure' to the individual and cultural malaises experienced by women today may be found.

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